

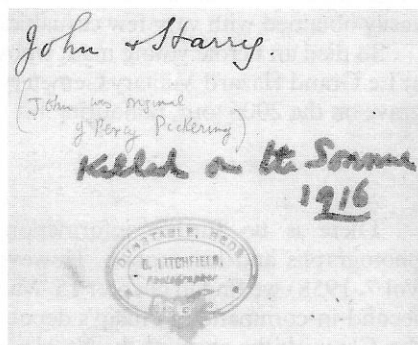
Cousin Charlie: a tribute

(Charlie Boon,* *kia* 16.11.1916, aged 21: buried at Frankfurt Trench Cemetery)
(compiled by Anne Williamson)

That HW's cousin Charlie, Charlie Boon from Mount Pleasant, Aspley Guise, Bedfordshire, is portrayed as Percy Pickering in the *Chronicle* is a well-known fact. That Charlie and Harry (as HW was called by his family) were indeed great childhood friends is a cherished thought that affects us *de profundis*. HW's visits to Aspley Guise were one of the highlights of his childhood.

At Easter 1914 young Harry, aged eighteen and a bit, still newly fledged from school and working in his first job as an insurance clerk, spent the holiday weekend with his Bedfordshire relations: his Aunt Margaret Eliza (beth) née Adams – known as Aunt Liz – and Uncle Henry Boon, manager of the gasworks, and their children Charlie and Marjorie. Aunt Liz and HW's mother Gertrude Leaver were (second) cousins, stemming from common great-grandparents, William and Elizabeth Turney.¹ The cousins spent Easter roaming the countryside around Aspley Guise, including straying on to the Woburn Estate, seat of the Duke of Bedford, looking for birds' nests and enjoying each other's company – totally innocent of imminent horrors: but note the unseen prescient presence of the 'Duke', mainstay of the regiment HW was to aspire to in the coming war.

Christened John Charles, Charlie's date of birth has not been checked, but one can deduce from his subsequent military records (he was 20 years and 2 months when he enlisted on 25 October 1915) that he was born in late August or early September 1895. Thus the two cousins were of very similar age, Charlie being the older by about four months. What is known of his life is very shadowy. He really only exists in his portrait as Percy Pickering in the *Chronicle* novels, and as himself in HW's schoolboy diary.



Caption from back of photo:
John and Harry
(John was original of Percy Pickering)
Killed on the Somme 1916

* I have adopted the official spelling 'Boon' minus the final 'e' that HW appeared to include and which I used in the biography.

After leaving school he was apparently, according to his family, training to be an accountant.² That he subsequently enlisted into the LRB would appear to suggest that he was actually domiciled in London at that time – otherwise he would surely have enlisted into the Bedfordshire Regiment, where HW puts Percy Pickering in the novel. (Thus he would have been lodging with his relations in Eastern Road – which accounts for HW's idea for Willie's lodging at outbreak of war.)

So Charlie enlisted into the LRB as Rifleman 2887 at 130 Bunhill Row, London (as had HW previously) into the London Rifle Brigade, 3/5 (City of London) Battalion, The London Regiment, on 25 October 1915 remaining with them until July 1916. Let us note here HW's now seen to be very misleading real-life note on an envelope in his archive stating that he 'wanted to join the Bedfordshires to be with his cousin Charlie Boon, but they never met up'.³ When HW transferred to the Bedford Regiment in the spring of 1915, Charlie had not even actually enlisted! As always with HW, one should not take anything for granted – I should have known better!

In January 1916 Charlie, having been posted in Sutton previously, was training with the LRB in No 2 Platoon 'C' Coy at Fovant Camp near Salisbury (this station being the reason the LRB badge is engraved into the famous 'Fovant Badges' hillside) from where he wrote a letter to his sister Marjorie (see p 103) – the little minx Polly Pickering of the *Chronicle*. Marjorie was born on 1 July 1898,⁴ so she is three years younger than the boys – and as she was giving Harry the 'come-on' well before the outbreak of war I think 'little minx' is an appropriate phrase!

