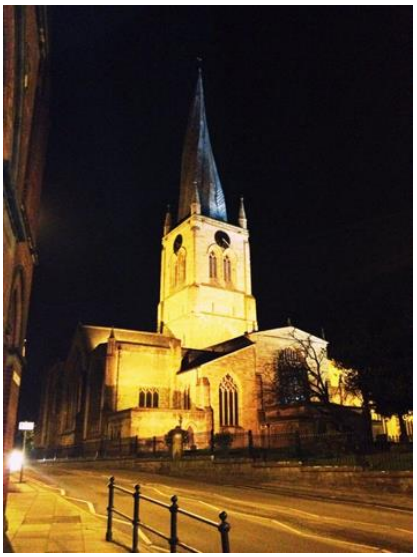
The Spire Sentinel



The Newsletter of The Branch of The Front

& Magazine Chesterfield Western Association

ISSUE 98 – April 2024

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the Great War'.

Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2024

Meetings start at 7.30pm and take place at the Labour Club, Unity House, Saltergate, Chesterfield S40 1NF

January	9th	. **AGM + `*Finding My Roots*` Jon-Paul Harding. ..**tracing his Great Grandfathers in The Great War
February	6th	***Nobody Of Any Importance: A Foot Soldier's Memoir Of World War 1*** by Phil Sutcliffe -"How his dad, Sam Sutcliffe, survived his frontline WW1 – in his own Memoir's words".
March	5th	***Murphy's Law on the Somme*** by Andy Rawson. The talk covers the details of the learning process during the campaign and how what could g wrong, did go wrong. We look at the problems encountered and the solutions which were used to try and solve them.
April	2nd	**'From Gaza to Jerusalem:** the southern Palestine campaigns of 1917" by Stuart Haddaway
May	7th	"**Audregnies Flank Guard Action 1914 "** by Phil Watson
June	4th	**1st Battalion the Wiltshire Regiment in WW1** by Edwin Astill
July	2nd	**Legend of the Pilgrimages – Wilfred Pointon, Sherwood Foresters** By Bill Bryan
August	6th	Roy Larkin - **The Invisible Corps** takes a brief look at the Army Service Corps during WW1 through the use of mechanical transport. A story of growth, evolution, inter-service rivalry and meddling civilians.
September	3rd	Kevin Jepson '**Project Fast Dog**' - from Mark IV to Whippet'
October	1st	Paul Burkitt – Barlborough and Clowne – Villages at War
November	5th	**Peter Hart** topic to be advised
December	3rd	Hedley Malloch ***Left Behind*** – the fate of British soldiers trapped behind German lines in Belgium and France after the Retreat of 1914

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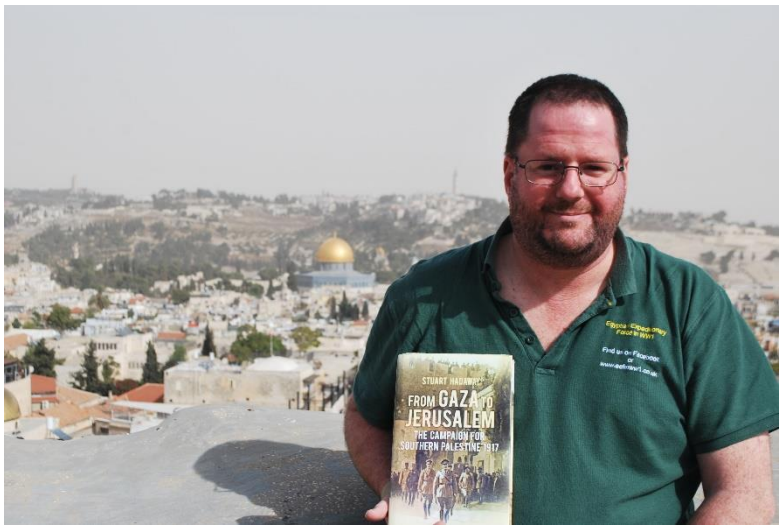
Any opinions expressed in this Newsletter /Magazine are not necessarily those of the Western Front Association, Chesterfield Branch, in particular, or the Western Front Association in general

April Meeting Speaker – Stuart Hadaway



In early 1917, the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force attempted to break out of the Sinai Desert into southern Palestine. This attempt resulted in two bloody repulses at Gaza in March and April, after which the EEF settled down to static warfare while gathering strength for their next effort. Meanwhile, across the lines the Ottomans not only strengthened their defences but also gathered their own forces for an attempt to retake the Sinai Desert and cut the Suez Canal. Their next clash began in October, and would see the EEF conduct a lightning advance in arguably the most successful British offensive of the war so far, capturing Jerusalem by Christmas.

Stuart Hadaway is a professional historian who has written several books on the First World War in Egypt and Palestine, and runs the online group 'Egyptian Expeditionary Force in WW1', which hosts monthly talks on the campaigns."

Branch Trip to Cannock Sunday 21st April.

Jane Lovatt who has done all the organising for this outing has requested that the undernoted be included.

Dear All

Only 3 weeks to go now, so I'd like to update everyone about our travel arrangements.
Please meet at the Labour Club car park (the venue for our monthly meetings) at 8.20 am. The Club Committee have kindly agreed that we may leave our vehicles in the car park for the duration of the trip. Naylors are providing transport. We will leave at 8.30am to arrive at the Great War Hut by 10am. Mike Price of the project will be our guide and we have been granted private access before the Hut opens to the public. A small donation to the project would be welcome, though not essential.

From there it is intended to make the short journey to the Commonwealth and German cemeteries. Afterward we will make the 30 minute journey to the Staffordshire Regiment Museum for a guided tour of the Coltman Trench.

We aim to leave the Museum by 2.30pm to make the journey back to Chesterfield.

Toilets are available at Cannock Chase Visitors Centre and the Museum. There is a cafe, but please bring a packed lunch as the schedule may not allow us time there. As we will be out for several hours, please remember to bring along any regular medication. Branch member and regular speaker, Tim Lynch, is also a battlefield tour guide. Unfortunately he is on holiday on the date of the trip, but has kindly forwarded some notes about Cannock Chase.

The trip involves walking, some if which is on unsheltered and uneven ground. Please check the weather forecast and dress appropriately.

My mobile number is 07825 569240. My email address is fjl1966@live.co.uk. It would be helpful if those who have not already done so, could forward to me their contact details.

Chesterfield Branch WFA cannot accept responsibility or liability for loss or injury and cannot guarantee the itinerary. By participating in the trip you accept this.

Best wishes,

Jane Lovatt

Dear Members and Friends,

I hope you all had a nice Easter Weekend….back to business on Tuesday 2nd April with a visit to the Branch (first time) from Stuart Hadaway – full details of Stuart and his talk elsewhere…but members may recall that during those iniquitous lockdowns when we held joint virtual meetings with our friends at Lincoln, Stuart was one of our `online` presenters. Please come along and hear what I`m sure will be an interesting talk on Tuesday.

WFA's national Conference and AGM which is taking place in Leeds in just over 3 weeks time. We need to know numbers as the venue has limited capacity and numbers are already heading towards the maximum.

There will be three speakers, namely

Anne Buckley 'Germans on the Run, from Tsingtao to Skipton'.....This is a gripping, little-known, story. Two German POW officers, Fritz Sachsse and Herbert Straehler, escaped in 1915 from Fukuoka in Japan. They spent a year on the run. They planned to travel west through China, Afghanistan, Persia and Turkey on the way back to Germany. Instead they ended in Skipton, Yorkshire. Based on Anne's translation of a recently found detailed diary written by one of the fugitives.

Dr Irfan Malik 'Dulmial village (in modern day Pakistan) in the Great War...This illustrated talk tells how 460 soldiers from a small village (then part of the Indian Empire, now in Pakistan) fought in the Great War and were rewarded with a 200-year-old British cannon. It also explores the wider role that Muslim soldiers played in the First World War. Members may remember we had Dr Malik present to us last year.

Fraser Skirrow 'Most of the Work, Most of the Blame, None of the Credit. Platoon commanders in the Great War' ....Great War subalterns were mocked and satirised, then and now, as enthusiastic and patriotic but naïve and ignorant public school boys. They led gallantly from the front, looking after their men, but with few tactical responsibilities and little autonomy. Later, the platoon became the key tactical attack unit, a flexible group of specialists with real discretion on the battlefield. So how did the Young Gentlemen of 1914/15 change into the pivotal battlefield mangers of 1917/18?

The venue is Leeds at Weetwood Hall Hotel (LS16 5PS) The event is free but with a charge for lunch (hot buffet) - this is just £10
To register just go to this link > https://forms.gle/qJgTWvUSBmkYiagR8
Please note - last date for bookings is 5 April

The first talk starts at 10.15am After the two post-lunch talks there's the WFA AGM which will be relatively speedy.

Next month we have another first time visitor / presenter to the Branch – Phil Watson – who will describe the "**Audregnies Flank Guard Action 1914 "** On my first organised battlefield trip in 2004 I visited the site of this action so Phil`s talk is of special interest to me.

Thanks to Rob Nash and Edwin Astill for their contributions to this Newsletter / Magazine

I look forward to seeing a good attendance on Tuesday.

Best wishes,

Grant

07824628638.

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Dedication of Birdholme WW1 Roll of Honour

The dedication of the Birdholme WW1 Roll of Honour is to be at St Augustine's Church on Derby Rd, 11:00hrs Saturday 27th April 2024. There are 72 names of men who were from the Birdholme area named on the roll, their names attached. The Bishop of Derby will be leading the service.

The public are to be invited to the service and should be of interest for any WFA members who live local.

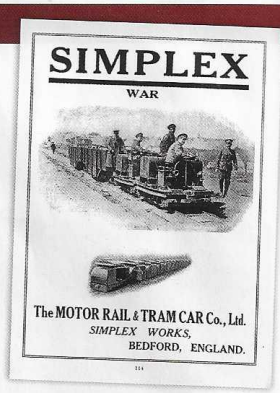
This is in fact a replacement roll of honour as the original went missing in the 1930's when the present church was built.

Soldiers from the local reserve unit 350 Field Squadron RE will be attending, plus veterans from the RE and Sherwood Foresters Associations with their standards.

BIOGRAPHIES INDEX

TRACKS TO THE TRENCHES

Cliff Thomas describes the crucial contribution narrow gauge railways made towards winning the war on the Western Front.



THE role of narrow gauge railways is one of the least widely understood elements in the history of the First World War. Maybe this is because small locomotives do not have a glamour factor, or perhaps because the work of the railways was principally undertaken at night and in the most dangerous zones of all.

By late 1914, the conflict had shifted from a war of manoeuvre into a static stalemate as the opposing armies had attempted to outflank each other and ran out of land by the waters of the North Sea.

The invading German forces had been halted and the fall of the Channel ports averted, at which point both sides literally dug in. By spring 1915, a continuous line of trench defences had been dug across Europe stretching some 200 miles from the North Sea to the border of Switzerland.

Warfare on the Western Front bogged down, in the most glutinous of senses, for the following three years.

The opposing front lines were separated by a narrow 'No Man's Land' and the combatants faced the massive challenge of transporting huge volumes of materials to supply and maintain the forces.

