



frontline.

The newsletter of the MK WFA, January 2023.



A Happy New Year to MK WFA

A very happy New Year to all our members, families, and friends. The photo above is James Brindley Nicholson, the subject of our next talk. Last year Jim Nicolson detailed the stories of four RFC/RAF VC recipients with some jaw-dropping accounts of the actions for which they were awarded their decorations. Jim is no stranger to aerial VCs, being the nephew of James Nicholson, the only fighter pilot to be awarded the VC in WW2, and in his follow-up visit Jim will detail his uncle's life and career and describe the amazing action for which James was awarded his Victoria Cross. The talk will focus on Nicolson's service life before the war, the award of the medal during the Battle of Britain and the impact the award had on him, his wife and family. Not to be missed.

Although we are hoping for a happy year this year, last year ended on a very sad note. Anne, Kevin and I attended Robert Excell's funeral on behalf of our branch. Another long-standing WFA member, Paul Kilmartin, who lived in Wilstead, sadly passed away unexpectedly on the 29 November. Very recently came the very sad news that long serving member and previous secretary, Roger Penny, had passed away on Christmas Eve. Roger used to be an engineer. He was a member of MK Model society and Milton Keynes Aviation Society. He was already in MK WFA when I joined and was secretary for Roy and later myself. I know that he gave lectures to other branches as well as ours, and that he had a huge knowledge of WW1 and European history. I also know that he was very supportive and had a great dry humour, and all at MK WFA are very saddened by his passing. Our condolences go to his wife Gill.



Mentioned in Despatches

On the 16th December we had our 'Festive Evening' with a distinctive 'Christmassy' feel. Entitled overall 'A Great War Christmas', I presented a talk entitled 'The Christmas Truce - It's Place in the Public Imagination' - a look at why the Christmas truce of 1914 and its famous football match still looms large, via film and literature, in the public imagination 108 years after it happened. So how does an event, something that happened all those years ago, especially a tiny moment, a moment that some people say never actually happened at all, remain in the public conscientiousness? The Great War has passed out of living memory and yet some echoes live on and reach through the generations to the present day. Most school pupils, through the sixties up to the present day, have had some exposure to the poetry of Wilfred Owen and other war poets, and an awareness of the mud, trenches, horror and slaughter is still part of the curriculum to some extent. The poppy and Remembrance is an annual echo of great loss and sacrifice, but what knowledge of the Great War is inherited and not actively sought out? Those of us with an interest or fascination have a rich plethora of specialist books, programmes and magazines, but being enthusiasts, we seek them out. How is it that one small event, in a conflict so vast, especially nowadays when so many people have little knowledge of it, can live on with the status of a legend, or myth?

The Great War Centenary gave four years of national exposure. 'Blackadder' had a part to play, the wonderful 'Warhorse,' especially the stage production as well as the film, reached a massive audience of all ages and continues to do so. '1917' also reached a vast audience. But what about the Truce itself?

We looked at the position of the British troops in the trenches at Christmas 1914, and what they had to look forward too - or not! Their main treat was the Princess Mary Gift tin (see Paul's article in the previous 'Frontline'). Then the legend began to unfold, and the story was told about how the Germans placed Christmas trees on the parapets of their trenches, and how the strains of 'Silent Night' drifted across No Mans Land, and halfway fraternization and football matches took place.

This was a controversial event and some examination about this, and where it happened took place, including the reading out of a letter by Second Lieutenant Chater of the Gordon Highlanders who documented it all happening. The fact that the following year British High Command put out strict orders that no repetition of any fraternization with the enemy was to take place is pretty strong evidence that it did occur in the first place!



'Possibly this film, at least for audiences in 1969, was an introduction to the Truce. 'Oh! What a Lovely War' was a comedy and musical based on the stage play of the same name. It was the 16th most popular film at the UK box office and won several awards. It was a surreal film with its mix of music hall and realism and was very much in the 'Lions led by Donkeys' mould. The Christmas Truce is clearly and realistically portrayed in this film. One of my favourite lines is when the British troops hear the German carols wafting over the front line 'Listen. What's that?' one says. 'It's those Welsh bastards in the next trench' comes the reply.



Tommy (Paul) meets Fritz (Paul) in No Mans' Land. Quite clever really.

