

## Alphonse Jacques Bouët and his Kidderminster Connections

This story does not start at the beginning but the discovery, by Joy Marshall, of the medal shown here. Joy purchased the medal from a Dudley family whose two boys had recovered it from a skip together with its silk purse. The local council had just cleared the home of an elderly lady who had died shortly before.



The WW1 sterling silver British War Medal was engraved with the name Alphonse Bouët and Joy set out to discover the story behind this soldier and his medal. In doing so she discovered a connection to Kidderminster and contacted the Kidderminster & District Archaeological & Historical Society.

The remainder of this account is a summary of Joy's findings supplemented by local Kidderminster knowledge.

Private 2955 Alphonse Jacques Bouët served in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment and was killed on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1916 when his battalion was engaged in a trenches above the Ancre river which runs into the Somme in Picardy. His obituary in the Kidderminster Shuttle describes Alphonse as 'Sniper Bouët' and states that he was 'killed by a shell, and died instantly, being shot through the heart'. 'Died instantly' was often a euphemism used by officers in an attempt to spare a bereaved family the harsh realities of death in wartime. In this case it seems that it is unlikely to be true for 'Soldiers Died in the Great War' records that he 'Died of Wounds' which usually meant back in a field hospital or dressing station.

At the time of his death Alphonse's family was probably living in Handsworth or Stourbridge but the family had strong connections with Kidderminster. Alphonse's father, Alfred Jacques, was born in Kidderminster a son of Alphonse Joannin Bouët a French carpet pattern designer who came to Kidderminster from Nimes in August 1855. Initially Alphonse Joannin joined Brintons but later worked for Crabtree & Co. At some stage he apparently set up an independent practice: the Post Office Directory of 1860 lists: Bouët & Jones, Carpet Pattern Designers, 11 Church St. The 1861 census shows the family (wife Emilie Antoinette and sons Edmond Alphonse and Alfred Jacques) living at 'Verandah Cottage', Whitville which still stands (un-named) in Franche Road. By 1871 a daughter Eliza Sophie had been added to the family and they were living in Comberton Road probably French Villa. A later owner of this house recalls Deeds indicating that the house was built for Alphonse Joannin Bouët in 1871. Clearly, the carpet designer had some personal input into the distinctive French architectural styling.

'French Villa'  
18 Comberton Road  
Kidderminster  
21 August 2011



Alphonse Joannin Bouët died on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1877 and is buried in St George's Churchyard but Bouëts continued to occupy 'French Villa' for many years. In 1881 and 1891 Alfred and Edmond were still living at home and classified (like their father) as Carpet Designers. In 1901 Edmond had been married to Ann Hawkins for ten years and was still a carpet designer living in Chester Road; but by 1911 he had moved back to occupy 'French Villa' his mother having died in 1904. He remained there until his death on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1933 his wife predeceasing him in 1924. Locals say that Edmond had been a freelance carpet designer.

Meanwhile, Alfred had married Clara Inston in 1892 and had become a Commercial traveller of Foley Park by 1901. Apparently, his carpet design activities had been affected by the introduction of 'modern styles'. The family later lived in Hagley but by 1911 Alfred was widowed and a Manufacturing Agent for an asbestos factory and living in Handsworth. Also at home were sons Alphonse Jacques aged 18, a chemical assistant at a steel works, and Albin Samuel aged 16 who was not yet working. Alfred died at Wollaston in 1937.

Like his brother Albin Samuel Bouët served with the Worcester Regiment during WW1 but he survived the war and died in Birmingham in 1969. Neither Albin nor Alphonse married.

Apparently the Bouët family does not appear to have made much effort to remember, publicly, the WW1 exploits of Alphonse Jacques. Apart from a short obituary without a photograph in the Kidderminster Shuttle, presumably submitted by the Kidderminster branch of the family, no other obituary has been found in Stourbridge or Black Country local newspapers. Nor has an inscription of his name on any town or other WW1 war memorial been traced. Neither the headstone on his war grave in the Cemetery at Pozieres, near Albert in France, nor his record on the Commonwealth War graves Commission database, contain any reference to his family or background.



A mystery still exists about the discovery of the medal. There was the elderly lady whose possessions apparently contained this lone medal. Who was she? When Albin died there appears to have been no close family left alive: no sister's, brothers or other issue from either Alfred's or Edmund's branches. Alphonse would also have at least been awarded a Victory medal and his relatives the large 'Next of Kin' Plaque. Are those missing items still out there somewhere awaiting discovery?

I am grateful to Joy Marshall for the collaboration that has made this account possible.

Bob Millward, October 2011.