



The Spire Sentinel



**The Newsletter
of The
Branch of The
Front**



**& Magazine
Chesterfield
Western
Association**

ISSUE 120 - February 2026

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the
Great War'.



Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2026

Meetings start at 7.30pm and take place at the Labour Club, Unity House, Saltergate, Chesterfield S40 1NF

January	6th	. AGM + Tim Lynch - “Huns on the Run” Tim explores the often overlooked experiences of German POWs held in Britain during and immediately after the First World War
February	3rd	Ross Beadle - Sarajevo 1914 This talk examines the sequence of chance events of the preceding 36 years and, even, on the day of the killing.
March	3rd	Andy Rawson - Malta...Nurse of the Mediterranean against the Germans and Italians during WWII. However, over 125,000 casualties from the 1915 Gallipoli and 1916 Salonika campaigns were cared for on the island during WWI.
April	7th	Mick Byrne - Shot at Dawn Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial arms, However, only 346 were executed with 37 of these having committed capital crimes such as murder. The remainder become the centrepiece of our talk.
May	5th	Christina Holstein - - Verdun. What was the plan behind the German offensive of February 1916? A thundering opening bombardment brought early success but the German advance soon slowed and the French refused to give up.
June	2nd	Scott Lindgren The Admiralty dispatched two dreadnought battlecruisers to the South Atlantic to eliminate the threat of the German East Asia cruiser squadron. This talk explains the events and consequences of the Falklands battle, along with some of the strategic and tactical lessons.
July	7th	John Wilson The action at Sheikh Sa'id November 1914. The opposed landing that nobody has ever heard about! .
August	4th	Ian Castle - Gotha Raids. The talk traces the sequence of raids made by the deadly Gotha and massive 'Giant' bombers, and the development of the world's first in depth, integrated aerial defence system. Based on his book London 1917-18: The Bomber Blitz
September	1st	Roy Larkin - Where the Money Went. Following the success of the original 'Where the Money Went', the Sequel explores the financial costs of the Great War. Fully illustrated
October	6th	Peter Hart Welsh Warrior at Ypres, 1914: The thrilling memories of Captain Hubert Rees who ended up in command of the 2nd Welsh Regiment during the fighting at Gheluvelt.
November	3rd	John Horner 'In the care of St Dunstons : Private Richard Horners story'
December	1st	Neil Taylor....”Winston`s Little Army...Aspects of the Royal Naval Division”

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Chairman`s Ramblings

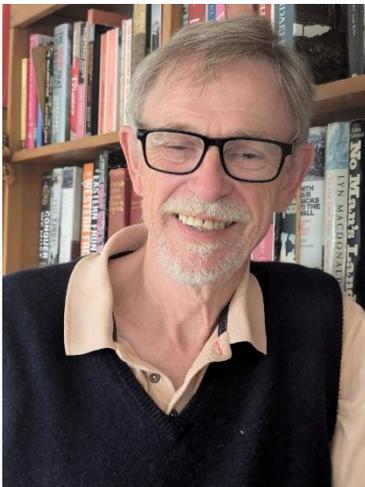


I would just like to thank everyone for their understanding last month when your committee made the decision to cancel the January meeting.. We wanted to keep everybody safe and well with the bad weather alerts that had been put out. Hopefully February's meeting will go ahead as planned, obviously we will have to start with the AGM I presume it will be quick one. Jane, Grant and myself offer ourselves for re-election.

I am sure this month's presentation will be a fascinating one to start our program of talks for the year ahead. I look forward to seeing everyone on the 3rd of February. Thank you again for the continued support of the branch. Any suggestions for trips or talks for the future please don't hesitate to contact a committee member.

All the best , Jon-Paul

Ross Beadle - February Speaker



Ross has been a popular lecturer on the WFA circuit for over 10 years. He specializes in strategy notably the Schlieffen Plan and the March to the Marne. However he also covers set piece battles like Neuve Chapelle and Cambrai where there are important strategic lessons for the history of the war.

He has a degree in history from Hull, but it was a course on the First World War run by the historian and author Robin Neillands at Kellogg College Oxford in 2001 that he now realizes re-directed his life. Since then far too many of his waking hours have been devoted to the history of the war. He is a frequent battlefield

tourer, particularly the Somme and the Isonzo.



