

# THE Poppy





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# CONTENTS

[click the page number to go to the page]

3 From the Editor

3 Pat Moren's Funeral

4 The 1918 Spanish Influenza  
Epidemic and Covid -19

7 The Railway Operating  
Division, Royal Engineers

10 Langley Vale Wood

## Covid-19 Update

Due to the present Coronavirus restrictions, all Thames Valley Branch meetings are cancelled. If this changes, members will be informed by e-mail and the information will also appear on the WFA Thames Valley Branch Facebook page

## Contacts

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The photograph on the front cover was taken by Roger Hoyle FRPS  
The location is Hill 62 which is near Sanctuary Wood



I did not expect to be editing another issue of *The Poppy that would* appear during "Lockdown", but at least this time we have the prospect of an effective vaccine to which to look forward.

Usually the bulk of Thames Valley's newsletter contains the Dedications that have been read out at our previous meetings plus the list of forthcoming speakers. Without those sections I am afraid this issue is a little thin. However, there is a fascinating article by Bruce Cherry on the parallels between the present Covid pandemic and the influenza pandemic of 1918-20 plus another from myself about the Railway Operating Division, Royal Engineers.

Although we have not had any Branch meetings, the W.F. A. nationally has been running regular "Zoom" talks on Monday and Thursday evenings. These can either be accessed via a Zoom link (which gives viewers the opportunity to ask questions at the end) or can be watched as a "broadcast" on the W.F.A. Facebook page. They are also recorded and can be watched later on the W.F.A. YouTube channel.

Audiences are usually large with viewers from as far away as the U.S.A. and Australia!

A new initiative for 2021 is online "Virtual Battlefield Tours" for Association members only - the "Webinars" on Facebook are available to anybody, members and non-members free of charge. Six such tours have been announced so far: there is a cost and a limit of 60 people per tour (and, at present, only one tour per member) but all are already fully booked - information can be found on the W.F.A. website.



**The late Pat Moren at the Private Memorial to 2nd Lt Charles Fletcher Hartley of the Coldstream Guards who died on 27th November 1917. The memorial is to be found between Bourlon Wood and Fontaine-Notre-Dame, on the Cambrai battlefield**

Image taken by the Editor on the 2006 Battlefield Tour

In spite of the limitations of Covid, Don and I were able to attend the funeral of branch member, Patrick Moren on Monday 16th November.

We both felt that in spite of all the difficulties, it was very well done and certainly well attended with over 20 people present; all socially distanced. Rita had told me that she preferred the West Berks Crematorium and did not want Pat's funeral to be at the one in Reading.

Pat had travelled widely in his life, living all over the place both growing up and through his working life. His career was in the retail trade and he moved his long-suffering family more or less every couple of years!

However, he had settled in our area a long time ago and had been a member of Thames Valley branch for around 30 years. His father served through the Great War and had been a committed member of the Western Front Association. He lived until he was 99. Pat then felt that he should join the WFA in his father's memory. He attended branch meetings regularly and accompanied us on several branch tours over the years. He treated us to an account of the Last

Stand of the Munsters at Etreux on one tour, in the cemetery where many of the Munsters are buried. Another year, on a tour to the Arras battlefields, he gave an account of events his father was involved

in near Croisilles. I don't think any of us present have ever forgotten those presentations. As a final tribute, his nephew Michael has also now joined the association to keep up the Moren family tradition. Although Michael is not in our area, I have added him to the email distribution list. I feel sure that Pat would be very touched by this gesture.

**Barbara Taylor**



# The 1918 Spanish Flu and Covid-19

Bruce Cherry

It stalked into camp when the day was damp  
And chilly and cold.  
It crept by the guards  
And murdered my pards  
With a hand that was clammy and bony and bold;  
And its breath was icy and mouldy and dank,  
And it killed so speedy  
And gloatingly greedy  
That it took away men from each company rank.  
*From 'The Flu' by Private Josh Lee, AEF 1919*

Next time I lead a lead a tour of Verdun and the Meuse Argonne, I will, as usual, make a point of visiting the massive, 130 acre American Military Cemetery at Romagne-sous-Montfaucon. It is America's largest cemetery in Europe, nearly half as big again as the Normandy D-Day cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer.

