



frontline.

The newsletter of the MK WFA, May 2023.



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

1916 was a pivotal year for the British Army, a year of intense combat defined by the Battle of the Somme and the appalling casualties of 1916. Yet it was also the year in which the British Army began to master industrial warfare and the tide of the war began to turn in favour of the Allies.

Michael's talk looks in detail at the German Trench Raid at La Boisselle, 11 April 1916 and the British response to this attack. Michael is Commissioning Editor at an esteemed publisher of military history and an established author himself. He has a PhD in Modern History and his research interests are the Victorian/Edwardian Army, Second Anglo-Boer War, Western Front, Mesopotamian and Gallipoli campaigns 1914-18 with a specific interest in the Third Battle of Ypres. Not to be missed!



The Western Front
Association
Milton Keynes Branch

Milton Keynes WFA Seminar



14th October 2023

Renowned expert speakers covering an exciting variety of aspects of the Great War

Alexandra Churchill, Peter Hart, Gary Beale, Charlie Barrett

Buffet lunch included plus tea, coffee and biscuits throughout the day.

Book stall, militaria and branch displays.

Bletchley Masonic Centre 9.30am - 4.30pm

Tickets soon available online from Eventbrite.



MAY

Trooper Richard Francis Rawson (Household Cavalry) Killed in Action 13th May 1917 aged 26
(Great-uncle of Anne McIntyre)

Dick landed in France on 9th November 1916 (on his first wedding anniversary). By April 1917, the regiment was fighting in the Battle of Arras and was in the centre of the First Battle of the Scarpe to capture Vimy Ridge. Twelve tunnels were built leading up to the frontline through which 24000 men crawled to the battlefront and the British lines moved 3 kilometres forward. Three days of heavy snowfall brought action to a halt. In another attempt to advance (Third Battle of the Scarpe) on the 3rd May, Dick was killed in action. His body was never recovered, and he is commemorated on the Arras memorial.



Richard Rawson (butcher) and his wife





Mentioned in Despatches

Jig a jig Tommy

On April 21st we had a fascinating and very informative talk by Dr Bruce Cherry. He set out to prove that his opening quote (from Prof Joanna Bourke,) 'the majority of British never had casual sex with any women during their active military service' was indeed very far from the mark, especially taking into consideration that the British army had more cases of VD than gunshot wounds. Dr Cherry then mentioned Kitchener, in a written address to the troops in 1914, 'You are ordered abroad as a soldier of the King to help our French comrades against the invasion of a common enemy...In this new experience you may find temptations both in wine and women. You must entirely resist both temptations, and, while treating all women with perfect courtesy, you should avoid any intimacy. Do your duty bravely. Fear God. Honour the King.' He then followed this with a variety of quotes from soldiers, including Dennis Wheatly, that showed that this piece of advice was soundly ignored!

The army's main concern, from the Crimean war onwards, was the health of their men. There was no penicillin, and venereal diseases were rife, often resulting in hospitalisation. A bad case could take a man out of service altogether. Kipling states that single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints. The army were also very aware that possible homosexuality, especially between ranks and officers, would cause a breakdown of discipline, especially as many of the officers had a public-school upbringing.

There had been previously the Contagious Diseases Act, first passed in 1864. It was extended in 1866 and 1869, before being repealed in 1886. The Acts were introduced as an attempt to regulate 'common prostitutes', in order to reduce the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases within the British army and navy. The Acts imitated regimes that had previously been implemented in countries such as India and Greece. They were first applied to garrison towns and ports, although their coverage increased over time. The Contagious Diseases Act made it the law for women suspected of prostitution to register with the police and submit to an invasive medical examination. The Act gave the police the power to determine who was a prostitute. If the woman was found to be suffering from a venereal disease, she would be confined to a 'lock hospital' until pronounced 'clean'. The alternative to agreeing to the examination was 3 months' imprisonment (extended to 6 months in the 1869 Act) or hard labour. The Acts did not enforce the examination of men. The Act evoked outrage among the British public because it led to the unjust treatment of women. It was eventually repealed after an impressive grassroots movement led by Josephine Butler, who founded the Ladies' National Association (LNA) to campaign against the implementation of the Act.

By the end of 1914 there were three types of soldier in the British Army, the original professionals of the BEF, Kitchener's volunteers, and the conscripted troops. These were from different social groups, with differing outlooks and morals. The army, taking a public stance, did its best to entertain

and divert the men, encouraging sports, setting up libraries etc. There was a campaign of lectures on the dangers of VD. In private the army tended to turn a blind eye. In the early part of the war VD was a good escape from the horrors of the trenches, far easier than shooting your own hand off, until the army introduced the strategy of docking pay and writing a letter to the wife. (This had the effect of causing troops with VD to hide the fact that they were infected.) The small ads of newspapers were full of advice, 'cures' and medicines for venereal diseases.

Dr Cherry then went on to explain the red and blue lights. In England brothels were banned, in France they were accepted and commonplace, traditionally every French town had a brothel. The army took over the French army brothels, and even supplied prophylactics. (After the lecture Kevin showed us something from his collection, a female 'washing' device! I have to say that no-one present, including Kevin, were very keen on thinking about the operation of the device - but it was very well made!)

Many of the middle classes had joined up, and they embodied a 'muscular Christianity', involving sports, a 'Tom Brown's Schooldays' outlook and a high moral stance. However, the old order was already under change, with women's rights and the beginning of the breakdown of the old class system. Soldiers, who didn't expect to survive long and were keen to experience as much of life while they still could, actively sought out the women and wine they were supposed to avoid. Soldier's pay tended to build up while they were in the line. Coarseness of language, drinking and gambling, the results of boredom, tended to build up when they were not. The army produced a Blue Light outfit (Dr Cherry had an example, very rare.) it was a cardboard box containing two tubes of cream and instructions which commanded 'when you have read this - destroy the instructions.



A lot of what went on in the war was pushed aside afterwards and forgotten. During the war, a lot was censored. A popular limerick with the troops went -

Jack and Bill went up the hill
To see the Frenchman's daughter
The censors here, I can't tell you
What they went and taught her.

And then there was 'Mademoiselle from Armentieres! Hinky-dinky parlez-vous!

In 1917 the Canadian government threatened to pull their troops out of England unless 'the girls of London were controlled'. In 1914 there were 3,921 cases of VD in the British armed forces, in 1918

over 60,000. Many soldiers never admitted they had it, and there are numerous accounts of men going 'over the top' to certain death rather than be found out.

There was a huge trade in pornographic photographs and postcards. Before going 'over the top' the men had to empty their pockets. Part of the reason for this was to avoid pornographic material being sent home with soldiers' effects. Dr Cherry also made clear the effects the war had on women, and their struggles to survive. France and Belgium had different morals to Great Britain, and the men imagined France would be very different to home. 'Jig-a-Jig Tommy?' would often be the first words a soldier would hear in France. Girls were attracted by the uniforms. Many were in desperate circumstances, their men away fighting or already dead. Soldiers were billeted in houses and farms with the local population. 'Walking out' was a popular distraction from the horrors of the front. Nurses in hospitals were strictly policed.