Secretary`s Scribbles

Dear Members and Friends,

Thank you for your understanding when Jon-Paul, Jane had to make the decision to cancel the January meeting, given the bad weather warnings that were being put out. The welfare of our members and friends was uppermost in our minds. I apologise to the member who turned up not having received the cancellation e mail. Your

understanding was really appreciated.

Now for a bit of sad news, Bill Bryan, a regular for as long as I can recall will not be able to attend meetings again due to a deterioration in his health. Up until last year Bill visited his grandfather`s grave at Fampoux near Arras on an annual basis.

Jon-Paul recently received the undernoted....

Dear Jon-Paul,

Apart from being Chair of the Lancashire (North) branch of the WFA, I am a member of the Football and War Network which has operated out of the University of Wolverhampton. The Football and War Network has organised a number of events since 2017 although they have tended to be London/southern England centric.

Alex Alexandrou, the chair of the Football and War Network, is proposing a football and war exhibition at The Fusilier Museum, Bury. These exhibitions are normally a partnership between a museum/football club, local WFA branches, the Army FA and the Football and War Network. Alex normally project manages such initiatives working closely with all partners. In terms of how the branches could support the proposed exhibition. Here is how it has worked with previous collaborations with the WFA at national and branch level.

1. Providing/identifying speakers/helping to structure the talk sessions accompanying an exhibition
2. Advising where required on the curation of the exhibition/possibly providing/loaning artefacts from their members
3. Obviously, being at the opening
4. Organising local branch visits to the exhibition and accompanying talks
5. Providing WFA publicity materials to be distributed
6. Providing financial support/sponsorship for the initiative/activity which will of course be based on what each branch is able/willing to give and previous WFA sponsorships have ranged from a few hundred pounds to a four-figure sum. These monies have been paid directly to the Army FA, who oversee expenditure which is used to cover the expenses of putting on an event/exhibition, covering the cost of planning meetings such as travel and also covering the fees/expenses/travel of any external speakers where required.

Yours sincerely,

Iain Adams Chair, Lancashire (North)

A very interesting letter and one to which, after Jon-Paul , Jane and I have discussed will be responded to.

The first part of Tuesday`s meeting will be the Branch AGM. Jane will update us on Branch finances (see following the financial report for 2025) then there will be the election of Office Bearers and Committee. Jon-Paul, Jane and myself have all indicated that, if the members so wish it, we will remain in our respective positions for another year. I put out a note in December thanking all for your support last year and was most gratified by the responses received. Thank you.

Our January meeting on Tuesday sees Ross Beadle make a welcome return to make a presentation to the Branch. This about the build up to, and the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Heir to the Throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which set of the train of events which lead to the Great War of 1914 - 1918.

What many of you may not know was that Franz Ferdinand visited not far from Chesterfield in November 1913...and something happened during that visit which...but for a couple of inches...might have changed the course of history. I have included an article from the BBC website on November 2013, which tells the story..."What If...?"

As always happy to accept articles / correspondence for inclusion in this Newsletter / Magazine.

Note. We should have some remaining WFA Calendars to hand for purchase on Tuesday evening - £10 each of which 50% goes to Branch funds.

Next month we have Andy Rawson talking about Malta - Nurse of the Mediterranean in WW1

Best wishes.

