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## Covid-19 Update

Thames Valley Branch meetings have now resumed at Berkshire Sports and Social Club. The bar will be open as usual, but no food will be provided.

## Contacts

Should you require any information relating to branch matters and activities, then please contact one of the committee members listed below:

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The photograph on the front cover was taken by the editor at Hill 60

## From the Editor

With the resumption of meetings at the Berkshire Sports and Social Club it was good to see old friends again before our usual summer recess, and, hopefully, the recent increase in Covid cases will still allow us to continue “in person” meetings when we resume in September. We have an excellent program of speakers lined up for the coming season, as detailed from Page 8 of this edition of *The Poppy*, which should, hopefully, induce an increased attendance at meetings, which has been slowly falling over recent years as the average age of our Branch membership has increased



**Thiepval Arch Memorial to the Missing of the Somme  
Photograph taken by the Editor on the 2005 Branch Tour**

## From our Chairman

Well, here we are, just starting our 2022-23 branch season and we have many interesting speakers and subjects coming up! As many know, I was very apprehensive about re-starting branch meetings after something like 20 months hiatus due to Covid. That can be a long time in organisations like ours for many reasons. Some due to the obvious ‘natural wastage’ situation, but also people can often find other things to do; things that they may find interest them more, or simply because they find another way of pursuing an interest. In these technological rich times that is all too easy! However, maybe I needn't have worried so much because most of you came back to meetings; in fact, quite a few told me that they simply couldn't wait to get back to some sort of normal!

The branch had a few financial worries as well, but these have now been resolved, thanks to WFA Head Office, the acquisition of a lot of good books and the commitment of branch member Ian Fenne being prepared to store them, sort them, transport them and sell them at the meetings! This has been a huge help to the branch and the committee are very grateful for his efforts. Also, regular attendees must realise that we are not now providing the sandwiches. This was an expense that we simply could not afford any more. We would sooner divert the money to being able to pay for speakers; after all, they and their subjects are surely what people primarily come to the meetings for.

I was very sorry that after all, we could not get a branch tour going this year. Due to some key players in the logistics of it all being unavailable, with regret we had to shelve it. We do however, have a plan for 2023 (see later in this publication). The annual tour has always been a feature of this branch and I for one would be sorry not to be able to have one any longer.

I attended the AGM in the spring. That showed the WFA to be in good shape, with a sizeable increase in the membership. In September I will be attending (or will have already done so) the branch chair's conference; another good indicator of the resilience of the association.

So here is to the next year – and I very much hope to see as many as possible attending meetings, which is crucial to the survival of an organisation such as the WFA at branch level.



# A Visit to the National Memorial Arboretum

Barbara Taylor

In early August 2021, a friend and I visited the NMA. We had been wanting to visit for a few years, but of course, Covid delayed that. A couple of years ago I had changed my house insurance and, as a 'thank you', I had been offered a free night's B&B for two in a hotel. The resultant fall-out of Covid meant that this could not be



**The WFA Memorial with Binyon's Exhortation**

done and in fact, the offer had run out by the time I could use it!

Anyway, I rang up and it was extended, so without further ado (before any further restrictions or lock downs occurred) we got on with booking. Consequently, we stayed in a very decent place at Coleshill, which surprisingly being so close to Birmingham, had a bit of a 'village' feel to it. This was the closest I could get on the list of hotels that could be used. While in the area, we also took in a couple of National Trust properties, as we were there for two nights.

We were very lucky with the weather as it was just about perfect, and had a really good day wandering around. The Arboretum is huge and it is impossible to do justice to it and see all the memorials in one go!

As I am sure you are aware, they are not all military, although they must be in the majority. The main one is the Armed Forces Memorial. It is a bit like Stonehenge in that it has an opening, which is designed to shine a shaft of light (always supposing it is sunny!) onto a bronze wreath in the centre of the memorial on Armistice Day at 11 am.



**The Armed Forces Memorial**

I had already seen that there was a memorial to the so-called 1914 Christmas Truce so I was keen to see that. To my surprise, we (the WFA) also have a memorial there: a stone engraved with Binyon's Exhortation, which is a nice touch. Just a pity they got the words the wrong way round, as many seem to do! I placed a poppy cross from the branch on the memorial.

Anyway, it is a great day out. Very tiring but very satisfying. I am sure many of you have been, but if not; go. You won't be disappointed.



# Francis Miles VC

Mike Settle

Last May I was invited to a wedding at Clearwell Castle in west Gloucestershire. On driving through the village I noticed the name Francis Miles on a plaque in the church wall and underneath it the distinct shape of a Victoria Cross. I stopped to explore the graveyard and found his headstone, a relatively simple black structure "erected by the Gloucester Regiment" in 1985. Intrigued I asked a local if they knew anything about Francis. "Go and see Old Tom, he's lived here all his life and knows everything", was the reply.

On finding Tom, he produced a wad of old newspaper cuttings and told me about Francis. He had joined up with his stepfather in late 1914. He was buried alive in a mining incident in July 1917 where 50 of his comrades were killed. He was hospitalised but returned to serve in Italy and France. However it is said he never recovered mentally or physically from his injuries. He won the VC at Bois L' Eveque on the 23rd October 1918 effectively taking out a nest of 16 machine guns and taking 51 prisoners. Francis returned a hero to his village and returned to his job as a miner at Bream Colliery and his pay packet was always marked Francis Miles VC. He regularly attended commemorations and famously, at the great Hyde Park VC Review on the 23rd May 1956, he stayed in the pub over the road a little too long and as he quickly made his way across the parade ground to join the other 300 VCs, escorted by a no doubt exasperated Colonel-in-Chief, the Royal party arrived and the band played the National Anthem. Francis and the colonel are photographed about 30 yards short of the parade, hat in hand standing smartly to attention. The Daily Express headline read "The VC who was late for the biggest parade of all".

Francis had married a local widow, May Taylor, with 12 children in 1932. Apparently Francis said "It was the bravest thing I ever did". Francis and May had one son together and Tom remembers playing with this huge family back in the forties and as a treat Francis would let him play with the Victoria Cross. Francis liked a beer or three, but money was tight: He would sell his VC in the pub on a Friday night for drink only to have it put

back through his letterbox on the Monday morning.

Despite his poor health he joined the Pioneer Corps at the outbreak of World War II and Tom remembers him becoming more 'crochety' as time went on.

Francis died in November 1961 aged 65 and as befitting a hero was buried on the 11th November with 5 regimental associations in attendance. In 1984 the Forest of Dean district council commissioned a painting by David Rowlands\* of Francis' action when the Gloucester Regiment was granted the Freedom of the Borough later that year. Lord Ashcroft bought his medals for £72,000 in 2005.



Francis Miles VC

Amazingly, whilst researching this article, I discovered that Clearwell provided more soldiers to the war effort proportionately than any other place in England! If they were all like Francis, the Hun never stood a chance.