The army turned a blind eye to, but unofficially promoted, the 'red light' brothels, because they were safer, with their regular inspections, than unlicensed ones. (The Germans had wheeled brothels that toured behind the lines.) In Paris in 1917, a US army document states that there were 40 major brothels, 5,000 licensed, card-carrying streetwalkers and 70,000 unlicensed prostitutes. After several big scandals Haig was ordered to close down the brothels, he ignored this because he didn't want to withdraw large numbers of soldiers from the front to guard them. The soldiers' leave passes started to include areas that were out of bounds. In 1917, one red lamp brothel near a military hospital recorded 171,000 visits. At 5 to 10 francs a throw (not sure that's the best term) there was huge money made.

In conclusion to his excellent presentation Dr Cherry asked - success or failure? Probably success. There was little evidence of homosexuality or sex crimes, (although court marshals tended to 'mask' such events). There was less AWOL, and no mutinies. Morale and discipline remained high. In the soldiers' view - it was all a bit of an adventure.

WFA AGM. On 22nd April Jim and I travelled down the National Army Museum in London for the 2023 AGM of the WFA. As well as giving us the opportunity to have a good look round the museum (well worth a visit) we were treated to three excellent lectures; 'The British West Indian Regiment: Race and colour on the Western Front' by Dominiek Dendooven, 'Absent bodies and broken hearts: the Imperial War Graves Commission and the repatriation debate, 1915-1939' by Prof. Mark Connelly and 'The German capture of Fort Douaumont 25 February 1916' by Christina Holstein. This was followed after lunch by the AGM, details of which will be reported in the WFA magazines.

MK WFA report for 'Bulletin', May 2023. Here is our 'report' for the next 'Bulletin'. In case it isn't included, this is it -

We have settled well into our venue at Wolverton. We have the use of two adjacent 'lounges' with wall seating, and we have discovered the perfect set up with two projectors on each wall and the guest speaker in the middle, which seems to work just fine.

We ended last year with our Christmas 'special', a talk, 'The Christmas Truce - It's Place in the Public Imagination' by Stuart Macfarlan (that's me), a break for 'festive fare', accompanied by songs inspired by the Great War performed by Tony Kempster, and a second talk, 'A Magic Lantern's Eye View of a German Christmas', by Kevin Varty. Although we are hoping for a happy year this year, last year ended on a very sad note. We lost, in quick succession, long standing member and stalwart of history in Milton Keynes, Robert Excell. Another long- standing WFA member, Paul Kilmartin, sadly passed away unexpectedly in November, and then 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. Another great loss, sadly missed. On a much lighter note, our first lecture in January was 'My Uncle - The Battle of Britain VC' by Jim Nicholson, followed in February by our AGM and quiz. In March Phil Tomaselli presented 'The Russian Front,' in April 'Jig-a-jig Tommy' by Bruce Cherry and in May, 'I shall hope to try an officer and at least one corporal for cowardice' - Michael de Cicero. All fascinating lectures and very much appreciated.

Our newest committee member, Gary, has taken on the role of social media coordinator and has also updated our branch page on the WFA website, which is a huge advantage (and relief!)

We are looking forward to presenting our branch display at the Heritage Weekend at Milton Keynes Museum on the 15th-17th September and at our seminar on October 14th which we are also very excited about, and we are hoping to see many of you there. (Stuart Macfarlan.)

Cemetery Tours Mike Chapman's CWGC tours are now open for booking. Eventbrite has:

Manor Road Cemetery - Saturday 20/5 14:00 & Friday 26/5 10:30

- <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cwgc-war-graves-week-tours-2023-bletchley-manor-road-cemetery-tickets-612301158247?aff=>

Wolverton Cemetery - Saturday 27/5 14:00 - <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cwgc-war-graves-week-tours-2023-wolverton-cemetery-tickets-611162021057?aff=>

St Peter & St Paul, Cranfield churchyard - Sunday 21/5 14:00 and Tuesday 23/5 10:30.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cwgc-war-graves-week-2023-cranfield-st-peter-paul-churchyard-tickets-617631501447>

www.cwgc.org/tours won't be updated until all Eventbrite entries are live and War Graves Week is announced, but will be the place to read about and book tours (there will be other sites in the wider area led by other people which may also be of interest).

Forthcoming Herts police tour. A trip is being organised by the Herts Police Great War Society on 8th, 9th, and 10th September, and will cover the German advance in the Somme in March 1918. Some members are just back from a similar trip 'Somme 1916' which, (apart from the weather!) was a great experience and they would very much recommend it. (See the following article).

The tour is organised by Jim Nicholson who you may remember came to give us a talk on his VC uncle James (remember there is no 'h') Nicolson in January.

In addition, the Police Society's next meeting is on Wednesday 7th June at the Mill Green Golf Club, Gypsy Lane, Welwyn Garden City, AL7 4TY. The speaker will be the excellent Alex Churchill. She will be talking about the life of Lawrence of Arabia, which promises to be a thoroughly absorbing presentation. Alex has been booked for our own seminar in October but will be speaking on a different topic so don't feel you will be duplicating if you go to hear about Lawrence in June. If you need more information on either event, please contact hertsgreatwar@virginmedia.com Details and booking form were attached to the email that Anne circulated to members, but if you need them again check their website or contact Anne or myself.

Twining Trip. George reports that the committee are busy working on the itinerary for the visit of the Belgians. Their visit is quite short, being only two days, but will include a concert and events at Bletchley Park and MK Museum. Further details will be forthcoming as they unfold.

The Somme 1916 Spring Tour

A 03:30am alarm call was a small price to pay for a visit to The Western Front, focusing in on the events that occurred at The Somme 1916. Clare and I were accompanied with familiar faces in Sally and Martin as we joined the Hertfordshire Constabulary Great War Society, led by Jim Nicolson.

We had a full itinerary ahead of us for the next three days, using the historic town of Arras as a centre point and hotel stay.

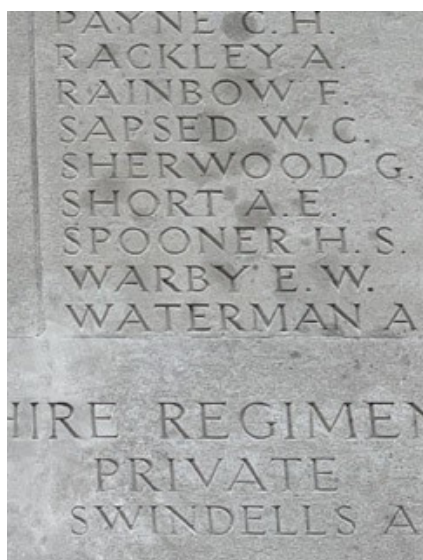
First stop of the day on arrival in France was The Ulster Tower, where we had traditional French fare of Jambon et Fromage Baguettes avec un petite beer, or in English: cheese and ham French stick with a tinny. (We were to sample the same lunch twice more).

Austin from the Ulster tower recounted the history of the tower and its significance to the people of Ireland. He then took us on a tour of Thiepval wood, with its recently restored trenches, explaining the huge losses the Ulster regiments experienced in 1916.