Grant Cullen

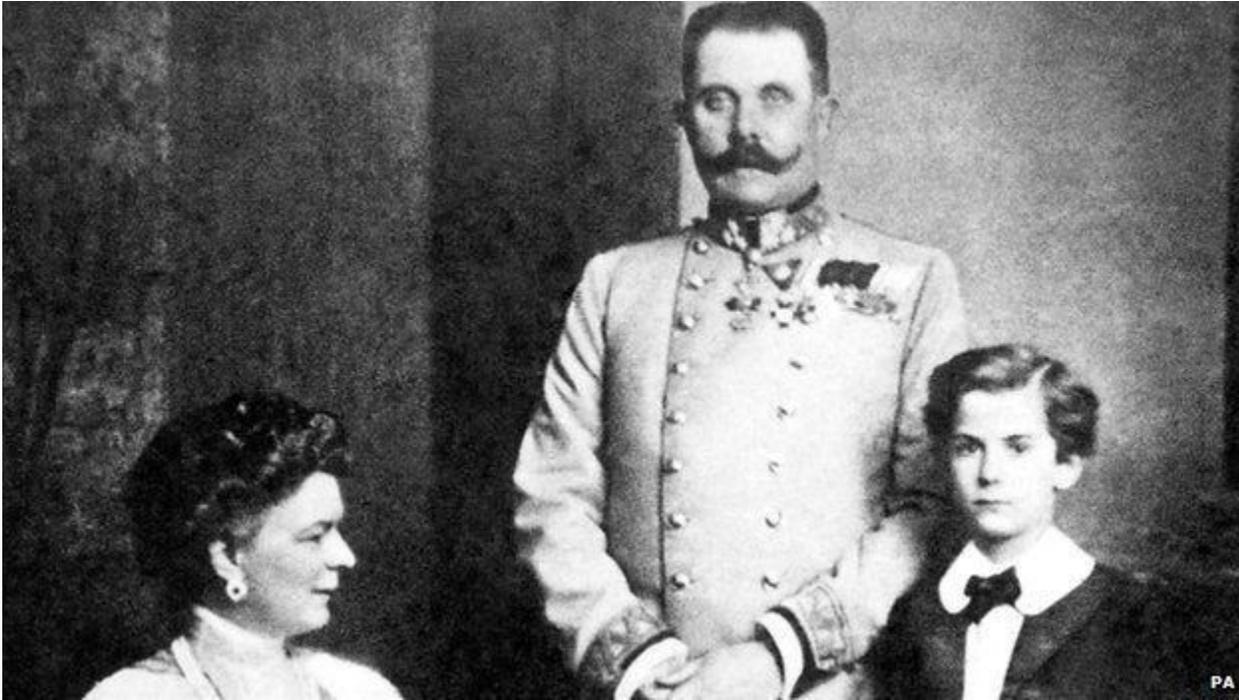
Branch Secretary

grantcullen@hotmail.com

07824628638

Could Franz Ferdinand Welbeck gun accident have halted WWI?

25 November 2013



The assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie brought years of European tension to a head

THE ROYAL VISIT.
THE ARCHDUKE FERDINAND.
WORKSOP'S HEARTY WELCOME.

During the week the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, with his Consort, the Duchess of Hohenberg, have been paying a visit to the Duke and Duchess of Portland at Welbeck. They arrived on Saturday night, having left King's Cross at 3.25, travelling in a special saloon. Mr. Bolton, G.N. superintendent at Peterborough, was in charge of the train as far as Retford, where a G.C. engine was attached, and Supt. Mozley took charge up to Worksop, where the train arrived at 6.42. Here great preparations had been made to receive them. The platform fronting the booking-hall was covered with a crimson carpet used only for the reception of Royal personages, and the booking-hall itself had been converted into the appearance of a conservatory, under the direction of Mr. J. Gibson, the head-gardener at Welbeck; so that the Archduke and his wife passed through an avenue of palms, shrubs, and magnificent chrysanthemums. The

and Lady George Hamilton, Lord and Lady Lovat, Lord Althorp, Lady Charles Bentinck, Lady Victoria Bentinck, the Marquis of Titchfield, Lord Richard and Lady Moyra Cavendish, Lord Edward Grosvenor, Lady Helen Grosvenor, Lord and Lady Salisbury, Lord Hugh Cecil, Lady Mary Cecil, Mr. Balfour, Sir Edgar and Lady Helen Vincent, Mr. and Mrs. Mildmay, Hon. Ivy Gordon Lennox, Major Baker Carr, Mr. Heath, Hon. Henry Stonor, Mr. Ewen Cameron.

A VISIT TO BOLSOVER.

In the course of a motor car tour on Monday the Archduke and his wife visited Bolsover Castle in company with the Duke and Duchess of Portland, Countess de Baillet Latour, Baron Von Rumerskirch, and Count Rudolf von Straten Ponthoz. The visit was quite unexpected, and the Archduke and his wife were welcomed by only a small crowd, whose greetings they smilingly acknowledged. After a stay of about an hour at the castle and church the distinguished visitors left for Hardwick Hall, where they lunched with the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. The Royal guests were charmed with the delightful scenery of the district.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The visit was reported in detail by the Worksop Guardian, which listed guests and other activities



Welbeck Abbey was lavishly extended in the 19th Century and became a hub for upper-class society



The accident happened while the Archduke (far right) was out shooting game with the Duke of Portland



Franz Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo led to scenes of chaos but also had huge global repercussions

Could a hunting accident in Nottinghamshire have delayed - or even prevented - the killing fields of World War One?