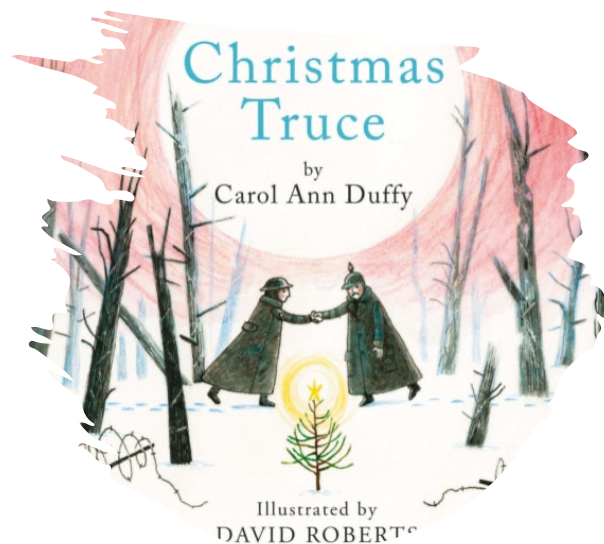
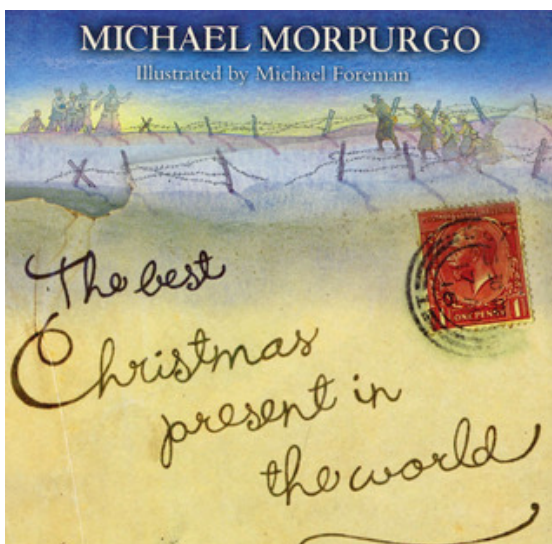
The next public appearance of the truce was a pop video released in 1983. The song 'Pipes of Peace' from Paul McCartney's LP of the same name was a Christmas Number one for two weeks. The video has a good eye for detail and is an effective and realistic portrayal. The plot is that Tommy McCartney meets Fritz McCartney in No Man's Land and when the meeting is broken up by the English artillery both race back to their own trenches where they realise that they have each other's photo of their wives. (This is virtually the same storyline of the later Sainsbury's advert of 2014 - without the chocolate!)

Coming on to the subject of the legendary/mythical football match in No Mans' Land, (and also the subject of introducing awareness of WW1 to youngsters so far removed by the passing of time that their great grandparents fought in the second) is a range of literature for children including 'War Game' by John Foreman. In a nutshell, this book, excellently illustrated by the author (who would also illustrate the following Michael Morpurgo book) tells the story of a group of young village lads, football fanatics to the core, who patriotically join up in a body and head for the trenches in France and a baptism of fire.



A lot of controversy surrounds the football match in No Mans' land. It certainly would have been a rough and ready affair but with lots of young lads talking and hanging about it's almost certain that a kick about would start. After all, the Germans are just as keen on football as the Brits. And according to some eyewitness reports, the Germans supplied the ball. 'War Game' ends with an attack where a football is kicked into action, which did happen on occasion. Spoiler alert, the ending is realistic.

This little book below, one of many WW1 themed books by the excellent Michael Morpurgo (e.g. 'Warhorse', 'A Medal for Leroy', 'Private Peaceful') is devoted to the story of the Christmas Truce. The main character in the story buys an old writing bureau in an antique shop. In a hidden drawer he finds a letter written from an army captain to his wife, where he describes the Christmas Truce. The finder then sets out to return the letter to its rightful owner. This delightful and evocative little story has introduced new generations to the Christmas truce of 1914 and has inspired other authors to write children's books on the same theme.





This is the football match that was played
As over the hills evergreens swayed
To echoes of bells that started to chime
When friends were made at Christmas time,
When enemy soldiers held out a hand,
A sign of peace in No Man's Land,
Peace for men like Ray and Ben,
Two of the soldiers who listened when
Karl stood up with his friend Lars
And sang *Silent Night* under the stars
To enemy soldiers, watching by night,
Under the moon, shining bright,
That lit up the place where peace was found.