The day rounded off with a visit to Mill Road and Ancre cemeteries where we listened to stories from Jim of the bravery of those men who paid the ultimate price.

The second day, and most poignant for me, was a trip to Thiepval memorial, and with luck, the opportunity for me to find my great uncle's name recorded along with the other 72,000 men who remain missing.

I was very fortunate to find him and pay my respects, Pte: Albert Ernest Short, Hertfordshire Regiment.



After finding Albert we then spent time wandering the Thiepval site, cemetery and visitor site, an incredible place to spend time at.

The next stop was the infamous Beaumont - Hamel where The Newfoundland regiment were cut to ribbons, losing 710 from a total number of 740. Once on the ground it was so clear to see what a folly it was for those men to be ordered across a barren expanse of open ground, heading straight into German machine gun posts.

The whole site is beautifully kept, with the trenches still clearly visible, some open to allow visitors to walk through. The magnificent Moose looks across the battlefield, where so many were lost.



The last visit of day was to Lochnagar Crater, even by standing on the perimeter of the crater it is difficult to comprehend the size of the explosion that would have caused such a scar on the landscape.



The remainder of the day was spent sampling French cuisine and all, well almost everything Arras has to offer a weary traveller and Battlefield enthusiast.

The third and final day of the tour took us to a number of key and significant areas and cemeteries, which included: The Dartmoor cemetery, Fricourt British cemetery and The Devonshire cemetery, including the trench where the Devonshire's sustained almost total decimation.

To keep a balance on the trip we visited the Fricourt German cemetery. A very different cemetery in contrast to those of the British and their allies. Rather than Portland stone we see plain black crosses and four mass graves where over 17,000 casualties were interned.

For me ,and others ,the irony of a first world war Jewish German soldier laid to rest with his comrades is not lost and symbolises..... well you decide!!



Three days of packed itinerary, new cemeteries visited and the paying of respects to a family member all amounted to something that only enhances the passion for The Western Front I have. I would highly recommend joining the trips Jim organises, they are great, Sally, Martin, Clare and I are already booked for September's trip to The Somme 1916, come and join us!!



Gary Short.

'Spads and Spandaus' - Biggles, W. E. Johns - Cultural Legacy and the Air War on the Western Front 1914-1918. Paul Salver (part 1)

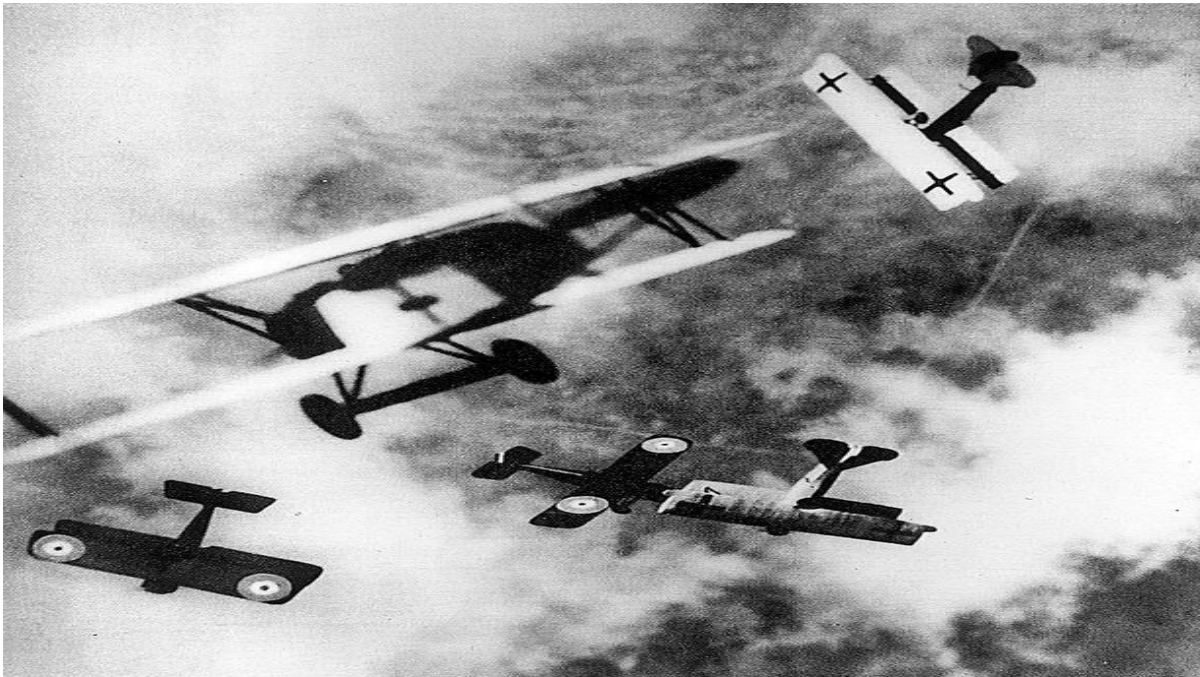


<https://archive.org/details/biggles-01-the-camels-are-coming> Dust jacket first edition

'The Albatroses were shooting, and the Spads swerved violently, like a school of minnows at the sudden presence of a pike. In a moment all formation was lost as they scattered in all directions. Biggles sucked in his breath quickly as a Spad burst into flames and dropped like a stone. He was among them now; a red-bellied machine appeared" through his sights and he pressed his triggers viciously, cursing a Spad that nearly collided with him.

A green Albatros came at him head-on, and as he charged it, another, with a blue and white checked fuselage sent a stream of tracer through his top plane. The green machine swerved, and he flung the Camel round behind it; but the checked machine had followed him and he had to pull up in a wild zoom to escape the hail of lead it spat at him. 'Hell!' grunted Biggles vigorously, as his windscreen flew to pieces, 'this is getting too hot. My God, what a mess!' A Spad and an Albatros, locked together, careered earthwards in a flat spin. A Camel, spinning viciously, whirled past him, and another Albatros, wrapped in a sheet of flame, flashed past his nose, the doomed pilot leaping into space even as it passed. ' 2[<https://archive.org/details/biggles-01-the-camels-are-coming> page 101- 102]

Published in 1932 in a book of collected stories [though Biggles first appeared in the story "The White Fokker," published in the first issue of Popular Flying magazine]- 'The Camels are coming' was not intended to be aimed at a child readership. The author W E Johns was drawing on his wartime experience to describe the air war on the Western Front. In the short story 'Spads and Spandaus' Johns vividly describes the twists, turns and horror of an aerial 'dogfight'.



3 An aerial dogfight between at least five planes. Dogfighting was the main method of attack.

Bettmann/CORBIS <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/world-history/first-world-war-in-images-hidden-and-extraordinary-a-unique-new-gallery>

The cultural legacy of Biggles

I have been a fan of Biggles and W E Johns since I received my first book at Christmas as a child. It was Biggles of 266- I read it and became hooked. As an adult I still had all my childhood books, so I started to be a collector- from second hand bookstores and Antiquarian sellers.