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 started a chain of events leading to the conflict which cost millions of lives.

But exactly 100 years ago, and just months before his death, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire narrowly avoided being killed in a freak accident.

His host, the Duke of Portland, later speculated the Archduke's death on his estate could have changed the course of history.

The Archduke also attended a service at St Mary's Roman Catholic church in Worksop

Although a fading power, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was still a major force in European politics, with close links to Germany.

Dr Nick Hayes, a historian from Nottingham Trent University, explained the complex political situation did not stop the social whirl.

"War wasn't thought to be inevitable and the great families of Europe had been visiting each other for years.

"Many of the royal houses were closely related and while the kings and Kaisers had to obey certain rules, others could travel pretty much as they wished."

The Archduke and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, had spent the week with King George V and Queen Mary at Windsor.

Illustrious guest list

Accepting an invitation from the Duke of Portland to stay at the palatial Welbeck Abbey, the couple arrived by train at Worksop, Nottinghamshire, on 22 November 1913.

Ralph Lloyd-Jones, team local studies librarian at Nottinghamshire County Council, said: "They were met that evening by limousines to take them to Welbeck Abbey.

"Since it was a Saturday there were large crowds in the town who cheered the imperial motorcade as it drove up Bridge Street and tree-lined Sparken Hill - then, as now, lovely in its autumn leaf."

Waiting for them was an illustrious guest list; the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, Lord Curzon, the Marquis of Titchfield, Lord and Lady Salisbury and ex-Prime Minister Arthur Balfour.

Mr Lloyd-Jones said: "It is fascinating to think that just a few months after his visit to Nottinghamshire, his assassination had sparked the start of the Great War.

"It is highly likely that as well as being a social visit to the UK, there will have been some diplomatic discussions taking place between those important people during that week at Welbeck Abbey as it was such a politically sensitive time across Europe.

'Both barrels'

"To think that people who were cheering these imperial visitors as they drove through Worksop would a year later be involved in what became such a horrific world conflict where many onlookers in that crowd would be killed, maimed or widowed is truly shocking."

During his stay the Archduke had a brush with death which could have turned these later events on their head.

As recalled in his memoirs *Men, Women and Things*, the Duke of Portland was out shooting pheasants with Franz Ferdinand when:

"One of the loaders fell down. This caused both barrels of the gun he was carrying to be discharged, the shot passing within a few feet of the archduke and myself.

"I have often wondered whether the Great War might not have been averted, or at least postponed, had the archduke met his death then and not at Sarajevo the following year."

Despite the narrow escape, the couple stayed for a week before continuing their travels.

On 28 June 1914, during a visit to the Bosnian capital, Franz Ferdinand and Duchess Sophie were shot dead by nationalist Gavrilo Princip.

The deaths set in train a series of treaties and ultimatums, stoked by long-running national rivalries, which resulted in the outbreak of World War One.

But Dr Hayes is sceptical an early, accidental shooting would have halted the march of war.

"Had it not been Franz Ferdinand's assassination, it would have been something else," he said.

"So many forces were at play, national rivalries, personal ambition, royal prestige, revolutionary ideals, it is hard to believe it could have been stopped."

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Sergeant William Patterson, age 28, had been a German prisoner of war since his capture at Passchendaele in October 1917. By January 1918, the British naval blockade of Germany was causing widespread starvation, affecting not just civilians but also POW camps where guards and prisoners alike were starving. William's daily ration had been reduced to thin soup and a small piece of black bread—barely 800 calories, not enough to sustain life long-term. But the German guards were receiving even less. The German Army prioritized frontline soldiers, leaving rear-area guards—often older men or boys too young for combat—to survive on

scraps. On January 14, 1918, William noticed that his guard, a boy named Hans who looked about 19, was literally starving to death, his uniform hanging on an skeletal frame, his hands shaking from malnutrition.

