

THE POPPY



THE NORFOLK BRANCH NEWSLETTER

Western Front Association

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CHAIR'S REMARKS

Please accept that there is no small amount of 'Devils advocacy' in what follows: I have just returned from completing my annual door to door RBL Poppy Appeal collection in the village of Clenchwarton. I like my collection route; it is one that I have collected on since 1998. As a result, I have got to know many of the residents well and now consider most to be friends. One, who I shall just call Mrs T. is a tea stop that I have made for many years. Our first meeting was one that initially caused me to grit my teeth and hold my council for Mrs T. was wearing a white poppy! Far from me being told to leave her property, Mrs T. opened her purse and made a sizeable donation but then stated "I won't be needing the poppy". When I asked why? I was promptly invited in to discuss her reasons. What followed, apart from the best jam sponge in Norfolk, was the fact that Mrs T. is a pacifist who respects the sacrifices made by service men and women in order to provide the freedom of speech that allows her to gently state her views. At the following Remembrance Sunday service in Tower Gardens, Kings Lynn, I caught sight of Mrs T. standing close to a group of a men all who had served in the Royal Marines amongst them was a Marine in uniform. I later saw Mrs T. in animated conversation with the group. At the close of the service, I popped into the RBL club (sadly now closed!) in Lynn and eventually got chatting with the Marine and his mates. I asked him what he had talked to Mrs T. about, and his response was that he had gently challenged the wearing of the white poppy and that all he was prepared to say was "Isn't she quite the lady mate? She showed us nothing but respect and offered a view of things that I found it hard to argue with" I have to agree. That said, for me the jury is still out regarding the plethora of different coloured poppies that have appeared in the last decade or so. They certainly stimulate debate, even if at times, it becomes a touch heated. I mentioned my thoughts to my friend and companion on several recent Somme visits. David stated: "If those other poppies stimulate debate that brings the memory of the fallen further to the fore is that such a bad thing?" An interesting view with which to close.

I look forward to receiving the views of members at the next meeting on Tuesday 7th November where the speaker will be: *Steve Warburton 'Out of the Western Front Frying Pan and into the Fire of Fermoy...'*

FROM THE EDITORS

Please let us have any items for consideration for inclusion in the Poppy by the 20th December by post to Mrs J Berry, 8 Fairstead Rd, Norwich NR7 8XQ or by email

jackie.berry3@btinternet.com, items can also be given at meetings.

MEETING REPORTS

Our September and October meetings were on subjects a wee bit different, the story of the fallen choristers of Kings College Cambridge, and then to the deserts of Egypt for the battle of Romani.

Kate Wills told us about 20 men of Kings College choir, Cambridge who died in fighting, and how what we know as the Christmas service of 9 lessons and carols seen on TV each year, was actually a form of war memorial, set into play from an idea of the Rev Eric Milner White MA DSO to honour the memory of men who were in the College choir and lost their lives.

I suppose it would be clear from the place these men were studying that few would be basic private soldiers, the lowest rank mentioned was a Norfolk 5th Battalion man, Sgt Ernest Beart from near Downham Market. His family were operating a business in the Downham area which is still around today, Kate said. Another man mentioned in the talk was a Capt Charles Lutyens a relative of the architect Edwin Lutyens who would become involved with the design of war cemeteries remembrance stones.

These choristers would fight in all theatres of war and in all services, but no choristers died after the end of 1917 apparently.

An interesting talk.

October was a return visit from Stuart Hadaway, on this occasion taking about the Battle of Romani and what turned out to be a turning point in the fighting to keep Egypt in British hands securing the Suez canal access and the movement of men and animals - both as meat and horses for the war - plus tea, and other materials needed to supply and support the war, saving both time and miles on other sea routes.