4 private collection Paul Salver

Biggles holds a unique place in British popular culture in books, film, TV, Radio and even computer games. Biggles books were bestsellers from the 1930's - late 1960s and due to the immense success throughout the world in 17 countries, they were translated into languages such as Finnish, Icelandic,

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Spanish, Dutch, Czech, Italian, Swedish, Danish, German, Norwegian, Hungarian, Portuguese, and Flemish. In 1964 the first UNESCO Statistical Yearbook reported that Biggles books had been placed 29th on a list of the most translated books in the world. The books also led to very popular series of comics in France and Belgium.

HOW THEY GOT TO THE TOP
BIGGLES
-AIR-ACE
No. 1

He's the greatest hero ever in flying fiction. CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS, his creator, has told of his adventures in 68 books, translated into 17 languages. And Biggles still flies on...

CAPTAIN William Earle Johns wrote the first Biggles story because he was annoyed. As an ex-pilot of the First World War and editor of a magazine dealing with flying, he wanted to run some stories of those epic air days, but all the stories available were about American pilots. "Anyone would have thought that no other nation had done any air fighting," says Johns. "So I wrote a story myself called 'The White Fokker,' about a German war pilot who devised the trick of waiting above our airfield as the flyers came in from raids, and then pounced on them."

Some British pilot had to beat that crafty German, so Johns created his hero, Bigglesworth, "the quiet sort of Briton—modest, loyal—a thoroughly good chap." If anyone had told the modest Johns that later he would have been amazed. He didn't know either that the first Biggles book was to be followed by sixty-seven others. That his income from writing would enable him to live in an elegant Queen Anne house in Hampton Court and go on three world tours.

And that the Biggles books would be translated into seventeen languages. The result of all those translations has brought delight into Captain Johns's life because of the letters he receives. "Dear Sir, I am a Chinese boy and I want to grow up like Biggles." "I am a Pakistan girl. I am fourteen and live in Lahore. I am in love with Biggles." "I am eighteen years-old Swedish boy and live in twenty-seven hours' flying time. The reason why I first was interested in planes and flying was your Biggles books."

Plan of Escape

In France he is the fourth biggest selling author. He is enormously popular in Germany (even though many of his stories had German villains) and in Norway during the Nazi occupation, two boys suggested themselves over the border past the Gestapo to buy the latest Biggles books. In Iceland the hero has to be called Benni, because they cannot pronounce the name Biggles. ("Have you ever had an income tax demand in Icelandic?" Johns asks wryly.)

The author particularly treasures one memory of a Biggles story. During the First World War, Johns was shot down by the great ace, Ernst Udet, and taken prisoner. He worked out a plan of escape. In later years he put his plan into one of his Biggles stories. It was copied successfully by prisoners in the Second World War! Accuracy in his stories? Johns has no illusions about that. "Modern youngsters are astoundingly well informed, and if they think you don't know your facts, you are out."

"I once wrote that a certain type of aircraft flew from London to Egypt non-stop. Captain Johns has been flying his Biggles in the same type of aircraft for a certain number of hours, and he says he is proud of the fact that he has kept the first war in the air."

Letters poured in pointing out that the journey was of 2,000 miles and that particular plane could only fly 1,800 miles without refuelling!

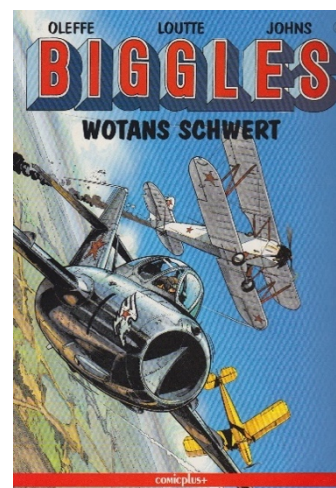
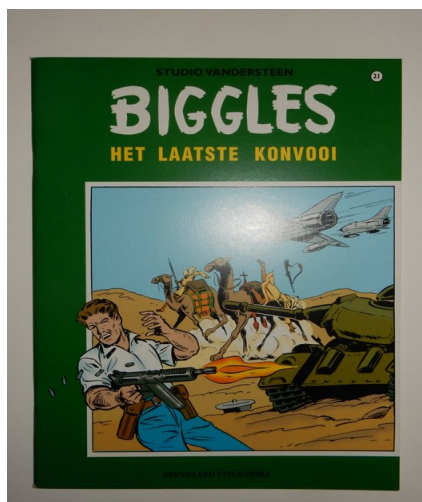
Yes, Johns is now living in comparative luxury, but if that also suggests a life of ease, then make no mistake. In one of the gracious rooms in a desk, and Johns sits at that desk at eight o'clock each morning to write another book—in longhand.

But he has to turn away sometimes to a tray piled high with letters. "Dear Captain Johns, I am a Zulu boy..." The American fiction, air heroes who began it all have faded into oblivion. But Biggles flies on.

SO YOU WANT TO WRITE A BOOK?

THERE is nothing to stop you from becoming a writer. But you do need to know what to do. You must have a plot interesting to yourself. You must be able to read on your own. You must be able to write and to revise. You must be able to take criticism and to accept it. You must be able to take criticism and to accept it. You must be able to take criticism and to accept it.

5 1964 Look and Learn article -<http://www.wejohns.com/Look%20and%20Learn/Biggles%20-%20Air-Ace>



6 <https://comicsforall269084760.wordpress.com/2022/01/03/biggles/>

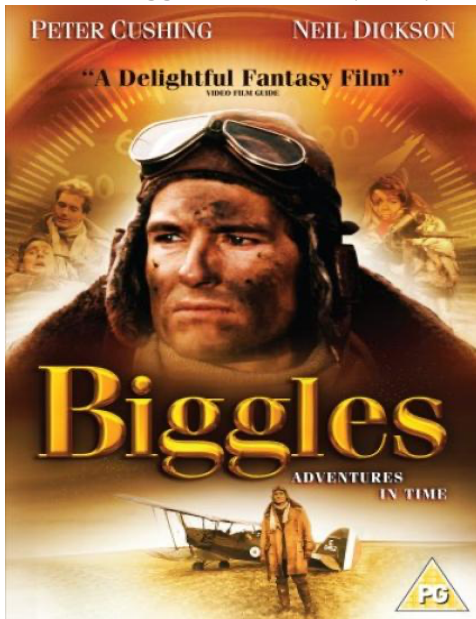


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7 Biggles 1960S TV SERIES <https://nostalgiacentral.com/television/tv-by-decade/tv-shows-1960s/biggles/>

In the early 1960s Biggles appeared in a TV children's action series, each episode had a thrilling flying sequence and a cliff-hanger ending: "Tune in again next week for more daring adventures . . ." Biggles, now an Air Detective Inspector, with his friends Ginger and Bertie, solve international crimes.

In 1986 Biggles was finally adapted into a film, released in US as Biggles: Adventures in Time.



8 Biggles: 1986 <https://letterboxd.com/film/biggles/>

A film spin off, based on the movie's storyline, was a video game released in 1986 by Microsoft Image Works .