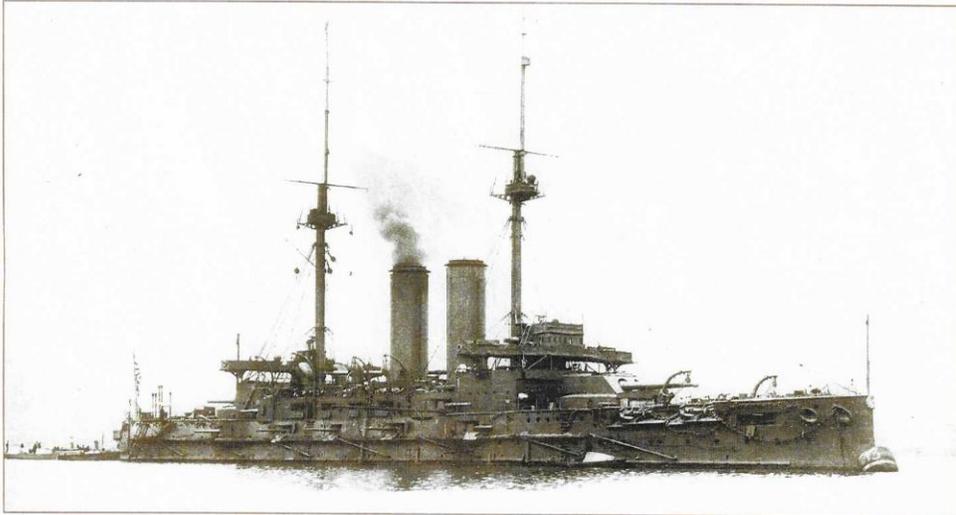
William watched Hans during the daily roll call—the boy could barely stand, swaying on his feet, his face gaunt and grey. Hans was supposed to be the enemy, the oppressor holding William captive. But William saw only a starving teenager, someone's son dying slowly from hunger. That evening, William made a decision that could have gotten him severely punished. He saved half of his already inadequate dinner ration—two ounces of bread and a few spoonfuls of soup—and approached Hans during the guard change. "Here," William said in broken German, offering the food. Hans stared at the bread like it was a hallucination, tears filling his eyes. "I... I cannot. You need it." William pressed the bread into Hans's trembling hands. "You're starving. Take it. We're both prisoners of this war—you just happen to be on the other side of the fence."

Hans ate the bread, crying as he did so, and William returned to his barracks knowing he had just given away food he desperately needed himself. But he couldn't watch a boy starve when he had anything to share. Over the next three weeks, William shared his ration with Hans six more times, each time reducing his own already inadequate calories, his own body growing thinner. Other British POWs noticed and some thought William was insane—giving food to the enemy during their own starvation. But others joined William's example, occasionally sharing bits of their rations with guards they recognized as starving teenagers and old men who had never wanted to be soldiers. An unofficial, unspoken truce developed—enemies sharing what little they had because starvation was a common enemy that transcended national boundaries.

On February 8, 1918, Hans disappeared from guard duty. William learned from another guard that Hans had collapsed from malnutrition and been sent to a hospital. William never saw Hans again. The war ended in November 1918, and William was repatriated to England in December, weighing 98 pounds—he'd entered the POW camp at 154 pounds thirteen months earlier. In 1923, William received a letter from Germany, forwarded through the Red Cross. It was from Hans, who had survived the war and wanted to thank the British sergeant who had shared bread when both were starving. Hans wrote: "I was 18 years old, starving, forced to guard prisoners while I myself was dying from hunger. You were my enemy, my prisoner, yet you shared your bread. You saved my life, Sergeant Patterson. The bread you gave me kept me alive until I reached the hospital. I spent years wondering why you did that—why sacrifice yourself for your enemy? Then I understood: you saw me not as your enemy but as another human suffering. That's a lesson I'll carry forever. You were a better man starving in a POW camp than most people well-fed and comfortable. Thank you. I hope this letter finds you alive and well."

William Patterson kept Hans's letter until his death in 1964 at age 74. He never spoke much about the war, but he kept that letter in his Bible and read it when he felt despair about humanity. William's granddaughter found the letter after his death and donated it to a museum. It's displayed with William's own written response, which he'd drafted but never sent: "Hans—I shared my bread because you were a starving boy, not because you were German or my guard. The war made us enemies. Hunger made us equal. I couldn't watch you die when I had anything to give. That's not heroism—that's basic humanity. The real tragedy

MIKASA: The Last Surviving Pre-Dreadnought Battleship



MIKASA MEMORIAL

The pre-Dreadnought battleship MIKASA clearly shows her British heritage in this period image. Her design was a development of the British Majestic class.