On 26 July 1916, Charlie was transferred ('willingly or otherwise') for training for the MGC at Belton Park, Grantham – and renumbered as Private 45153. 'Willingly or otherwise' is quoted from an official document. In his history of the LRB⁵ Mitchison explains, in a chapter entitled 'Controversy and the First Great Transition', the background to this otherwise cryptic remark which was part of a controversial order from High Command. In January 1916 several of the Battalion (no details!) were detached to form part of 8 Brigade's Machine Gun Section. A protest was entered that this was not a legitimate transfer. In vain – these were war tactics. Another group of LRB volunteers (F Coy/3rd Batt) were also transferred to the new 60th (London) Division. This batch of 300 had enlisted in November 1915 and had trained with the 3rd Batt at Fovant from January 1916. This would seem to cover Charlie Boon's transfer.

Note that in the official record the name immediately above Charlie's is that of W.H. Busby (Private 45152) of the Tank Corps. It was Bill Busby who after Charlie's death befriended and in due course married the heartbroken Biddy (HW's younger sister Doris, who had been in love with Charlie and whom HW recorded was 'heartbroken' at his death.). And it was Bill Busby – 'Four Toes' (see *Wet Flanders Plain*) – who accompanied HW on his trip to the Battlefields in June 1927.

Also note that HW was posted to MGC Training Centre at Grantham in January 1916 (208 Coy, 62 Div, 187 Brigade) and was there until he went into Millbank Hospital on 31 May 1916, where he stayed for the whole of June, and was then convalescent until end October. During August he went down to Georgeham with Terence Tetley (and there are photos of them both naked on the beach and sitting drying themselves on what looks like the rocks at bottom of Baggy Point): not to Lynton with Willie and Percy, Doris and Polly as in *The Golden Virgin* (where the observant Aunt Dora notices that Doris and Percy are in love). HW recommenced training at Grantham on 23 October 1916, as full Lt with the MGC. There is nothing anywhere in his archive papers to suggest that Charlie was in the LRB or the MGC – nor that they so narrowly missed each other at Grantham. There is however – once one knows – the merest hint in the *Chronicle* (see extracts below).

Training completed, Charlie was posted to France and embarked at Southampton on 6 August 1916, joining 99 Brigade MGC as part of a gun crew at the Front, and three months later was involved in the Battle of the Ancre, which took place between 13–18 November 1916. It had been preceded by the Battle of the Ancre Heights, 21 Oct–11 Nov and one presumes Charlie was slightly injured during that action as his record notes that he was admitted to hospital on 24 October, the cause not known but not serious as he was discharged the next day.

Gerald Gliddon⁶ describes the area thus:

The valley led up from River Ancre to the ruins of Beaumont Hamel which formed a natural stronghold by the junction of several uplands, and as a result the area was broken and more difficult to fight over than most other parts of the Western Front. The ruins of the village had provided the



The Forvant Badges viewed from the north

<i>The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry</i>	<i>YMCA</i>	<i>6th Battalion, The City of London Regiment</i>	<i>Australian Commonwealth Military Forces</i>	<i>Royal Corps of Signals</i>	<i>The Wiltshire Regiment</i>	<i>The London Rifle Brigade</i>	<i>The Post Office Rifles</i>	<i>The Devonshire Regiment</i>
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Germans with very good facilities for its defences and it was honeycombed with extensive caves. The famous Y Ravine ran along the southern edge of the village. It had virtually precipitous banks, from which two arms emerged from the main stem in the direction of the British lines, bristled with dugouts and was intersected by several trenches. Frankfurt Trench was about 1.6 km (1m) north-east of Beaumont Hamel.

The official record shows the progress of the Battle and its outcome. On 12 Nov No 2 Special Company R.E. fired 180 lachrymatory bombs into Beaumont Hamel. Such actions always alerted the enemy that an attack was imminent. We cannot say exactly what Charlie did, nor what happened to him, but an overall view sets the scene. Most of the infantry had a long and trying march to the front and had spent several weeks cold and wet in muddy trenches or in poor billets and bivouacs behind the line. Movement towards the front began early on the 13 Nov when the whole battlefield became shrouded in dripping fog. The first objective was Beaumont Trench, then Munich Trench, and the third and final objective, Frankfurt Trench. The situation was confused and fluctuating and the objectives were not achieved. At 3 pm the Corps gave verbal orders for 99 Brig to attack Munich Trench but this was then postponed to the morning of 14 Nov. Following a cold and cheerless night (the trenches very muddy, and V Corps heavy artillery maintaining a slow bombardment through the night, with heavy German retaliation) the attack was renewed. Beaumont was captured at 10.30am. 2nd Div. attacked Munich Trench at 6.20 am using two Bttns of 99 Brigade (Charlie's lot) forming up in Beaumont Trench 1 hour before zero. There was much chaos, the attack was not successful, and the men fell back to Wagon Road. At 2.45, thinking that Munich Trench was taken (although it wasn't) a new attack ordered for Frankfurt Trench, with disastrous result – the men were mown down by the Germans still occupying Munich Trench. Again all fell back to Wagon Road – where great confusion then reigned.