I normally do this to provoke a reassessment of the Doughboys' contribution to the successes of 1918. It has been fairly common over years' past to hear less well-read Great War devotees disparage the American contribution to the war effort; 'late as always ... chaotic ... disorganised ... badly led ... gung-ho ...' etc. Standing amid 14,249 crosses, most of which commemorate men who died over a barely six-week period, challenges

such dismissive comments, and demands a reassessment of any such prejudices.

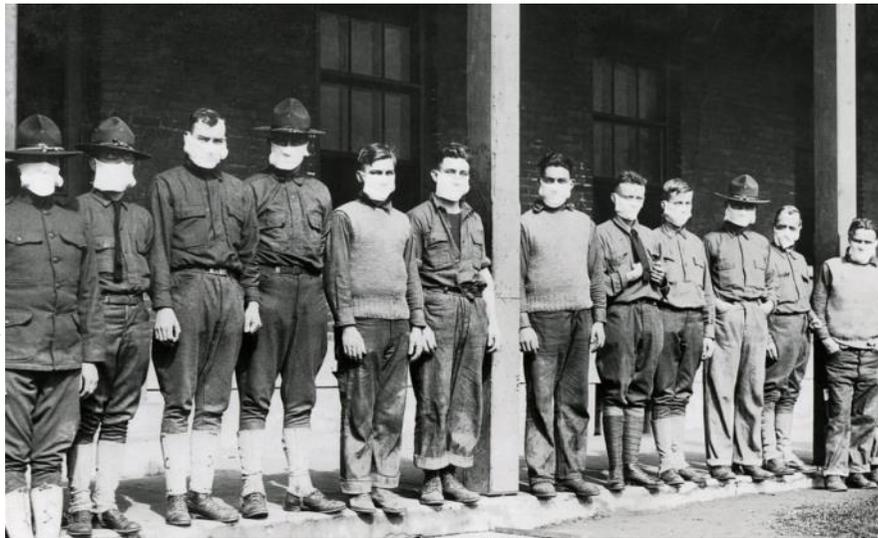
What will surprise tour participants, however, is that the first headstone we will stand over will not be that of a Legion of Honour winner (there are nine there) but that of Private John R. Adams whose headstone records his death as November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1918. Why Private Adams when there are so many other headstones that would lead us to stories of courage and sacrifice?

Because young John's life was cut short not by German bullet or bomb, or deed of derring do, but by Spanish flu. The shock and experience of the current pandemic is no doubt going to make us reconsider the impact of the 1918 'flu' on the course of the last year of the Great War, and demand a greater understanding of what led young John Adams and countless others to their deaths at the hands of an unseen enemy.

John's death was just one of the 15 849 in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) who died of the flu. While the pandemic hit all armies, it appears - with morbid parallels to the 2020 global mortality rates - to have been at its deadliest among the Americans. The 'visitor from Spain'

killed at least another 30, 000 men at AEF training camps before they could even embark to France and, in total, 26% of the U.S. Army (over one million men) were infected.

Of course, flu was not just within the ranks of the AEF. The medical history of the Great War records that a total of 313,000 Tommies were infected on the Western Front during the first and second waves of early Spring and Autumn, 1918. The German Army recorded just under three-quarters of a million men as infected. French figures are hard to find but the French Army was evacuating 1500-2000 cases of influenza to the rear of the front per day in May 1918,



**American troops wearing face masks during the 1918 influenza pandemic**

during the first wave of the pandemic.

A third wave occurred during the initial months of 1919, while a final fourth wave spread during the first months of 1920. These took out many men who had stayed on the continent as part of battlefield clearance operations, further adding to the flu's grim harvest.

Cynicism aside, these statistics are probably as reliable as the ones we are currently fed. When we still have disagreements over the number of total war dead, it seems unlikely that we will have accurate measurements of mortality from a disease that was as little understood then as it is now.