The Japanese warship MIKASA is believed to be the last pre-Dreadnought battleship in the world, and has been preserved as a museum ship in Yokosuka. She flew Admiral Togo's flag during the Russo-Japanese War and fought in the Battles of Port Arthur and Yellow Sea in 1904, and Tsushima in 1905. She is named after Mount Mikasa.

Built by Vickers at Barrow in Furness, she was completed in 1902 as one of six battleships in Japan's 1896 Ten Year Naval Expansion programme. Her design was a development of the Royal Navy's Majestic class, which gave considerable firepower and armoured protection. At the time she was seen as being very much a state of the art vessel.

MIKASA was armed with 4 x 12-inch main guns and a secondary battery of 14 x 6-inch guns plus an array of smaller weapons and 4 x 18-inch torpedo tubes. She was powered by triple expansion engines producing 15,000 hp, and when new was capable of 18 knots.

RUSO-JAPANESE WAR

MIKASA was in action soon after being commissioned into the Japanese fleet, with the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-7, where she was Vice Admiral Heihachiro's flagship.

The naval war was concentrated in the waters around Korea, and in the straits between Japan and Korea. There was also a land campaign with theatres of operation in Southern Manchuria, including the Liaodong Peninsula and Mukden. The well trained Imperial Japanese

Navy began the conflict with a pre-emptive strike on the Russian base of Port Arthur, situated at the north eastern end of the Yellow Sea. The attack took place before the declaration of war on 8 February 1904.

The Japanese plan was to strike the Russian Far East Fleet in the port with a powerful force of six battleships, led by MIKASA, four armored cruisers 15 destroyers and 20 torpedo boats. The Russian Far East Fleet had seven battleships and five cruisers. The first attack was undertaken by destroyers, which badly damaged the two heaviest battleships in the Russian Fleet and a cruiser.

The following day both battle fleets exchanged fire with MIKASA, amongst others, sustaining several hits. The Russians achieved a minor victory in driving off the Japanese forces through the combined fire of shore batteries and the Russian fleet, although there were no losses of major warships on either side. A siege of Port Arthur followed with occasional, but inconclusive exchanges of gun fire, as the Japanese blockaded the port and the Russians attempted to break out. But two Japanese battleships were sunk by mines, on 15 May.

The Russian's second attempt at breaking out lead to the Battle of the Yellow Sea, when MIKASA was further heavily damaged, suffering a number of hits, some sources claim as many as 30. She was able to withstand this battering thanks to the quality of her armour plate. However, nevertheless she suffered 32 dead and 78 wounded.

The various naval actions culminated in the Battle of Tsushima, May 1905, which

is recognised as in one of the most decisive naval battles in history. Much analysed by the leading naval staffs, it established the effectiveness of long range gunnery, and led to major changes in battleship design, the most significant being that of HMS DREADNOUGHT. It also helped establish Japan in the leading rank of naval powers.

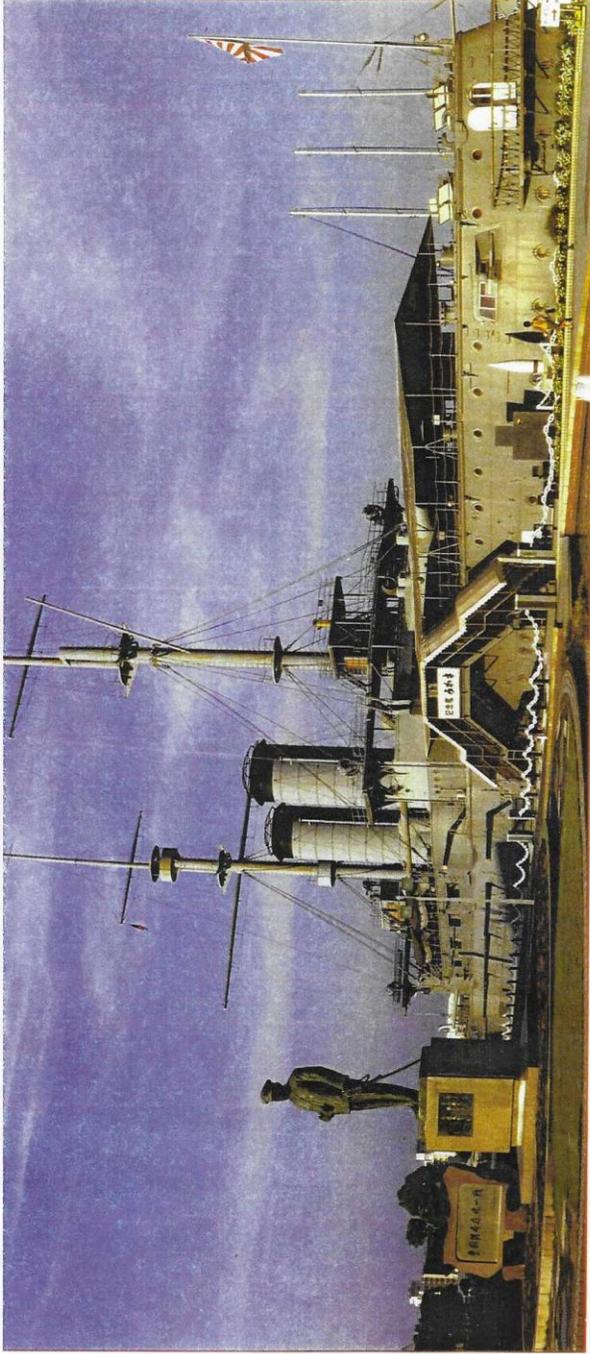
The outcome of the war, at sea, and on land, damaged Russian prestige, and encouraged Japan to see herself as both a modern industrial nation and the dominant Far Eastern power. It was the first occasion a European nation had been defeated by an East Asian nation, and it has also been argued that it had domestic repercussions in Russia, helping act as a catalyst for the 1905 revolution there.