Charlie is recorded as having been killed in action between 14 and 16 November. As is obvious, there was a great deal of confused fighting for both Munich Trench and Frankfurt Trench – which were not of course actually taken – the Germans having poured in reserves overnight. Charlie's grave records the date of his death as 16 November: his name on the War Memorial at Aspley Guise shows it as the 14th. Whatever, it was obviously the most ghastly affair.

On the recent (2006) HWS visit to the Battlefields to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Somme Battles, we stood at Charlie's grave in the Frankfurt Trench Cemetery near Beaumont-Hamel, laying a wreath and paying tribute to this lad, so familiar to us as the gentle and kind Percy Pickering, who aged just 21 gave his life in the service of his country.

Notes

1. For a full family tree of the Turney branch see HWSJ 31, p 8.
2. I am indebted to Benjamin Turney, one of Marjorie's sons for providing this information. Marjorie and William Turney had 8 children. Little seems to be known about Charlie's actual life.
3. See AW, HW biog, p 49 and WW1 vol, p 51
4. In the family trees referred to in note 1 above, in default of real information I had calculated Marjorie's birth to have been 1900. This should be amended to the correct date of 1898
5. K.W. Mitchinson, *Gentlemen and Officers: The Impact and Experience of War on a Territorial Regiment 1914-1918* (IWM, 1995) (This is a history of the LRB.)
6. Gerald Gliddon, *The Battle of the Somme* (Sutton 1987, repub. Leo Cooper, 1990).

Acknowledgements

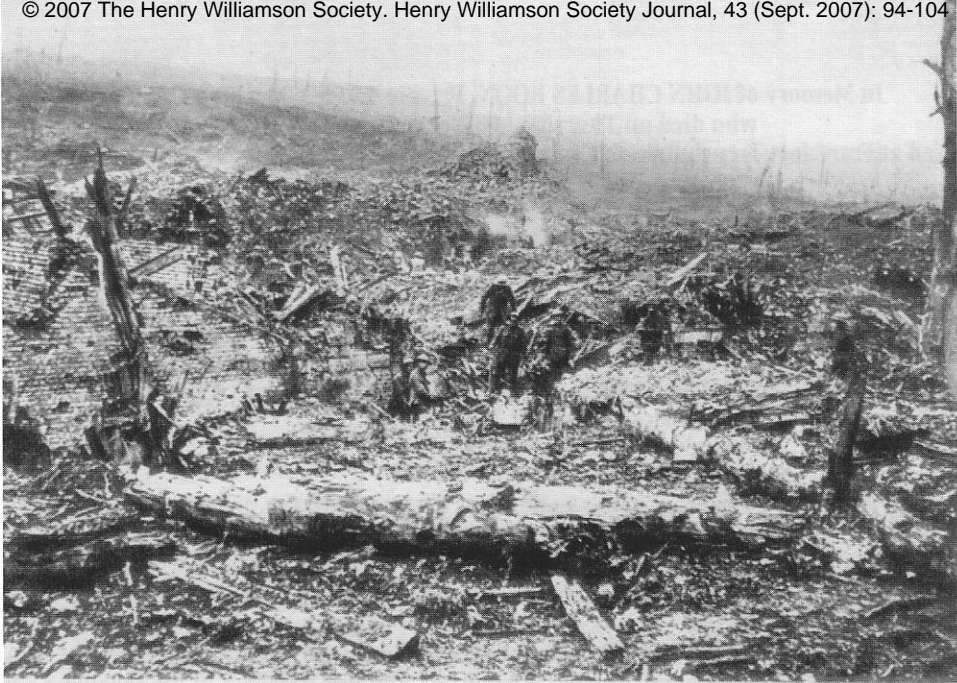
My grateful thanks to Benjamin Turney for making information available and providing the photograph of Charlie in uniform; to MGC researchers Bob Alexander and Jim Parker for service information and to Pam Waugh for making the opportunity for us to visit Charlie's grave – a very poignant occasion.



John Charles (Charlie) Boon, Private 45153, LRB & MGC.