'Joyeux Noel' was a film almost entirely about the truce although it didn't reach such huge audiences as the others we have mentioned. There is a humorous little episode where a French soldier had wormed his way to the German lines under cover of dark so he could eavesdrop on the enemy the next day. Suddenly the Germans leave their trenches on Christmas morning and walk past his hiding place.

'Hello Frenchie' they call. The film also details the repercussions from High Command on those who took part.



There was an evocative and well managed version in 'The Dr Who Christmas Special' of 2017 which reaches a vast audience. Another great quote - Peter Capaldi, the then doctor, announces to the older Doctor that he has an army captain from WW1 with him. The captain replies 'What do you mean World War ONE?'



Perhaps one of the most striking renditions of the Christmas Truce, which also reached a vast new audience, was the 2014 Christmas advert by Sainsburys. People were uncomfortable at the time about the ethics of a supermarket using a historical Great War event to sell groceries, but that aside, it is excellently made and beautifully shot. Sainsburys sold many thousands of the chocolate bars featured in their advert, the proceeds going to the British Legion.



Lieutenant George 'We had that wonderful Christmas truce, do you remember sir? We could hear 'Silent Night' drifting across the still, clear air of no mans land. And then they came, the Germans, out of the freezing night mist, calling to us. And we clambered up over the top and went to meet them'.
Captain Blackadder 'Both sides advanced more in one Christmas piss-up than they managed in the next two and a half years of war.'

Why was the truce never repeated? As mentioned earlier, a few days before Christmas 1915, soldiers in the front line were warned that there would be no repetition of any kind of 'festive' fraternization, as this memo from GOC confirms.

'The GOC directs me to remind you of the unauthorised truce which occurred in the line last year. Nothing of the kind is to be allowed on the divisional front this year and every opportunity will be taken to inflict casualties upon any of the enemy exposing themselves.'

This could well have been an unnecessary precaution anyway.

In the space of a year between the Christmas truce of 1914 and Christmas 1915, many of the participants would have been killed or wounded. The German U- boat blockade of Britain had begun, the battlefields had degraded into a total morass, Edith Cavell had been executed, the Lusitania sunk, poison gas had been in use and there had been 113,000 allied casualties in Gallipoli.

The war had entered a more horrific and darker stage that had no place for Christmas festivities, with escalating horrors and miseries to come. Nevertheless, this brief incident, which took place over a single day, remains, and looks to continue to remain, firmly entrenched in the public imagination. The talk finishes with the words of our late Queen that Paul Salver quoted in his article in the December issue.

In-between the two talks was a break for the festive refreshments mentioned earlier, sandwiches, crisps and mince pies. We were then entertained by Tony Kempster performing 'The Devon Brigade' and other songs based on WW1. Tony is a very competent guitarist and has a fine singing voice and everyone both enjoyed his performance and joined in when requested. Many thanks to Tony for an excellent session.



We didn't take any photos of our Christmas 'Do' but this is a photo of Tony performing at our Members' Evening way back in June 2019 at our old venue. In another photo of this event our good friend Robert Excell can be seen in the audience.

'A Magic Lantern's Eye View of a German Christmas' - Kevin Varty.

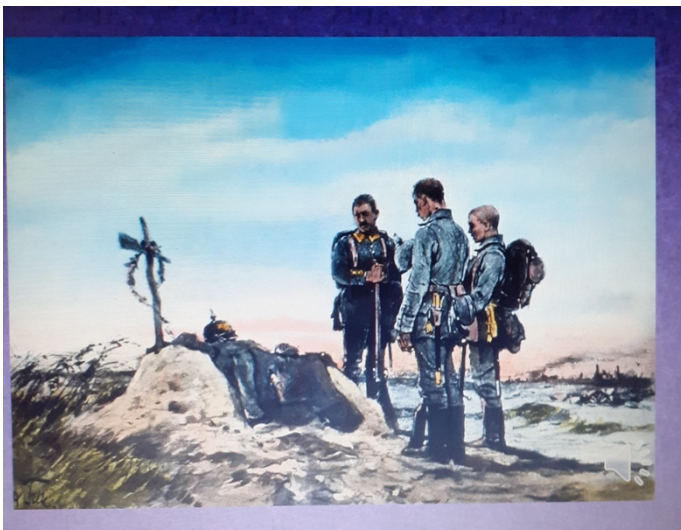
Kevin's excellent talk was about his collection of magic lantern (the First World War version of a projector) slides, showing how the Germans might have entertained themselves at Christmas. We were astounded at the quality and variety of these slides. Kevin had researched each one and as well as explaining their backgrounds, provided fitting background music for many. Kevin explains

'I came across a set of German WW1 slides some 20 years ago. At the time, they were too expensive to buy but I did manage to obtain copies of some of them.