\* Barbara Taylor adds:

"I had many email exchanges with David Rowlands while still at the 'day' job on the Army Battlefield Guide, as he kindly allowed us to use one of his images. He has now allowed our friends at the British Modern Military History Society to use his Falklands painting on the front of their *Glimpses of the Falklands War* book. I have since met him, and recently spent a convivial afternoon with him in Farnham."

## 2023 Battlefield Tour

Having been unable to have a Branch Battlefield Tour for three years, we hope (Covid permitting) to have one again in 2023, leaving on Sunday 11th June and returning on Friday 16th June. Instead of trying, for a third time, to visit the areas around Reims, we intend to re-visit

the Somme battlefield and nearby areas, looking at some actions that we haven't considered in detail before, but also returning to some old favourites. We will probably be staying at the Trois Luppars in Arras, as we have many times in the past, and will send out our usual Booking Form with the next edition of *The Poppy*. In the meantime, would members who have any particular sites and actions that they would like to visit or re-visit let the Editor know at [niall.ferguson@ntlworld.com](mailto:niall.ferguson@ntlworld.com) so that we can begin to compile a potential program.



# Women “Freed” by the War?

Barbara Taylor

As we all know, the first real opportunities for women to shake off their purely domestic, and for many even drudgery role came with the Great War.



**IWM Q19714: A Tracer at the WRNS Signal School, Portsmouth**

There had been a few, such as Elizabeth Garrett Anderson who had managed to qualify as a doctor. She only achieved this through a certain amount of subterfuge and even then her qualification was not recognised for some years, as she had obtained it in Paris. The point being that as the daughter of a man who had done quite well in his business, she had been well educated, along with her siblings. Advantages such as this were available to only a few. Of course, there were roles, such as being a governess or a nurse that were ‘acceptable’, but again required education. Most women, certainly in my family, were in Service, or perhaps a factory or some kind of home ‘piece’ work until marriage and ‘Unpaid domestic duties’, as it states on the Census returns.

Mrs Anderson was also a member of the suffragist movement, although I can’t think she condoned some of the more extreme actions they employed to

attempt to achieve female suffrage.

I, personally, am not a feminist (never address me as Ms) but at the same time, I do believe in equal opportunities, rights, and pay etc. etc.

I had a good grammar school education. I didn’t appreciate it one bit at the time; hated it and just wanted to get out to work and earn some money. The reason was that I found it so hard. It has taken me many years to work out why, but the reasons really are blindingly obvious. I was ill for much of primary school and missed most of the basics. I managed to pass the 11+, hence grammar school, then got another medical issue. Result: I got further and further behind and was, in any case no great academic.

It was a Technical Grammar school. Amongst other things, this meant that girls as well as boys did Technical Drawing. I loved it, rubbish at the exam bit, but the teacher told us that there were good jobs for girls in an office as a Tracer. I had never heard of such a thing, but knew that I didn’t want to work in a bank or as a typist, air hostess, policewoman – need I go on? Fast forward and purely by chance I met a Tracer and went to work at the company she worked at. I was a draftswoman all of my working life.

What has all this got to do with women and war, let alone in war, I hear you ask? And will she ever get to the point?

In 1914 men still dominated all the main roles in office work and most of the others as well, but the need to increase the size of the army and Kitchener’s poster successfully stripped offices bare. So, what was to happen? Some enterprising young women had been learning to type, as we all know. To do this they must have been able to save money from their wages to pay for teaching, or had some kind of benefactor. I doubt most ordinarily educated women recognised it at the time, but their opportunity had come; albeit at horrendous cost. Women started to do many of the jobs that had been a male preserve; all but the heaviest kind of work.

Fast forward again to a day out at IWM Duxford. Probably nearly 30 years ago now, but on the wall as part of a display was an IWM photo. Q19714 to be precise. The photo to the left shows a very young woman working at a drawing board. This drew me to look at it more closely because most of the equipment she seemed to be using was stuff I used, or had used at some point or other during my working life. Some of it even then, pretty archaic! I should point out at this juncture that it was well before computers could be used on an everyday basis for the kind of work I did. Underneath her overall she seems to be wearing part of a naval rating’s uniform.



The photograph is one of a collection photographed by George P Lewis, entitled: THE WOMEN'S ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE ON THE HOME FRONT, 1917-1918. The date he took it is listed as unknown. A bit of research shows that he didn't live for very long; 1875-1926. He apparently went to work in Indonesia for an Armenian professional photographer, Onnes Kurkdjian, in 1896. His work there was divided between fine, industrial, and topographic photography. He returned to Britain in 1917. Although too old for active service, Lewis wanted to assist in the war effort and was assigned to photograph activity on the Home Front. It is for the approximately 1,300 photographs he took in the following eighteen months that he is most known. Lewis was one of only sixteen official British photographers who documented the war.

I made a note of the photo number and sent off for it as soon as I got home! It now occupies a place on the wall in my home office.

Fast forward again to 2015 and a tour of the now re-sited and re-built Grahame-White wartime factory at the RAF Museum at Hendon, where Claude Grahame-White had his factory and airfield. Many of the photos from his book about the factory: *The Grahame-White Company Ltd. Hendon NW9. Views of Works*, are reproduced as murals around the building. Again, I was attracted to the photo below, particularly the two ladies in the right foreground as they are clearly working at drawing boards.



Sometime later I watched a BBC programme introduced by the architectural historian Dan Cruickshank about the re-construction of this iconic building; *Brick by Brick; Rebuilding Our Past – Watchtower*. For this programme, the researchers had looked for descendants of any who had worked there and a Mr Ken Pattinson, whose father had worked there as an engine fitter had come forward. On looking through his photo album, Dan recognised Ken's aunt May (seen in this photo below, with her sister Ada) and recognised her from the main photo. It turns out that May had worked there originally as a Fabric-er; not only stitching the fabric around the airframes, but then doping them with the highly toxic stuff that was used to tighten it around the frames. Some coped with it, but May became very seriously ill. Graham-White was considered a good employer and other work was found for her; as it turns out in the drawing office! The blown up section on the right below is now the start-up screen on my mobile phone.

These women are clearly the first to ever work in a drawing office of any description. It was very definitely a strictly male preserve before that war. By the time I started in 1967, working on hospitals, I might add, being a Tracer was very much a female preserve. Something for which I personally have to thank the Great War.



**Above: Enlarged section of the main photograph**

**Left: May with her sister Ada**



# Programme for the coming months

With meetings having resumed, details of the speakers for the first part of our 2022—23 season, up until March 2023 are set out below and offer a variety of different subjects to meet most interests. Should you have any comments on the programme or suggestions for future topics and speakers please let us know. This programme is also available for viewing on:

[www.westernfrontassociation.com/thames-valley](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/thames-valley). For a description of the talk just double click on the talk title.

All meetings are held at the Berkshire Sports and Social Club, Sonning Lane, Reading on the last Thursday of each month (except December) commencing at 8.00 p.m. For the foreseeable future, although the bar will be open, no food will be provided.