More interesting than conjecture over the numbers, however, are those debates on where and when the disease first started, and, for the student of 1918, its impact on end-of-war strategy. They are as contentious, however, as the current 'blame game' over responsibility for the current strain, and over the efficacy of contemporary Government strategy in reacting to it. Perhaps Lloyd George and others were fortunate in not having the press we have today.

In terms of its gestation, it is now generally agreed that it did not come from Spain. It got branded as such as the war-neutral Spanish Government was more transparent in its early reporting of the pandemic than the heavily-censored combatant countries whose honesty was similar to that of Iran, Pakistan and North Korea today.

One popular school of thought pins the disease's origins to Camp Funston, a U.S. Army training camp in Kansas. Interestingly, Chinese camp workers got the blame then, too.

Another more controversial account, however, speculates that the beginning of the pandemic occurred in a British military base at Étaples, where there was an outbreak of a contagious respiratory illness in late 1916, early 1917.

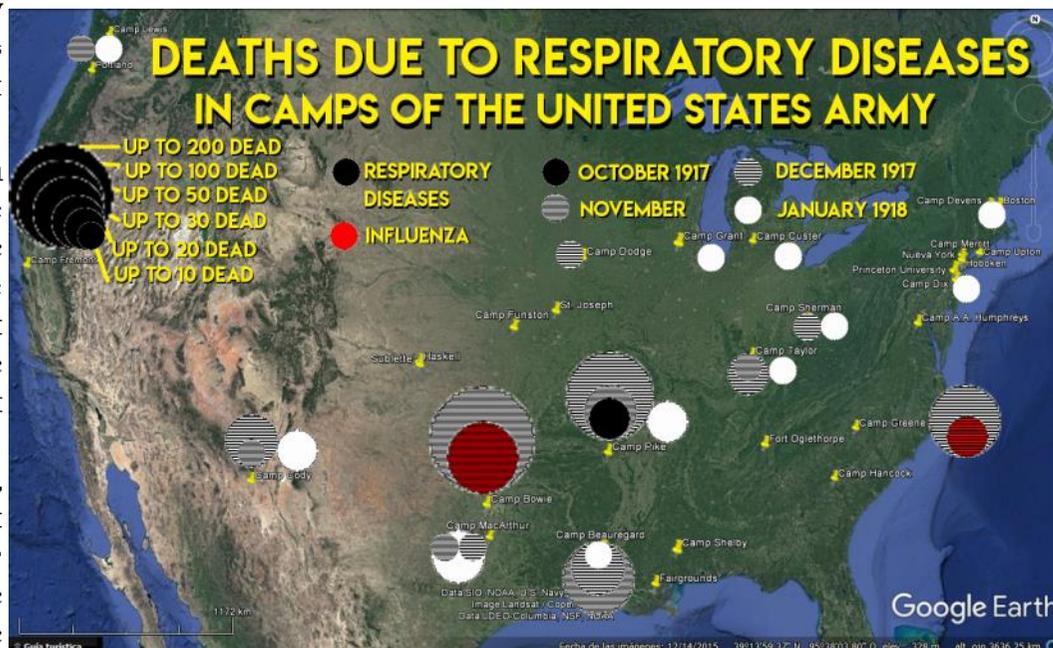
It is conjectured that the disease could have had its origins in the farms of area whose animal products fed the troops - the animal's health having been affected by mutagenic war gasses that were stored and tested in the region. There was also an outbreak at home in Aldershot in March 1917. Apparently, the symptoms and physical signs at both Aldershot and Étaples were similar to those of those later waves dubbed as 'Spanish'.

Another earlier Western Front source candidate can be traced to Indochinese soldiers (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) fighting in France from 1916. Several epidemics of acute respiratory infections that broke out among these troops, in turn spreading to the *Poilu*, were noted at the time as '*Annamite pneumonia*'; Annamite being the name of the old Indochinese kingdom. Not too

distant from being described as 'Chinese flu'.

Like the current pandemic, we are probably never going to know the true origins. But is its impact on the conduct of the war itself more easily assessed? There are certainly many indications that the disease put the military planners on the back foot.