The title slide translates as "To the Memory of our Fallen Heroes". The slides show graves, battle scenes, wounded soldiers and ends up at Christmas in a hut complete with Red Cross dogs and a decorated tree.

I was amazed at the similarity of these slides to the British ones that I have in my collection, they certainly show the human side of the war. The slides look best when shown by a Magic Lantern, however due to the layout in Wolverton, they had to be on PowerPoint.'



A fittingly festive slide to round off the evening.



Composers for WFAMK ~ August 2022

(The final section of a talk delivered to members of the Milton Keynes Branch of the WFA in August last year by Eric, including several of the accompanying illustrations.)

Introductory

In the WFA Our chief focus: battles land, sea and air and those who fought in them. Nonetheless as we recognise, the effects of the Great War throughout society and worldwide were far-reaching, profound, sometimes devastating. Part of that was the effect on the creative arts: literature, the visual arts, music, architecture.

Composers - and musicians generally - generally receive less attention than the authors and the visual artists. This evening I aim to redress the balance a little! I cannot possibly be comprehensive, nor even perhaps properly representative across the board. I aim at least to present a selection of composers - English composers - and of their works, some of whom and of which are surely familiar to you, some perhaps less so. I am afraid the music presented is largely rather sombre - it cannot be otherwise. Some of my subjects served in the armed forces 1914-18, some did not, chiefly by reason of age, or younger men rejected on medical grounds. Some of those who served gave their lives, some sustained significant injuries, in body or in mind. None, I think, who lived through those years - whether they saw military service or not - were uninfluenced by the War in their later life and work.

GUSTAV HOLST



Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was born and brought up in Cheltenham. His mother was English, his father, a professional musician, of mixed Swedish, Latvian and German ancestry; properly the family surname was von Holst. Gustav was a rather sickly child with asthma, poor eyesight and neuritis in one arm. Aged 18 he applied for a composition scholarship to the RCM but it was won that year by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor - remembered today chiefly for *Hiawatha*. (The illegitimate, mixed-race child of a gentleman from Sierra Leone and an English mother - so claims of ingrained 'racism' in British society at the time do seem a tad misplaced, don't they!) Holst's father had to borrow £100 to see him through his first year and it was clearly a bit of a stretch. (£12,000 at 2020 values using the RPI as comparator, £45,000 using average earnings.) Fortunately he was then awarded a scholarship to cover future years.

Holst went on to develop a busy career as a jobbing musician: performance - he played the trombone - teaching, as much composition as he could find time for. He became a lifelong friend of RVW.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Holst tried to enlist but to his intense frustration - if unsurprisingly - he was rejected as unfit for military service. He continued to teach and to compose. At last in 1918 he had his chance, the music section of the YMCA's education department needed volunteers to work with British troops stationed in Europe awaiting demobilisation. But the YMCA felt that his surname looked too German to be acceptable in such a rôle. He changed 'von Holst' to 'Holst' by deed poll in September 1918 and he was forthwith appointed as the YMCA's musical organiser for the Near East, based in Salonica.

Before he set off his friends and admirers - who were now many - gave him as a parting present a concert of his own works at the Queen's Hall, The Queen's Hall orchestra, his friend Adrian Boult conducting, the works! So on Sunday 29th September 1918 was premiered a composition on which Holst had been working hard throughout those war years: *The Planets*.

(Eric then played *Venus - Bringer of Peace*.)

And then off he went to Salonica where - as appears - he had a whale of a time, before returning to England and resuming his career.

PATRICK HADLEY



A composer with whom you may be far less familiar was Patrick Hadley (1899-1973). Declaration of interest, his elder brother Peyton Sheldon Hadley (1895-1918) was at my old school and fell in the War - more precisely, early in 1918 he was seriously wounded but survived, he was eventually brought home to a convalescent hospital in Eastbourne, where he died of Spanish 'flu' that October.