The Russian fleet was virtually wiped out, losing eight battleships and numerous smaller vessels, and more than 5,000 men, while the Japanese lost three torpedo boats. In the battle MIKASA received at least six hits from heavy Russian weapons, and a considerable number from smaller calibre guns. However, this battle saw the annihilation of the Russian Far Eastern Fleet. The war ended with the signing of a peace treaty at Portsmouth, Maine on 5 September 1904.

Shortly after the signing, a fire on board MIKASA, while at anchor in Sasebo, caused a magazine explosion, killing 339 sailors, and sinking the ship. Almost a year later she was raised, salvaged and refitted. The opportunity was taken to re-equip the ship with more powerful 12-inch guns.

POST RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

MIKASA was re-commissioned in 1908, but was soon regarded as being obsolete



The Battleship MIKASA as she is today at her permanent berth at Yokosuka, Japan.

Technical Specifications

Speed	18 knots
Armament	4 x 12-inch (40 calibre, increased to 45 calibre in 1908); 14 x 6 inch QF guns; 20 x 12 pdr guns; 8 x 3 pdr guns; 4 x 2.5 pdr guns; 4 x 18 torpedo tubes
Complement	830
Displacement	15,140 tons
Length	432 ft
Beam	76 ft
Draught	27 ft
Propulsion	25 boilers powering reciprocating engines driving two shafts producing 15,000 hp
Range	7,000 miles at 10 knots

because of the revolution in battleship design brought about with the building of HMS DREADNOUGHT. She was reclassified as a second class battleship, and then reduced to the third class. By 1921 she had been reclassified as a coast defence ship.

That year she ran aground in dense fog while patrolling off the Russian coast, and was repaired in Vladivostok, which was then in Japanese hands. She was subsequently placed in reserve.

MEMORIAL SHIP

In 1925 she was made into a memorial ship and berthed in Yokosuka. Although surviving air raids by the USAAF, she was in a very poor state at the end of WW2.



BRANDED GOODS SHOP Availability

Branded Goods are split into two areas, “Branded Items” which WFA supply direct, and “Branded Clothing”, which is supplied by a Third Party “West Coast Workwear. Please check the Shop for both areas or use this single URL for purchasing

<https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/about-the-wfa/branded-goods-shop/> Prices quoted for Branded Items are inclusive of Vat and Postage, prices quoted for Branded Clothing is inclusive of Vat but Postage will be added during checkout.,

Branded Items

- 1 Fridge Magnet (£5.55)
- 2 Fridge Tile Magnet (£3.55)
- 3 Mousemats (£7)
- 4 Bookmarks (£2.87)
- 5 Baseball Caps (£8.55)
- 6 Ties (£14.55)
- 7 Lapel Badges (£3.50)
- 8 Mug (£10.50)
- 9 Messenger Bag (£28.20)
- 10 Despatch Bag (£36.20)
- 11 Shoulder Bag (£28.20)
- 12 Record Bag (£28.20)