The demand for ammunition

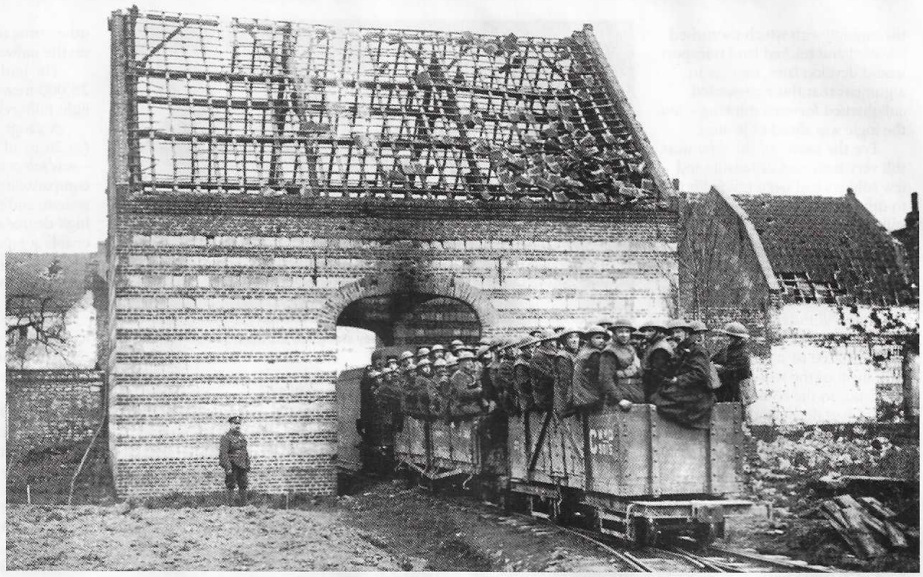
Bogged down in the mud: A train carrying field cannon attempts to reach the front.

The advantage of 60cm track was that it could be laid quickly with no machinery!

Left: The Motor Rail & Tram Car Ltd of Bedford provided many of the small internal combustion locomotives used on the 60cm lines of the Western Front.

Far left: One of the finest collections of First World War field railway equipment is held at the Leighton Buzzard Railway in Bedfordshire. In this 21st century re-enactment, a soldier is seen with Baldwin 4-6-0T WDLR No. 778. CLIFF THOMAS

Right: So devastated were the shelled buildings of northern France that rails were often laid straight though them, as here at Arras in 1918. MUSEUM OF ARMY TRANSPORT



alone was huge and constant, both to defend what was held and to build up stocks for the offensive barrages laid down by the 'big guns' as the prelude to attacks.

By way of example, during the 153 days of the 1916 Somme offensive, nearly 28million shells were fired over the 14 miles of combat areas (almost 4,000 tons of explosives a day).

Add to that food and water for the soldiers, huge volumes of timber and other building supplies to build and reinforce the trenches (which had developed beyond hastily dug holes into an extensive fixed fortification network) plus a multitude of other transport-related requirements – not least the movement of injured soldiers back from the combat zones.

The standard gauge lines of northern France and Belgium could move men and materials only so far, it being plainly impractical to employ such large locomotives and wagons right up to the trenches. Something else was required to link the railheads with the battlefields.

As the war clouds had loomed in the early years of the 20th century, the level of preparedness for the supply of logistical support in battlefield areas had differed among the principal nations.

Germany, drawing on its 1897/1907 experience in South-West Africa, realised that a system of railways that could be rapidly built and maintained as the army advanced was capable of maintaining a flow of supplies to the front until standard gauge lines could be extended to a new railhead.

Moreover, if the advance should falter, such 'Feldbahn' (Field Railway) systems could maintain the supply lines in dangerous and potentially fluid areas. Stocks of 60cm- (basically 2ft) gauge light railway equipment were prepared and troops trained to use it.

In France, the Decauville firm had been producing 'portable' 60cm-gauge railway systems from the late 19th century and the French Army too recognised the value of such light railways in supporting fortifications.

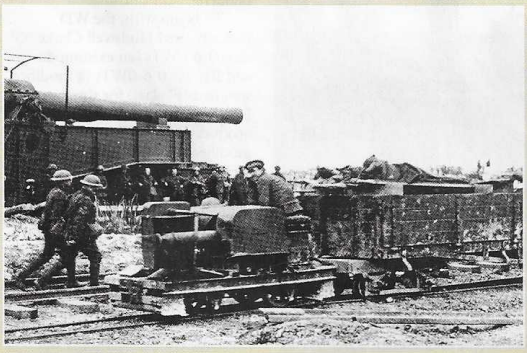
Rapid thrusts

Russia had seen the value of light military railways during its 1904/1905 war with Japan and considered how such lines would assist in resisting any attack on the eastern front by Germany and/or the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Britain, however, had taken a very different view. The problem was not that the military authorities were unaware of narrow gauge railways (such lines were used at establishments such as the 18in-gauge system at Woolwich Arsenal). The Royal Engineers had also looked at the various 15in gauge 'minimum gauge' lines promoted by Sir Arthur Heywood and seen military potential in them a decade or so prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The issue was more one of mindset as to how the war would be waged.

The leaders of the British Army had envisaged a war of movement with continued trust in cavalry as the means by which rapid thrusts through and behind enemy lines could be achieved and they reasoned that railways would be left behind in the rear.

The War Office decided, as late as the issue of 1913 Army Regulations, that lorries would be the means by which stores would be moved from main line railheads to the combat zones and no provision was made for the use of light railways at all. Considering ▶



A 20hp Simplex hauls stretchered troops past a standard gauge howitzer.

More than 100 field railway engines stored at Beaurainville at the end of 1918. IWM

the rapidity with which motorised wheeled and tracked land transport would develop later, there is an argument that this represented enlightened forward thinking – but the logic was ahead of its time.

For the lorries of the time were still very basic and unreliable and few soldiers had been trained how to drive them. The major role was still performed by horses… but this was a war in which machine guns rendered cavalry charges tragically and lethally obsolete.

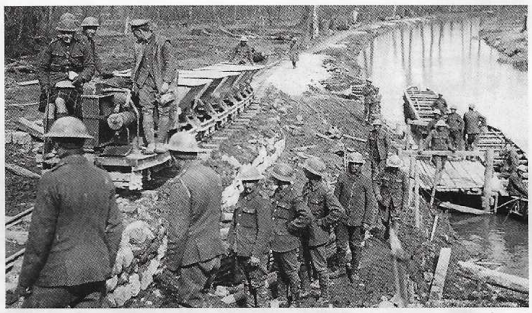
By 1915, shelling had virtually destroyed all the rural roads in the region (many of which had not been surfaced to start with) along with most of the woodland and farmland, so the countryside around had degenerated into quagmires and cratered mud. The crude motor and steam lorries of the time were struggling to maintain the supply lines, as were horse-drawn wagons.

The British began to see the value of lightweight railways and the first trench tramways started to appear, often very basic affairs utilising locally requisitioned materials. It should be emphasised just how light these lines were, normally employing 9lb/yd rail and suitable only for hand, possibly horse, operation.

During the early stages of the war, the administration, maintenance and operation of railways had, understandably, been in the hands of France, but in March 1915 Britain was asked to help. The response was the formation of the Railway Operating Division (ROD).

This took over sections of the French standard gauge network that had been allocated to the UK for operational purposes, along with tracks that had been newly laid down by the British.

The ROD was centred on the Royal Engineers, which already had among its numbers some specialist railway soldiers who had arrived with the 1914 British Expeditionary Force to work on French and Belgian standard gauge lines. It was in about February 1916 that the ROD also took on the running of narrow gauge lines built by the French.



Royal Artillery men at work on a field railway alongside the River Scarpe at Blangy, France, in April 1917. IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

The British Army in France progressively grew in size and the 1916 Somme offensive then placed additional strain on the railways. With the front lines essentially remaining where they had been a year earlier, the situation was becoming critical with the French transport network from the Channel ports to the battle zones stretched close to the point of collapse.

> "There was a real fear that the war could be lost if the flow to the front could not be maintained"

There was real concern that the war could be lost if the flow of material to the front could not be maintained.

A re-think was needed. 1916, the Secretary of State for War, David Lloyd-George, appointed Sir Eric Geddes, a departmental director at the Ministry of Munitions (and former deputy general manager of the North Eastern Railway), as Director General of Transportation to oversee the reorganisation of transport in France. Moreover, flowing from this role, he also became Director General of Military Railways and, very significantly for this story, the organisational changes he brought about included a role of Director of Light Railways, initially filled by Major General P G Twining.

The resulting reorganisation left the Railway Operating Division responsible for standard gauge lines, while the light railways serving the front were developed and operated by the new Directorate of Light Railways (although early deliveries of locos and equipment did initially run under ROD auspices until the new set-up was fully established).

A large number of men were transferred from the ROD to the new organisation and several light railway operating companies were formed, manpower being boosted by new recruits and soldiers from other army units who had worked on the railways in civilian life.

The initial plans called for 25,000 men to build and run the light railways.

A gauge of 60cm – 1ft 11⅝ins (or 2ft to all intents and purposes) – was selected to maintain compatibility with the French system, and the track featured a high degree of pre-fabrication, enabling rapid tracklaying without the skills and manpower that would have been required for standard gauge.

The need for track, locomotives and rolling stock resulted in huge orders being placed. The eventual totals ordered by the War Office for use in France comprised 665 steam locomotives, 1,083 petrol locos and 12,960 wagons. In addition, workshop and maintenance facilities were constructed.

Much of this work was undertaken by a consortium assembled by the War Office and Robert Hudson Ltd of Leeds, a well-established supplier of light railway equipment, which built track and rolling stock, but sub-contracted locomotive construction to specialist builders such as Hunslet and Hudswell Clarke.

The urgency with which the equipment needed to be supplied brought forth further issues, with British manufacturing capacity already heavily committed to war production. There was also little standardisation applying to narrow gauge equipment already in civilian use.

War Department Light Railways (WDLR) equipment eventually fell into five basic types of steam locomotive and five petrol-engined types. Even that was less standardised than on the German side, whose locomotives fell into just three basic steam designs. Indeed, the 'Feldbahn' 0-8-0T type totalled some 2,500 engines to the same design constructed by 19 different builders!

To begin with, the WD basically used Hudswell Clarke 'G' class 0-6-0WTs (an existing design) and Barclay 0-6-0WTs (a modified standard 'F' class) for shunting. For 'main line' work, Hunslet produced a 4-6-0T (basically a modified version of an existing 0-6-0T design to meet the lower axle weight requirements of comparatively light track), but it was clear British manufacturers could not produce steam locos in the numbers required – Hunslet initially produced 45 of its 4-6-0s in 13 months followed by a further order for 30 placed in 1916; an excellent effort, but simply not enough to meet what was needed.

Surviving examples of the two types of 4-6-0T steam locomotives ordered by the War Department for use on the battlefield supply lines. To the right is Baldwin No. 778, restored to steam by the Greensand Railway Museum Trust. Left is Hunslet No. 303, owned by the War Office Locomotive Trust. The two were united for this August 31, 2009 picture at the Leighton Buzzard Railway's Stonehenge Works. The Hunslet, at that time a static exhibit, has subsequently been dismantled for restoration and should return to steam at the Apedale Valley Light Railway during 2015. CLIFF THOMAS

FIELD RAILWAY STOCK IN PRESERVATION

THE Leighton Buzzard Light Railway, built in 1919 to serve the sand industry, was effectively constructed with ex-WDLR material and it is thought that the line and the sand quarries it served used as many as 100 Simplex locomotives in their heyday.

Today, the Leighton Buzzard Railway is a major centre of First World War railway equipment and its collection includes important WDLR locomotives owned by the Greensand Railway Museum Trust and National Railway Museum.

The other big assembly of preserved WDLR equipment in Britain is the Moseley Railway Trust collection, now based at the Apedale Heritage Centre, Staffordshire. The collection includes the War Office Locomotive Trust's Hunslet 4-6-0T No. 303 (HE1215/1916) and Hudswell Clarke 'Ganges' class 0-6-0WT 1238/1916 – both in the latter stages of restoration – and Kerr Stuart 'Joffre' 0-6-0T No. 3014.

The MRT is hosting a Tracks to the Trenches 1914 event from September 12-14, during which visiting locos will join Apedale residents to showcase WDLR motive power and other First World War era equipment.

