

STORY BEHIND THE NUMBER – LEONARD LECKENBY



HERITAGE GROUP

Having finished a disappointing twelfth in the 1911-12 season, Leeds went on a concerted recruitment drive.

Among those brought to the club were names destined to leave an indelible mark; 'Dinny' Campbell from Australia and unrelated Welshmen Hughie and Willie Davies, the latter of whom was to appear in the famous against-the-odds 'Rorke's Drift' Test win in Sydney in 1914.

Several others were signed on whose contributions were less heralded in history, there was Reginald Pae (heritage number 270), for example, who had played for the Headingley Lacrosse team and could walk to the ground from Leeds Moorland, and Leonard Leckenby (heritage number 267).

Born in York on 7 October 1891, Leckenby was the middle of three brothers, between Gordon and Stanley, and had a younger sister, Alice.

Leeds spotted him playing for York Leaman Wanderers. Quick for a forward, he stood 5ft. 9in. and weighed 12st 10lbs.

He had joined Wanderers from another amateur team in the Minster city, York Groves United, where he had been a team mate of Albert Dennis (heritage number 261).

Leckenby signed in October 1912 and made his debut soon after on 19th, a 3-2 defeat away at Hull while his full-time employment, unusually, was listed as a 'foreman gentleman service' or more commonly a butler.

He was described as being: "A well-built young player with plenty of dash and determination with a fancy for the wing three-quarter position, where he had shown in junior football that he was no mean performer in that department of the game, being a splendid kicker who takes the ball very well."

That season he played four times in total, not scoring, but they were his only appearances.

Apart from rugby, he had been successful in weightlifting competitions but he gave that up to pursue a career with the oval ball where, according to contemporary reports: "It was expected that he should develop into a class man."

The outbreak of War scuppered that and he joined the 8th battalion Seaforth Highlanders, a Scottish regiment – although his mother was Irish – and became a sergeant (service number S/10587), specialising in operating a machine gun.

As dawn broke on 23 April, 1917, he was part to the force in the advance to the outskirts of the village of Guémappe, as part of the second battle of the Scarpe, south east of Arras.

However, the allied troops found that the preparatory artillery barrage beforehand had done little to dislodge the German machine-gun positions.

The Highlanders were halted by a volley of fire across their lines from the German positions south of the river, on the high ground around Wancourt Tower.

A second attempt to advance was made at 8am but it also made little ground, eventually establishing a tenuous hold on shell hole positions to the east of the strategic village.

Around 9am, 44th Brigade trench mortars managed to knock-out the German machine-guns around Wancourt Tower and the Seaforths, with support from 9th Black Watch (Royal Highlanders) were able to advance into Guémappe from the south as the Germans withdrew.

It was only temporary as the enemy re-grouped, the allies coming under increasing machine-gun fire and German counter-attacks, meaning they were unable to hold the village.

They were advised to evacuate to establish strong points on the outskirts but unfortunately the information was not passed on correctly to the divisional artillery, so that when a new barrage opened up prior to the next advance, the Highlanders came under fire from both sides.

Three officers and 95 men were killed that day including Leonard Leckenby, aged 25, his actions making him eligible for the British War Medal and Victory Medal. He is commemorated in the Guemappe British Cemetery, Wancourt.