

## GEORGE HILLIARD SHIELDS

*Lieutenant, Gold Coast Regiment, West African Frontier Force*



George Hilliard Shields was born in 1879 at Berwick-on-Tweed, where he may have attended the Grammar School.

He appears to have attended Bede College over 1897-1899, to qualify as a school teacher, and then apparently matriculated at Durham University in the Michaelmas term of 1898 as a non-collegiate student. He was studying for a Bachelor of Letters and is recorded as a member of the 'Unattached' but his attendance seems to have been sporadic. His name continues to appear in the records for Epiphany and Easter terms of 1899 but by Michaelmas 1899, he disappears and does not appear again. There is no record of his graduating.

By 1901, at 22 years old, Shields had become employed as a teacher in a local school in the border town of Kelso. He was later a teacher at the Boys National School (subsequently Holy Trinity School) in Berwick. In 1911, he was working as an assistant master at Wolsingham Grammar School in Weardale.

Nothing of Shields history, living in small towns in the Border counties, gives any indication of a burgeoning *wanderlust* but in his thirty-third year, he set off to explore new worlds. He left Britain, apparently pitching up in Singapore where he was employed to teach at 'Raffles Institution', the oldest and most prestigious school in the city. By 1913, Shields had moved again, to Accra, the capital of the British Gold Coast of west Africa.

# St. Cuthbert's Alumni Association

The alumni association of St. Cuthbert's Society, Durham University

Accra was still very much a city in development when Shields appeared in 1913 as a member of the Education Department of the Gold Coast. He arrived as Headmaster of the Government Boys' School and, evidently having some flair for languages, before long had distinguished himself by passing the difficult interpreter's examination in Ga, the language local to the region around Accra.

At the outbreak of war, Shields volunteered for active service, but it was not found possible to release him from civil employment until 1916 when he was appointed an officer in the Gold Coast Regiment of the West African Frontier Force. This was a multi-battalion field army which had been formed in 1900 to garrison Britain's West African colonies of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Gambia and the Gold Coast.

The WAFF became a valuable reinforcement to the British Empire forces operating against Germany's colonial *Schutztruppe* ('Protection forces') in German East Africa. This was an area almost three times the size of present-day Germany which included what are now Burundi, Rwanda and Tanganyika – the mainland part of present-day Tanzania and, in common with many of Europe's imperial territories in Africa, was isolated and weakly defended. The British became pinned down in East Africa and the campaign proved costly and destructive. With German forces never exceeding some 3,500 European troops and 12,000 African *askaris*, the German commander kept nearly 373,000 British troops occupied.

In a bid to confine the enemy to the low-lying valley of the Rufiji river during the coming wet season, the Gold Coast Regiment moved to occupy the south bank. This was intended to support those troops seeking to prevent the enemy from establishing his winter quarters on the southern side of the valley, within a mile or two of the coast. Conditions were extremely harsh and between July and late November, the strength of the regiment had reduced by over a quarter. Shields distinguished himself in a battle capturing so-called Gold Coast Hill in December 1916, under heavy artillery fire, amid a considerable number of casualties while pinned down under constant fire for many hours.

In January 1917, the regiment set out to patrol the roads around the lower stretches of the Rufiji. On 3 February, Lieutenant Shields and his Colour-Sergeant, 50 foot-soldiers and a machine-gun, were sent out for this purpose. A white man, dressed as an officer of the King's African Rifles, appeared, crying out in English, "Don't fire!" we are K.A.R.s." Shields, who was short-sighted, told his men not fire, and the enemy, who appear to have been about 200 strong, fired a volley into the patrol from the bush at very short range. Lieutenant Shields and his Colour-Sergeant were both killed.

After an initial local burial, Shields was subsequently re-interred in Dar Es Salaam War Cemetery, now in Tanzania.