There is another important collection of First World War equipment originating from Lincolnshire's Nocton Estates light railway system, which was built utilising ex-WDLR track and equipment. This is now owned by the LCLR Historic Vehicles Trust, based at the Lincolnshire Coast Light Railway, near Skegness.

Many other items of WDLR origin can be found around the country at a range of narrow gauge lines, while the North Gloucestershire Railway Trust possesses a locomotive from the German side of the trenches – Henschel 'Brigadelok' 0-8-0T No. 1091 (15968/1918).

In France, it is even possible to travel by train on a section of 60cm gauge railway that once formed part of the Somme battlefield lines.

Le P'tit train de la Haute Somme (The little train of the Upper Somme) runs on part of the one-time military network, which later served local industry, including a sugar refinery.

Pictured above, it was saved for preservation in 1970 and runs from Froissy, whose station incorporates a museum displaying First World War equipment, before climbing an astonishing zig-zag line to reach a plateau near Dompierre.

The line is twinned with the Leighton Buzzard Railway and a major ambition of the Greensand Railway Museum Trust was realised in June 2011 when its Baldwin 4-6-0T WDLR No. 778 – the only working 10-12-D Baldwin in Britain – visited France to run along battlefield lines it might well have worked on during the dark years of 1914/18.

The answer lay in the United States, where Baldwin, of Philadelphia, was already producing a 60cm gauge 4-6-0T (class 10-12-D) for French military lines in Morocco. American production capacity was demonstrated in all its might and with a slight simplification of the design to suit mass production, 45 were produced for the WD by December 1916, followed by another 350 by April 1917.

It was an astounding achievement, but even Baldwin could not undertake a further 100 requested in the same timescale, so that order went to the American Locomotive Corporation (Alco), which produced a 2-6-2T variant of the design – the trailing truck being added to smooth the loco's ride when running in reverse.

In the early years of the 20th century, production of commercially viable petrol locomotives was pretty well uncharted territory with only Baguley Cars Ltd (and its subsidiary McEwan Pratt) having some experience in this field. Matters could have been even worse had a suitable design not been available thanks to Mr T Dixon-Abbott, managing director of the Motor Rail & Tramcar Co Ltd.

His company had been founded in 1911 and was producing petrol-electric tramcars and inspection vehicles in Lewes, Sussex. Dixon-Abbott had holidayed in Germany prior to the outbreak of hostilities and noted significant stockpiles of military light railway equipment. Realising war seemed imminent, he designed a small petrol locomotive that could be mass-produced.

His pre-war attempts to interest the War Office had been rebuffed, but when the need for such motive power was finally recognised Motor Rail was in a position to rapidly start production of its Simplex 20hp 4wPM 'tractor' locomotive.

Between August 1916 and the end of the war in November 1918, Motor Rail not only turned out 950 such machines but quickly designed and produced a 40hp 4wPM Simplex type in three variants: 'Open' (with virtually no bodywork); 'Protected' (some upperworks) and 'Armoured' (full protective plating). While the latter offered some security to its driver, he was still virtually sitting on a petrol tank on wheels!

The Motor Rails were so successful that a plan to introduce overhead-electric locos was dropped, although 200 petrol-locos were built – half by Dick, Kerr & Co and the rest by British Westinghouse. They had 40hp Dorman engines driving a 30 kilowatt generator supplying 500 volts to axle-hung traction motors.

The remaining types of small internal-combustion locos ▶

Hunslet 4-6-0T No. 359 with a supply train at a location 'somewhere in Belgium'. The location is the site of an engine shed, on the right, and the date is believed to be the summer of 1917.

RIGHT: An example of an Alco 2-6-2T, a later variant of the Baldwin 4-6-0T design, emerges from the tunnel at Cappy, on the Froissy-Cappy-Dompierre line, on May 28, 2006. CLIFF THOMAS

ABOVE: Two variants of 40hp Motor Rail Simplex locomotives resident at Leighton Buzzard. Left, WDLR No. 2182 (owned by the Greensand Railway Museum Trust) is an 'Armoured' type. The top elements of the 'armour' on No. 2182 are presently replicated in wood. It is planned to restore the loco both to operation and its full original appearance in metal over the next two years. It is seen coupled to WDLR No. 3098 (owned by the NRM) which is a 'Protected' type. CLIFF THOMAS

employed by the WDLR were McEwan Pratt 0-4-0PMs (using 10hp Baguley engines) and 'Crewe Tractors' – road/rail petrol machines built by the LNWR at Crewe. The latter employed a Ford Model T engine, gearbox and axles (which were chain driven) mounted on a steel underframe, and incorporated a built-in turning plate. Neither type turned out to be particularly successful.

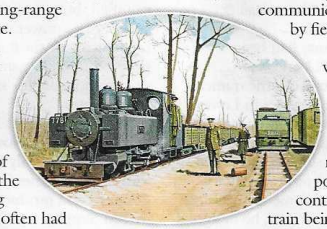
For completeness, it should be mentioned that some French locos (inherited when the British took over sectors previously operated by the French Army) were also operated. These included examples of Kerr Stuart 0-6-0T 'Joffre' class locos, built in Britain in 1915/1916 for the French military.

After the USA entered the war (in April 1917) further locomotive types arrived on the Western Front. Notably, 2-6-2T was adopted as the favoured arrangement for steam with locos very similar in appearance to the Baldwin Class 10-12-D 4-6-0T being supplied, principally by Baldwin and Alco. Others to the same standardised design were constructed by Davenport and Vulcan Ironworks, although many were not delivered until after the cessation of hostilities.

When it came to wagons, a series of standardised designs was developed for the WD, each type being defined by a letter. For example, 'D' for heavy loads (e.g. ammunition), 'E' drop side, 'F' bolster flat and 'H' water tank. Specialist vehicles were also produced on the same standardised bogie underframes, ranging from mobile workshop trains to ambulance wagons to carry the wounded on stretchers. There were also four-wheel wagons, including the ubiquitous four-wheel V-skip. WDLR stock did not include brakevans, as guards rode on wagons at the rear of the train, working hand brakes.

Once the British had taken the decision to opt for 60cm-gauge light railways, the rate of expansion was rapid. At the end of 1916, there were 96 miles of track. Twelve months later there were 815 and, in 1918, a further 768 miles of track were laid and 580 miles rebuilt (the German spring offensive having overrun or destroyed significant elements of the system).

OPERATION OF FIELD RAILWAYS: So how were the field railways of the First World War operated? The French and Belgian standard gauge main line networks, which remained (relatively) intact behind the combat areas, carried men and materials to marshalling yards as close to the combat areas as possible, while remaining beyond the reach of long-range enemy shell fire.



Generally, this was about 10 miles from the combat areas, although in the final year of the war (after the German spring offensive) this often had to be increased to nearer 20 miles.

From the yards, the network of 2ft-gauge railways was developed. The first stage – which can be thought of as 'narrow gauge main lines' (the term is comparative) – were worked by steam locomotives (principally 4-6-0Ts) from the marshalling yard interchanges to light railway depots. The depots were located close to the forward areas, but sufficiently far back as to be reasonably beyond the range of enemy artillery. Trains arriving at the depots were divided into shorter rakes before continuing forward over a series of branch lines fanning out to the various artillery batteries and right up to the trench networks.

Steam operation close to the front lines was plainly impractical (smoke in daytime and visible fires glowing at night would have been a magnet for enemy gunners), so operation from the depots to the front itself was undertaken by the internal combustion engines. Even then it had to be under cover of darkness, as many of the routes were open to observation by the enemy and likely to be shelled at the first sign of movement. In fact, it was not uncommon for tracks in the most forward areas to be camouflaged with cloth covers during daytime in an effort to prevent the enemy realising where the lines were.

There were no timetables (other than special circumstances such as the build-up to a major attack) and no fixed signalling, all communication being by field telephone. The lines were all single-track with passing loops at telephone reporting points and control posts, the train being reported back to a main control 'office' (most likely in a dugout), where its progress was tracked by tags being moved on a control board according to the telephoned reports.

The typical method of working in the forward areas was for numerous trains to set off following each other as darkness fell, taking the branches as required to deliver their loads. On the 'main' lines, trains could carry nose and tail lights, but in the forward areas illumination was too dangerous and crews relied on luminous discs at the front and rear.

Nevertheless, collisions and derailments were frequent, but with the comparatively light nature of the equipment, little damage was done and men quickly became adept at re-railing even in darkness when the use of torches could attract a sniper's bullet or a burst of shell fire.

The most extensive narrow gauge networks were principally in the Ypres sector in the north and the Somme sector in the South, with lines evolving to meet operational requirements.

The major German offensive in spring 1918 had a profound effect. Launched on March 21, 1918, the attacks broke through allied lines and achieved the most extensive territorial advances by either side since 1914.

The advance had been checked by the end of April, but by then three major workshop complexes (Berguette, Aire and Borre) had been evacuated and large amounts of light railway equipment lost.

Once the danger of a complete German breakthrough had passed, reconstruction began in June 1918 and included the extension of the narrow gauge lines all the way back into the rear areas, so that, in the event of another retreat, 60cm stock wouldn't have to be abandoned once it had reached the standard gauge marshalling yard interchanges.

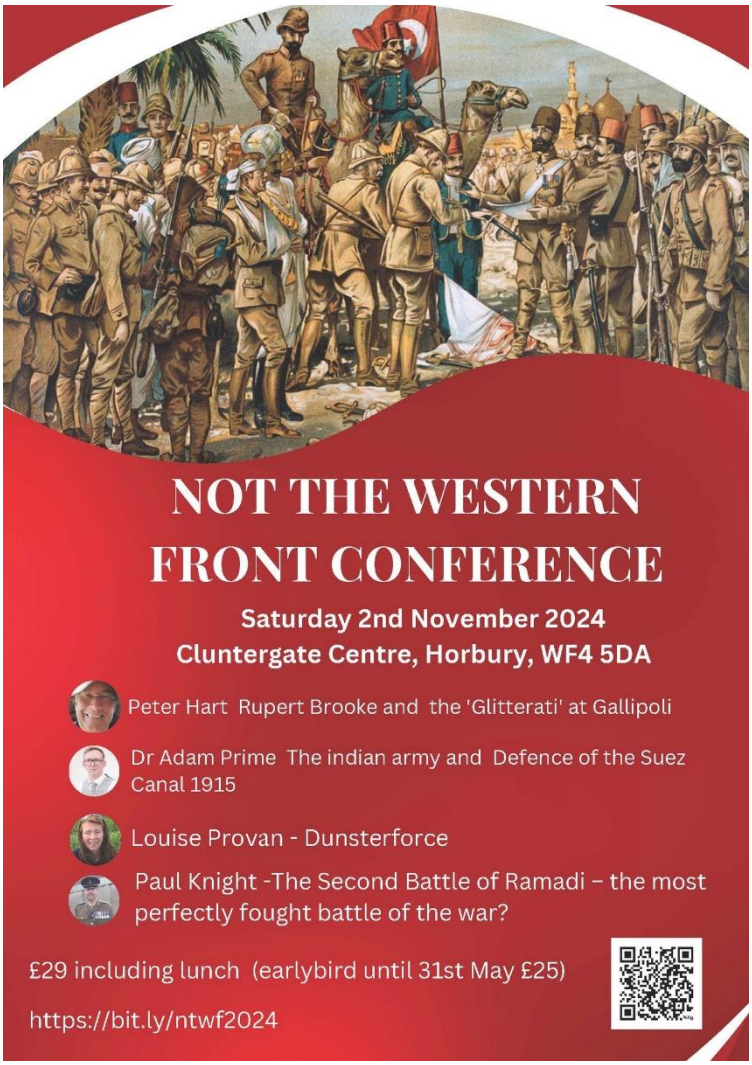
Fortunately, there were to be no more retreats and as 1918 progressed, the tide of war swung in favour of the allies – so much so that it was possible to capture and utilise enemy tracks and trains.