In 1915 the area was relatively quiet as much of the focus was on the Gallipoli fighting which meant the Ottomans had gained the upper hand in Egypt and Palestine. The British with Anzac forces would head into battle in August 1916 to change this. Starting on the 4th with a victory by the 6th. It was a hard fight in desert conditions, with ups and downs for both sides around Romani. While we know so much about the mud of the Western Front and its problems for both men and horses, we perhaps forget that moving around on sand is not that easy either. Dressed in battle gear the allies struggled with their heavy boots crossing loose sand, the Ottoman forces were often bare foot, making movement far more easy. In desert conditions the heat can be a major problem, flies, illness and getting water supplies difficult. Horses are thirsty animals and this meant the Camel Corp was a better option, perhaps. Just getting everyone in the right positions was difficult!

Into the story came the legend that was the Australian horse "Bill the Bastard", a one man horse with attitude, but said to be extremely brave and rescued several men in one go with his rider. It is also where the Australians, as often happened, blamed the British for some of the difficulties encountered, but that is the Australian way. Even to this day some of its historians still blame the British for losses in battles and men.

The Ottomans are said to have lost around 5000, killed, wounded or captured, while around 200 British died in fighting for Romani

FUTURE PROGRAMME

Our final talk of the year is Stephen Barker talking about Hardit Singh Malik known as the flying

Sikh. Having travelled to Britain as a child of just 14 to attend college, he would join the RFC. Surviving the war he would have a distinguished career in the Indian Civil Service.

This is on the 5th December and our Christmas meeting, we will have the normal formula of talk with sandwich break at half time, perhaps the odd Christmas extra, mince pie or other might just appear.....

It would be nice to have a raffle with some Christmassy prizes, if you would like to donate anything please bring it along.

IN THE NEWS

51 Commonwealth war cemeteries and memorials have been granted UNESCO World Heritage Status with a total of 139 WW1 Western Front locations in all, including those on the German side as well as France and Belgium.

The Director General of the CWGC says on the site - *"In recognising the Outstanding Universal Value of these places of memory - places that commemorate the sacrifice of those of many nations, faiths, and ethnicities - the proposal acknowledges CWGC's century plus stewardship of all the cemeteries and memorials to a standard of excellence. World Heritage Status also recognises the global importance of these Silent Cities to ongoing commemoration of the war dead and brings with it significant and tangible benefits - not least the opportunity to engage wider and more diverse audiences.*

"We are grateful to both the Belgian and French delegations for their sponsorship of the proposal and for their consultation and engagement with us throughout the process, and we look forward to working with all our partners to give "those silent witnesses to the desolation of war" the voice they deserve."

Three sets of remains have been re-interred in the Poelcapelle British Cemetery recently, 2 are unidentified but the 3rd has been named as Private William Meager of the Middlesex Regiment who was killed on August 17th in fighting at Langemarck. The three sets of remains were found during a dig in August 2019 prior to construction work beginning. Meager was found with a Middlesex badge, and a pipe, which probably helped identify him.

His brother Henry who also was Middlesex Regiment was killed around the time William joined up in 1915, his body was not found and he is listed on the Menin Gate.

Remembrance poppies - From this October you will be able to buy the new 100% recyclable paper poppy which can be put in with your paper bin collections after use.

SUFFOLK WFA

Meetings held at the RBL Club, Tavern St, Stowmarket IP14 1PH 7.30pm

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

With the 11th November fast approaching there are events and stories appearing relating to the Great War, these are mainly the details for remembrance services to be held around the county and country, road closures etc, this year may well have the issue of very wet, muddy ground in rural areas with little hard standing for cars around memorials, so leave you self plenty of time to find a parking place.

Love them or hate them, postbox toppers and other knitted or crocheted memorials are being placed around the country by people who want to remember loved ones, family, friends and animals that gave their lives for us. We have seen one that is a full sized soldier, it has been placed somewhere in Derbyshire according to a BBC post, but we are not sure of the precise location, it must have taken hours of crocheting. Everyone has their own way of remembering, but at least they are remembering!

A colleague in the forestry group we are involved with posted some pictures from his local area - Reymerston, Garvestone and Thuxton, here in Norfolk.