## 29th September 2022 – Stephen Barker

Hardit Singh Malik, The Flying Sikh of the First World War

From his arrival in the UK alone in 1908, as a fourteen-year-old, to Balliol College, Oxford, and into the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War, Hardit Singh Malik lived an extraordinary life, often in the face of great adversity, yet always with charm and good humour. He played cricket for Sussex and was an Oxford blue in golf, playing with the Prince of Wales. He rose to become the Indian Ambassador to France after a long and distinguished career in the Indian Civil service, yet always maintained strong bonds with Great Britain. Yet it is as a fighter pilot during 1917-19 that he is best known, coming up against the Red Baron and the British military establishment.



Stephen Barker is an independent Heritage Advisor who works with museums, universities, and other heritage organisations to design



Hardit Singh Malik with his Sopwith Camel

exhibitions and make funding applications. He worked at Banbury Museum and Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum. Stephen has delivered projects for University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University and the Battlefields Trust. He delivers presentations and tours related to the First World War and British Civil Wars. He is a Trustee of the Bucks Military Museum Trust, the Old Gaol, Buckingham and is an Arts Council Museum Mentor.

He is the author of *Lancashire's Forgotten Heroes - the 8th East Lancs in the Great War* and *The Flying Sikh: Hardit Singh Malik*. He completed an MA in Museum Studies at Leicester University in 2011.

27th October 2022 – Dr James Wearn FLS

The landscape of memory: Kew Gardens, the IWGC, and the creation of war cemeteries

While the death and destruction caused by the war became prevailing characters in the public memory during post-war decades, the process of healing – of people and landscapes – has been central to the legacy of the conflict. Purposeful architecture went hand-in-hand with carefully considered planting within war cemeteries to create sites of tranquility and solemnity for remembrance of the fallen. Research by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in collaboration with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, has reflected upon the creation and evolution of these sites of remembrance. Furthermore, landscape-scale fieldwork on the Western Front has identified three distinctive components of the post-war botanical landscape – the wild, the managed, and the planted; each of which plays a role in the transmission of memory today.



Dr James Wearn FLS is an ecologist and historian. James led the First World War Centenary project at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, and his research into 'polemobotany' (war botany) brings together sciences and humanities to explore the environmental legacies of war. He has published more than 80 papers in both academic journals and popular magazines, and has carried out fieldwork in Europe, Africa and South-East Asia. James was elected a lifetime Fellow of the Linnean Society in 2010, and was recently interviewed for the BBC Radio 4 programme 'Poppy'.

24th November 2022 – Clive Harris

From the Dardanelles to the Caspian Sea - Eric 'Kipper' Robinson VC

One of the most intriguing characters of the Great War, Eric 'Kipper' Robinson served notably in the Gallipoli Campaign, Palestine and The Caspian Sea. He was decorated on numerous occasions and appears on the fringes of seemingly endless moments of history from the Boxer Rebellion, through the Battle of Heligoland Bight and the Zeebrugge Raid to the 1940 Battle of the Atlantic. This is his amazing story.



Clive Harris served in the Royal Signals, and Constabulary on a career in 1998. In publication of London Blitz', Wartime Greater Game" to Time Team, Spirit and CBS's specialist are The Retreat Salient, 1918, and the Italian 1943/44. Clive is badge number of Battlefield elected onto the prestigious British Commission for Military History in 2010.

served in the Royal with Hertfordshire before embarking military history in addition to the "Walking the Wander through London" and "The he has contributed Time Watch, Blitz Legacy of War. His battlefield subjects of 1914, The Ypres The London Blitz Campaign of the holder of 33 within the Guild Guides and was

15th December 2022 – Note the Date!

Lt Col Simon Shephard - 'Artillery Conquers, Infantry Occupies' A study of the effectiveness of the British artillery at the Third Battle of Ypres



Lt Col Simon Shephard seeks to assess the performance of the British Expeditionary Forces artillery during the preparation for, and conduct of, the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. To carry out this assessment, it uses a set of Principles of War which Col J F C Fuller published in the February 1916 edition of the RUSI Journal. These are often referenced as the start point for the way the British Army has subsequently developed its use of the Principles of War.

The lecture will focus on the conduct of the artillery battles at Army, Corps and Divisional level for:

- Pilkem Ridge, 31st July - British Fifth Army;
- Menin Road Ridge, 20th September - British Second Army;
- Second Passchendaele, 26th October to 11th November Movement - Canadian Corps.

Lieutenant Colonel Simon Shephard AGS(PS) completed his 37-year Regular career in 2018 and remains an active member of the Army Reserve, serving on the staff of the Army Officer Selection Board, Westbury. He spent 9-years in the ranks, including a period of time in the Small Arms School Corps before commissioning through the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. The majority of his officer career has been spent delivering personnel policy and operational G1 activities. Always interested in military history, following his attendance on the Chief of the General Staff's, SOMME 16, Staff Ride he completed the MA course in Britain and the First World War at Wolverhampton University under Dr Spencer Jones and Professor Gary Sheffield. He has presented his findings to the Western Front Association, the Royal Artillery Historical Society and to the Royal Engineer Historical Society together with various British and Canadian artillery regiments. His work appears as a chapter in Dr Spencer Jones latest book 'The Darkest Year, The British Army on the Western Front 1917.' Lieutenant Colonel Shephard is particularly interested in how doctrinal lessons from the past can be applied to the current and future issues facing the British Army. He is currently working on a consolidated biography of the past President of the Regular Commissions Board.

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## Dedications

As a mark of respect to all those who perished during the Great War the meetings last season were dedicated to the memory of a local man who died on that date during 1914–1918. If during your travels you happen to be near to where any of these soldiers are buried or commemorated kindly pay a visit.

## October 2021

### Capt. Clifford Angus Mallam MC & Bar 3rd Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment,

Clifford Mallam was born at Oxford on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1890, the third eldest of four children born to Surgeon George Beasant Mallam M.R.C.S and his wife Annie Kyffin (née Thomas) of Adelaide, South Australia. In 1891, the family were living at 102 Iffley Road, Oxford but by 1892 had moved to 223 Iffley Road. Then following the death of his father in 1910, they settled at Hall Place, Sparshott, Wantage.



Clifford had two brothers, Dalton, born in Australia, in 1886, Roy, born in 1888 and a sister Louie, born in 1892.

He was educated at Epsom College and Keble College, Oxford and joined the Universities and Public Schools Brigade to volunteer for active service in September 1914.



Clifford joined the 22<sup>nd</sup> Bn Royal Fusiliers, as a private, but was then posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Service) Bn. Royal Berks.

He was gazetted 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant to the 5<sup>th</sup> Bn Royal Berks on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1915, promoted to Lieutenant in 1916 and to Captain in 1917. His brothers Dalton and Roy, both Doctors, served with the Royal Army Medical Corps for the duration of the war.

Clifford was unmarried and served in France and Flanders from March 1916. He was wounded in action on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1918 at Hauterive, a small hamlet on the northern edge of the Foret de Raismes, north-west of Valenciennes and sadly died the next day at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Casualty Clearing Station in Douai. He was the first to be interred at Douai British Cemetery, Cuincy, and is buried in grave A.1.