As previously mentioned, the Germans had realised the value of light railways in advance of the war and their systems were thus far more sophisticated. Imagine, for instance, the reaction of WDLR personnel taking over German lines such as that between Fournes and Harbourdine and finding almost four miles of double-track 60cm gauge main line equipped with semaphore signals, warning boards, speed indicators and even brick-built signalboxes! ■

The Froissy- Dompierre deceauville light railway near Bray – sur-Somme

The Great Gosling Press "Not the Western Front" Conference will take place on Saturday 2nd November in Wakefield just by Junction 39 of the M1. 4 great speakes including The Second Battle of Ramadi – the most perfectly fought battle of the war?–Paul Knight

The Second Battle of Ramadi was fought in Mesopotamia in September 1917. Perceptions of the Mesopotamia Campaign are dominated by the disaster of the Siege of Kut. Kut was an anomaly. Second Ramadi followed the standard approach to battle which shows how British Army generals wanted to fight battles. Success at Second Ramadi occurred because technology now allowed commanders to overcome the difficulties of operating in such an extreme environment.
https://goslingpress.co.uk/not-the-western-front-conferance/



Pictures from a Nurse`s Album – part 1

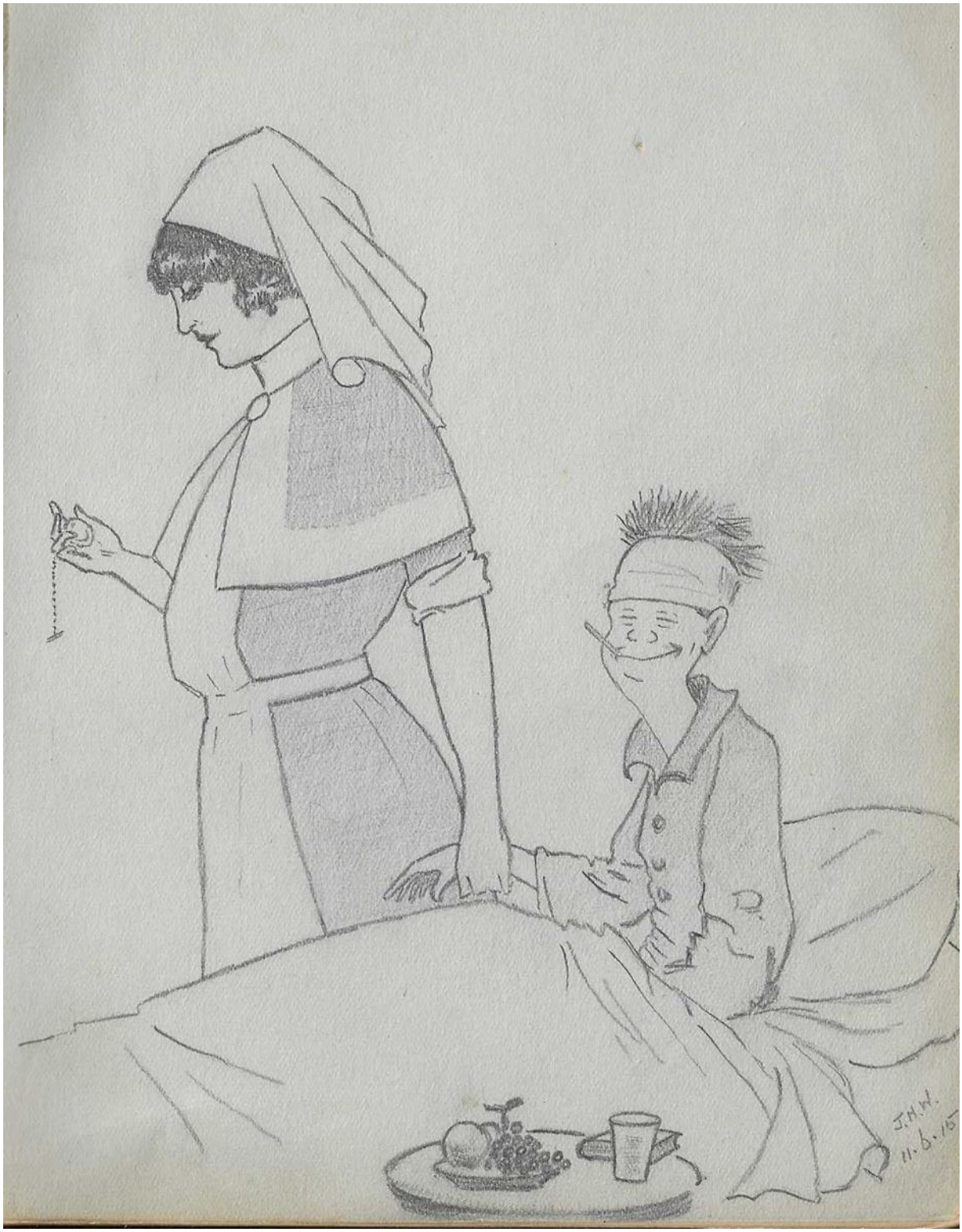
I`ve not been able to trace any notable forebears in my family from the Great War….only my Great Aunt, Mary Etchells (nee Dallow) my maternal Grandfather`s sister.Pre-war she was a nurse in London at Guy`s Hospital but went to France for a short time after women nurses were permitted to serve abroad. She spent some time at a Casualty Clearing station but she contracted rheumatic fever, probably due to the rather primitive living conditions. On her recovery she went to work at The Hall-Walker Hospital for Officers which had opened in 1914 in Sussex Lodge, the residence of Colonel and Mrs Hall-Walker. After the war she dropped off the family radar but her niece – my aunt - traced her to living in rather straightened circumstances in Helensburgh in the 1960s. She then moved to a little cottage in Girvan, Ayrshire where she lived until passing away in 1973. I got to know her during her time in Girvan and she had great recollections of nursing wounded soldiers who affectionately knew her as `Scottie`. She passed on to me a leather bound album filled with autographs, sketches, poems and cartoons written by men she nursed. It is a prized possession – that and her certificate (below)

The first picture a superb ink drawing of Mary in all her finery ready to out for a night on the town. Even in her 80s she was tall, slim and elegant….this drawing, for me captures her as a beautiful young woman.

This second picture shows her sitting in the garden of her cottage in Girvan, probably taken the year before she, sadly, had a fall and passed away.

This picture is of the certificate she received in recognition of her war service.

One of the cartoons in the album…..



To be continued…….

March Meeting.

Branch regular and vastly experienced author, Andy Rawson was our speaker at this meeting. As always Andy`s work was well researched and delivered in a manner easily understood by all our attendees. Once again our members could see the depth of knowledge and the ability to link conditions and situations together displayed by Andy.

Murphy's Law on the Somme

The term Learning Curve was first used by Professor Peter Simpkins

The phrase was changed to Learning Process, because Curve suggested a continual upward improvement

And this was not true because there were step backs as well as step forwards

So, a graph showing zig-zagging line making an upward trend is a better representation

Now I always got frustrated when reading about attacks

Narratives that said it failed so many casualties

I always wanted to know why it had failed

And my curiosity led me to believe there are five parts to the learning process

Or what I call problem solving

The same as is in any job

The Problem with Learning

The proactive parts of problem solving relate to the decisions taken before an attack:

1) **Solving a Problem:** A problem had been identified and the chosen solution worked
2) **Eliminating a Problem:** Where a problem had been identified and the chosen solution did not work

The reactive parts of problem solving relate to the conclusions drawn after an attack:

3) **Identifying a Problem:** Where a new problem arose and the correct conclusion was taken
4) **Misinterpreting a Problem:** Where a new problem arose and the incorrect conclusion was taken

But the Worst Outcome of all

5) **Oblivious of a Problem:** Not realising there was a problem at all

1 July 1916

So, we have to start with 1 July 1916

I am not going to analyse that dreadful day because it would take too long

But as others have suggested, an important point about that disastrous day

Is that the BEF carried on, despite suffered 57,000 casualties

I believe that the BEF became painfully aware of its limitations after 1 July

But rather than give up, it began learning in earnest

The aim of my talk is to look at the tactical situations faced over the next four and a half months

In particular, the four types of problems faced

a) Those posed by Mother Nature
b) Those posed by the terrain
c) Those created by the Germans
d) Those created by the British

I need to make a quick note on sources

I have used a method called Tactical Snippeting, a term devised by the late Paddy Griffith

I read a variety of official histories, unit histories, and war diaries

Because I found that units usually explain why they failed

So here goes…

Thiepval, 3 July

General Hubert Gough's Reserve Army took over north of the Bapaume road

It scaled down an attack against Thiepval down due to an ammunition shortage

So, zero hour on 3 July had to be postponed but no one told the artillery

And they had wasted their shells before the infantry advanced

My Conclusion: A lack of communication

Fourth Army

General Sir Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army

Attacked six objectives between 3 and 14 July, so, I shall look at each in turn

Ovillers

On 3 July, the smoke screen was too thin to cover the pre-dawn advance

But it was too thick on the objective, so many dugouts were missed

And it then cleared, so the reinforcements could not advance

On 7 July the wind failed to blow the smoke forward during an attack with artillery support

A pre-dawn bombing attack was then tried, followed by a surprise night attack

My Conclusions: Controlling smoke was a problem

But different types of attack were been tried

La Boisselle

The advance on 3 July was delayed by a deep trench that had been missed

A need for reconnaissance

My Conclusion: There had been a lack of ground reconnaissance

La Boisselle

Used a barrage and smoke screen against Ovillers, during a second attack

But fighting for La Boisselle raged for three days and nights

Because it required a narrow advance along the length of the village

Contalmaison

Attack on 7 July was delayed because the Germans captured the jumping off position

And the late change in zero hour resulted in the infantry walking into the creeping barrage

A second attempt captured Contalmaison but the German trenches had been plotted incorrectly

While others had been obliterated by artillery fire

My Conclusions: A lack of aerial observation and too much shelling

Quadrangle Trenches

The British artillery did not hear about the attack on 2 July

So, the Germans in Crucifix Trench were taken by surprise

A night attack on 5 July captured Quadrangle Trench

A surprise attack Quadrangle Support Trench before dawn on 7 July ran into wire

So, the gunners were given time to cut it

A late change in zero hour, then resulted in some men advancing a few minutes late

A surprise attack late on 9 July failed because the infantry again advanced a few minutes late

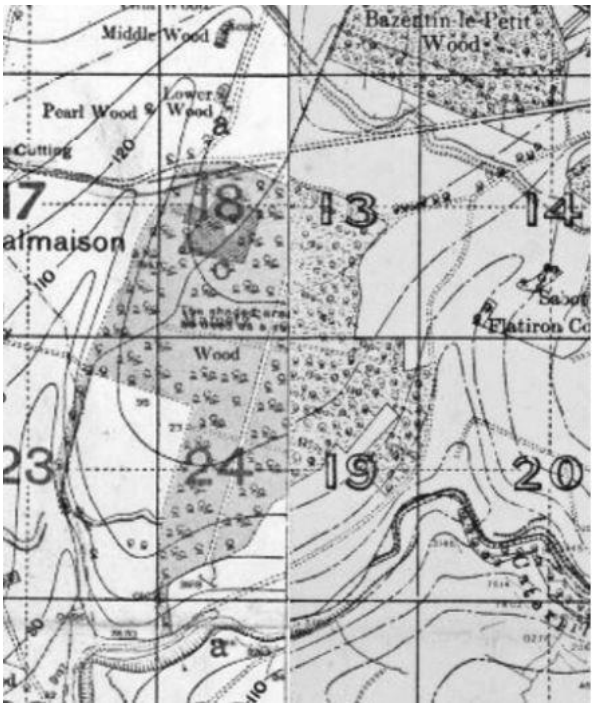
My Conclusions: Surprise attacks were being made