Killed in action, 16.11.1916, Battle of Ancre.

(Photograph kindly provided by Benjamin Turney, son of Charlie's sister Marjorie)



The village of Beaumont Hamel after capture in November 1916

Winter on the Somme: an ammunition limber
on the road to Flers, November 1916



Pictures fallen out of an old book (on the Somme) from HW's archive. The top one shows the situation in which Charlie met his death. The one below is typical of HW's own situation as Transport Officer in that area in 1917. And it was at the Battle of Flers that HW placed the death of Percy Pickering.

**In Memory of JOHN CHARLES BOON, Private 45153, Machine Gun Corps
who died on Thursday, 16 November 1916, Age 21
Buried at Frankfurt Trench British Cemetery, Beaumont Hamel, Somme Grave number B.14**



John Charles Boon enlisted into 3/5 (City of London) Battalion The London Regiment (London Rifle Brigade) as Rifleman No. 2887 on 25 October 1915 at 130 Bunhill Row, London, EC, and was billeted in Sutton. Men of this Battalion were trained in expectation ... of serving in France. John remained with 3/5 Battalion until July 1916. He transferred, willingly or otherwise, into the Machine Gun Corps on 26 July 1916 and completed training on the Vickers machine gun at the Machine Gun Training Centre at Grantham, being issued with a new number – 45153.

In the list of men who transferred at the same time, the name above John Charles is:

Private 45152, Busby, W.H. – Comm. 03 02 18 – Tank corps
(who later married Henry's sister Doris (Biddy))

John was posted to France and embarked at Southampton on 6 August 1916, and on 10 August joined 99 Brigade Machine Gun Company, 2 Division, and was involved in the following action.

John was admitted to hospital on 24 October (for reasons unknown), but discharged the next day.

On 1 November the company moved to Mailly-Maillette from Bertrancourt on 30 October, and had ten guns in the line and six guns in reserve. The War diary states that the trenches were in shocking condition but otherwise little to report between 2 and 6 November.

10 Nov: the company was informed 'Z' day would be 13 November. On 12 Nov the company paraded in fighting order at 10 am for inspection, red patches were worn on the front of the haversacks and a blue and yellow distinguishing patch was worn by everyone on the right shoulder. Gun teams were formed and placed according to orders.

13/16 November: Battle of the Ancre (V Corps, Fifth Army)

Beaumont-Hamel was attacked again and taken on 13 Nov. 1916, by the 51st (Highland) and 63rd (Royal Naval) Divisions.

Between 13 and 17 Nov. 99 Company suffered 26 casualties, 14 of those in No 3 Section

John (Charlie) is recorded as having been killed in action between 14 and 16 November and is buried in Frankfurt Trench British Cemetery, Beaumont-Hamel, Somme, France.

Frankfurt Trench Cemetery is named from a German Trench about 1.6 kms north-east of the village, which remained in enemy hands until the German retreat early in 1917. The cemetery was made by V Corps after that retreat, when their units cleared the Ancre battlefield, and it was known as V Corps Cemetery No 11. The cemetery covers an area of 427 square metres and commemorates over 150 First World War casualties, of which over one fifth are unidentified.

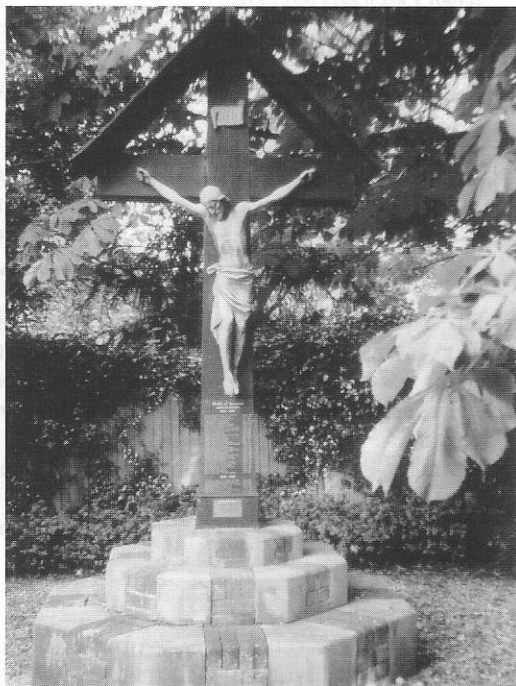
LEST WE FORGET

The above information has been amalgamated from official sources, including the official Commonwealth War Graves Commission commemoration entry.