His Commanding Officer wrote: "He was the most efficient adjutant I ever had, and as a friend invaluable." He was mentioned in Despatches on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1917 by Sir Douglas Haig and his Military Cross was awarded for gallantry at the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917. The Bar to his Military Cross was posthumously awarded on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1919 and reads:

"For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during an advance. When the situation was obscure and a gap was reported to exist in our lines, he went out under heavy shell fire to reconnoitre and brought back most valuable information which enabled the battalion to move forward and fill the gap"



**Capt. Clifford Mallam's grave in Douai British Cemetery with its original grave marker**

## November 2021

### Sgt. Benjamin Smith

Sgt. Benjamin Smith of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment was killed in action 104 years ago, on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1917, aged 39.

Benjamin was born in 1877 in Hungerford, the youngest of nine children to John and Emma Smith of Stongrove Hill, Hungerford. He had four brothers and four sisters and on leaving school worked locally as a ploughboy but on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1896, age 19½, he enlisted as a Private with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment in Reading. Benjamin was a man of small stature being 5' 5" tall and weighing just 9 stone. He was posted to South Africa in February 1898 and served in the Second Boer War Campaign before returning home to Brock Barracks, Oxford Road, Reading in December 1900. In May 1902, Benjamin was posted back to South Africa for six months then onward to Egypt for about a year, before returning home to Reading in October 1904. During this spell at home, he met Mary Elizabeth Walker from Pewsey, Wiltshire and on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1906 the couple were married at Woodstock, Oxfordshire.

After 12 years service with the Royal Berks, Benjamin was discharged from the Regiment on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1908 and the pair set up home together at 17 Berkeley Road, Newbury, where he found work as coalman and by 1911, they had two sons, Percy and Reginald.

On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1915, Benjamin, now age 37, re-joined his old regiment and went to France with the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion in October 1915. Now promoted to the rank of Sergeant, he was mentioned in dispatches in April 1917 and again in November 1917. The *Reading Mercury* carried an account of the opening days of the Battle of Arras 1917, submitted by Sgt. W Webb, which included the following reference to Sgt. Smith.

'Number 8 Platoon of my company was beginning to suffer casualties from a machine gun. A sergeant, named B Smith, got a few men together and started off to work round the machine gun position. When they were near enough to rush the gun, the sergeant gave the order to charge. They succeeded in capturing the gun. There were only two Germans left alive, whom they made prisoner. They collected a few more Germans and carried the gun back to HQ. On their way back to join the battalion, who were still advancing, the same sergeant noted that they were being held up by field guns. He once again collected a few men and started to advance on the field guns, which were only a few hundred yards away, still shelling our men. Our men made another splendid charge and succeeded in capturing the whole battery and ammunition.'

Sgt. Benjamin Smith was killed in action, age 39, during the Battle of Cambrai, on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1917 and his name is recorded on the Cambrai Memorial to the Missing, panel 8, Louverval, France.

Sergeant  
Benjamin Smith



## December 2021

### 2nd Lt Frank Giddings MM, Lt Stewart Houghton Troup & Lt Herbert Alfred Vincent Wait

The dedication this month is to three young officers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment all killed in action prior to Christmas, just over 104 years ago on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917.

All from widely differing backgrounds, the officers are firstly:

#### Lt Stewart Houghton Troup

**Stewart Troup** was born in Northampton during the autumn of 1892 and was the second eldest of four children born to William and Alice Troup, having two sisters and a younger brother. He came from a wealthy family of private means and lived in a large family house at 2 Gledstones Road, West Kensington, together with a live-in cook and housemaid. At the age of 18, Stewart was still at school but later, joined an officer training unit before enlisting with the Royal Berkshire Regiment as Lieutenant in 1915.

The second officer is:

#### Lt Herbert Alfred Vincent Wait

Herbert Wait was born in Reading during the summer of 1898 and was the only child of George and Mary Wait of 45 Eastern Avenue, Reading. His father worked as a self-employed representative in the soap-market industry and they lived in a large house, employing a general domestic servant. Herbert was educated at Oakham Public School in Rutland, between 1910 and 1915, and then to Sandhurst before joining the Royal Berkshire Regiment in 1917.

The third officer is:

#### 2nd Lt Frank Giddings MM

Frank Giddings was born in Wantage during the winter of 1897 and was the second youngest of 15 children born to William and Mary Giddings of Mill Street, Wantage. His father worked as a carpenter and wheelwright but due to chronic rheumatism was forced to retire in 1904.

#### Lt Herbert Alfred Vincent Wait



On leaving school around 1910, Frank worked as a draper's errand boy but appears to have enlisted with the Royal Berkshire Regiment, around the outbreak of war, possibly as a boy soldier, before being sent to France with the rank of Lance Corporal, on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1915. Frank was awarded the Military Medal for his actions during the Battle of the Somme and promoted to the rank of L/Sgt on 21st October 1916. Promoted again to the rank of Acting Sergeant, he saw action in the Ypres Salient during the summer of 1917 and on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1917, it was announced in the London Gazette that he had been further promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant in B company.

The Third Battle of Ypres officially ended on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1917 but operations continued north of Passchendaele until the end of December 1917. After 10 days out of the line the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn moved back to the hated Passchendaele sector on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1917 to attack two enemy strongholds, which if captured, would give good observation over the enemy rear areas.

On 1st December 25th Brigade were ordered to attack with B and D Companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berks making the main assault at 7:15 p.m. The conditions from the rear areas were appalling with rain, glutinous mud, enemy shelling and darkness but first platoon under 2/Lt Giddings managed to get across before floundering in the morass. Giddings managed to re-organise and continued to go forward with his platoon before reporting back at 11:30 p.m. that they were in the right place for the attack. Zero hour was 1:55 a.m. on 2<sup>nd</sup> December but when the flares went up the enemy opened with heavy rifle and machine gun fire. At 2:04 a.m. German artillery knocked out B Companies HQ and 2/Lt Giddings was left dazed. The assault continued throughout the night with very limited success and at daybreak B and D companies were occupying shell holes. The enemy countered throughout the day but were constantly repelled and by 5:00 p.m. the Germans appeared to have given up and all went quiet. The lines were made more tenable and by nightfall 25 Brigade were relieved by units from 14<sup>th</sup> Division and returned to Junction Camp near Ypres.

Sadly, during this operation Lt. Stewart Troup, age 25, Lt. Herbert Wait, age 19 and 2/Lt Frank Giddings, age 20, were killed and their bodies lost in the mud of the Salient. All three are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing, panels 105 to 106.

January 2022

### Cpl. Arthur Doe

The dedication for January was to Cpl. Arthur Doe, of the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment, who was killed in action, just over 107 years ago on New Year's Day, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1915, age 28.

Arthur was born on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1886 in Sandhurst, the second youngest of four children born to Charles and Mary Doe (née Wooderson) of High Street, Sandhurst. He had three brothers, Charles (b 1884), Herbert (b 1885, who sadly died in 1891, age 6) and William (b 1891) and at just 3½ years of age, Arthur started school on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1890, at St. Michael's Church of England Primary School, Sandhurst. By 1901, the family had moved to Harts Leap, Scotland Hill, Sandhurst, where Arthur, now age 14, had left school and was working as a domestic gardener.