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9 http://www.gamebase64.com/oldsite/gameofweek/15/gotw_biggles.htm

Biggles has been parodied many times demonstrating his importance as a cultural symbol. He was referenced multiple times on Monty Pythons Flying Circus and as Boggles in Russ Abbotts Madhouse comedy sketches.

10



11



10 <http://roadstothegreatwar-ww1.blogspot.com/2016/02/who-was-biggles.html>

11 https://www.comedy.co.uk/tv/russ_abbots_saturday_madhouse

In 2011 Biggles was adapted into a comedy satirical stage production - 'Biggles Flies a Fokker Home' a spoof of the WE Johns novels. A review states:

An 'hilarious parody on the utter absurdity of both plot and characters. For all Biggles's blustering bravado, he is in the end as clueless as his arch enemy Von Spineschiller. As such, the play is a satire on the nationalistic heroism of war as opposed to a celebration of it.'¹²

<https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/bigglesrondo-rev>

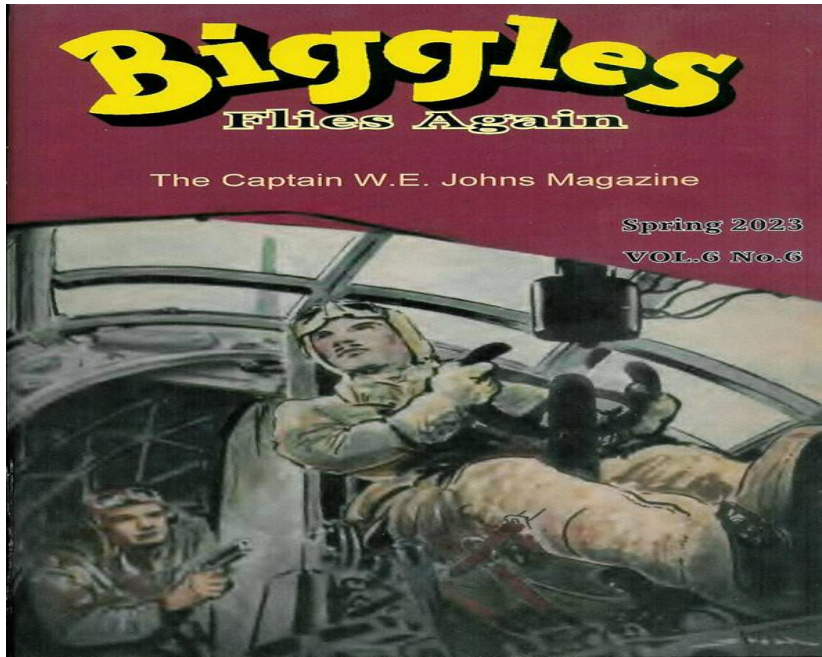
A search of Amazon fancy dress costumes shows that the image of Biggles is still firmly set in our cultural imagination - even in the 21st century you can buy both male and female Biggles outfits!



13 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=biggles+fancy+dress>

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The legacy of Biggles also lives on in the fan magazines - Biggles Flies Again [ex Biggles and Co] and the International Biggles Association.



14 <http://www.bigglesfliesagain.com/>

What is the historical accuracy of W E Johns First World war Biggles stories?

So, 'Biggles' influence is still with us - with a far-reaching cultural legacy. Even those who have never read a Biggles book can identify with the pilot image complete with goggles, helmet, and flying jacket.

However, beyond the fictional character, how accurate are the Biggles First World war stories about the war in the air on the Western Front? The stories are primarily intended as fiction and were not intended to be a factual account of the war. While the author, W. E. Johns, had first-hand experience as a pilot during World War I, he also included elements of imagination and exaggeration in his stories for dramatic effect. Therefore, while the Biggles stories may provide some insights into the air war during World War I, they should not be relied upon as a completely accurate portrayal of historical events.

It is also worth noting that the Biggles stories were written during a time when popular perceptions of World War I were shifting. In the years after the war, many people were disillusioned with the conflict and viewed it as a tragic and pointless waste of life. However, by the 1930s, as Europe was once again on the brink of war, there was a growing nostalgia for the heroism and patriotism of the World War I era. The Biggles stories can be seen as reflecting this trend, presenting a romanticized view of the war and its participants.

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15 - Paul Salver - Private collection Biggles First World War stories

However, starting with 'The Camels are coming' Johns First World War stories have an air of authenticity based on his own wartime experiences and he showed the horror of war that he saw. All of this finds its way into the character of Biggles and the events in the books. As Johns wrote: "Captain James Bigglesworth is a fictional character, yet he could be found in any RFC mess during those great days of 1917 and 1918" 16 The Camels are coming- Introduction page 1



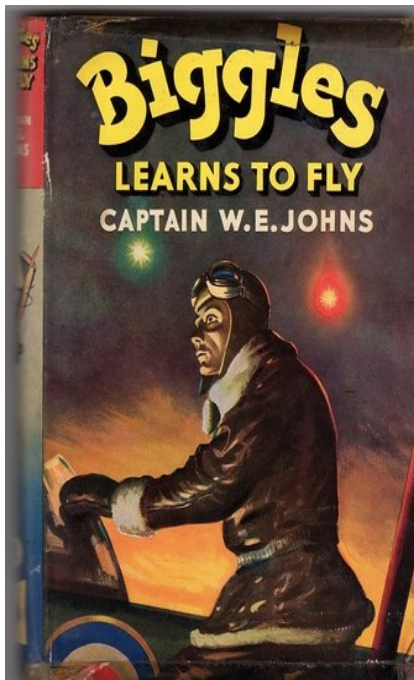
17 W E Johns <https://downthetubes.net/biggles-author-w-e-johns-recalled-at-raf-museum-anniversary-event/>

When war broke out in August 1914 Johns served in the army in the King's Own Royal Regiment. He fought at Gallipoli and on the Macedonian front. The experience had a lasting impression. He said later that " in my youthful folly, I supposed was going to be death or glory. I had yet to learn that in war there is plenty of death but little glory; that in war only death is real; that glory is simply gilt and tinsel to wrap around the other so that it looks less like what it really is". 18 - By Jove, Biggles. The Life story of Captain W E Johns - Beresford 1981

In 1917 Johns transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and after his flight training - and a period of instructor- he was posted to the Western Front in September 1918.

He uses these first experiences in 'Biggles Learns to fly'.

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19 Paul Salver – Private collection



20 De Havilland DH-4 [De Havilland DH-4 \(defense.gov\)](https://www.defense.gov)

Johns was posted to No. 55 Bombing Squadron stationed on an airfield near Nancy. He flew the De Havilland DH4 aircraft, two-seater heavy bombers- nicknamed "flaming coffins" 'because the petrol tank was an easy target for enemy fighters- situated between the pilot and co-pilot. Whilst flying in formation on a bombing mission Johns, and his observer and rear gunner, Amey, were attacked by anti-aircraft fire. Damaged, they were an easy target for German fighters. Amey was killed and Johns hit in the thigh and had his goggles smashed by bullets. The fuel tanks were hit, and the plane crashed. Johns could not pull Amey's body from the wreck, and he was taken prisoner. This trauma is remembered by Johns in Biggles Learns to fly:

'His eyes were open but there was an expression that Biggles had not seen before.....Slowly and with great care they lifted the body of the dead observer and lowered it into the waiting arms below' 21 Biggles Learns to fly page 38



[Type here]

22 Young Pilots of the RFC - Source : IWM

It has been estimated that c250,000 underage boys volunteered for the Armed forces after 1914.