From what he said and from leaflets he has since handed me it tells of Reymerston Remembrance Space where trees have been planted with details of each of the 26 men from the villages who died from fighting, illness, wounds etc. Each of the three churches has a commemorative tree and plaque. There are several sets of brothers listed and two men are buried in the Reymerston churchyard, while another is buried in Worstead churchyard. There is one man buried in India and another who died as a POW in Poland.

You can follow one of two walks which take you between the three churches, maps for the "walk of peace" are to be found on the internet under Garveston parish council.

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR - Bob Kerry

The discussion on whether British soldiers were led by incompetent generals, the main one of whom was General Haig, in the Great War has been going on for the best part of 100 years. Up to the late 1920's Haig was thought to have done a pretty good job as after all we did win the war didn't, we? But then Lloyd George (Prime Minister during the war) in his memoirs in the 1930's wrote that Haig was "intellectually and temperamentally unequal to the task" though Lloyd-George was not of course an unbiased source but from this and other books written at the time the seeds were sown. In the 1940's and 1950's we had another World War and its aftermath to concentrate on but in the 1960's interest was rekindled in the First World War for various reasons.

The 50th Anniversary of the First World War was approaching, the BBC began work on its monumental history *The Great War* in 1963 (running to 26 episodes and watched by 11 million) and many old soldiers, now in their 60's and 70's, now spoke about their experiences for the first time. Also, having just fought a World War between 1939 to 1945 some were asking what "The War to end all wars" between 1914 and 1918 was for? And then in 1961 Alan Clarke's published *The Donkey's* which really did relight the argument that Haig and his like really were the incompetent buffoons, donkeys leading lions, as first famously described by German Staff Officer Carl Hoffmann.

On Armistice Day 1961 the radio musical play *The Long Long Trail* by Charles Chilton was broadcast which included an unusual mixture of popular songs and hymns of the early 20th century but re-written with satirical lyrics. This inspired Gerry Raffles to suggest to Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop to turn this into a full musical, and so *Oh What a Lovely War* was born.

Oh What a Lovely War depicts the generals as completely incompetent idiots quite happy to squander the lives of their soldiers, and the soldiers themselves as stoic Tommie's helpless to do anything about their fate other than "just get on with it". Revisionists who think Haig and his like were given an almost impossible job and did it to the best of their ability, and in the end did it quite well (after all we won the war didn't, we?) usually hate both Alan Clarke's book and the musical. Those who think the generals were as portrayed probably don't.

Oh What a lovely War is not put on much these days so it was with much anticipation that I went to see a new production, by the Blackeyed Theatre of Bracknell, Berkshire, at the Playhouse in Norwich on Monday 25th September.

For those who are not familiar with the piece the title is derived from the music hall song "Oh! It's a Lovely War". The production summarises and comments on the events of the Great War using popular songs of the time, many of which were parodies of older popular songs, to criticise the manner in which the eventual victory was won. The start of the war in 1914 is shown as a parade of optimism as are the early battles like Mons. 1915 is depicted as darkly contrasting in tone. Black humour among the soldiers has now replaced the enthusiasm of the early days. 1916 passes and the tone darkens again. The Americans arrive in 1917 and eventually the war ends with those soldiers still alive realising with disgust that they are literally back where they started, Mons.

The satire throughout is biting and there were no fewer than 33 songs. Most, such as *We don't want to lose you, it's a long way to Tipperary, Hold your hand out naughty boy, I'll make a man of you, Silent night, Gassed last night, Roses of Picardy, If you want the old battalion, Forward Joe Soaps Army* and *And when they ask us* were amazingly familiar. In fact, I found myself knowing most of the words to most of the songs despite not having seen the 1969 film for decades. What that says about me I leave it to you to decide.

