

# OX & BUCKS BRANCH

## NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2018



Founded by John Giles Inaugurated 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1980  
Registered Charity No.: 298365



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[www.westernfrontassociation.com](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com)



## COMMENT

Welcome to the February Newsletter. I am sorry to have to report that long standing member Dennis Bruce sadly died the week before our last meeting. Dennis was a regular attendee at our meetings and he will be missed. His funeral will be at The Milton Chapel, Amersham Crematorium on Fri 16<sup>th</sup> February at 1pm.



This month's topical picture is of the Hospital Ship H.M.H.S. Glenart Castle which was sunk by the German submarine UC56 at 4a.m. on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1918 on her way from Newport, South Wales to Brest. Of the 194 people on board there were only 32 survivors. In 2002 a memorial was erected to those who perished on Hartland Point in Devon, 20 miles from where she was lost.

I am very grateful to Nigel for his fascinating article on what you discover walking a dog and I hope that you will also find this of interest.

- David Adamson

### Future Meetings and Events

February 17<sup>th</sup> - Denise Beddows - Mutiny during the Great War

March 17<sup>th</sup> - Paul Croft - The Chilterns in the Great War

April 21<sup>st</sup> - AGM & Ian Massey - RFC/ RNAS to the RAF 1918

### Soldiers Remembered: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Sydney Batte, London Regiment

Second Lieut Sydney Batte died of wounds 20<sup>th</sup> January 1917 aged 20. He was serving with 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion having been commissioned in November 1916. He was laid to rest in Rocquigny Equancourt Road Military Cemetery, Manacourt, on the Somme. His profession was fishmonger and his father, George, ran the family business in Packhorse Road, Gerrards Cross. Sydney is remembered on the Gerrards Cross Memorial. The family shop was taken over after ten years by an apprentice named Bott. The shop increased in popularity even appearing many times in TV series such as "Pie in the Sky".



## Report of Last Meeting

### **January 20<sup>th</sup> - John Baker – Military Balloons in the Great War**

John began his talk with a brief history of manned balloon flight, beginning with the Montgolfier brothers in 1783 and including aerial observation during the American Civil War. The first British military use in action was with spherical balloons in the Second Boer War (1899-1902). In 1897 the Germans developed the elongated 'sausage' or 'dragon' balloon which was much more stable in flight and used by them throughout the Great War.

In 1914 only the Belgians and Germans had observation balloons on the Western Front, but as artillery was moved further back from the front aerial observation became more critical. As balloons hovered the observers could gain a good understanding of the area under observation. Initially the British still only had the spherical balloons but, under Wing Commander Edward Maitland of the RNAS, the service developed. Amongst other innovations, Maitland introduced parachutes for balloon observers. The Royal Navy used balloons deployed from ships in the Dardanelles. It was the Frenchman, Caquot, who introduced the three fins to the 'dragon' type to aid stabilisation and this type of kite balloon was used by both sides from then on. Before this, the 'dragon' type had a set of windsocks attached to the tail to keep it facing into the wind but became unstable in high winds. The Caquot type was 60' long and 50' in diameter and could support one or two baskets. Inside the balloons, as well as the hydrogen for lift, there was an air filled bladder to help maintain the balloon's shape.

The baskets were made of wicker and were hung from a trapeze by the allies and from a ring by the Germans. Bulky items were mounted on the outside of the basket for example: the map board, parachute and ballast. Equipment inside the basket would include two telephones, a thermometer, sheath knife and two pairs of binoculars. At times the observer could even be suspended under a balloon without a basket. With the use of a telephone line and a PBX lorry, three-way conversations could be held between the observer, the handling crew and the gunners.

Initially the winches were either hand or steam powered but soon were driven with petrol engines; often the vehicles own engine. The winch lorries were provided with chocs and were also tied down to prevent them from being dragged.

From 1915, observers wore a harness attached to the parachute which was deployed on jumping, opened in 2s and slowed the descent to 16 feet per second. These Spencer Guardian Angel parachutes could fail if packed badly, became tangled in the balloon rigging or caught fire. At this stage in the war they were far too large and heavy for use in aircraft.

Hydrogen was produced by reacting silicon, caustic soda and water and was then compressed into metal cylinders, about 150 of which were required to fill a balloon. The balloons were usually a light khaki colour although other colours and two-tone colour schemes were known. Because the material panels of the envelopes alternated in direction to even out the elasticity, this could give the impression of two different colours. Although the British tended not to apply any markings (occasionally a Union Flag), the French and Americans applied roundels and the Germans crosses.

British Balloon training took place at Hurlingham (where a gas main was laid across the polo ground), Folkestone and Hythe. Courses lasted four to six weeks and included both free and captive balloons. Warm clothing was provided including thick coats or overalls.

Ideally, when not in use, the balloons were moved to a sheltered hollow in the ground and "bagged down" with sand bags to keep them in place. A drainage ditch would surround the hollow to protect the balloon. 'Nurse' balloons (with no fins) were used as reservoirs for topping up the gas.