*Left: Charlie's Grave at the Frankfurt Trench Cemetery.
Below: The Roll of Honour showing details of Charlie
and the War Memorial at Aspley Guise in Bedfordshire.*

Roll of honour ASPLEY GUISE 1914 - 1919	
BILLINGTON, WILLIAM CHARLES, Pte, 7th Beds Regt	Sept 27
BLANSHARD, ERNEST, Pte 8th Beds Regt	Nov 8
BOON, JOHN CHARLES, Pte London Rifle Brigade	Nov 12
BRITNELL, WILLIAM, Pte 1st Glouc Regt	Nov 1



Frankfurt Trench Cemetery, Beaumont Hamel, Somme.

Some extracts from *The Golden Virgin* featuring Percy Pickering

In Jan 1916 Phillip is in training at Grantham, and visits his relations James Pickering (Uncle Jim) and Eliza (née Thacker) (Aunt Liz), and his cousins Percy and Polly at the family home, Beau Brickhill, on the way back to Grantham at end February 1916 and is told:

Polly has gone for a walk with Percy, he's home on leave you know, and goes back to barracks tomorrow and then to a battalion at Catterick Camp in the North. (p 122)

Uncle Jim has bought Percy a pair of breeches – [this is the hint that Charlie was in the MGC]:
So he will be equipped if a vacancy occurs in the transport of the battalion he is joining because I remember [what you said] about the transport being more or less out of the thick of the fighting. (p 124)

Phillip, already out in France, in letter home to his mother dated 27 June 1916:

I wonder if by any chance Percy Pickering will come across him [‘Spectre’ West/Gaultshires] if and when Percy gets out here. (p 258)

After Somme: Phillip has been wounded and returned home, so time is August: Phillip on way to Lynton, Devon, -- he to convalesce at Hollerday House – with Doris and Polly (in separate carriage!) who are to stay with Aunt Dora in her cottage in Lynmouth. They are to be joined the next day by Willie and Percy.

Percy but for three days ... Dora saw ... by the bright eyes of Doris and the bloom upon her cheeks, that the two young people were in love. Percy; an honest rosy-faced country boy, a little slow perhaps, and with an ordinary mind, but that was all to the good

[there being far too much nervous energy in ‘others’ in the family!] (p 358)

Phillip (having been relieved to have learnt earlier that Polly is not pregnant by him) rushes down again to see Mrs Neville to tell her the news just heard:

Percy had been killed during the battle of Flers on the fifteenth September. What could he say? Percy had copped it; he hadn't been one of the lucky ones. ... Doris is very cut up too. She and Percy were very thick. (p 412) [Battle of Flers, 15-22 Sept 1916]

Phillip takes Polly to the station to return to her home, Doris going with them. Later (after a few drinks):

But why was he thinking of Polly and Percy, and the grief that must now be felt even by the walls of Brickhill House.

Further Thoughts

In 1917 when HW returned to the battlefields of France as Transport Officer he found himself at Beaumont Hamel, writing to his mother, 27 Feb 1917:

By the time you get this, I shall be round about the place Charlie is now...

And his diary records on Sunday 4 March:

Weather clearing. Went to Beaumont Hamel. Saw Y Ravine. Terrible place. Deep dugouts. Artillery moving forward.

This is four months after Charlie was killed here. Gliddon (op cit) notes that Frankfurt Trench was held by the Germans until the retreat in 1917 (no date given but the *Official History* states 25 Feb 1917) and that the Cemetery was made by V corps after their units cleared the Ancre Battlefield (again no date), and that it was known then as V corps Cemetery No 11. It is therefore certain that this cemetery was not in place when HW visited there on Sunday 4 March but somewhere in the vicinity the graves would have all been marked with crosses and names, but if HW saw them, as one feels he surely must have done, the moment was apparently too terrible to mention.

Two more letters home mention Charlie:

19 April 1917 at Mory:

And if it is willed, & I don't think it is somehow, that I join dear old Charlie, well, don't worry – I shall have only gone a little way away.

5 May:

I feel awfully lonely, as most of my pals are with Charlie ...

Letter from John Charles (Charlie) Boon to his sister Marjorie

Addressed to: Miss M Boon, Mount Pleasant House, Aspley Guise, Beds.

As from: No 2 Platoon 'C' Coy, London Rifle Brigade, Fovant Camp, Salisbury.