To say that the six young actors in the production (Christopher Arkeston, Tom Crabtree, Harry Curley, Alice Mayer, Chioma Uma and Euan Wilson), most at the very start of their acting careers, were talented is to do them a great injustice. They were incredible! Not only did they act, dance, narrate and sing but they also played all the instruments, there not being a separate band! This meant that they were continually changing from singing and dancing to playing an instrument (including piano, accordion, drums, trumpet, trombone, saxophone and double bass) and often moving around and playing at the same time. The split-second timing required throughout was amazing as the stage was not large and I was continually thinking throughout the production "how on earth did they do that without tripping over each other". The creative team and particularly the director Nicky Allpress did an amazing job in putting this all together.

Needless to say, I loved it but as I like musicals and agree with the sentiments of the production it would have been amazing if I hadn't. However, I was accompanied by a friend who is not known for liking musicals and I don't think shares my view of the "Donkey's" but he liked it as well which just shows how good the production was. It will probably be many years before *Oh What a Lovely War* comes to Norwich again but when it does, I would suggest you go to see it whether you consider yourself a "revisionist" or not.

AN UNUSUAL WAR MEMORIAL

Roger and I took a two night trip into enemy territory recently, heading to a location on the Suffolk/Essex border near Clare, towards the end of September. While heading to where we were staying we came across this village by the name of Tilbury Juxta Clare and caught a glimpse of a rather different war memorial located on what appeared to a dangerous corner, so we decided we would stop nearby the next day for pictures. In the meantime we tried to find out more and it turns out to be a memorial put up in May 2021 to replace a former memorial.

By 2003 the old memorial was badly eroded and funds were hunted down to do repairs. Sadly in the following years the memorial was vandalised on more than one occasion - apparently it had a statue of Christ on the cross which someone decided to destroy.

Not to all tastes I would suspect, the new memorial is made of steel girders to form the cross,

has a Brodie Helmet, barbed wire, metal poppy and metal spikes to look like grass stalks which have the names of the fallen from the village engraved on them. The rust colour made it hard to pick out these names. These appear to be Fredrick Hickford buried at Wancourt, Frank Laver buried at Bedford House, Lewis Parmenter who is buried in the village churchyard and two men by the name of Kemp, James and William which I have not located yet.

Maybe our Suffolk pals might have more information on the memorial and men??

LT COLONEL WILLIAM J R CHEESEMAN AIF

I came across this soldier recently, he is often said to be one of the youngest Australian Colonel's of the Great War. He also had a good tally of medals and honours - DSO, MC, MiD (Mentioned in Dispatches), Croix de Chevalier and Legion D Honnuer.

William Joseph Robert Cheeseman was born in 1894, signed up to the AIF and sailed from Sydney as a Lieutenant in 1915 with the 30th Infantry Battalion. William was made a Lt Colonel in September 17 at the age of 23, he was brave and he was gassed, but he did survive the war and was discharged as a LT Colonel in 1919.

In 1936 he moved to Adelaide to work it is said, as a manager in Woolworths, but sadly in 1938 he died after an operation for appendicitis aged just 44. His ashes were buried in an Adelaide Cemetery.

Australian Woolworths had no links to the USA and UK brand, and still trades today. A group of cheeky entrepreneurs realised the Americans had not registered the brand name in Australia and stole the whole American idea!

And Finally

I know things have to change but I was recently shocked to see a Facebook post at the Berks Memorial cemetery of a cafe/bar right opposite, this is not that far from where my great uncle is buried in the Strand, I can't remember seeing this place there, maybe it was, we did tend to go over in the winter months so it may not have been open. It just feels wrong to be sitting drinking beer by a cemetery. For me it was the silence of these places that made you think about the men lying there, now there are people laughing and shouting... Would the ghosts of these men approve? Yes, they died for our freedom, but they never got to enjoy life like these people - would it make them happy or sad to see? Its not just here, there seems to have been a building craze for visitors centres at other locations, yes its good that toilets are now available at some sites and that some information is available but has it gone too far, is there too much, it would be interesting to know what others think.

Sadly for us, ill health in our families over the past few years and having to be carers put a stop to our travelling to the battlefields, and further afield, We are struggling to get back into it, maybe one day....