Within the context of the British Army, Siegfried Sassoon, in his fictionalized autobiography, hints at the impact of the disease on military operations: "The influenza epidemic defied all operation orders of the Divisional staff, and during the latter part of June more than half the men in our brigade were too ill to leave their billets."



Captain Geoffrey Keynes of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) recounts that "There were rows of corpses, absolutely rows of them, hundreds of them, dying from something quite different. It was a ghastly sight, to see them lying there dead of something I didn't have the treatment for".

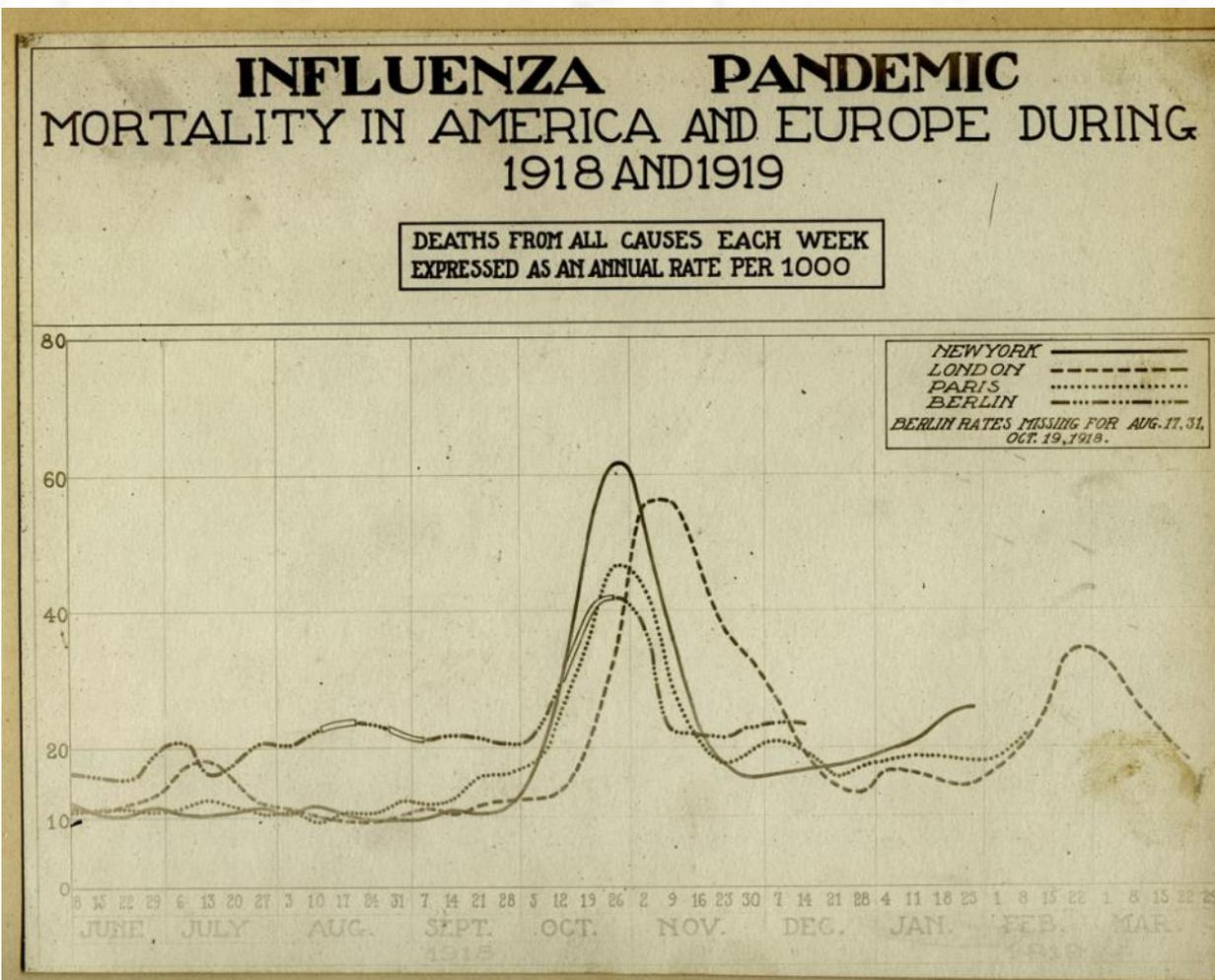
It was not only British Army planners that had cause to rue the casualties of the 'hidden' enemy. Did our great victory of August 8<sup>th</sup>, Germany's 'Black Day' of morale collapse, and then the subsequent Battle of Amiens, have more to do with the weakening of the opposition through flu than the undoubted courage of Aussie and Canadian forces? General Erich Ludendorff acknowledged the problem:

