

THE POPPY



THE NORFOLK BRANCH NEWSLETTER

Western Front Association

March April 2026 VOL26 No6

CHAIRMANS REMARKS

As the first signs of Spring 2026 appear I wonder what the soldier in his trench contemplated for that coming war year. Certainly looking forward to less mud in his trench but when and where would the next offensive commence. From all the biographies I have read it seems that only Kitchener truly believed that the war would not be over by Christmas. And as the war years dragged on the value of a quality coordinated team effort would be vital if an ending could be imagined.

On the subject of good team work, I would like to thank last year's committee for its work. Every member deserves a pat on the back. Bob had a monumental task of taking part in the revamping of the national WFA website as well as his other duties. Jackie and Roger I thank for their books sales organisation and editing and publication of The Poppy and taking monies on meeting nights. Paul maintains his high standard as Speaker Secretary supplying quality speakers for us. As vice chairman he is a loyal right hand man.

I look forward to another successful year for the Branch.

Thank you all,

Kindest Regards and Best Wishes,

ROB

FROM THE EDITORS

Please let us have any items for consideration for inclusion in the Poppy by the 20th April 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

Dale Wiseman talked to us in January about the Norfolk War Hospital at Thorpe St Andrew. Opened in 1813 as an Asylum and used from 1915 to 1919 as a war hospital with several thousand wounded brought to the hospital by train. Used again for WW2 and finally closing and being

turned into housing in the 1990's.

The main hospital buildings were on one side (known as Southside) of the Old Yarmouth Road and a range of WW1 tented accommodation on the other (known as Northside), crossing over the bridge that remains to this day. Most of the area opposite is built on with industrial buildings, while the most beautiful building the clock tower and its remaining buildings was destroyed by suspected arson a few years ago.

Also in the industrial site can be found the site where Polish burials were made, just a grass area with a simple plaque near the BT yard. Another burial site is within the housing on the main hospital site. Soldiers from the hospital who died from wounds were buried mainly in the Earlham CWGC plot.

Our speaker for February was Steve Smith on this occasion talking about Three Norfolk Hero's of the 9th Norfolk's, Lt Col Bernard Leathes-Prior DSO, Captain Cyril Bassingthwaighte MC and bar, both who seemed to arrive in October 1916 and Private James Cooper a stretcher bearer and bandsman, all of whom wrote down their experiences. Prior and Bassingthwaighte joined the regiment in October as the battle of the Somme sort of neared its end. As these men joined the regiment the coming fight for Mild Trench took place on October 18th that fight took the life of 200 plus Norfolk's including my Great Uncle Alfred. The 9th would go on to fight in several more battles in the coming two years, with officers coming and going to other Battalions. Steve's book on The Norfolk Regiment is full of information on all the exploits of our men and the battles they fought and in some cases died in - I just need time to read it properly!

All three men returned home. Lt Col Prior as he was known, was a member of the Leathes-Prior family who still are well known as solicitors here in Norwich. Capt Bassingthwaighte went on to become the National President of the Grocers' Association. Private James Cooper who was in his 40's during the war returned home dying in 1938 at the age of 63.

FUTURE PROGRAMME

April 7th - The Zeebrugge Raid - Scott Lindgren

May 5th Evolving Meritocracy in the BEF - Dr Peter Hodgkinson

IN THE NEWS

So sad to see the storm damage pictures of the Anzac Cove and V Beach Cemetery in Gallipoli that has occurred in the past few weeks. The Cemetery is closed till further notice, while they look into how to repair the damage. More storms are expected in the area and sadly like many coastal locations land and its history is being destroyed by the sea undermining buildings etc.

SUFFOLK WFA

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

March 11th - the half shilling curate - Rev Herbert Butler Cowl MC - Sarah Reay

April 8th - Facial Injuries - Rob Burkett

LITTLE KNOWN BATTLES and A SOLDIER WITH A VERY NON GERMAN SOUNDING NAME

Sometimes I think I've not heard of a battle only to find its part of a bigger battle, others I know of briefly, some I never realised were ever fought!

The Battle of Brasso fought between 7th and 9th October, 1916 in which the Austro-Hungarians and Germans fought the Romanians as part of the Battle of Transylvania.

The Battle of Haelen, August 1914, when Belgium cavalry fought German cavalry, the Belgians dismounted and beat the Germans.