Patrick volunteered straight from school - Winchester College. He took a commission in the Royal Artillery. In the last weeks of the war he was injured, necessitating amputation of his right leg. Post-war he went up to Cambridge, to Pembroke College where his father was Master, then to the RCM, where in 1925 he joined the staff, teaching composition. His own compositional output was not extensive but his influence as a teacher was significant.

In 1938 Hadley was elected to a Fellowship at Gonville and Caius College in Cambridge and appointed as a lecturer in the music faculty. In 1946 he was elected to the Chair of Music at Cambridge University.

But there is a sad story about Hadley which our son Christopher heard during his own time at Cambridge a few years ago. Christopher read Classics but he spent a lot of his time at university pursuing musical interests - he is now a professional singer.

The story concerns Hadley and his injury. His wartime experiences and the pain of his wound led to his becoming a heavy drinker. And if you only have one leg to stand on in the first place it must be all the easier to get totally legless. This he would do with some regularity at one of the Cambridge pubs, where he was well known and liked. A 'phone call would be made, one of his college porters would be sent out with a wheelbarrow . . .

Here is an orchestral sketch he wrote in 1923: *Kinder Scout*, a musical evocation of that distinctive Derbyshire peak, and a Christmas Carol.

(Eric played *Kinder Scout* and *I Sing of a Maiden*)

There are other composers too numerous to mention, examples of whose music I have no time to play. Here are a few who merit a passing note - please pardon the pun.

FREDERICK DELIUS

Frederick Delius (1862-1934) - christened Fritz - was born in Bradford, his family origins were German / Dutch. As a young man he studied music in Germany before making his home in France. He and his wife lived in England for a period during the earlier part of the War, to keep out of harm's way, before returning to France. One of his major wartime works was his *Requiem*, dedicated 'to the memory of all young Artists fallen in the war' but it was a determinedly atheistic work, consequently it didn't go down too well at the time and it has seldom been performed since. Post-war, Delius became increasingly disabled by tertiary syphilis but he continued to compose, with assistance from a young admirer, Eric Fenby (1906-1997). To the end, he spoke with a strong Yorkshire accent and took a keen interest in Yorkshire cricket.

ARTHUR BLISS

Arthur Bliss (1891-1975) was the eldest son of an American father and his English 2nd wife. He was at Rugby School and at Pembroke College Cambridge where he read Classics, then at the RCM. Come the Great War he took a commission in the Royal Fusiliers, transferring to the Grenadier Guards in 1917. He was twice wounded, once gassed and he was mentioned in despatches. It was later written of him that 'the emotional wounds inflicted by the war were deep and lasting'. He nonetheless made a long and successful career as a composer, in 1953 he was appointed Master of the Queen's Music, in succession to Arnold Bax.



Frederick Delius



Arthur Bliss

FRANK BRIDGE

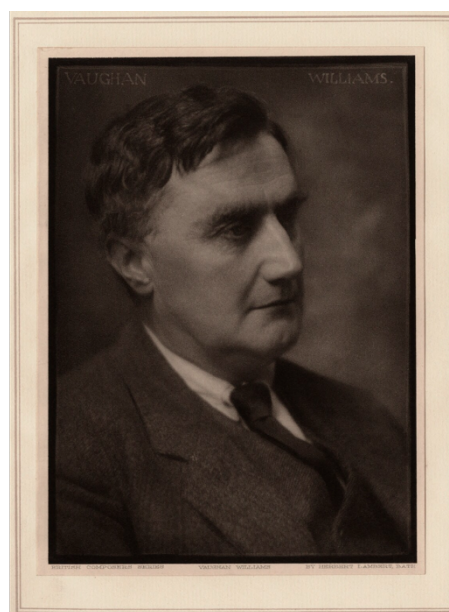
Frank Bridge (1879-1941) born in Brighton, was the 9th child of a musical family. He studied at the RCM. He became a determined pacifist and by means which I have been unable to determine he contrived to avoid all involvement in the War. It was said of him that in 1915 he was: *'in utter despair over the futility of the War and the state of the world and would walk round Kensington in the early hours of the morning unable to get any rest or sleep.'*

NB Bridge's *Lament (for Catherine, aged 9 "Lusitania" 1915)* for string orchestra. (Not played.)

Post-war he went on to become Benjamin Britten's mentor. NB Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge (1937)*. (Not played.)