"Influenza was rampant... It was a grievous business having to listen every morning to the chiefs of staffs' recital of the number of influenza cases, and their complaints about the weakness of their troops if the English attacked again ... it often left a greater weakness in its wake than the doctors realised".

A weakness perhaps the German High Command understood much better, but likewise had no answer for?

By the late summer of 1918, the disease was rampant throughout the Western Front with an estimated 32% mortality, which puts our current maximum of 3% into context. In mid-October, during the height of the

Meuse-Argonne offensive, deaths from influenza in the AEF reached 1451 reported fatalities. Even General Ludendorff noted on 17 October that "the fighting power of the Entente [Allies] has not been up to its previous level ... the Americans are suffering severely from influenza". The Yanks strategic success, patently, was not stymied as it continued to rip through the Germans faster even than the flu. But perhaps the generally fitter Americans were more than a match for the German soldier with



**A graph with many similarities to the ones that appear on our TV screens during the daily briefings from Downing Street**

four years of debilitating war behind him.

What could the military planners of any side do to stop this pandemic? There was no way of controlling the spread of the disease in a war-ravaged Europe. What chance of social-distancing in a barracks or trench? All travel in 1918 was essential if it involved chasing the enemy back to the Rhine.



'Foreign' travel was characterised by multi-national troop movements to and from the line and into the rear of billets and base towns on leave. No wonder it became a global pandemic.

As for the men, 'furloughing' – ironically then a word more often used in a military context – was definitely not an option, and not even the brassiest 'lead-swinger' would have got away with 'Sorry, Sarge, but I'm quarantining' when ordered over the top!

When we stand over John Adams headstone, discussing these many aspects of the 1918 flu, it will sobering to note that the disease did not discriminate between nationality; colour of uniform or skin; soldier or civilian; gender; the rich or poor; the anonymous or the famed; the young or old, as it appears to in some ways today. The Meuse Argonne American Cemetery is not the only one where we could stand over a Spanish Flu headstone to illustrate that point. There are those of the Chinese Labour Corp at Liejenshoek and the nurses of Queen Mary's Army Auxilliary Corps at Wimereux. At Y Farm CWGC Cemtery, Bois Grenier, the same date as etched on Adam's headstone, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, is also on the headstone of Australian born, George R.D. Moor, VC MC and bar, Lieutenant in the Hampshire Regiment. From Gallipoli to France he'd ridden his luck; he could not out ride the flu.

Battlefield tours are certainly going to have a newly added dimension from 2020, and we will doubtless not walk past those headstones recording October and November deaths with quite the same feelings as we might have on past visits.



**Lt G R D Moor  
VC MC & Bar  
and  
his headstone  
in Bois Grenier  
cemetery.**



# The Railway Operating Division Royal Engineers

## Niall Ferguson

It had been obvious for some years prior to 1914 that any major European war would require extensive use of the rail network to transport war materiel and troops, and although the amount of logistic support planned fell far short of later requirements, upon declaration of war the three Special Reserve companies of the Royal Anglesey & Monmouth Royal Engineers (RE) were mobilised, and, together with the 8<sup>th</sup> Railway Company RE, which departed from Longmoor for France with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on 14<sup>th</sup> August, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Railway Company RE, mobilised at about the same time, formed the total of five companies of specialist railway personnel which were available to the British army at the outbreak of the Great War. These personnel were all concerned with the operation of Standard (4ft 8½in) Gauge lines (known to the ROD as Broad Gauge Companies) and this article will confine itself to that gauge and ignore the enormous narrow gauge network that eventually existed behind the front lines.