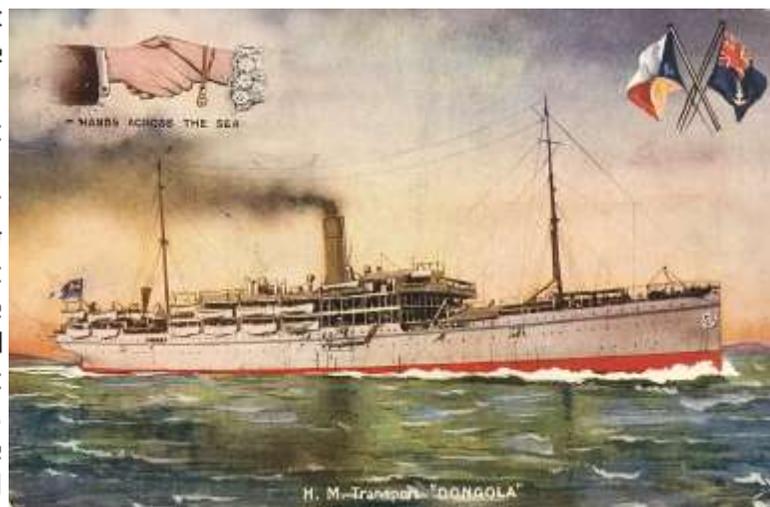
Sometime around 1906, Arthur decided to join the regular army, and enlisted at the Recruiting Office in Yorktown Road, Sandhurst. He was allocated to the Royal Berkshire Regiment and for the next two years underwent training with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at Brock Barracks, Reading before being posted to India via Egypt in 1909 to form part of the Delhi Garrison at Meerut.

In April 1911 Arthur, now promoted to Corporal, was based

at Chakrata Hill Station for a couple of weeks, where Companies took it in turn to relax and recover in a cooler climate from the heat of Delhi.

During December 1911, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion played a major role in the arrangements for the Great Delhi Durbar and in February 1913 moved to a new base at Jhansi, 200 miles south of Delhi.

On 26<sup>th</sup> August 1914 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berks received orders for an immediate return to England and eleven days later marched out of Jhansi Barracks and boarded two trains bound for Deolali Transit Camp, near Bombay. The Battalion departed Bombay Docks on 14<sup>th</sup> September aboard HMT *Dongola* an 8,000 ton P&O ship chartered by the Admiralty for summertime trooping, bound for Liverpool.



On arrival at Liverpool on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion immediately entrained for Hursley Park Camp, near Winchester for a 10-day mobilisation period before embarking on HMT *Kingstonian* bound for France on 4<sup>th</sup> November, as part of 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 8<sup>th</sup> Division. Arriving at Le Havre the next day, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berks proceeded to No.6 Rest Camp for five days before entraining to Strazeele on 10<sup>th</sup> November and marching to billets near Merville the next day. Three days later, the battalion entered the trenches for the first time at Fauquissart and for the next 47 days, up to New Year's Eve, spent 28 days in and out of the front line at Fauquissart and Rue du Bacquerot with spells of billeting at Laventie and Fort D'Esquin. The conditions in the trenches were appalling and during this period the battalion suffered 12 men killed and 35 men wounded but by far the most hospitalised casualties were 265 men reporting sick, no doubt exacerbated from the effects of malaria and other tropical diseases caught whilst serving their lengthy spell in India.

An interesting extract from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berks War Diary for the 1914 Christmas period reads:

**24<sup>th</sup> December 1914**

*In trenches at Fauquissart, at 7 p.m. enemy ceased fire and an informal truce commenced, communications by word of mouth taking place between our men and the enemy*

**25<sup>th</sup> December 1914**

*Men got up on parapet and advanced half way towards German trenches and in some cases conversed with them. Orders given at 11 a.m. prohibiting men from going beyond parapet. Much work done in improving trenches during this day, the enemy protested against barb wire being repaired and we stopped enemy repairing theirs.*

**26<sup>th</sup> December 1914**

*Truce continued so far as rifle fire was concerned although our artillery twice opened fire, more work done in improving trenches. 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade relieved Battalion at 5 p.m.*

Returning to the trenches at Fauquissart on 29<sup>th</sup> December the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary for New Year's Day 1915 reads:

*In trenches, relieved at 5 p.m. by 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Rifle Brigade (1 NCO killed in action)*

Sadly, this 13th man from the battalion to be killed was Cpl. Arthur Doe, age 28. He is buried in Fauquissart Military Cemetery, Laventie, grave D.11 and is also commemorated on the Finchampstead War Memorial, where the family were now residing.

## February 2022

### Assistant Baker Albert Charles Harper

The year 1916 was a Leap Year and on that extra day of Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> February, no less than 218 British Servicemen died including 70 men from the crew of HMS *Alcantara* sunk in action during an engagement with a German raider off the Shetland Isles.

The 15,000 ton RMS *Alcantara* was an ocean going liner built by Harland and Wolff in Govan for the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company and was launched on the 30th October 1913. She made her maiden voyage in June 1914 from Southampton to Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Buenos Aires.

In April 1915 RMS *Alcantara* was requisitioned by the British Admiralty, together with her "A-series" sisters *Avon*, *Ariana* and *Andes* to be converted to armed merchant cruisers. She was armed with eight 6-inch guns, two six-pounder anti-aircraft guns, and depth charges. On 17th April she was commissioned at Liverpool into the Royal Navy's 10th Cruiser Squadron as HMS *Alcantara* with Capt. Wardle at the helm and formed part of the Northern Patrol covering about 200,000 square miles of the North Sea, Norwegian Sea and Arctic Ocean to prevent German access to or from the North Atlantic.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February, British radio detection equipment located a German signal coming from an area off the south-western coast of Norway. Admiral Jellicoe immediately ordered two cruisers and four destroyers from Rosyth into the North Sea to block the western side of the Northern Patrol Area and three light cruisers a destroyer from Scapa Flow to sweep the Norwegian Coast. HMS *Columella* and HMS *Patia* from 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron were sent to search the area to the north-east of the Shetland Isles whilst *Alcantara*, due to be relieved for re-coaling in Liverpool, was instructed to remain east of the Shetlands and rendezvous with relief sister ship, HMS *Andes* under Capt. Young.