Frank Bridge



Ralph Vaughan Williams

RALPH (Pronounced 'Raeph') VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

My last subject tonight -but by no means the least - is Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958). Vaughan Williams was born in Gloucestershire, the son of a vicar. His mother, Margaret née Wedgewood, was a great granddaughter of Josiah Wedgewood and a niece of Charles Darwin. In old age Ralph was wont to say that: 'I was born with a very small silver spoon in my mouth'. In due course he had a small private income of his own. His father died when he was just 3 years old and he was brought up in Surrey. 1887-1890 he was at my own old school: Charterhouse.

He had demonstrated a musical talent from a young age and from Charterhouse, aged 18, he went straight to the RCM. His family would have preferred him to go to University first. In 1892 he went up to Trinity College Cambridge where he read Music and History, before returning to the RCM for a further year. He and Gustav Holst became particular friends, with considerable influence on each other's music. Like many other young composers of his era - as we have heard - he developed a fascination for folk music and he went busily around the country collecting folk-songs - which then influenced and inspired his musical compositions.

Through the period leading up to the Great War Vaughan Williams' career steadily developed, he began to be a man to watch. 1910 saw the premier performances of his *Fantasy on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and his *Sea Symphony*. Shortly before the War, in 1914, came his *London Symphony*. We have heard that story. On New Year's Eve 1914 despite his age - he was then 42 - Vaughan Williams enlisted as a Private in the 2nd/4th London Field Ambulance, 179th Brigade, 60th Division. His unit was sent to France on 22nd June 1915, to Écoivres, a few miles northwest of Arras. This was absolutely no kind of picnic. They continued there until November 1916 when they were sent south across France to Marseilles, thence to Salonica.

In Salonica they appear largely to have served further away from the front, on or behind the so-called Birdcage Line - so that life became more orderly and RVW had the opportunity to organise some *ad hoc* musical performances - between spells of latrine duty and mosquito squad work. Eventually in June 1917 he was transferred home to England where he was trained and commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery. As such he saw action in France from March 1918. After the Armistice he served as Director of Music for the British First Army until he was demobilised in February 1919.

Post-war he resumed his career. Amongst much else, he returned to a piece *The Lark Ascending* which he had written for piano and violin in 1914 and re-worked it with an orchestral accompaniment; it was first performed in this form in 1921.

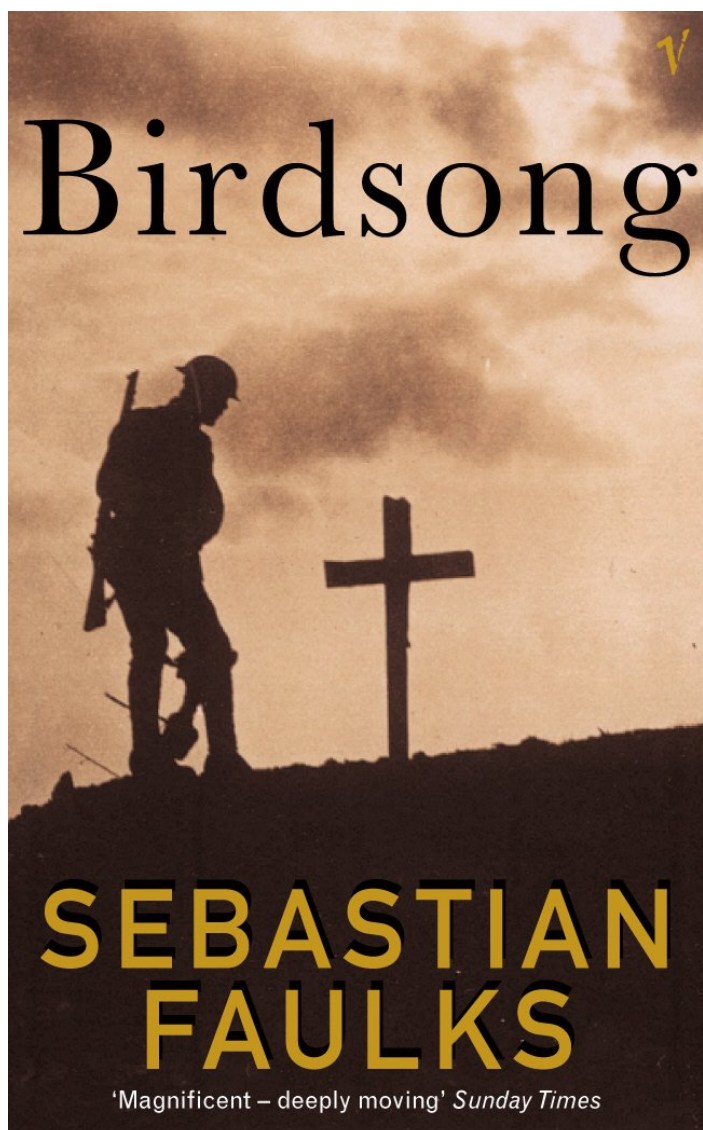
In 1922 he produced a major new composition, his *Third Symphony*, which he later titled *A Pastoral Symphony* - but to quote his own words: 'It's really wartime music - a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night in the ambulance wagon at Écoivres and we went up a steep hill and there was this wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset. It's not really lambkins frisking at all, as most people take for granted. A bugler used to practise and this sound became part of that evening landscape and is the genesis of the long trumpet cadenza in the second movement of the symphony'.