When the German army overran Belgium only a small proportion of a total of 3,470 Belgian locomotives were not either destroyed, or captured by the Germans. One source makes this figure as low as 81, but the Official History implies that up to 800 evaded capture, and later evidence makes that a more likely figure. Whatever the true numbers, these were of many types, and almost all required an extensive overhaul before they were fit for service.

A Railway Operating Troops Depot was established in the Longmoor area in April 1915, and over the next 48 months it trained nearly 500 officers and over 26,000 soldiers, who went to form a total more than 40 British ROD (RE) companies, as well supporting four Australian, three South African and two Canadian operating companies. Meanwhile, in the spring of 1915 arrangements were made for the British forces to hire twenty-five of the Belgian locomotives, and temporary workshops were arranged in a sugar factory at Pont d'Ardres, near Calais, where they were overhauled.

In November 1916 a further large repair shop was established alongside the R.O.D. engine shed at Borre, where heavy repairs were to be carried out on a further 148 locomotives, although by the end of 1917 only seven locomotives had actually been repaired. Light repairs to a further 423 locomotives were undertaken by the Belgians themselves at Oissel, near Rouen.

Although the ROD initially only operated military spurs off the existing French rail network, by the end of 1915 the French railway companies were finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the demands made on them, a shortage of locomotives and rolling stock being the principal problem. In November 1915 the BEF formally requested assistance from the British railway companies, and by the end of that year 45 British locomotives had been transferred across the Channel, a number that would eventually reach nearly 700, along with no less than 20,000 wagons.

Apart from the Belgian locomotives, locomotives were initially loaned by various British railway companies. The first to arrive were eight South Eastern & Chatham Railway tank engines in April/May 1915, but it was early 1916 before such locomotives started arriving in any quantity, by which time arrangements had been put in place to purchase other standard gauge locomotives from the United States. During 1916 a total of 66 locomotives arrived in France from the UK (including 44 from the London & North Western Railway and 14, originally intended for Holland, direct from the builders, Beyer-Peacock, Manchester) as well as the first batch of 28 Baldwin 0-4-0STs from the USA.



**The South Yard in ROD depot at Saint Etienne in France with American Baldwin 2-8-0 locomotive No.1397. Two Belgian 0-6-0 locomotives can be seen in the distance.**

During 1917 no less than 501 locomotives were shipped across the channel, with batches coming from every major railway company in the United Kingdom, principally from the LNWR (52), Great Western Railway (73), Midland Railway (78), but with 25 coming from as far away as the Caledonian Railway in Scotland. Included in the total were also the first 32 examples of the "Military Marys" or ROD 2-8-0s, of which a further 240 arrived in 1918: a further 427 new standard gauge locomotives also arrived from the USA during 1917 and 1918.

By the middle of 1916 the ROD was operating lengths of previously French lines, and handling both civilian and military traffic. By 1918 it

was responsible for over 1,000 locomotives, and more than 20,000 wagons, and was operating not only the rail network supplying the British and Empire armies, but also part of the French Nord network (that was because the ROD had to maintain spare capacity to cope with military advances, and were thus able to take over running civilian services, as they could withdraw them in time of need, whereas the Nord company barely had enough capacity to cope with their military supply activities).

Standard gauge support for the British was already difficult at the end of 1917 as Le Havre and Dieppe were the principal ports of supply and were separated from the front line by the River

Somme which had only four rail crossing points. Those were able to cope with a maximum of 140 trains per day.

That was just enough for a stable front but periods of action might need up to 212 trains daily.

The German attack of March 1918 produced major problems for the railheads. The major rail centre of Amiens, through which 80% of traffic passed, was nearly taken and remained under shellfire. So too did Hazebrouck Junction, the St.Pol-Bethune and Bethune-St.Omer lines, and the Amiens-Arras line, which had always been used for coal trains from the northern French coalfields, was behind enemy lines for much of the stretch between Albert and Arras.

One of the main purposes of the Amiens attack on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1918 was to relieve pressure on the rail network and the advance was closely followed by Canadian railway troops who by 16<sup>th</sup> August had opened up railheads only four miles behind the front at Villers Bretonneux, Marcelcave, Wiencourt and Guillaucourt.