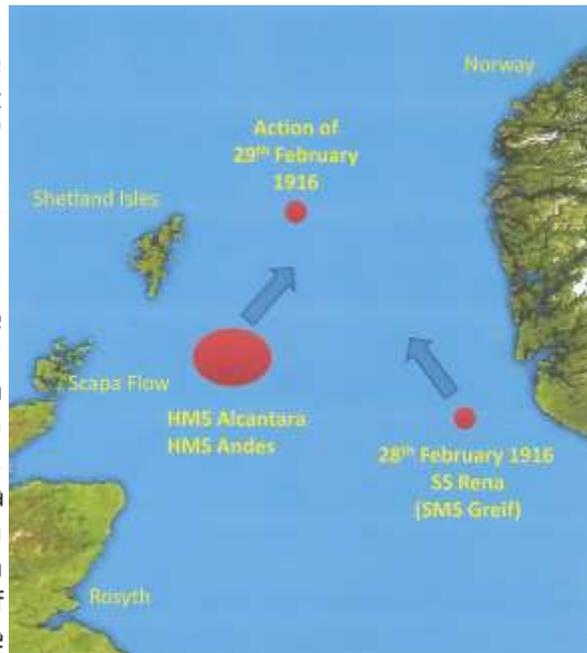
RMS *Alcantara*

At 8:45 am on 29<sup>th</sup> February lookouts on *Alcantara* spotted smoke off the port beam and manoeuvred closer to identify the source. A few minutes later *Andes* signalled "Enemy in sight north-east, 15 knots". Capt. Wardle ordered *Alcantara* to turn north at maximum speed and soon sighted a ship with one funnel, flying Norwegian flags. He then decided to examine the unknown ship, called action stations and fired two blanks to force mystery vessel heave to. The lookouts on *Alcantara* could see the Norwegian name *Rena* on the stern and the ship looked authentic.

At about 1,000 yds astern of *Rena*, a boat was lowered to check the ship's particulars. Wardle signalled to *Andes* of the developments and received the reply from Young, "This is the suspicious ship". As the message was being read, a gun at the stern of the "*Rena*" was unmasked, flaps fell down along the sides, revealing more guns and she opened fire.

*Rena* was in fact the 5,000 ton auxiliary cruiser *SMS Greif*, a former German cargo ship named *Guben*, converted into a merchant raider and on its way to the North Atlantic out of Cuxhaven. In the ensuing close quarter battle that followed both ships were severely hit and caught fire. *Greif's* crew abandoned ship at about 10:30 am and she was sunk by *Andes* about an hour later with the loss of 187 men and 125 taken prisoner. Around 11:00 am with *Alcantara* on the brink of capsizing, Wardle ordered abandon ship and she went down shortly afterwards with the loss of 70 men. Fortunately, the remainder of the large crew were all rescued.

Sadly, one of those to be killed in this action on 29<sup>th</sup> February 1916 was 723290 Assistant Baker Albert Charles Harper RN, age 25 from Stockcross near Newbury.



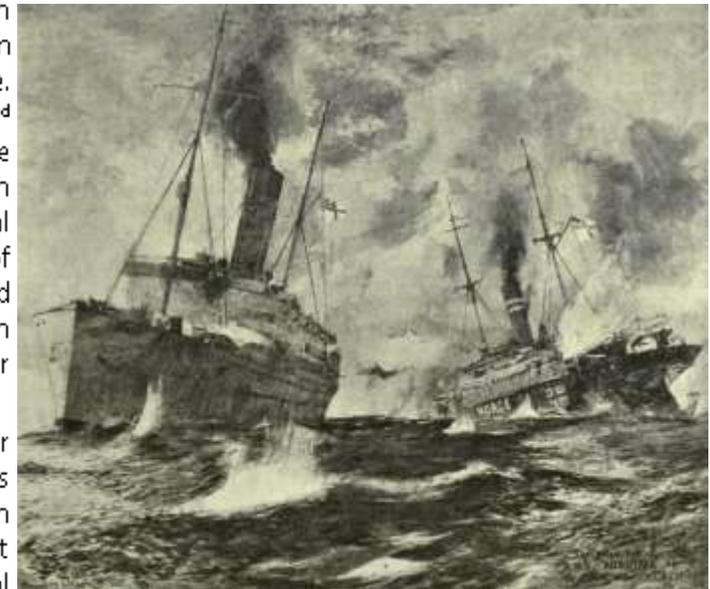
Albert had been born during the spring of 1891, the third eldest of ten children born to Jesse and Kate Prudence Harper (née Waite) of Stockcross Road, Speen, Newbury. He had four brothers, William, Arthur, Alfred and Harry and five sisters Gertrude, Alice, Edith, who sadly died in infancy, Emily and Mabel.

In 1901 the family were living at Rose Cottages in Stockcross, where Albert's father worked as a general labourer and in the autumn of 1908 his mother, Kate sadly died at the relatively tender age of 40.

By 1911, Albert, now age 19, had left home and was in lodgings at 1 Dean Farm Cottage, Donnington, near Newbury and was working as a baker. In the period before or during the Great War, he enlisted with the Royal Navy or the Mercantile Marine Reserve, as Assistant Baker and posted to *HMS Alcantara*.

Following Albert's death in February 1916, another tragedy befell the family later that year on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, when elder brother Pte. William Harper, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Cheshire Regiment, died in Manchester Royal Infirmary, age 27, of malaria, contracted whilst serving in India, Egypt or Salonika.

Assistant Baker Albert Harper is commemorated on the magnificent Plymouth Naval Memorial (panel 20) on Plymouth Hoe and Pte. William Harper is commemorated on the Screen Wall (panel Q 389) at Manchester Southern Cemetery. In addition both men are commemorated inside St. John's Church, Church Road, Stockcross on the beautiful Stockcross & Marsh Benham Memorial plaque.



**The action between *SMS Greif* (to the right, disguised as the Norwegian *Rena*) and the Armed Merchant Cruiser *HMS Alcantara* (in the foreground).**

Assistant Baker Albert Harper is commemorated on the magnificent Plymouth Naval Memorial (panel 20) on Plymouth Hoe and Pte. William Harper is commemorated on the Screen Wall (panel Q 389) at Manchester Southern Cemetery. In addition both men are commemorated inside St. John's Church, Church Road, Stockcross on the beautiful Stockcross & Marsh Benham Memorial plaque.

## March 2022

Unfortunately there was no Dedication for March 2022.

## April 2022

### Leading Seaman Edward John Gilkerson

On St. George's Day 1918, no less than 789 British servicemen died including 227 sailors and marines who took part in the infamous Zeebrugge Raid during the early hours of Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> April. Sadly, one of those ratings to be killed that day was Leading Seaman Edward John Gilkerson, age 23, from Binfield aboard HMS *Vindictive*.

Edward was born on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1895, the fourth eldest of eight children born to Charles, a general labourer and Lucy Gilkerson (née Wooldrige) at 3 Temperance Cottages, Binfield Road, Bracknell. He had five brothers, Archie, William, Dennis, Laurence and Hector and two sisters Lily and Edith. However, in addition, however, Edward had three step-brothers, Charles, Arthur and John and a step-sister Amelia from his father's first marriage to Sarah, who sadly passed away at the tender age of 29 in 1885. By 1911, Edward, now age 16, had left school and was employed making wooden moulds for a pattern maker company.