Still poor communication between the infantry and artillery

The whole time enfilade fire from Mametz Wood had caused casualties

Pointing to a lack of coordination between divisions

Mametz Wood



Patrols reported that Mametz Wood had been abandoned on 3 July

But vague instructions meant only a few patrols checked it the following day

Germans reoccupied the wood while a new division took over the line

Three attacks on 7 July against the Hammerhead, on the east side of the wood

Failed because wind dispersed the smoke screen

A mistake over orders meant that only a few men entered the wood that night

So, the divisional commander was replaced and an attack was planned for 10 July

The orders were issued late, resulting in a rushed deployment south of the wood

The troops became disorganised in the undergrowth as their covering barrage exploded in the trees

They then faced two problems

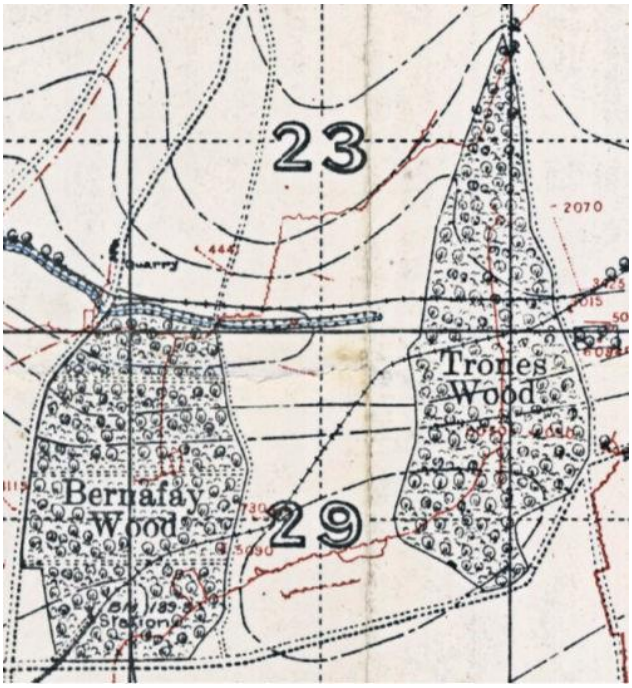
German machine guns in Bazentin-le-Petit Wood stopped them going further

And the north edge was a ranging target for the German artillery

My Conclusions: Staff work and a lack of urgency to take the wood

Woods posed a serious problem that needed thinking about

Bernafay Wood and Trônes Wood



Howitzers used thermite shells set Bernafay Wood on fire, driving the Germans out on 8 July

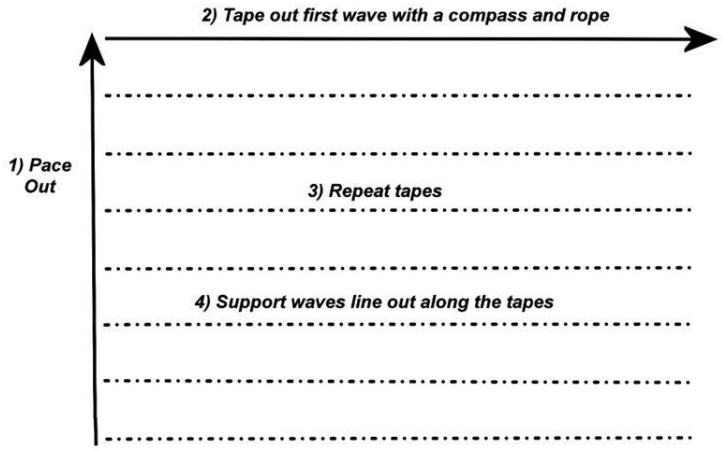
Six days of fighting for Trônes Wood followed

Eventually on 14 July, men lined out across the south end of the wood

They fixed bayonets and then walked north, firing from the hip

My Conclusions: Again, a wood was a problem and it was down to the men on the ground to sort it

Bazentin Ridge, 14 July



This was the first major attack since 1 July and it was completely different

Howitzer shells blasted craters so Lewis gun teams could deploy to protect the deployment area

Officers then used a compass and rope to locate the jumping off line

They then laid white tapes across No Man's Land in Caterpillar Valley

And then 20,000 men were directed into position in silence

Smoke was discharged towards Pozières to the north-west, to draw attention away

A short bombardment preceded the pre-dawn assault

High explosive shells were mixed into the creeping barrage

Because their explosions stopped the infantry running into the shrapnel in the dark

My Conclusion: A brilliant effort. Why wasn't this done on 1 July?

And why don't we hear more about this?

A Failure to Breakthrough

The attack was a success in the centre and High Wood was for the taking

But Fourth Army did not tell its cavalry to move forward until mid-morning

They were delayed because their approach routes had not been arranged

The order to advance into High Wood was finally given mid-afternoon

And infantry finally entered it at dusk, only to find the Germans had reoccupied it

While the cavalry was pinned down to the east of it

My Conclusion: Defeat had been snatched from the jaws of victory

Because Fourth Army had not planned adequately for success

Follow Up, 15 July

A follow up attack involved rushed planning and hurried orders

Rain prevented the use of flares to coordinate the attack, so there were delays

No time to scout No Man's Land, so low entanglements in the long grass stopped the advance

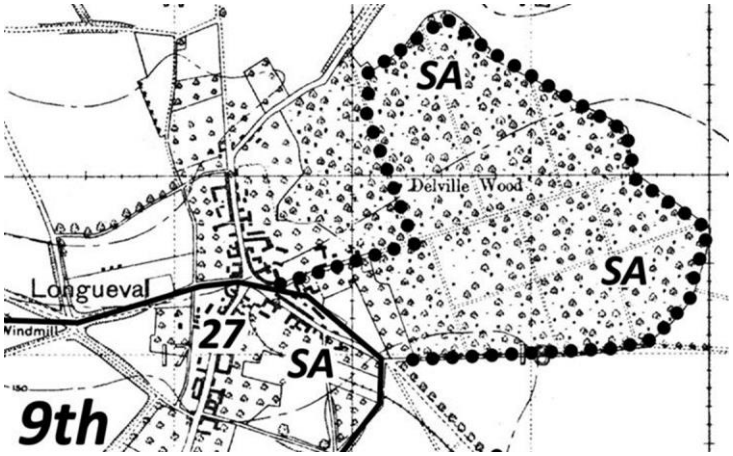
While the creeping barrage ended too soon in other areas, leaving the infantry unprotected

All the survivors could do, was to abandon of High Wood and let the artillery shell it

My Conclusion: Never rush a follow up attack

Because the artillery had little time to prepare and the infantry had little time to reconnoitre

Longueval and Delville Wood



On 15 July hedges laced with wire stopped the advance west of Longueval

Machine-guns stopped the advance through the village

Delville Wood was taken but it left the troops in a vulnerable salient

Because the British gunners could not see beyond the wood while the Germans could not fail to miss it

My Conclusions: A short-term success had created a long-term problem

A pre-dawn attack through Longueval the following morning missed many dugouts in the dark

So, there was panic when the Germans lit up the village with flares

A complicated deployment before dawn on 18 July allowed the troops to outflank the wired hedges

But a decision to allow the infantry to set zero hour in Longueval ended in disaster

No one told the gunners that the deployment had been delayed, so there was no creeping barrage

My Conclusion: Pre-dawn attacks needed thorough mopping up to secure the area

Do not let the infantry set zero hour

High Wood to Delville Wood

Progress was made through High Wood in darkness and mist on 20 July

Ran into machine-gun teams hidden in the long grass Wood Lane

And there was a disaster around Longueval and Delville Wood

One battalion never received the order to advance

The second battalion was late because its guide got lost

While German flares illuminated the third battalion

Meanwhile, a counter-attack retook High Wood

My Conclusions: Required more time for reconnaissance and more time to deploy

Guillemont

A German gas shells delayed the advance until it was light on 20 July

And then machine-gun fire then stopped the attack against Guillemont

A second attempt discovered that the bombardment had levelled the objective trenches

Two days later the creeping barrage landed on the assembly trenches, delaying the deployment

While the smoke supposed to cover the flank drifted across the objective, disorientating the troops

My Conclusions: Too much artillery fire on German trenches

Inaccurate artillery on the British trenches

Issues with smoke

Reserve Army, Pozières

Time to look at the Reserve Army along the Bapaume Road

The Australians crawled towards Pozières before dawn on 23 July

Shelling intensified west of the objective, to distract the Germans

The village was quickly taken, because they approached it side on

But it left the Australians holding a salient on a ridge and the ruins were an easy target

The next attack on 25 July overshot the objective trench because the artillery had flattened it

But a later attack north of Pozières was a success

Early on 29 July, spotted the Australians creeping forward

Because the intense part of the barrage lasted for just one minute before zero

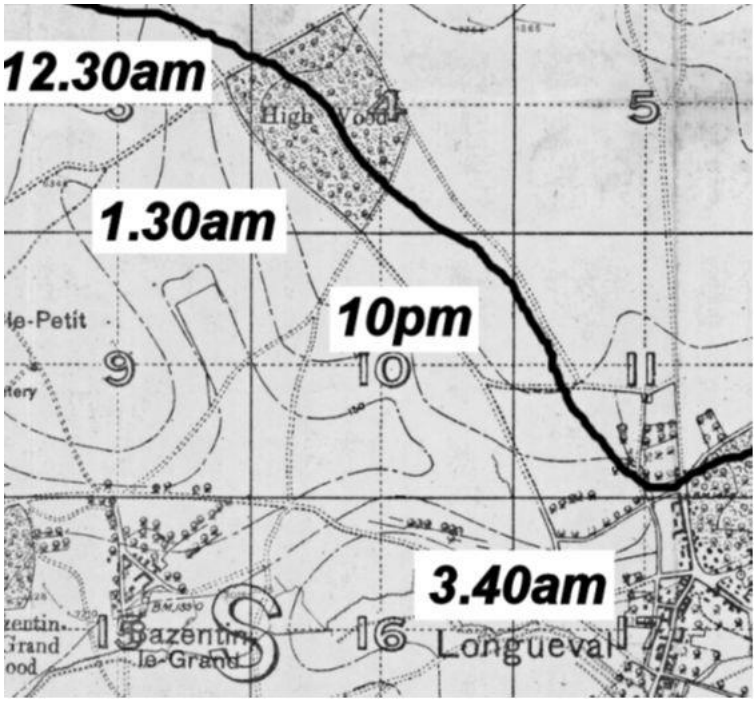
Smoke then obscured the infantry calls for a protective barrage

On 4 August, the artillery again obliterated the objective trench

So, the troops overshot it and ran into their own barrage

My Conclusions: Again, too much artillery fire on the objective

Fourth Army



Rawlinson wanted to attack all along the line but choosing zero hour was a problem

Because he had to coordinate with the Reserve Army on his left flank

And compensate for the French cancelling their attack on his right flank

He wanted every division to reach its objective at the same time

So, several zero hours were chosen over the night of 22 and 23 July; it proved to be a fatal mistake

The Germans lit up the attack east of High Wood when the first attack went in at 10 pm on 22 July

And their counter-barrage disrupted the troops assembling for later attacks

It also alerted the sentries all along the line

Flares lit up the 12.30 am attack west of High Wood and the 1.30 am advance through the wood

While the deployment in front of Longueval was delayed because

The assault troops found other troops occupying their assembly trenches

The British artillery then failed to intensify their firing before the 3.40 am zero hour

Done as a warning to advance in the darkness

The assault troops hesitated and they lost the creeping barrage

My Conclusions: It was a disastrous decision to stagger zero hours

Because it alerted everyone in ear shot

Pinching Out High Wood, 30 July

Rawlinson decided to pinch out High Wood early on 30 July

Part of Intermediate Trench, to the west, was taken in the morning mist

But the artillery wanted to observe their fire on Wood Lane, to the east

A German barrage forced the British mortars to withdraw as they waited for the mist to clear