Balloons were at risk from strong winds, lightning and gunfire. Both sides developing balloon guns with high angles of fire and air-burst shells with time fuses. 'Balloon Buster' pilots also specialised in attacking balloons, the highest scoring was Belgian Willy Coppens who shot down 37. After one observer was killed, his colleagues filled an observation basket with explosives and a dummy observer. When the Germans attacked it the explosives were detonated remotely and killed the pilot.



## 'Just Another Hospital Appointment'

Not your normal title granted but not really your normal start to writing an article for any publication either! Dropping off a patient attending one of the many clinics at St Marks Hospital is one thing, but when the Border Terrier sat in my car decides that not knowing that area of Maidenhead is a reason to whine and whinge and telling me its now time for a walk and possibly a long walk its time to park! Setting off with Rory taking me for the walk (not the other way round!) he decided to investigate the Municipal Cemetery located on Courthouse Road one side and All Saints Avenue on the other. The other two sides of the square are St Marks Hospital and the Lawn Tennis Club.

I agree that walking around a cemetery is not everybody's idea but remember, blame the dog! Anyway I was surprised by the number of war graves and that the majority appeared to be from World War 2 and not as I expected the Great War.

However the first grave I noticed was actually not one tended by the CWGC. Very close to the entrance is the last resting place of Nathan Curtis Thompson, who hailed from Maidenhead. He was a well respected local business man having quite a retail empire. On the family grave can be found other family members including Muriel, his 31 year old daughter who died on the Lusitania when it was torpedoed 7 May 1915. Muriel was one of the 1,198 who perished although another sources give slightly different figures. The Reading Mercury published on 29 May 1915 announced Muriel's passing to a wider audience.

With Rory galloping on, I managed to notice a number of Great War headstones and hopefully remembering some names decided to do the detective work on my return home. Using the CWGC web site I found that there were 61 burials within the cemetery of which 14 are World War One. The first burial recorded was Private James Boddy (died on 4 March 1915) and the last Private Horace Wise who passed away on 27 February 1919. Changing tack to another web site, further details were discovered. James was born in Sheffield but died in the Red Cross Hospital, Maidenhead. Pure guess work but it is highly likely that the hospital James was being treated at was the 200 bed Auxiliary Red Cross Hospital based in the Technical Institute, Marlow Road. The other hospital locally was the Canadian Red Cross Hospital, Taplow. The Technical Institute building still survives and is actually located next door to the headquarters of the CWGC also on Marlow Road. James was serving with 9th Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry however the list of soldiers effects shows that he had served less than six months when he died. With a home address in Belmont Road, Maidenhead, Horace James Wise was serving abroad and signed up in October 1916. Joining the army in Reading he served in the Royal Berkshire Regiment but was with the 184 Company, Machine Gun Corps at the time he was injured. On the 25 August 1917, Horace was hit by shrapnel. He was injured in the back and hip. After a casualty clearing station he arrived at 14 General Hospital, Wimereux on 8 September 1917. In February 1919 he was at Belton Park Military Hospital, a 670 bed hospital near Grantham where after suffering from bronchial pneumonia, he died aged 27 at 5.30am on 27 February 1919. His mother, who was still residing at 14 Belmont Road in Maidenhead, added to his headstone 'In loving Memory' followed by 'He gave his life for us' costing her 9s 4d. Belton Park is now looked after by the National Trust who organised a centenary exhibition in Belton House. The Trust also issued a teachers' pack full of photographs and even a plan showing the hospital, training camp, camp railway and other buildings. For those whose interest is World War Two, Maidenhead has a large number of Air Transport Auxiliary graves. The ATA flew from White Waltham Airfield located close by. There are 20 members of the ATA buried in Maidenhead including a South African, Australian, New Zealander and a Pole. Six of the burials were for female members of the ATA and all 6 died in crashes two of the accidents occurring at White Waltham. One of the six was Cadet Betty Eileen Sayer who died on 15 March 1942 along with Bridget Hill and Graham Lever when the Argus they were flying crash landed just short of the runway at White Waltham. The aircraft hit two bungalows in Smithfield Road, where a number of residents suffered injuries. Betty was buried near her home in Maidenhead.

Interesting how taking my dog for a walk can lead to so much history!





photos are (1) Soldiers & Nurses outside Maidenhead Red Cross Hospital, (2) Technical Institute with Drill Hall in distance, (3) ATA & other graves Maidenhead Cemetery

- Nigel Crompton



**2017-2018 Committee**

**Chairman & Newsletter Editor - David Adamson ([adtm@btinternet.com](mailto:adtm@btinternet.com))**

**Deputy Chairman - Nigel Crompton**

**Treasurer – Lance Hale**

**Committee Members – Norman Bonney, Val Crompton & Jacqui Ward**

Meetings: The Guide Centre, School Lane, Chalfont St. Giles. HP8 4JJ  
Starting at 2:30