On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1915, aged 20, Edward joined the Royal Navy, as an Able Seaman, and served aboard the dreadnought battleship HMS *King George V*, based at Scapa Flow. During 1915 and mid-1916, *King George V* carried out many gunnery and training exercises with periodic patrols of the



**The bow section of HMS *Vindictive* preserved as a memorial at Ostend**

central North Sea, before taking a minor part in the Battle of Jutland on 31st May to 1st June 1916. Following Jutland, HMS *King George V* was mostly confined to port at Scapa Flow and Rosyth for the duration of the war.

Edward was promoted to Leading Seaman on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1918 and on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1918 he was transferred to the pre-dreadnought parent battleship HMS *Hindustan* in preparation for the joint Zeebrugge and Ostend Raids. It is highly probable that he volunteered for this transfer as, up to this time in the war, he had not been involved in much action.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1918, a landing force of 200 sailors including Edward and Royal Marines boarded the cruiser HMS *Vindictive* and with two Mersey ferries, *Iris II* and *Daffodil* in tow set off to land on the Zeebrugge Mole to blow up the viaduct connecting the mole to the shore.

Arriving in the early hours of St Georges Day the raid commenced with HMS *Vindictive*, *Iris II* and *Daffodil*, accompanied by two old submarines, attempted to land the force on the Mole, but the wind changed and the smokescreen covering the ship was blown offshore, exposing the attacking flotilla. The ships and landing parties came under heavy German fire and was forced to land in the wrong place suffering many casualties, including Leading Seaman Edward Gilkerson. Most of the casualties and survivors were picked up by HMS *Vindictive* before returning to England.

The viaduct was destroyed by a demolition charge from one of the submarines but the blocking ships HMS *Thetis*, *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia*, filled with concrete, were sunk in the wrong positions and the canal was only obstructed for a few days.

Around 1,700 men were involved in this operation with 227 dead,



356 wounded and the destroyer HMS *North Star* sunk. The Germans suffered casualties of just eight dead and 16 wounded.

Some of the casualties who died are buried in the Zeebrugge Plot at Dover (St. James's) Cemetery, where nine unidentified and 62 named men including Leading Seaman Edward John Gilkerson are buried. Others were returned to their families for local burial.

Three other local men died in this action on St Georges Day 1918:

Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class Arthur Ada, Royal Navy (HMS *Phoebe*), age 34, from Maidenhead, is buried in Maidenhead (All Saints) Cemetery.

Pte. Reginald Gatehouse, 4<sup>th</sup> Rm Bn, Royal Marine Light Infantry, age 19, from Kentbury, is buried in Earley (St Peter) Churchyard.

Pte. Frank Rolfe, 4<sup>th</sup> RM Bn, Royal Marine Light Infantry, age 19, from Newbury is buried in Dover (St. James's) Cemetery.

Just over two weeks later on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 1918 the battered veteran of the



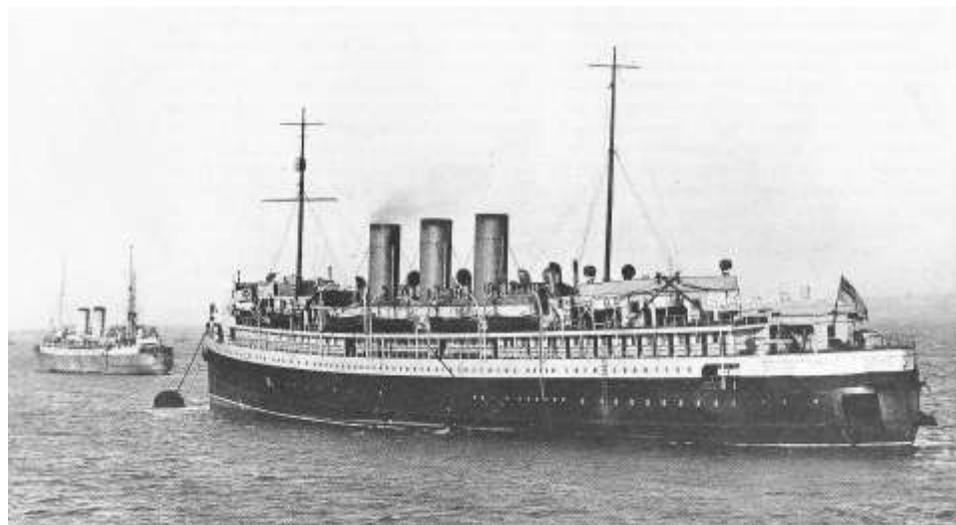
**The Storming Party on the Mole at Zeebrugge**

of the port nearer where she was scuttled on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1918.

Sadly, Edward Gilkerson's parents suffered three further tragic losses during the war.

Zeebrugge raid, HMS *Vindictive*, with her forward ballast tanks filled with concrete, was used as a block ship at the entrance to the Ostend canal but this again was only partially achieved, as she ran aground on a nearby sandbank. However, that operation did prevent large enemy warships from using the port until the town was captured by the Allies in October 1918. On 16<sup>th</sup> August 1920, the wreck of *Vindictive* was raised and her bow is preserved as the well-known HMS *Vindictive* Memorial at Ostend, situated inland alongside the canal for many years. In May 2013 the bow was restored and moved to a new position on the east bank

Three years earlier, on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1915, their second eldest son, Pte. William Thomas Gilkerson, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment, age 24, died of wounds received whilst serving in the trenches near Fleurbaix. William is buried in Merville Communal Cemetery, Pas de Calais, grave 2.P.1



**The 'Fast Minelayer' HMS *Princess Irene* after conversion for Naval service: note the two guns mounted on the stern and the White Ensign. Presumably the funnels have been painted grey.**

One month later after William's death on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1915, eldest son, Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class Archie Gilkerson, Royal Navy, age 27, was killed when his ship, the minelayer *HMS Princess Irene*, was destroyed, without warning, by a massive explosion, on the River Medway, killing 273 officers and men, 75 dockyard workers and 3 civilians. Archie is commemorated on the Chatham Naval Memorial, Kent, panel 11. Married in early 1914 he left a wife, Alice, at home in Rose Cottage, London Road, Bracknell.

Lastly, on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1916, eldest step-son, Driver Charles Henry Gilkerson, Army Service Corps, age 41, died of tuberculosis on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1916 at Grosvenor Sanatorium, Kennington seven weeks after being discharged from the Army on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 at Catterick Camp. He served with the ASC for 23 years at home, during the South African Campaign and in the Great War. He is buried in London Road Cemetery, Reading. Being discharged before his death he does not appear in CWGC records or have a CWGC headstone. He left a wife Elizabeth and two daughters, Edith and Lucy, and lived at 46 Brook Street, West Reading.

May 2022

## Air Mechanic 1<sup>st</sup> Class Arthur Henry Commins

Exactly 104 years before the date of our May meeting, on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1918, Air Mechanic 1<sup>st</sup> Class, Arthur Henry Commins, age 33, from Reading was killed in a non-flying accident at Great Yarmouth.

Arthur was born on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1884, the second youngest of nine children born to William and Emily Commins (née Toby) of 31 Upper Crown Street, Reading. His father worked as a painter and decorator and he had four elder sisters, Selina, Gertrude, Amelia and Edith, two elder brothers, William and

Horace (he sadly died in infancy at the age of one), a younger brother Sidney and a twin brother Ernest, who tragically died at the age of eight in 1893. On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1884, the twins were baptised together at St. Mary's Church, Castle Street, Reading and during 1889 both attended the British Infants School in Reading.