Leaving the machine-gun teams at the east corner of High Wood free to enfilade the attack

My Conclusions: Again, a poor decision to stagger zero hours

Clearing Delville Wood

Most of Longueval and Delville Wood were cleared on 27 July

But the troops had to avoid the tree line because it was an easy target

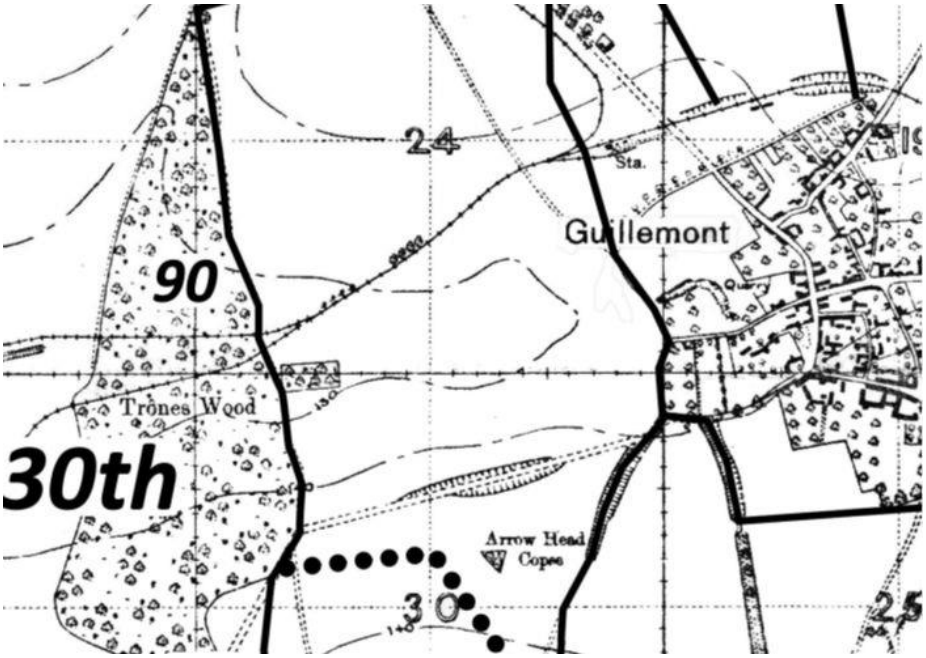
The British ground observers could not see beyond the wood

While aerial observation was still in its infancy, so the artillery could not help two attacks

One in the dark on 4 August and one in daylight on 7 August

My Conclusions: Aerial correction of artillery fire was the problem

Guillemont



The Germans used a thinned-out defence around Guillemont on 30 July

To reduce the number of casualties from the British bombardment

Machine-gun posts disrupted the advance

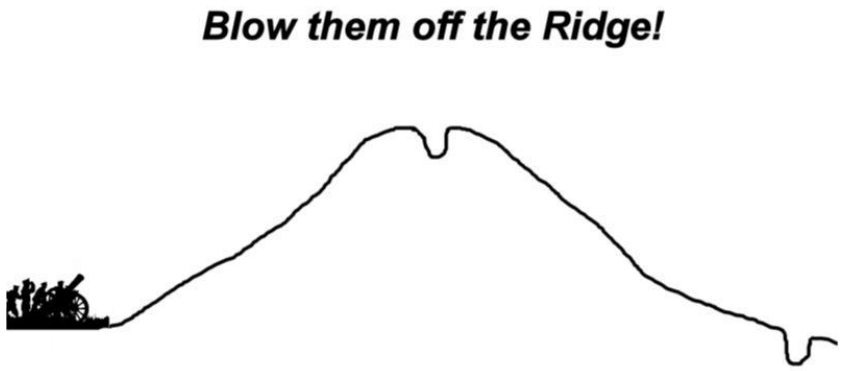
And the German reserves pounced when the British were at their weakest

Mist also interfered with the signalling, so the SOS barrage overshot the target

And Guillemont had to be abandoned

My Conclusion: The Germans employed a successful elastic defence

Reserve Army, Skyline Ridge 4 to 12 August



It took from 4 to 12 August days to capture Skyline Trench, west of Pozières

Because the German artillery targeted the ridge line every time British troops occupied it

The solution was to build strongpoints along the crest, so it could be held with a small garrison

My Conclusion: Hill crests make excellent targets but the strongpoint solution worked

Mouquet Farm

On 12 August, the gunners failed to register the German trenches beyond Mouquet Farm

And then late infantry orders resulted in the attack failing

A mix up over the artillery timetable caused the infantry

To walk into the creeping barrage in the darkness on 18 August

On 21 August, used three practice barrages to confuse the Germans

But all it did was alert them and German spotter plane called down a counter-barrage

Mouquet Farm was taken but the Germans emerged from the cellars to retake the area

A lack of landmarks meant the wrong trench was captured in the darkness on 26 August

While orders to withdraw to a safe distance on 29 August were issued late

So, the troops were hit by their own bombardment and the German counter-barrage

My Conclusions: I think you will agree that lots of mistakes were made

Reserve Army, Nab Valley

Trenches around Nab Valley had to be cleared one at a time, to avoid enfilade fire across the valley

On 18 August box barrages isolated the Leipzig Salient and Hindenburg Trench

On 23 August the attack failed because the barrage stopped a few minutes early

On 25 August a smoke screen around Thiepval drew draw attention from a surprise

On 27 August the creeping barrage hit the troops advancing on Pole Trench

My Conclusion: A difficult terrain feature was cleared bit by bit

Fourth Army, High Wood

Fourth Army still had to clear High Wood

Early on 12 August the barrage intensified and then slackened off

Fooling the Germans in the Switch Line into thinking the attack had been cancelled

Pipe pushers were then detonated under No Man's Land, making it easier to dig communication trenches

On 17 August an inaccurate map meant the artillery only shelled part of the objective

Early on 18 August the barrage landed short during the attack on Intermediate Trench

While an afternoon attack through High Wood was a complete disaster

The bombardment landed short, knocking out the British flamethrower teams

Pipe-pushers exploded short of the German trench due to tree roots

Burning oil failed to penetrate the German dugouts

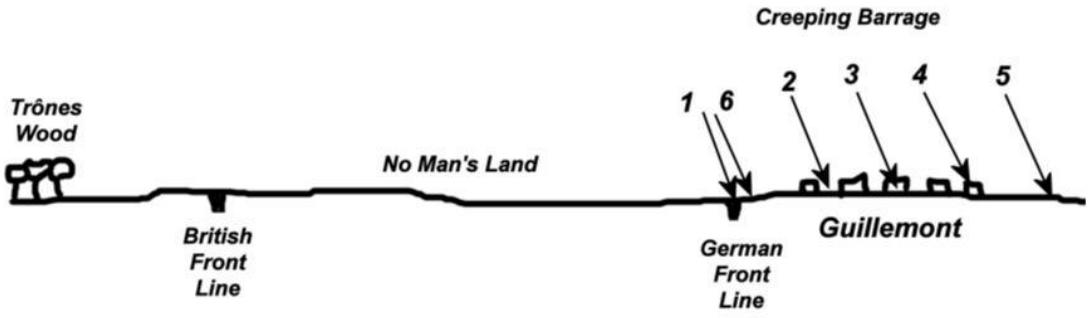
The smoke screen was fired too late to make a difference

And finally, the creeping barrage landed on the assault troops

My Conclusions: The artillery was trying different things

But they were getting the basics wrong; getting the shells on target

Guillemont, 7 August



On 7 August the barrage crept across Guillemont before dropping back onto the front trench

To teach the Germans to stay under cover during a creeping barrage

It worked but it also used a lot of ammunition

Unfortunately, many dug-outs were missed in the morning fog when the attack began

So, the Germans reoccupied their trench, leaving the British artillery unable to track the advance

On 18 August the artillery did not intensify its rate of fire at zero hour, so as not to alert the Germans

However, the assault troops failed to notice the barrage was creeping forward

Time and again the problem around Guillemont was that

Accurate German barrages stopped the support troops moving forward

My Conclusions: Difficult communicating between the artillery and the moving infantry

While the German artillery just had to hit pre-selected No Man's Land

Lonely Trench

Four attempts were made to clear Lonely Trench on a ridge, south of Guillemont

Where No Man's Land was narrow

The first time, the barrage overshot the German trenches

The second time, the infantry advanced before the barrage started

The third time, Stokes mortars failed to silence the Germans

The fourth time, the bombardment hit the British assembly trenches

My Conclusions: A narrow No Man's Land was more difficult to cross than you would think

Reserve Army

On 3 September the width of No Man's Land had been underestimated west of the Ancre

So, the creeping barrage jumped forward too soon

East of the river no one saw the signals through the mist and all the runners were hit

So, no reinforcements were sent forward

My Conclusions: Better reconnaissance and signalling

Fourth Army

There was a need to straighten out Fourth Army's line because tanks had been promised

So, I will detail each section of the line before 15 September

The main attack was made on 3 September

And Rawlinson chose not to intensify the bombardment before zero hour

It resulted in many Germans being captured in their dugouts, waiting for the final burst of shelling

High Wood

Stokes mortars were used in High Wood on 3 September because No Man's Land was so narrow

But the shells landed short and they blew up the Livens projectors and their drums of oil

The pipe-pushers again blew up short of the German trench

A mine destroyed the strongpoint at the east corner of High Wood but the crater was soon lost

On 8 September, Intermediate Trench, to the west of High Wood, was captured

While the detonation of second mine under the east corner of High Wood

Meant Wood Lane could be taken the following day

My Conclusions: Do not rely on Stokes mortars or pipe-pushers

Beyond Longueval and Delville Wood, 3 to 9 September

The first attack on 3 September was cancelled because the runners confirming zero hour were killed

The barrage crept forward at the wrong time during the second attempt

On 9 September a camouflaged trench delayed the advance east of Delville Wood

My Conclusion: Germans used camouflaged trenches to avoid bombardments

Ginchy

And now the sad case of Ginchy…

Contact was lost with the troops entering the village on 3 September

So, there was no bombardment of the ruins because it was thought to be held

An attack the following morning was a disaster

A night attack was cancelled because one battalion lost all its officers while the other was late

Troops then advanced in the wrong direction during a third attempt early on 6 September

Troops reached Ginchy during the afternoon attack

However, a German barrage prevented reinforcements from crossing No Man's Land

So, assembly trenches were dug closer to reduce the width of No Man's Land

Except no one told the artillery, so the creeping barrage hit the assault troops on 9 September

My Conclusion: What a mess… Ginchy was taken after five attempts but it had created another salient

Guillemont, 3 September

The French wanted to attack at an earlier hour on 3 September

So, a false creeping barrage was fired at their zero hour, to confuse the Germans

The bombardment intensified before the British zero to warn the troops

To follow the real creeping barrage through Guillemont

Only the advancing infantry missed a German stronghold and men had to go back to deal with it

My Conclusion: It was never easy dealing with the French

Mopping up needed to be organised better

Quadrilateral, Leuze Wood and Falfemont Farm

The French failed to support attacks against Falfemont Farm and Leuze Wood on two occasions

The British barrage landed behind and then crept over the British trenches on four occasions

Mist prevented the artillery observers from correcting the problem

Leuze Wood was finally taken but the Quadrilateral still held out

German shellfire cut telephone lines the following morning

So, no one told the batteries to support the advance beyond Leuze Wood failed

Stokes mortars failed to silence the Quadrilateral's machine guns in the afternoon

And the troops again advanced in the wrong direction early the following morning

Two more attempts to take the Quadrilateral on 13 September failed

My Conclusions: Poor artillery coordination and mist made a difficult task impossible