Branded Clothing

- 13 Unisex Polo Shirt £21.46
- 14 Ladies Polo Shirt £21.46
- 15 Unisex Oxford Shirt £35.88
- 16 Ladies Oxford Shirt £35.88
- 17 Unisex Sweatshirt £25.66
- 18 Ladies Sweatshirt £26.34
- 19 Unisex T-Shirt £13.20
- 20 Ladies T-Shirt £14.40
- 21 Unisex Rugby Shirt £33.48
- 22 Ladies Rugby Shirt £35.95
- 23 Unisex Breathgable Jacket £108.96
- 24 Ladies Waterproof Jacket £96.00
- 25 Unisex Fleece £27.48
- 26 Ladies Fleece £27.48

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Thomas Brennan



Thomas Brennan, age 54, a civilian gravedigger from Leeds, was recruited by the British Army in 1915 to work at the military cemeteries in France. He thought he would be burying soldiers with proper ceremonies, giving them dignified rest. Instead, during the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, Thomas became an industrial death processor. On July 1st, the first day of the Somme, 19,240 British soldiers died in one day. Bodies arrived at Thomas's cemetery in wagons, stacked like firewood, sometimes forty bodies per wagon, hundreds of wagons per day. Thomas and twelve other gravediggers worked around the clock, digging graves in assembly-line fashion—dig, bury, mark with a temporary wooden cross, move to the next plot, repeat.

On July 8, 1916, one week into the Somme offensive, Thomas had personally buried 247 soldiers. He stopped reading their names after the first fifty—couldn't emotionally process

each individual death anymore. They became numbers, bodies, corpses to be efficiently interred so the next wave could arrive. Thomas's hands bled from wielding the shovel eighteen hours a day. His back screamed in constant pain. His mind was numb, operating mechanically—dig a hole six feet deep, four feet wide, help lower a body, cover with earth, place a cross, move eight feet over and dig the next hole. The cemetery expanded daily, white crosses spreading like a disease across the French countryside. Thomas was creating a city of the dead, and the bodies kept coming.

Thomas kept a private count on paper hidden in his coat—a tally of every body he'd personally buried. By August 1916, the count reached 500. By September, 800. By November when the Somme offensive finally ended, Thomas had buried 1,247 soldiers with his own hands. The number haunted him. 1,247 young men he'd put in the ground, most unmarked except for a number and a temporary cross. Some bodies were so damaged Thomas couldn't tell if they were one person or pieces of several. Some were just fragments—a torso without limbs, a leg still in a boot, partial remains that barely filled a coffin. Thomas buried them all with equal mechanical efficiency, his humanity slowly eroding under the sheer volume of death.

On December 3, 1916, Thomas collapsed while digging grave number 1,248. His heart simply gave out—not from disease but from exhaustion and psychic trauma. He died in the cemetery he'd spent eighteen months expanding, surrounded by 1,247 graves he'd dug personally and thousands more dug by others. Thomas was buried in the same cemetery by his fellow gravediggers, given plot number 1,248—the grave he'd been digging when he died. His wife Alice traveled from Leeds to see Thomas's grave in 1920, after the war ended. She was shocked by the size of the cemetery—over 10,000 graves spreading in perfect rows. A cemetery chaplain told her Thomas had dug 1,247 of these graves personally. Alice stood at Thomas's grave and wept, realizing her husband had died from the weight of burying an army, from the psychological toll of processing industrial-scale death day after day until his body and spirit broke. Alice brought Thomas's count paper back to England—1,247 tally marks in her husband's handwriting, the last mark incomplete, his pencil having fallen from his hand mid-stroke when his heart stopped. She framed it and hung it in their bedroom, a memorial to a man who died from witnessing too much death. In 1958, Alice donated the tally paper to the Imperial War Museum with a note: "My husband Thomas buried 1,247 soldiers in eighteen months. This killed him. Not battle, not bullets, but the horror of endless burial, of seeing humanity reduced to corpses to be efficiently interred.

Thomas died from bearing witness to industrial slaughter. He deserves to be remembered too—not as a soldier but as a man who broke under the weight of burying an entire generation of young men." The tally paper is displayed at the museum, 1,247 marks in fading pencil, the final mark trailing off mid-stroke—a gravedigger's count of the uncountable cost of war.