"It was obvious they weren't 19," states Richard Van Emden author of 'Boy Soldiers of the Great War', "but you'd have a queue of men going down the road, you're getting a bounty for everyone who joins up, are you really going to argue the toss with a young lad who's enthusiastic, who's keen as mustard to go, who looks maybe pretty fit, pretty well. Let's take him."

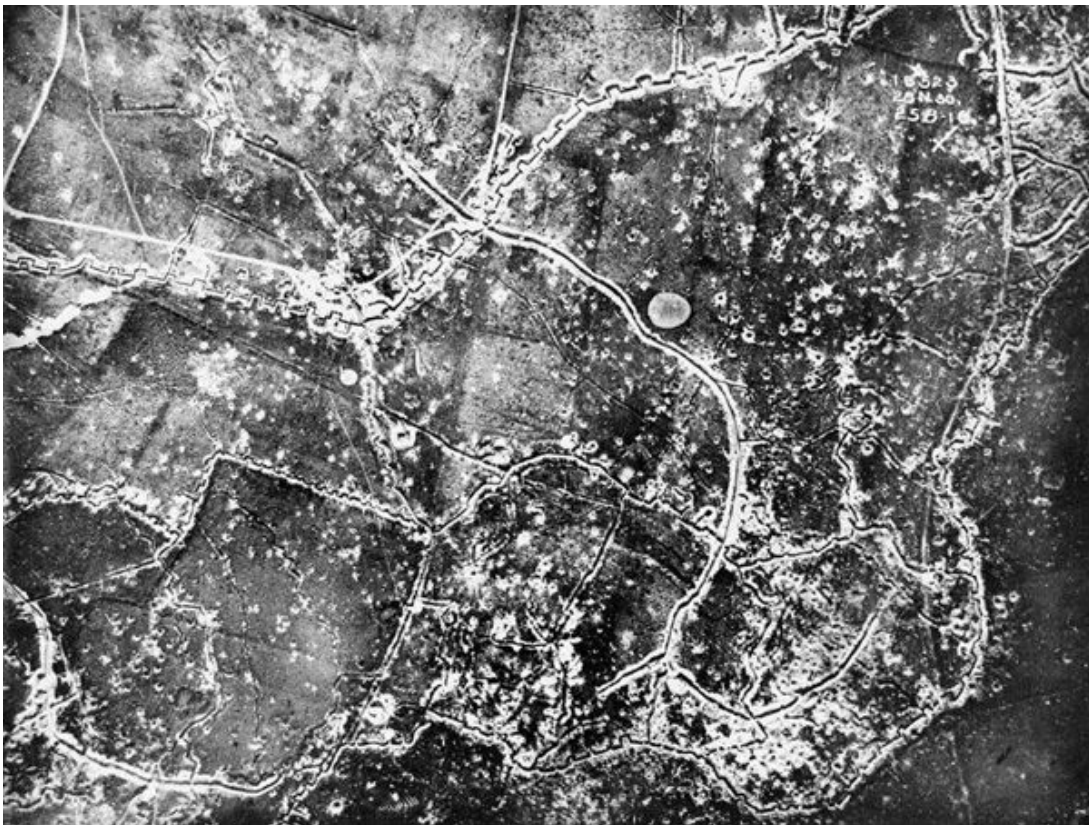
23 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29934965>

The pilots of the RFC - 146 Officers and less than 100 aircraft were sent to France in August 1914. They were young, enthusiastic, and patriotic young men. One was Lieutenant Henry Le Marchant Brock who looked forward to the war as 'a great rag'²⁴ [The Royal Flying Corps in World War One - Ralph Barker page 5] As Barker states : 'Most of them in their early to mid-twenties, but destined to give way ,as time passed, to extreme youth'²⁵ IBID

Johns accurately portrays these very young, and sometimes underage men, in his description of Biggles: 'a slight, fair-haired, good-looking lad still in his teens'²⁶ The Camels are coming.

'His youthfulness was apparent. He might have reached the eighteen years shown on his papers, but his birth certificate, had he produced it at the recruiting office, would have revealed that he would not attain that age for another eleven months. Like many others who had left school to plunge straight into the war, he had conveniently 'lost' his birth certificate when applying for enlistment, nearly three months previously.'²⁷ Source Biggles Learns to fly.

There are also many accurate descriptions of the Western Front from the air- which match the aerial photographs.



28 [Aerial photography and the First World War - The National Archives blog](#)

[Type here]

Johns describes the view of the trenches in clear detail.

'The ground was dull green, with big bare patches, pock-marked with holes, some of which were still smoking, showing where shells had recently fallen. A clump of shattered trees, blasted into bare, gaunt spectres, marked the site of what had once been a wood..... marked with countless zigzag lines of trenches in which a million men were crouching in readiness for the coming struggle.' 29 Biggles learns to fly.

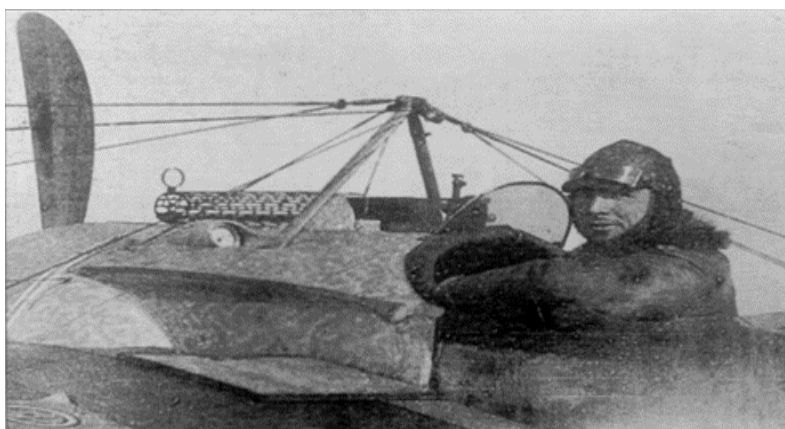
He also conveys a real sense of the reality of war in No Mans Land - in graphic detail which gives us a chilling sense of the horror of trench warfare. In *The Camels are coming*, Biggles is shot down and is forced to make his way across No Mans land in the dark-

'I can't stand much more of this' growled Biggles. 'It's giving me the creeps. I've just crawled over somebody or something that was somebody'³⁰ *The Camels are coming* page 134.



31 'Something that was somebody' — the reality of war. Photographs like this were censored by the British Army during the First World War. Image from National Library of Scotland

As a result of the Fokker scourge 1915- 16 the RFC had set up a wartime training programme to produce capable flyers to combat the experienced German pilots in the new Fokker Eindecker monoplane fighter - a technological game changer with forward firing synchronised machine gun. The Germans introduced the improved Fokker DVIIE at the start of 1918.