Dated: Jan 20 1916

P.S. Please excuse
this writing but two of
the three electric lights
in the hut have failed
(electric light again) & it
is a rotten light

No 2 Platoon 'C' Coy
London Rifle Brigade
Fovant Camp
Salisbury
Jan 20th 16

My dear Marjorie,

I think it is your
turn to have a letter so I am
writing to you.

I received the parcel this morning
& was very glad to have it.

Thank Granny very much for Cigs
& mother for mince pies & choc.
You have no idea how hungry
one gets down here.

Being in the open air a lot &
having such a lot of duties
makes us as hungry as hunters
& then although the food is better
than it was you cannot have
more than a certain amount.

My pal & I buy stuff & take it in
to meals with us, condensed milk,
jam, sardines &c & eat them in
addition to our army allowance.

So please don't be afraid of

My dear Marjorie,

I think it is your turn to have a letter so I am writing to you. I received the parcel this morning & was very glad to have it.

Thank Granny very much for Cigs & mother for mince pies & choc. You have no idea how hungry one gets down here. Being in the open makes us as hungry as hunters & then although the food is better than it was

you cannot have more than a certain amount. My pals & I buy stuff & take it in to meals with us, condensed milk, jam, sardines etc & eat them in addition to our army allowance.

So please don't be afraid of sending too much stuff down. In fact I want it more now than I did at Sutton. I have already spent my week's pay & over this week on nothing but food, tea & etc except for one or two extras.

Now I think of it please tell mother I must have a fresh pair of pants as the two pairs I have are very bad & we have to replace them ourselves. I shall be sending a parcel of dirty things home this weekend & then they can be mended but I must have a new pair.

Last night we had night ops. We fell in at 5.30 with lanterns in full marching order & marched about a mile through mud up to your knees nearly in places till we got to some trenches. The idea was to charge trenches like they do at the front. So we noiselessly went into the trenches & they were ½ mile long, relieving another company & we had to stay in there about an hour; it was pouring heavens hard.

Talk about mud!!! Didn't know what it was until I came down here.

Got back about 9 o'clock covered with mud from head to foot as was everybody.

Today we paraded at 8.30 & got picks & shovels & marched to the open range.

It wanted making up before firing could be commenced on it so of course one hut had to be picked for this rotten job. We have been hard at it all day carting turf & earth in buckets & sand bags & feel jolly tired.

I daresay you feel rather lonely now Biddy has gone, & expect you are working up for your exam.

Hope Dad, mum & Gran are alright & stand this awful weather alright.

It has rained nearly every day we have been here. My teeth ached a bit on Tuesday so I paraded before M.O. & he said I had better have them seen to, & if I made an appointment with a dentist in town he would give me leave to get them done. He didn't say how long.

I wrote to Biddy & asked her for an address of a good dentist, & am waiting for a reply. When I hear I shall fix up with him & have the matter attended to as they must be done.

I shall probably want some money as I have only got £2.10.0 & it costs 7/6 to get to Waterloo & I have 5 teeth want stopping & 2 extracting. Still I can't help exp[ense] it must be done or I shall lose all my teeth.

Will you please ask Dad how much it will cost (his opinion) & he can judge how much money to send me.

As I expect to go up about Tuesday or Wednesday next week if I have any luck, will you ask him to send as soon as poss.

We had a shot on the miniature range yesterday, to practice grouping & I got my 5 shots in a 2" circle so didn't do so badly.

There are reports that we shall soon leave Salisbury but personally I think we have come to stay & finish our training.

On Saturday there is a cross country run & the officer has again asked me to run. He asked me last week & I didn't run but I think I shall this week.

When you are sending a parcel you might perhaps look up my running shoes, the black ones with spikes & send them as they will come in handy.

Tuesday next the platoon is giving a concert & I expect we shall have a bit of fun. On Sunday my pal & I nailed a photographer & arranged for him to come & take our hut & the chaps in the afternoon. If the photo is any good I will send you one as you all will probably be interested to see anything of my military life.

By the way hows the egg trade [?], flourishing I hope.

Now I must clean my equipment as it is covered in mud & the officer told those who were on parade today (some didn't get fatigues) that not a speck of mud must be seen in the morning on it otherwise there would be trouble.

I may as well tell you he is a rotter & a fool & I am sick of him. In fact we are all fed up with this rotten hole.

Well, cheerio: please give my best love to all & with much for yourself I remain

Your loving brother
Charlie