It is said the first shots of WW1 were in Africa in the German colony of Togo in a battle for a radio station! For the time it was a very high tech base, which had to be taken by the Allies or destroyed by its builders, rather depending on which side you were on. It could have given the Germans contact in Asia..

The Battle of Lake Naroch in March 1916 was a poorly set up Russian battle to help hide the forthcoming Battle of the Somme. A disaster!

The Battle of Jardar was fought in August 14, when the Austrians invaded Serbia, crossing the river of that name near to Belgrade. Despite the Austrians having the biggest army the Serbs did manage to defeat them after a few days of fighting.

The Battle of Ortigara was fought in June 1917 between the Austro-Hungarians and Italians for Mount Ortigara in the Asiago Plateau, a beautiful landscape with a fiercely fought bloody battle.

Killed in the above battle in Italy in WW1 was a soldier by the wonderful name of Artur von Mecenseffy, Feldmarschall-leutnant.or Lieutenant-General, supposed to be the highest ranking officer killed in the war, 6th October 1917. First buried in a military cemetery, his family requested his body to go to the family tomb in Vienna. There is a memorial for him overlooking the battle area, worth a trip to see just for the views I would think.

CAPT ROBERT CAMPBELL - PRISONER OF WAR

Campbell who served with the 1st Battalion East Surrey Regiment was captured by the Germans during August 1914 when fighting in the Battle of Mons. He was taken to Magdeburg POW camp in Germany where he would spend the war - well not exactly what happened it seems.. Some two years later he learned that his mother was dying and decided to write to the Kaiser asking if he could go and visit her, amazingly he was given permission on the understanding he would return to the camp - which he did.

Later being an Officer, Campbell felt duty bound to try and escape, which he and others did by digging their way out of the camp and headed towards the Dutch border, but they got caught and returned to the camp.

After the war ended Campbell stayed in the military until 1925. He died in 1966 on the Isle of Wight.

No other POW's had this chance of visiting ill family after the British turned down a German POW who made a similar request.

AN UNUSUAL WAR MEMORIAL?

Recently Roger came across something on Facebook which we had not heard of before. In an area of Derbyshire where we have spent lots of time exploring over the years, there seems to be a new memorial having been installed during the 100 year commemorations. This memorial is not to a

person but to the stone quarried and used in many CWGC cemeteries around the world for headstones to the dead. Better known as Middleton Quarry, it was also known as Hopton Wood Stone company/firm. At what is now the Steeple Grange Light Railway and formerly the starting point for transporting materials back then, and which is in the area of Middleton-by-Wirksworth, this stone was installed after people thought it right that this place and its history be recognised.

A CWGC shaped headstone has an inscription with the badge of the London & North Western Railway Company. This company moved the headstones from the quarry back in the 1920's, to then go on to its required locations across the world including Gallipoli, France and Belgium. The memorial stone placed here on the railway site is of donated Longcliff stone as Hopwood stone is no longer available.

The inscription on the headstone reads - After the Great War of 1914-18 more than 120,000 headstones were carried on this line destined for Imperial War Graves cemeteries. We Will Remember Them.

You can find this site from the High Peak Trail.

MINI ANTHRAX EPIDEMIC IN WW1

Did you know there was an Anthrax problem during WW1?

Pre war shaving brushes were made of various animal hair, with badger being the most popular. Unfortunately when the war began the supply of badger hair became in short supply, so by around 1915 horse hair became the most common material. Coming in from places such as China and Russia normally hair would be disinfected but war meant corners were cut and this did not happen.

The bacteria that causes Anthrax can lie active in the ground for long periods and passes into the grass eaten by horses and other herbivores and was then passed to men who used shaving brushes made from horse hair, via cuts and scratches on their faces. The US Military believed back then that a clean shaven face was better for using a gas mask and so issued men with a shaving kit suitable for use out in the field. Unfortunately the shaving brushes were never properly disinfected and the infection passed into the skin making around 200 ill and presumably the odd death. Around 200 people were made ill, mostly in the USA and both Military and civilian, with some in Britain also infected, again both Military and civilian.

It is claimed by some, that a doctor with affiliations to Germany took the bacteria to the US and infected horses with Anthrax cells.....

OBITUARY FOR DICK RAYNER

The following is the write up that Andrew and Rob have submitted to the WFA for the Bulletin to be published later this year. More info on Dick's earlier life can be found on WISEArchive under the Post Office Engineer - and the horses (1940's to 2016).