Planning for the Tanks

The story of the introduction of tanks to the battlefield is well known

But let me recap the basic facts; the first batch had been ordered in February 1916

Leaving Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig facing a Catch 22 situation

Allow the infantry time to train with the tanks, giving the Germans time to find out about them

Or throw the tanks straight into battle, so they would be a surprise

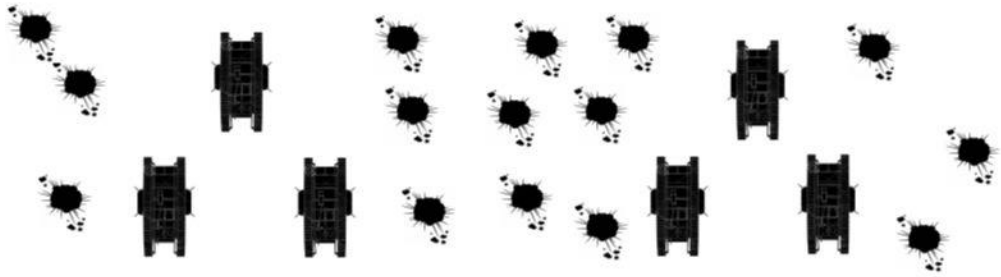
To the both the British soldiers and the German soldiers

My Conclusion: With hindsight, an early introduction onto the battlefield

Resulted in problems being raised and early solutions being found

Giving the BEF the improved Mark IV in the summer of 1917 and the Mark V in the summer of 1918

The Tank Attack, 15 September



Zero was set for when it light enough for the crews and the infantry to navigate

But dark enough to blind the German machine gun teams

Gaps had been left in the creeping barrage, so the tanks could lead

And the infantry could stay close to the exploding shells

The plan was to tell the artillery to close the gaps if the tanks broke down before zero hour

But it would be impossible to do so if tanks were put out of action after zero hour

My Conclusion: The gaps were an invitation for disaster for the infantry

Reserve Army

We shall start north of the Bapaume Road for our look at the tank attack on 15 September

The preliminary bombardment overshot Fabeck Graben on the left flank

Because it was on the flank and perpendicular to the line of the advance

But the Canadians still captured Courcelette

The artillery again overshot its flank target on 16 September

So, bombers diverted the Germans' attention before a charge over the top was made on the 20th

My Conclusion: The gunners found it difficult to shell targets at awkward angles

Martinpuich

The British artillery could not fire an accurate protective barrage to cover the final objective

Because it was on the reverse slope and could not be observed

The Germans could fire an accurate offensive barrage because had dug the trench

My Conclusion: The British troops should have dug a new trench, like others did

High Wood

The tanks could not cross the tree stumps and craters in High Wood

It left the infantry without a protective barrage en route to Crest Trench

My Conclusion: Tanks should have never been sent through the wood

Advance to Flers

A localised change in the plan had the tanks following the infantry

The men then dug in beyond the Switch Line, so the counter-barrage missed them

However, the barrage had moved on before the tanks caught up with the infantry

A 2-mile advance had been made but the troops were left in a precarious situation around Flers

The survivors were beyond artillery range and the reinforcements were too far away to help

My Conclusion: A good idea to let the tanks follow to begin with

Could cross No Man's Land slowly before moving faster across better ground

Troops dug their own trench, avoiding the counter barrage

However, a long advance left them without artillery support

Beyond Ginchy

Most of the tanks failed to reach the jumping off line, leaving gaps in the barrage

Advanced from a tight corner to a wide objective

The assault troops went in the wrong direction in the smoke and dust

So, the support battalions approached the objective without artillery support

Impossible to capture the Quadrilateral without tanks

The artillery missed the strongpoint during a second attempt

My Conclusions: The missing tanks and gaps in the barrage left the infantry exposed

But there was also the problem of fanning out from a corner

Fourth Army, Straightening the Line

15 September left a jagged front line and it was desirable to be straightened

So, the artillery could support future large attacks effectively

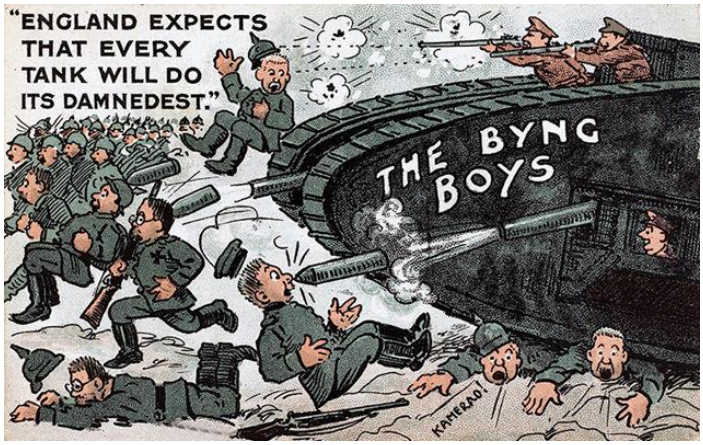
But the long advance left the artillery insufficient time to register new targets

So, attempts to straighten the line on 16 and 17 September failed

Trench by trench, the line was straightened by small bombing and surprise attacks

My Conclusion: Had to give the artillery time to settle in

An Appraisal of the Tank



Most of the tanks had broken down, got stuck, or had been knocked out

And the gaps in the barrage left the infantry exposed

Those still running had driven to their objective and back

The artillery had to catch up, leaving the infantry exposed

And while some Germans had panicked but there had been no rout

Julian Byng thought the tanks were 'a useful accessory to the infantry, but nothing more'

With hindsight, I think a lot was learnt and useful modifications would be made

Reserve Army, Thiepval, 26 and 27 September

Now we shall turn our attentions to Thiepval

The plan was to capture the ruins in the afternoon and consolidate the area before dusk

With the idea of leaving the Germans counter-attacking in the dark

The machine guns opened fire one minute before the 12.35 pm zero

The assault troops then ran across No Man's Land

While the support troops hung back to avoid the counter-barrage

The relief finished early the following morning, so the battalion commander attacked at once

And the lack of a barrage surprised the Germans and the rest of Thiepval was cleared

My Conclusion: A strong position had been taken speed, surprise, and daring

Zollern and Stuff Redoubts

Troops ran forward before zero hour on 26 September

Trapping the Germans in the cellars of Mouquet Farm

It had taken two months to take the farm

However, they had been insufficient time was given to clear the first objective

So, the creeping barrage moved too soon towards Zollern Redoubt

The following day was a complete mess

The relief took too long, so zero hour was postponed

One battalion did not hear of the change and advanced towards Zollern Redoubt

So, the gunners opened fire, to give them support

And that left them with no ammunition to support the second battalion at the revised zero hour

The Germans were surprised by the lack of artillery fire, but they held onto Stuff Redoubt

My Conclusions: Troops were not given enough time to deploy

lack of coordination between the artillery and infantry

Regina Trench

Flares lit up No Man's Land during a pre-dawn attempt to capture Regina Trench on 28 September

But the main problem was the artillery did not know where the new Canadian front line was

Because it was beyond the crest of a ridge

The preliminary bombardment overshot Regina Trench on 1 October

While the creeping barrage hit the assault troops

Early on 8 October the advancing troops approached the curved trench at different times

Which gave the Germans furthest away time to man the parapet

So, a long pause was ordered while the trench was accurately located

The bombardment was so effective that the Germans resorted to hiding in nearby shell holes

So, the barrages were moved back and forth to catch them in the open

The Canadians captured Regina Trench on the afternoon 21 October

But it was not the end of Canadian problems with their artillery

The barrage on 25 October omitted a strongpoint called Quadrilateral

So, the garrison could pour enfilade fire into the flank of the advancing infantry

The rains set in on 30 October, bringing operations to an end

My Conclusions: The artillery needed time to get their job done right

Fourth Army

Zero hour was set for 12.35 pm on 25 September

Because the French wanted to complete their bombardment after the autumn mist had cleared

So, the infantry had to deploy before dawn and then huddle in their assembly trenches

The six hours long wait in broad daylight left them tired and anxious

But the advance around Lesboeufs and Morval went well in most areas

My Conclusion: Afternoon attacks were nerve wracking affairs

An Ingenious Attack

Part of the advance had been interrupted by a trench which the Germans dug during the night

So, an ingenious attack was carried out against Gird Trenches the following day

The pilot of a plane flying overhead fired a flare to start the barrage

The infantry deployed in No Man's Land while the Germans took cover

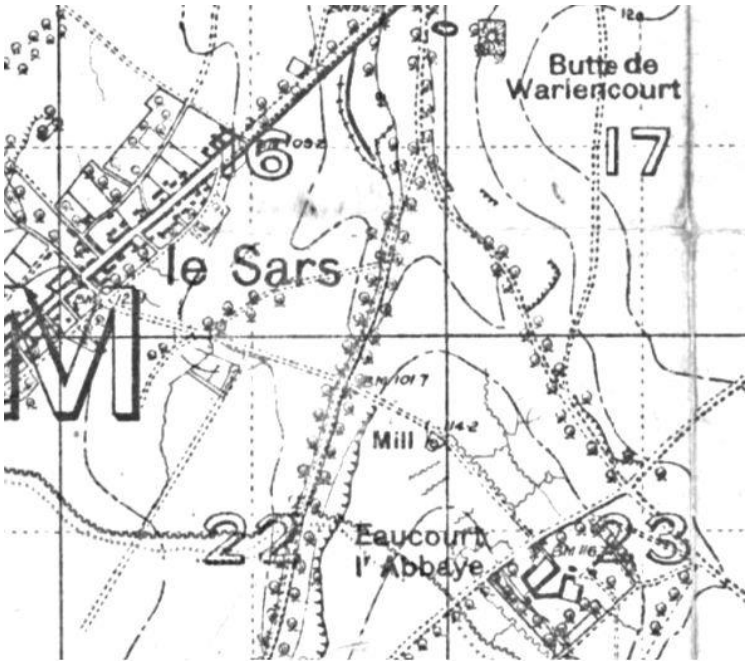
The pilot fired a second flare to stop the barrage, when he was sure the infantry was ready

He then strafed the trench to keep the Germans under cover

A tank supported the infantry as they moved down the trenches, taking many prisoners

My Conclusion: This attack is pure genius and it leaves me wondering why weren't there more like it?

The Problem of the Butte



The Germans could see everything from the ancient burial mound called the Butte

While Gird Trenches and Flers Trench were captured on 1 October

But the smoke screening Le Sars, on the left flank, drifted across the battlefield

So, the troops could not find Flers Support

So, the men next tried creeping forward to find it in the dark on 7 October

The poor autumn weather meant aerial photography was out of the question

So, a false attack, or Chinese attack, was made on 11 October

With an artillery barrage and cheering troops

As hoped, it sparked a counter-barrage, so many German batteries could be targeted

Another smoke screen on 12 October succeeded in alerting the Germans around the Butte

It then dispersing, leaving the advancing soldiers silhouetted by the setting sun

Making them perfect targets for the German machine gun teams

Before dawn on 18 October, smoke smothered the Butte

In fact, it hid the objective so well, many soldiers went beyond their objective and were never seen again

The mud meant it was becoming impossible to judge the speed of the creeping barrage

So, the infantry was given control for the first time on 20 October

They fired flares after every 50-yards, so the gunners could extend their range

My Conclusions: The Butte was proving to be a problem but tricks were still being tried

Fourth Army's Final Battles

The weather had turned the battlefield into quagmire

Mist blinded the observers and grounded the Royal Flying Corps

Rain flooded the trenches, men struggled to advance in the mud and their weapons jammed

My Conclusion: I shall leave it to Major General Philip Robertson of 17th Division:

"The weather conditions have been simply appalling and the trenches awful; men buried in mud, several deaths from exposure alone, men drowned in mud… I wonder if those behind the lines have the slightest conception of what it is like?"