Logistic requirements during the Hundred Days were immense, and put an enormous strain on the rail network. The usual size of a standard gauge supply train was 300 tons. The ammunition expended during the 24 hours from midday on 28<sup>th</sup> until midday on 29<sup>th</sup> September was greatest for entire war. In June 1918 ammunition had needed 16 trains per day but on 24<sup>th</sup> September no less than 33 trains were sent.

However, such trains also grew longer (increasing on average from 27 to 33 wagons) as the heavier guns were left behind, and a shortage of empty wagons became a problem. To keep the rapidly advancing front supplied there would be a single (or possibly double) line of track closest to the front, where rail was being laid or repaired. It was the absolute limit of rail access, and needed trains of ballast, pre-formed track sections and railway construction troops to keep the track moving forward.



**Members of the Chinese Labour Corps transfer heavy shells from a standard gauge French covered van into a narrow gauge wagon**

The main railheads, fairly large goods yards with many sidings to unload trains, could be up to 25 miles behind the front, and makeshift advanced railheads with limited siding space were often constructed closer to the advancing front. This obviously put a great pressure on the railway construction troops, who had to juggle the needs of advancing a developed rail network with the acute need to move ammunition and similar as far forward as possible.

By the beginning of September 1918 the General Staff were already planning to open rail routes through Dunkerque into Belgium, and from Calais to Liege and on to Namur in 1919. Immediately after the Armistice work stopped on all lines except the routes through Belgium plus a third one via Courtrai. The line Valenciennes-Mons-Namur-Liege was, therefore, the only line operated to the German frontier plus the lines from Cambrai to Le Cateau, from Lille to Mons, and from Courtrai to Audenarde. Traffic became much more difficult because of the need for civilian, leave, and POW trains, plus the precipitate abandonment of occupied territory (particularly Belgium, where they feared retaliation by the population) by German railway troops. A return to peacetime conditions also saw the re-

currence of vandalism, and such was the damage to leave trains that recourse was made, as during the war, to the use of open trucks with huts on them plus heating stoves. However, so great was the need for these for the civilian population that the stoves were almost invariably stolen. In an effort to stop these they were bolted to the floors of the trucks, but that merely resulted in the floor being removed along with the stove – repair gangs were stationed at all the termini but even so 2-3 trips was all that was possible before trains became unserviceable.



# Langley Vale Wood

Barbara Taylor

I wonder how many of you know about this? I knew nothing, but a friend of mine, who lives quite close by was keen that I visit. Julia is a very keen photographer and has been visiting there for a while, observing progress on the project.

Langley Vale is the largest of The Woodland Trust's four Centenary Woods to commemorate the sacrifice of so many in the Great War. It was opened by Princess Anne in 2015. The other three woods are one in each of the other home nations. The wood covers 640 acres and is a haven for wildlife; both fauna and flora, with some 59 species of animals and birds and over 300 species of plants and trees.

The area was the site of Tadworth Training Camp during the Great War and is very close to Epsom racecourse. It comprised eight camps and at its peak, some 8000 soldiers were billeted here to learn the rudiments of trench warfare.

November, when I visited, is their Month of Remembrance and along the way was a Remembrance Wreath, equipped with leaf cut-outs and pens for you to leave your own message. Mine was on behalf of the branch.



## Walks in Langley Vale Wood



The main attraction, though is the Regiment of Trees. 12 life-size stone sculptures depicting both civilian and military personnel, to commemorate an inspection by Lord Kitchener in January 1915. I am not a feminist, but I would say that I immediately noticed not one of the figures represented women and I feel that should be corrected. One area, Jutland Wood, is to tell the story of the RN at Jutland and new sculptures are to be erected there.

The Covid pandemic of 2020 has seriously disrupted their programme of work, including new paths, a car park and visitor centre. I commend you all to visit a lovely, peaceful area of woodland. I am looking forward to going again in the spring/summer. Julia said that the whole area around the sculptures was a sea of wild flowers, including, of course poppies.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/woods/langley-vale-wood/>



The Memorial Plaque with figures behind