32 Source from Osprey Aircraft of the Aces #73, "Early German Aces of World War I" authored by Greg van Wyngarden, page 24. The pilot is German Ace Max Immelmann ACE -17victories.

To be continued.....

Paul Salver

[Type here]

A Corner of a Friendly Field - The 'Gate' Group, Part 2

Gayhurst.

Not all those who fell in the Great War are buried in a corner of a foreign field that is forever England - to quote those famous and evocative lines from Rupert Brook's poem, 'The Soldier'. Many of the fallen, perishing in accidents or from disease, or succumbing to their injuries whilst at a military hospital at home, rest in quiet churchyards across the United Kingdom. Other reminders of the Great War and its impact also abound, memorials of many kinds, to one person or sadly to many, some old, some quite modern, often also in churches or in some central public place.

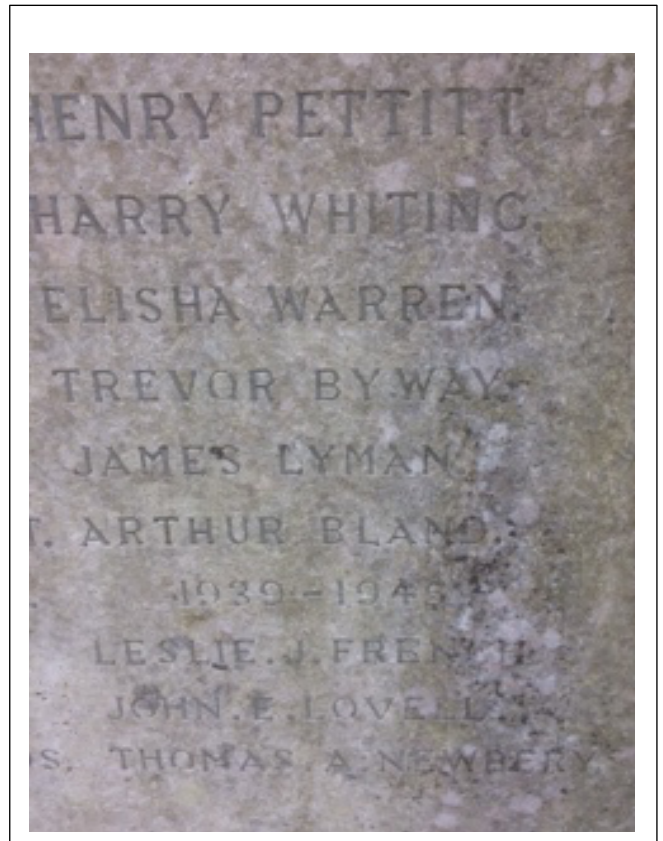
Gayhurst is a village and civil parish in the unitary authority area of the City of Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, England. It is about two and a half miles NNW of Newport Pagnell. The village name is an Old English language word meaning 'wooded hill where goats are kept.' It shares a rector and services with others in the 'Gate' group - Ravenstone, Weston Underwood, and Stoke Goldington, all of which are adjacent villages/hamlets, each of which have a single scattered grave from the First World War, with just Ravenstone exempt. (Stoke Goldington was covered in part one.)

Gayhurst has a long and interesting story to tell. It starts in the Bronze Age, runs through the Roman occupation, is mentioned in the Domesday Book, and on to medieval times. It briefly involves Sir Francis Drake, then has a key role in the Gunpowder Plot and the chequered history of the family involved. Then came the Georgian reconstruction of the house and the new village. Eventually the Estate grew to encompass most of Stoke Goldington. During WWII it played a key role as an Outstation to Bletchley Park. After the war the house was converted into a boy's boarding college, and finally developed into a series of private, rather exclusive, dwellings. The church stands beside Gayhurst House and faces the stables across the main lawn. Originally there had been a medieval church on the site but in 1724 it the church was rebuilt. It was duly demolished and by 1728 the current church, built in the Renaissance style, was finished.

The road from Newport Pagnell to Northampton runs past Gayhurst and forms the main street through the village of Stoke Goldington, with the war memorial in the middle, as described in last month's article. The memorial lists 31 names from WW1, and 3 from WW2, but the three you need to look out for are Private Pettitt, Private Macalister and Lt Colonel Henry Osbert Samuel Cadogan.

Going back down the road towards Newport Pagnell, the first buildings you come across belong to Gayhurst. Past the big stone barn conversion on your right is a turning right signposted to Gayhurst and the church. On your left as you turn in is the gatehouse, once, back in the day, a very pleasant pub called 'The Francis Drake', now (unfortunately in my view) a private residence, as is all the estate ahead, with plenty of reminders that it is - private property! Carry on over the cattle grid and along the round that winds through parkland, and past the fishing lakes on your left. The church is ahead of you, nearly hidden by trees. You need to park in the road opposite the church, and from there you will see the main house set back alongside. Pretty magnificent! Go up the path to the church door, turn sharp right through the metal gate and you re in the church burial ground. On your right, concealed behind the large yew is the CWGC headstone belonging to Private 482548 Henry Green Pettitt. Henry Pettitt, (sometimes spelled Pettit) was born in 1887 in Gayhurst to John and Sarah Pettitt. John was a farm labourer and his son followed in his footsteps, moving to live in Newport Pagnell. Henry enlisted in Bletchley in October 1916, joining the 4th/1st Battalion, the Cambridgeshire Regiment with the service number 8814. He then transferred to the 430th Agricultural Company of the Labour Corps, possibly because of being wounded or suffering ill health. These companies

recruited farm workers to help with the harvests at home. Whatever the cause, at some point Henry was invalided home and died of fever in Kempston Hospital, 30/10/1918, aged 31.



Stoke Goldington Memorial dressed for the Coronation. Henry Pettitt's name, the last few of 1918. A moment in time.



St Peter's Church, Gayhurst



8814 Private Pettitt, 'Thy Will Be Done'

No. of Contract.....dated.....

Name and address of Firm.....

.....

.....

.....

IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES COMMISSION.

SCHEDULE "B" PAGE.....

NAME OF CEMETERY.

COMPREHENSIVE REPORT (B) HEADSTONE PERSONAL INSCRIPTIONS
to be read in conjunction with
COMPREHENSIVE REPORT (A) HEADSTONE MILITARY INSCRIPTIONS
together with

GAYHURST (ST. PETER) CHYD.
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

TWO STANDARD LAYOUTS (the layouts to be used are quoted on the badge design.)

| Badge Design. No. and Layout. | Head- stone. No. | T E X T | | | | No. of letters in Text. (7) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|---|---------|---------|---|
| | | Line 1. | Line 2. | Line 3. | Line 4. | |
| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
| 1081/1B | 1 | THY WILL BE DONE | (Mr. J. Pettit, Gayhurst, Newport R Fagnell, Bucks.) | | | 18 |

Names and addresses of next-of-kin are shown in brackets
and will not appear on the headstones.