Battle of the Ancre, November

But there was to be one final push on the newly named Fifth Army's front, astride the River Ancre

Zero hour was set for before dawn on 13 November

The gunners fired regular morning barrages to establish a routine

It was a foggy morning and the barrage intensified to warn the troop

A mine detonating under Hawthorn Crater was the signal for zero hour

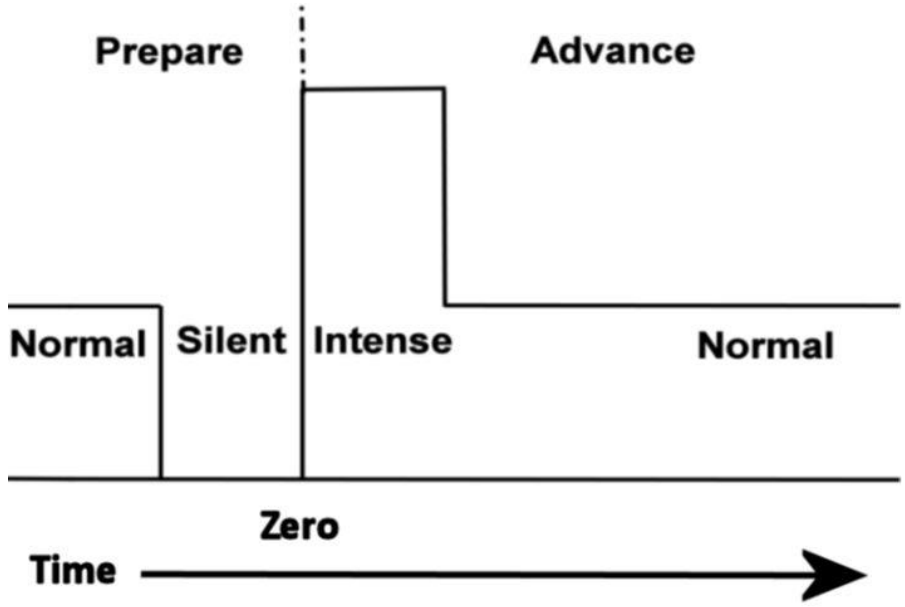
The artillery then used a double creeping barrage

All the guns hit the German trench to begin with

One in four guns then reduced their range by 50 yards

The double barrage then crept forward, keeping the Germans under cover for longer

My Conclusion: It was a useful trick to help the troops get across No Man's Land



The creeping barrage was then used to coordinate the advance in the fog

The guns stopped firing to give the infantry a five-minute-warning

They then fired at double the normal rate when it was time to move forward again

It coordinated the artillery and the infantry with sound

My Conclusion: A sound idea… which the Germans immediately picked up on

But variations on this theme would be introduced later

And now we come to the final attack on 18 November

Which ended in disaster because everyone became disorientated in the wintry conditions

It brought the Somme campaign to an end with a snowy whimper

Conclusions

So, we have seen the wide range of problems faced by the BEF on the Somme

They were either posed by the enemy, created by themselves

Presented by the terrain or thrown at them by the weather

But I hope you agree, many things had been tried; some had worked and some had failed

And some had been countered by the Germans

In summary the staff had learnt they had to consider a huge number of things

If an attack was going to be successful

This is my summary of the BEF's Learning Process, which an adaption of the rules of learning

I opened the talk with

They were first described by management trainer Martin Broadwell back in 1969

1915 Battles: Unconscious Incompetence

An ignorance of the problems and mistakes were repeated

There was little chance for experience and confidence exceeded ability

1916 Somme Campaign: Conscious Incompetence

The BEF's confidence dropped because they became aware of their limitations

But they persisted in trying new ideas as their learning in earnest begins

1917 Campaigns: Conscious Competence

The BEF's confidence increased with each success and fell with each failure

It needed to focus and adapt to the enemy reactions

1918 Advance to Victory: Unconscious Incompetence

The BEF's confidence was at a high, as new skills became good practice

Lessons learned meant that new challenges could be dealt with effectively

And that is my take on the Learning Process on the Somme

It was all going to be food for thought over the coming winter months

Because Sod's Law would come into play in the campaigns of 1917

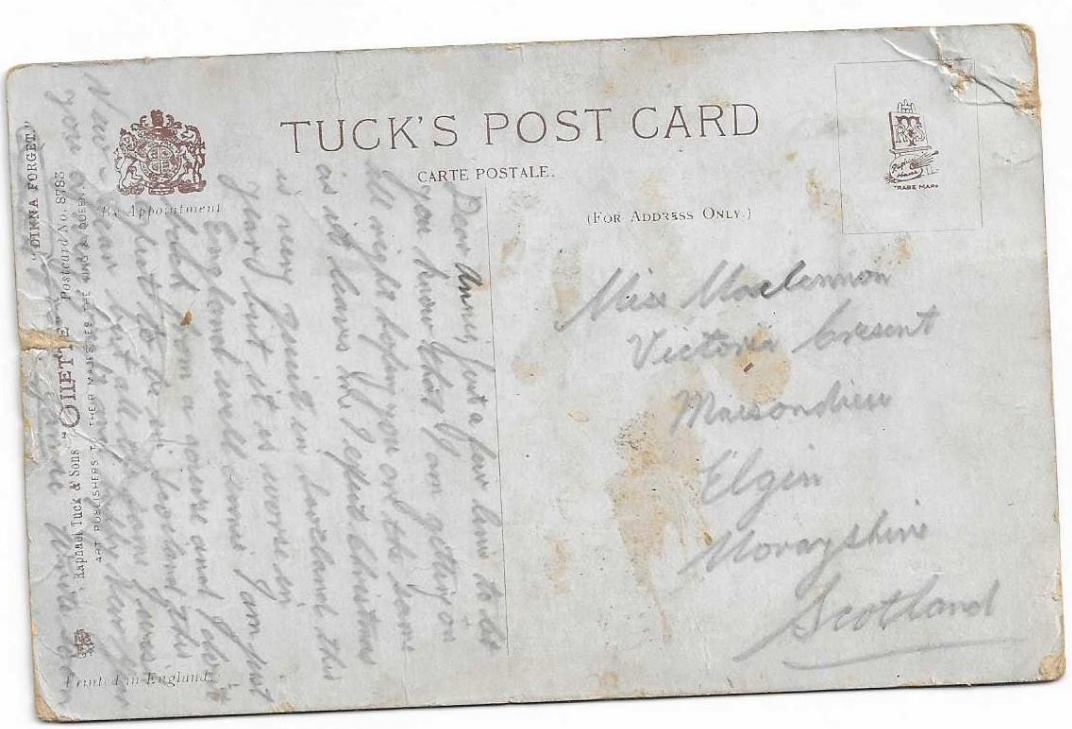
Because I am sure you know that if Murphy was an optimist, Sod was definitely a pessimist

THE LEARNING PROCESS

THE BEF'S ART OF WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914-18

ANDREW RAWSON

I have this post card in my collection…the address in Elgin is still there….



The post card is addressed to Miss McLemmon, Victoria Crescent, Maisondieu, Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland and says…..

Dear Annie, Just a few lines to let you know I am getting on all right hoping you are the same as it leaves me. I expect Christmas is very quiet in Scotland this year but it is worse in England. Well Annie I am just back from a course and don`t expect to be to be in Scotland this New-Year but all the same I wish you a very bright and happy New Year. From Jamie…….write soon

Did Jamie survive the war? Did he and Annie get together as man and wife ?…that we will probably never know

Lizzie Robinson OBE

Standing before 60,000 spectators at Ibrox Park, 21-year-old Lizzie Robinson looked swamped in her khaki overalls, as the king pinned a medal to her. In 18 months, she had not missed a shift at the Cardonald munitions factory. Seven days a week from 6am until 5.30pm and on night shifts every two weeks, Lizzie was the best time-keeper. She was the first woman to be awarded the Medal of the Order of the British Empire, an honour created in 1917 for devotion to duty but which has now been superseded by other awards

A Mother`s Love……

The remarkable Great War story of a mother reunited with her missing son
Emma McQuay always believed that her son George would return home from France, even though he had been listed as missing since 1916.
When the war ended, Emma visited the docks and searched the faces of the homecoming soldiers hoping to see George.
Emma attended every Anzac Day service. As she watched the veterans march by, she found herself staring at their faces. This ritual seemed to lift her spirits.
She always returned home with a renewed strength, convinced that George would return one day.
In 1928 a journalist visited Emma and told her that her son was indeed alive. He explained that George had languished in Callan Park Mental Hospital, ever since he had been found wandering aimlessly about the battlefield.
Authorities organised Emma's passage to the asylum. Upon arrival, the superintendent delicately explained to Emma that George suffered a severe psychiatric condition with no chance of recovery.
Emma, upon meeting George, embraced him and called out 'Darling, darling.' After a brief moment of bewilderment, George responded, 'You have been crying mum.'
Emma and George obligingly walked through the nearby gardens for the gathered photographers. Away from the prying cameras, they stood together, holding hands, Emma quietly sobbing while she gently stroked George's head.
George had only been identified after the asylum's superintendent shared his photograph with newspapers.
What had followed was a sad procession of hundreds of parents to the asylum, who had cherished through the years the flickering hope that perhaps their boy might have been wrongly reported as missing.
It was the flickering hope that Emma had harboured for George's return.
And it was the same flickering hope that compelled thousands of mothers throughout Australia to maintain their missing son's bedroom exactly as they had

left it: linen freshly laundered, flowers displayed, and clothes laid out for that improbable day they returned home.
Unlike George, they never did.

Professor Knatschke

Jean Jacques Waltz, the author of 'Professor Knatschke', was born in Alsace in 1873 just after that Department was annexed by the Germans following the Franco-Prussian war. The Germans followed a policy of enforced Germanisation of their French conquests. This was much resented by the French population of Alsace. Waltz's response (writing under the pen name of Hansi) was to ridicule the Germans. His creation, Professor Knatschke, was a particular example of their crass pedantic type. This, of course, came to the notice of the authorities, and he was fined and imprisoned on several occasions. One day, sitting in a café, he observed a group of German officers at a neighbouring table behaving in an arrogant and overbearing manner. After they left he burnt some sugar in a saucer and proceeded to fumigate the seats they had vacated. This led to a charge of high treason. Waltz was able to give the authorities the slip just a few days before the outbreak of the Great War. Escaping to France he joined the French army. Back to 'Professor Knatschke' who in 1907 made a trip to the 'Babylon by the Seine'. He found Paris overrated and not to be compared with Berlin. The Louve was disappointing, not having any of the latest German modern masterpieces. The French had not even bothered to repair the famous Venus de Milo. Any German professor of Art History could have advised on how to fix it. In order check out on French morality Knatschke and his friend hit upon a cunning ruse. "We had thought we would make both our wives walk along by themselves in front of us. We took up our positions some twenty paces behind them, never losing sight of our German wives, we looked out intently to see how long it would be before some saucy Parisian should dare to annoy our wedded halves." Although the street was crowded with French soldiers and working men the ladies were able to pass by unscathed. As a good German the Professor took note of the military with a view to reporting his findings to the War Minister. He regarded the French flying machines as harmless weapons. They buzzed around in a disorderly fashion "time and time again we could observe a plain single-decker aeroplane overhauling a double-decker, its undoubted superior in military rank: nor did the monoplane pay any outward marks of respect to the bi-plane, or keep its proper distance, but just insolently flew on in front. To be fair to the Germans, many of them also found Hansi's Professor Knatschke amusing. Germans remained figures of fun in a similar vein during the war I bought my copy of 'Professor Knatschke' some 50 years ago, and only recently came across it again. The question of Alsach and Lorraine and the response of the inhabitants and German authorities to the war is one of interest.