Richard (Dick) Rayner

Dick once jokingly remarked that, just like a stick of Yarmouth rock, if you cut him in half, he would have Norfolk written through his middle. Dick Rayner was born on 27 April 1937 and died on Boxing Day 2025; he left behind a strong and unique legacy. He was a Norfolk man through and through, and proud to be recognised as such, a family man with simple origins, he

grew up working on a farm which experience gave him a life-long passion for the country, a man who loved his football (he played semi-professional for many years including a stint at Norwich City), he also loved his beer, whisky and food. At work he was a professional working for British Telecom for almost his entire career, a hard and stubborn taskmaster, yet a well respected and very caring manager, an utterly polite, and an exceptionally generous man. He was very liked by his work colleagues. And when early retirement came he devoted himself to one of the great loves of his life, the 8th battalion of the Norfolk Regiment. He gained the reputation of being an excellent researcher, and many an erudite historian would seek Dick's help and advice. He didn't, however, limit himself to just the 8 / Norfolks, many other units within the Norfolk Regiment came into his sharp focus. We used to tell Dick that he was the world expert on the 8 / Norfolks. He treated the epithet as something of a joke, we (and many others) didn't.

At one point Dick was effervescent at the misinformation and the bending of the truth regarding what really happened to the 1/5 Norfolks on 12 August 1915 at Gallipoli. A despatch published on 6 January 1916 by Sir Ian Hamilton on the Gallipoli Campaign, following the 1/5 Battalion's attack on 12 August 1915, noted that they were lost, and it stated, *'Nothing more was ever seen or heard of any of them. They charged into the forest and were lost to sight or sound. Not one of them ever came back.'* Dick was rightly outraged, and he decided that he was going to write the definitive account of the event, not as was depicted in the TV programme 'All the Kings Men', He once joked that the only bit of truth in that programme was that the Norfolks were at Gallipoli! (sorry Taff) Dick took his standard approach and wrote a well researched article which was published as a stand-alone insert for the Gallipollian entitled **'The Sandringhams at Suvla Bay'**. Such was the high regard in which the article was received it was also published in 'Stand To!' in 2000. Andrew remembers researching at the National Archive and having had delivered the War Diary of the 1/5 Norfolks, and upon opening the box seeing on a single sheet of his paper was Dick's handwriting pointing out that the date of the landing, as recorded by the adjutant, was wrong, and that Dick has provided the reader with the correct date!

A collaboration between the late Maurice Johnson, Andrew and Dick resulted in an article entitled **'Mont de Soissons'** published in 'Stand To!'. The place was a farm on Maurice's beloved Aisne, and the article included references to the 1 / Norfolk Regiment. Why write it otherwise?! Maurice and Dick became very close friends and we three spent many trips to the Western Front together.

A research and writing collaboration between Dick, Rob and Andrew resulted in an article published in 'Stand To!' in the Somme 100th anniversary edition. The title, chosen by Dick, was **'Private Harold Page: a Norfolk Man'**.

Dick was always at home on the Somme, where his beloved 8 / Norfolks played such a significant part, particularly to his second home at 'Monique's place' at Miraumont, also at Norfolk Cemetery ('to see the boys again'), and we fondly remember the many times we visited the village well at Molliens-au-Bois where the 8 / Norfolks posted a sentry to ensure the water supply was not compromised! And so many other favourite locations! How could we ever forget standing on the 8 / Norfolk's start line close to Montauban on 1 July 1916 at the 90th anniversary, just the three of us, and being led through the lead up to the attack by Dick minute by minute until the whistle blew at 07:30. He stood there full of pride, raw emotion, and with more than one tear in his eye. We were there again on the 100th anniversary as well.... but it wasn't the same. There were other people spread along the front line, and although they had every right to be there, it wasn't the private moment that Dick wanted,

just him remembering his beloved 8 / Norfolks.

Having spent over 30 years going to the battlefields together we came to admire and love the man Dick Rayner was.... caring, generous, humorous, a brilliant researcher, self deprecating, not one to easily forgive fools or pretentious people, a man completely absorbed in the First World War in general, and the Norfolks in particular. Dick didn't like the tactics and strategy of the General Staff he was a man firmly interested in the ordinary soldier and, in his humble opinion, the very important contribution they made.

We have been privileged to have shared the life of this unique and wonderful man. We particularly remember his family at this time and his many friends. The greatest tribute he could receive was to be remembered as a true Norfolk Man; we are two of many who shall.

Andrew England, Rob Burkett.