(Final piece of music for the evening- *Pastoral Symphony*, 2nd movement) Eric Webb

(Many thanks to Eric for both an excellent evening and these contributions to 'Frontline')

Book and Film 8

Continuing our look at books and DVDs available to borrow from our lending library.



The story begins in Amiens in Northern France in 1910 where Stephen Wraysford, is working in a textile factory. He falls in love with, and runs away with, the wife of the factory owner. Despite being pregnant, she leaves him. The story moves on to Flanders in 1916. Stephen is an infantry officer on the Western Front, friendly with a tunnelling engineer called Michael Weir. The narrative dwells on the lives of both infantrymen and tunnellers, notably Stephen, his commanding officer Captain Gray, Michael Weir, and a tunneller called Jack Firebrace. It describes the daily life of the soldier, the horrific effects of wounds and gas, but also the intense friendships of men under pressure. The story gives the first day of the Battle of the Somme from Stephen's point of view, from the wait at dawn to the fall of dusk when he lies wounded in a shell hole, among 60,000 British casualties. In the 1970's his diary is found by his grand-daughter Elizabeth where she discovers that her mother is Stephen and Isabelle's daughter. Elizabeth manages to track down Gray, now an old man living in Scotland. Back in 1917, Stephen meets Isabelle again and in 1918, is trapped underground with Jack Firebrace, when an explosion brings down the roof on a tunnel. Jack dies but not before Stephen promises that if he ever has children, he will name one of them John, after Jack's son who died. After days underground, Stephen, himself close to death, is rescued to find the war is over. In the final scene of the book, Elizabeth gives birth to a son who she names John, closing the circle with the past.

Birdsong is a two-part British 2012 television drama, based on the 1993 novel by Sebastian Faulkes. It stars Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Wraysford and Clemence Poesy as Isabelle Azaire and was directed by Philip Martin, based on a screenplay by Abi Morgan. The adaptation was produced for the BBC and PBS as a two-part mini-series. It premiered in January 2012 in the United Kingdom and in April 2012 in the United States. Not having the budget of a major film, the battle scenes are very well shot, with particular emphasis on the horrors of tunnelling. Whereas in the novel Stephen is terrified of birds, the television adaptation, despite the title, does not explore this, although birdsong is frequently heard.





We Need You at the A.G.M.

Join us for our A.G.M and quiz.
(Refreshments included)



Our Events Programme.

January 20th - 'My Uncle - The Battle of Britain VC' - Jim Nicholson.

February 17th - MK WFA AGM and quiz.

March 17th 'The Russian Front' - Phil Tomaselli

April 21st 'Jig-a-jig Tommy' - Bruce Cherry

May 19th - 'I shall hope to try an officer and at least one corporal for cowardice' - Michael de Cicero

Meetings are 7.30 - 9.30.at Wolverton Working Men's Social Club, 49 - 50, Stratford Road MK12 5LS

Committee members are...

Stuart Macfarlan - Chairman (macfarlan87@gmail.com)

Anne McIntyre - Secretary/historical events co-ordinator (annefmmcintyre@gmail.com)

Ian Wright - Talks organiser

Caroline Wright - Treasurer

Jim Barrett - Seminar and visits co-ordinator

George Maby - Wolverton Town Council liaison (Twinning and Albert French commemoration)