South Denes Seaplane Base at Great Yarmouth

By 1901 the family had moved to 140 Southampton Street, Reading, where Arthur worked as an apprentice gas fitter. In the summer of 1910, Arthur, now aged 25, married Helen Mary Allen, age 28, from Wallingford and the couple set up home together at Nellgrove Road, Hillingdon, near Uxbridge, where he was employed as an engineer at the Uxbridge Sewerage Works, and was also a well-known local footballer.

At the age of 32, Arthur was conscripted into the Navy on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1917 with the Royal Naval Air Service at Great Yarmouth, as a fitter Air Mechanic 2<sup>nd</sup> Class. His attestation papers show that he was 5' 6" tall, of slim build, of dark complexion with black hair and brown eyes. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1918 he was promoted to Air Mechanic 1<sup>st</sup> Class before being transferred to the Royal Air Force on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1918.

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The RNAS aerodrome at Great Yarmouth was built on the site of the old racecourse at South Denes adjacent to the seaplane beach and was operational from April 1913 until November 1920. From 14<sup>th</sup> May 1917 to the end of the war, some 30 aircraft carried out advanced U-Boat detection work and played an exceptional role in defending the country from German bomber and Zeppelin raids including the shooting down of Zeppelin L.70 with Peter Strasser aboard, the notorious chief commander of the German Imperial Navy Zeppelins. Key to the success of operations at South Denes was the background support from air mechanics such as Arthur Commins but whilst on duty at the aerodrome on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1918, sadly, he was killed in a non-flying accident, struck by an aircraft propeller.

Arthur Henry Commins is buried, with a private headstone, in Reading Cemetery and is commemorated on the roll of honour inside St. John the Baptist Church, Uxbridge Road, Hillingdon. His funeral took place on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1918 and was reported in the Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette on the Friday, his death having already been reported in their edition of the 31<sup>st</sup> May.

**"Footballers in Middlesex generally, and the many supporters of the Uxbridge Club in particular, will learn with sincere regret that the popular and clever Uxbridge forward, Arthur Commins, has this week been accidentally killed while on service on the East Coast. He was struck by the propeller of an aeroplane, which inflicted fatal injuries. Arthur joined the R.N.A.S. some long time ago. A fine all round sportsman, Arthur Commins for several years assisted the Uxbridge football club, being always one of its most prominent**

**forwards, and the "darling" of the home crowds. Very fast and quick on the ball, Arthur was always the watched man of the team, and his play was such that he was called upon to play for the County, and had several Middlesex honours. Of a quiet, retiring disposition, he was a general favourite, and he had many friends amongst the club's opponents, who respected his manliness and his clean and clever play. Before joining the Service, Cummins was an engineer at the Sewage Farm at Cowley. The deep sympathy of a wide circle of friends will be extended to his young wife and friends in their sad bereavement."**



After Arthur's death, wife Helen moved back to Reading living at 52 Edgehill Street and as far as can be ascertained the couple had no children. Widow, Helen Commins never re-married and died in January 1962, age 80.

## Private Sydney Charles Smith

Sydney Charles Smith was a young soldier serving with the 1st Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment, and was killed in action in Artois on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1915, age 17.

Sydney was born on the 29th January 1898, the third eldest of seven children born to Henry and Margaret Smith (née Wickens) in Caversham, where his father worked as a journeyman carpenter. He had an elder brother Gilbert (b 1896), a younger brother Leonard (b 1902) and four sisters, Dorothy (b 1897), Catherine (b 1899), Hilda (b 1900) and Olive (b 1910).

Due to the nature of his father's work, the family moved around the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire and Surrey areas. In 1901 they were living at Rose Cottage, Ash, Surrey; by 1911 they had moved to 2 Cross Road, Badshot Lea, Surrey, and in 1914 they were living at 12

Firgrove Terrace, Boundary Road, Woking.

After leaving school in 1912 at the age of 14, Sydney was employed as an Under Gamekeeper, but shortly after the outbreak of war, at the tender age of 16 years old, he enlisted at Guildford on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1914.

Posted to the Royal Berkshire Regiment, Sydney underwent training at home for the next six months before landing in France on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1915 with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. Four days earlier, on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1915, his elder brother was severely wounded at Festubert, whilst serving with The Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment and subsequently had his leg amputated.



**The Brick Stacks at Cuinchy in 1915**

During the six-day Battle of Festubert between 15<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> May the 1st Bn Royal Berks were in trenches at Richebourg l'Avoue and suffered 406 casualties including 114 killed in action or died of wounds. The battalion was withdrawn from the battle on 19<sup>th</sup> May and moved to billets at Allouagne, a small village 3 miles south of Lillers and 7 miles west of Bethune. Here the battalion remained for the next 11 days for rest, recuperation and training which included an inspection by Major General Horne on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, and a visit from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Khartoum, Franz Xavier Geyer for a divine service parade on 30<sup>th</sup> May. Three batches of reinforcements arrived at Allouagne during this spell, 128 other ranks on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 107 on 22<sup>nd</sup> May and a further 118 on 30<sup>th</sup> May. It is probable that Sydney came with the second batch on 22<sup>nd</sup> May.

Now virtually back to full strength the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion left Allouagne on 30<sup>th</sup> May for billets at les Brebis, near Mazingarbe for three days followed by further short spells of billeting at Grenay, near Loos (4 days), Noeux-les-Mines (1 day), Verquigneul (4 days), Vermelles (4 days), and Verquin (3 days).

On 19<sup>th</sup> June the battalion returned to front line duty to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Northampton from 1<sup>st</sup> Division in trenches opposite the notorious Brickstacks at Cuinchy, where the battalion had previously served in early February 1915.

The battalion remained in the Cuinchy/Cambrin area until the end of the month and suffered relatively few casualties with just 13 killed for that 11 day period. The battalion War Diary for 20<sup>th</sup> June 1915 reads:

*'Battalion in the trenches - the Germans had been allowed to gain superiority of fire, they sniped continuously and were very annoying - a very great deal of work was done and sniper posts were established - otherwise a quiet day'*

There is no mention here of any casualties for the 20<sup>th</sup> May but sadly Pte. Sydney Charles Smith, age 17, was the only one killed that day, by a German sniper. He had been in France for one month and in the front line for only one day.

Sydney Smith was originally buried in Vieille-Chapelle Old Military Cemetery, Lacouture but this was closed in November 1915, being too close to a school and too exposed to enemy artillery fire. After the Armistice his body was reinterred in Vieille-Chapelle New Military Cemetery where he now lies at rest in grave 2.B.16, with the emotive inscription 'SAVIOUR IN THY GRACIOUS KEEPING - LEAVE WE NOW THY SERVANT SLEEPING' on his headstone. Sydney Smith is also commemorated on the impressive Woking War Memorial at Jubilee Square in that town.