(Handwritten initials: M, W)

Many of the graves in the churchyard, not that there are a lot, are weathered and moss covered, the inscriptions almost impossible to decipher. However, peeping through the moss, the words 'Battle of Loos' caught my eye, the only other reference to WW1 that I could find. It was a very tranquil spot, a robin was singing his heart out in the yew tree, the rain had stopped, and the air was heavy with the scent of the lilacs by the Church door, and the smell of new mown grass. And there, just behind and slightly left of Henry Pettitt, was this scroll headstone, blanketed in moss and wreathed with ivy, the last resting place of Emily Phoebe Macalister. Also on her headstone is a commemoration to her only son, Private 15642 James Denoon Macalister who died at the Battle of Loos, 27th September 1915 aged 18 yrs. James enlisted in Northampton into the 7th Battalion the Northamptonshire Regiment, the Mobb's Own.



The Battle of Loos was fought from 25 September until about 16 October 1915 in an area of coalmines and mining villages near the town of Lens, north of Arras. Six British divisions attacked

strong German defences in support of French offensives to the south. The attackers suffered very high casualties in capturing the village of Loos, Hill 70 and the formidable Hohenzollern Redoubt, including some self-inflicted losses from the use of chlorine gas against the Germans. Worse came as British units tried to repel German counterattacks. Despite initial successes and hopes of a breakthrough, the British lost the ground they had gained. By the time the battle ended British losses in men killed, wounded, or missing amounted to over 60,000. James was one of the many lost in action whose bodies were never found. He is commemorated on the Loos memorial to the missing in Dud Corner Cemetery, panels 91-93. His mother died the year afterwards, aged 46.



The Church was locked when I visited, evidently it usually is, so I was unable to take my own photographs of the two memorials inside. These are courtesy of Peter Underwood (Buckinghamshire Remembers). The one above is clearly worded, the imposing wooden one below requires some description.



The inscription on the tablet reads 'In loving memory of Lt Colonel Henry Osbert Samuel Cadogan, commanding 23rd RI. Welsh Fusiliers in the 7th Division. He was killed during the first Battle of Ypres at Zandvoorde on the morning of October 30th, 1914, while trying to save his Adjutant Capt. Dooner and was buried in Hooze Cemetery May 21st, 1919. This wooden German cross marked the spot where his body was found by his brother-in-law Walter who, with his wife Blanche Carlile, erected this tablet.

On him be peace and the blessing for he was great hearted. (Part of the original German cross is fixed to the plaque. It reads 'Hier ruht Ein Engländer' - Here rests an Englishman.)

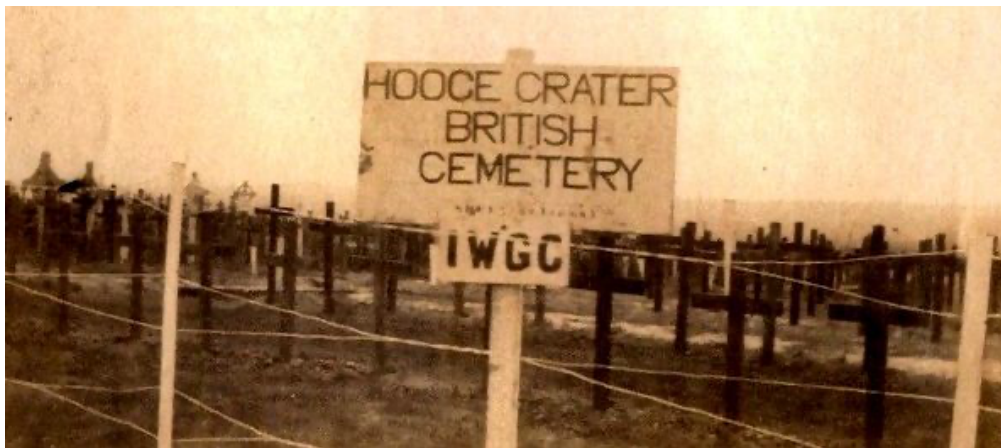
Henry Cadogan was a career soldier with a long and distinguished service record. Son of the Rev. Edward Cadogan, Rector of Wicken, Northants, he was married to Evelyn Violet Cadogan. When war broke out he was immediately involved, and by 4 October 1914 his Battalion had landed in Zeebrugge, Belgium as part of the 7th Division and moved to the front line in Ghent. The area was in a state of confusion with civilians fleeing the advancing Germans. On the night of October 11 the Battalion moved back with the 7th Division to Ypres. Field Marshall, Sir John French, Commander in Chief of the British Armies in France and Flanders described great losses in the ensuing fighting. He twice mentioned Henry in despatches, citing his "gallant and distinguished service in the field". By October 30 the Battalion was reduced to three-hundred officers and men. That day the attack was renewed and some dismounted cavalry on the right of the Welsh Fusiliers were forced back, leaving the Battalion open to attack. The Times published an account of what happened next given to them by surviving soldiers. 'Seeing this danger, the Adjutant, Lieutenant Dooner, rushed across a fire swept piece of ground - the trenches were not continuous - to give some instructions to the company on the right, and was returning to re-join his Commanding Officer when he was seen to fall. Survivors of the Regiment, now prisoners in Germany, state that Lieutenant Colonel Cadogan at once ran out of the trench to his Adjutant's assistance and while stooping over him was shot down, and they believe killed'. Shortly afterwards the remnant of the Battalion was surrounded and captured. Only one officer and eighty-six men survived.



Henry Cadogan's grave marker from the battlefield was brought back to England and St Peter's Church by his brother-in-law, Walter Carlile, MP for Buckingham and his sister Blanch, who discovered his grave. He was re-interred in Hooze Cemetery 21st March 1919.



Lt Col. Henry Osbert Samuel Cadogan 30/10/1914 aged 46 Cpt Alfred Edwin Claud Toke Dooner 30/10/1914 aged 22



<http://www.inmemories.com/Cemeteries/hooze crater.htm>

<https://buckinghamshireremembers.org.uk/casualties.htm>

<https://www.cwgc.org/>

http://www.greatwarbuckinghamshire.co.uk/RollofHonour.aspx?RecID=119&TableName=ta_ww1biography&BrowseID=1143

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HOW LONDON HAILED THE END OF WAR



'Now the War is Over' - Dr Daniel Weinbren

How did Britain respond to the momentous events of 1919 and 1920 as it adjusted to peace after four years of war? What were the challenges the British people faced and how did they cope with the massive changes that confronted them? Dr Daniel Weinbren's talk, 'Now the War Is Over,' will answer these questions. He will explain what happened in every sphere of life and show that even today we are still dealing with the consequences of those years of transition. Across Europe were revolutions, a war for independence in Ireland, and widespread race riots in Britain. Most servicemen simply wanted to come home to a land fit for heroes, to their families and a secure job, but for most that didn't happen. There was no return to the old days, too much had been lost. Dr Weinbren will give us a fascinating insight into how the Great War changed the direction of the nation.

June 16th - 'Now the War is Over' - Dr Daniel Weinbren

July 21st - 'Britannia's unruly stepchildren', Americans in the British Armed Forces- Michael O'Brien

September 15th - 'Logistics of the East Africa Campaign' Dr Anne Samson

September 15th, 16th, 17th - MK WFA at MK Museum Heritage event.

October 14th - MK WFA seminar

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)

Gary Short - Social Media co-ordinator.