

Private Charles Grinling Dempster©

Regimental number: 23224

**159th Company, 10th Labour Battalion, Princess Charlotte of Wales's
(Royal Berkshire) Regiment**

born: 1896–died: 5 October 1918

Private Charles Grinling Dempster had two families. His father, Oliver Dempster, born in Lichfield, Staffordshire, in 1865,¹ first married Charles' mother, the former Jane Gilbert. Jane was born in about 1862 also in Lichfield.² In 1886, she and Oliver married at St John the Baptist Church in Shenstone, Staffordshire.³ They had five children:

- Henry Only (born in 1889, but died the following year)⁴
- Oliver Brice (born on 20 March 1890)⁵
- Edith Annie (born on 27 August 1891)⁶
- Horace Malcolm (born in 1893 but died soon after birth)⁷
- Charles Grinling (born in 1896)⁸

In 1891, Oliver Sr. and Jane, with their son Oliver, were living on Irving Street in Birmingham, where Oliver Sr. was a currier's assistant.⁹ Ten years later, the family was living at 101 Weaman Street in Birmingham and Oliver Sr. had become a leather warehouseman and caretaker.¹⁰

The next year, Charles' mother died at about the age of 40, and his father remarried fairly soon afterward. He and Rosina Partridge, born in 1872 in West Bromwich, Staffordshire,¹¹ were married in Birmingham in 1903.¹² They had four children:

- Ethel Victoria (born on 19 January 1904)¹³
- George William Henry (born on 23 July 1907)¹⁴
- Maud Rosina (born in 1909, but died at the age of 1 and was buried in Witton Cemetery in Birmingham)¹⁵
- Daisy Dormer (born in 1911)¹⁶

In 1911, the family, now including five children, was living at 3 The Avenue, Ellen Street in Birmingham. This house would remain in the Dempster family until at least 1965. Oliver Sr. was a salesman of rough harness leather. One child had followed him into the leather industry—Edith was a bridle stitcher making harnesses. Oliver Jr. was a packer in a woodworking company and Charles was a filer¹⁷ in a brass foundry.¹⁸

Charles served for almost the entirety of the Great War. He enlisted soon after the outbreak,¹⁹ when he would have been about 18, and survived until only about six weeks before the armistice. He initially served with the Wiltshire Regiment (regimental number 24635)²⁰ but, at some point, he transferred to the 159th Labour Company of the Berkshire Regiment.²¹

Labour Corps (which included Labour Companies) were established in 1917. Prior to that date, each infantry division included a labour battalion with men who, while they were trained to fight as infantry, were normally engaged in labouring work. These soldiers, called Pioneers, were often experienced with picks and shovels or skilled trades. Perhaps Charles' experience working in a brass foundry qualified him for this job. In 1917, labour companies were formed from existing

regimental infantry labour battalions and infantry labour companies. The 159th Labour Company had been formed from the Royal Berkshire Regiment and was part of the 10th Labour Battalion.²²

Unfortunately, labour companies were not required to keep war diaries unless specifically requested, so little is known about the movements of these companies.²³ In early October 1918, Charles was stationed somewhere near Arras in northern France. On 5 October, he was admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station with wounds to both legs and his right arm caused by a bomb. He died the same day.²⁴ A casualty clearing station was a military medical unit behind the front lines, usually located near transportation. Casualties who did not soon die or could not be adequately treated in the CCS were stabilized before being transported to a field or military hospital.²⁵

Charles was buried on 6 October in Duisans British Military Cemetery (Plot 7, Row B, Grave 15) with the Canadian chaplain A. D. Reid presiding.²⁶ Duisans British Military Cemetery is located in Étrun, near Arras, France. The first burials in the cemetery took place in March 1917.²⁷ No. 1 CCCS arrived at the beginning of September 1918 and was stationed near Duisans for two months. As a result of the serious and urgent nature of the cases admitted to No. 1 CCCS, the death rate was high in October—a total of 83 deaths occurred during the month.²⁸

Oliver Dempster was still living at 3 The Avenue when he received a letter notifying him of his son's death.

Charles was awarded posthumously the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre).²⁹ Even though he enlisted early in the war, Charles did not receive the 1914–15 Star, suggesting that he did not go to the Front until at least 1916³⁰—perhaps because of his age.

While Charles was in the military, his stepmother died. Rosina died in Birmingham in 1916, age 44. Her three living children were 12 years of age and under—the youngest only 5 years old. Charles' father died in 1929,³¹ having outlived two wives and four children.

Charles' older brother **Oliver** served in, but survived, the Great War. The year of its outbreak he married Caroline A. Cale in Birmingham.³² He served as a private in the 2nd Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers (regimental number 25796) and in the Labour Corps (regimental number 276923).³³

Volunteering in January 1916, he was drafted to the Western Front on completion of his training. Whilst in this theatre of war he took part in the battle of Ypres, Meteren and Kemmel, and then heavy fighting at Tourcoing and Courtrai, during the Advance of 1918. After the Armistice he proceeded to Germany with the Army of Occupation, and served there until his demobilization in October 1919.³⁴

He was discharged on 14 November 1919.³⁵ After the war, he was living at 4 Clairmont Buildings, Health Green Road, Winson Green in Birmingham.³⁶ In 1939, Oliver was working as a lorry driver.³⁷ He remained at Clairmont Buildings until his death on 27 December 1956.³⁸ Caroline stayed on until at least 1965.³⁹

All Charles' other siblings remained in the Birmingham area and continued to remain close—some of them living together in the family home that belonged to their father before and after the war. His sister **Edith** married Albert W. Townsend in 1912.⁴⁰ It appears as though Alfred died in 1914.⁴¹

Edith did not remarry for 20 years; she married William J. Weir in Birmingham in 1934.⁴² In 1930, William Weir had been living with his future brother-in-law George and sister-in-law Ethel at 3 The Avenue.⁴³ The year after their marriage, Edith and William were both in the family home.⁴⁴ In 1939, William was a heavy work labourer in a builders' yard and Edith was a fancy leather worker.⁴⁵ Edith's stepbrother **George**, who was single and a fruiter's labourer, was living with them.⁴⁶ Edith died in 1977⁴⁷ and George in 1954⁴⁸—both in Birmingham.

Charles' stepsister **Ethel** married William H. Cattell in 1927. It is not known what become of William Cattell but, in 1939, Ethel was living at 42 Norman Street in Birmingham, where she was a leather worker.⁴⁹ She was recorded as being married, but William was not with her. By 1950, Ethel was back at 3 The Avenue with Edith and William Weir. After William's death in 1956,⁵⁰ Edith and Ethel continued to live in the family home until at least 1965.⁵¹ Ethel died in Birmingham in 1969.⁵²

The youngest of Charles' family, his stepsister **Daisy**, died at the young age of 19 in 1931 in Birmingham.⁵³

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⁵ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 14 August 2020), entry for Oliver B Dempster, Schedule number: 83, Sub-schedule number: 1, Enumeration district: QAPZ, Registration district: 384/4

⁶ "1939 Register," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 14 August 2020), entry for Edith A. Weir, Reference: RG101/5515F/011/36 Letter code: QAOK

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- ¹² "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 11 August 2020), entry for Oliver Dempster, Registration district: Birmingham, Inferred county: Oliver Dempster, Volume: 6d, Page: 269
- ¹³ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 14 August 2020), entry for Ethel V. Cattell, Schedule number: 129, Sub-schedule number: 1, Enumeration district: QAPW, Registration district: 384/4
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- ¹⁷ A filer dresses metal articles that have been cast, forged, pressed, stamped, wrought, etc., in order to remove rough edges to prepare the article for huffing and polishing. ("Filer," *A Dictionary of Occupational Terms Based on the Classification of Occupations used in the Census of Population, 1921* <http://doot.spub.co.uk/>: accessed 14 August 2020))
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