

THE POPPY



THE NORFOLK BRANCH NEWSLETTER

Western Front Association

November December 2025 VOL26 No4

CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

On a recent trip to Dartmouth, Devon for the annual food festival, under the guise of visiting the Royal Navy College, I came across yet another story to feed my hunger for WW1 knowledge. My old pal, Dick Rayner, told me to always look out for the CWGC signs on the walls of English cemeteries. So at Kingswear, near our accommodation, I popped in to pay my respects to three casualties resting there. One happened to be Commander Valentine Francis Gibbs RN who had died of wounds aboard HMS Iris, a commissioned Merseyside ferry that took part in the Zeebrugge raid 23 April 1918. Gibbs had been chosen for the mission on the basis of a solid naval career. Over 300 wounded were brought back to the UK after the raid and of those who subsequently died, their bodies were returned for local burials. Valentine Gibbs had received the honour of a burial in his sleepy home village amongst loved ones. HMS Iris returned to duty as a Merseyside ferry after the war. Thanks to Dick's wise advice, my wife's keen eye spotting a green plaque on a wall and a good internet phone connection my knowledge in-tray has been replenished. So keep an eye out for those green plaques.

Kindest Regards, Chairman Rob

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

Two interesting meetings in September and October. Simon Shephard's talk on the gunner's of the London TF's was interesting - you can not imagine that one minute you are heading off for your annual summer camp and the next heading off for the real thing - war! Shortages of equipment, death in some cases would await many of these men, after going to places many would never have imagined they would ever see on all fronts where fighting took place. How these became boys became men, and how the war taught and changed the army over the four war years.

But for me Vernon Creek's talk on the Observation Balloons in October was the most interesting of the two talks. Yes, you see pictures of balloons above the front now and then, but not on the scale this talk told. These guys in the balloons had a really dangerous job, only a wicker basket under their feet, freezing cold, floating there hours on end at height attached to ropes and also being sitting ducks for any German gunfire.

Of course they had an important role to play and photographs gave much help to the men below, but sadly these men are often overlooked by history. Let us remember these "balloonatics".

FUTURE PROGRAMME

November 4th - Imperial War Graves Commission - Revolution and Challenges in Commemoration - Nik Chapman CBE

December 2nd - Peter Hart - Paul says its definitely "The French at Gallipoli" this time. - Bring your money as Peter will have more books to sell!

2026

Please remember for our first meeting of 2026 will be on the 2nd Tuesday, 13th January - St Andrews Hospital Norwich, the Norfolk War Hospital - Dale Wiseman

3rd February - Three men of the 9th Norfolks - Steve Smith

3rd March - AGM followed by The 12th Lancers: From Horse to Horse Power - Major Phil Watson

IN THE NEWS

WW1 TRAIN ON DORSET WATERCRESS FARM

Dodding's Farm in Bere Regis, Dorset, is home to what is thought to be the last surviving agricultural railway in the UK, but also a piece of WW1 history

Up to 2023, the miniature locomotive, known as the Watercress Queen, had been working on the watercress beds, taking the cut cress to be packed before being sent off around the country, now its future is uncertain.

The train has featured in several books over the years, but sadly it is now covered in cobwebs and in need of some care and attention. It is thought it once carried ammunition into the trenches and men and supplies back out to the rear. After the war these small trains were sold off cheaply to who ever wanted them.

Although the train has most likely reached the end of its useful working life on the farm., where she has been for around 100 years, it is hoped to get it back to working order and cleaned up and maybe find a new home where her fans can visit her - yes, she has a fan club on line!

EDITH CAVELL 110 REMEMBRANCE EVENTS

On the 11th and 12th October events were held at Norwich cathedral to mark the 110 anniversary of Edith's execution by the Germans on October 12th 1915. A small display in the Cathedral of paintings and letters as well as her dog Jack is being held until December 23rd Tuesdays to Thursdays from 10am to 4pm. The annual grave side service that has marked the years following her reburial in the Cathedral grounds was held with the service looking to be well attended, and as

normal, modern nursing staff were present to lay wreaths.

MEMORIAL TO R H MOTTRAM DEFACED

Sadly, WW1 soldier, author of the Spanish Farm trilogy and former Lord Mayor of Norwich, Ralph Mottram's memorial on St James Hill, Mousehold was defaced by vandals recently.

Sadly in the run up to Remembrance Day there have already been damage to memorials by vandals in some locations across the country.

DID YOU KNOW one of the newer housing areas in Wymondham has roads with WW1 connections, Flanders Rise, Wilfred Owen Mews, Edith Cavell Close, Poppy Street, Jutland Rise, Tipperary Avenue, Enfield Row, and Kitchener Close.

CWGC REBURIALS FOR NOVEMBER

On November 12th 2 soldiers will be rededicated in Tyne Cot Lt Norman Frederick Hunter and Sergeant George Goodson Moore DCM. After in the Vichte Military Cemetery Private George Hall will be buried. Then on the 13th at St Symphorien Cemetery Sergeant William Augustus Fritz will be laid to rest.

On the 19th an unknown British soldier will be reburied in Arezzo in Italy.

SUFFOLK WFA

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

November 12th - Archaeology on the Western Front - Clive Harris

December AGM + 3 Cameos by branch members

THINGS TO SPOT ON MILITARY HEADSTONES

I have always looked closely at headstones in CWGC cemeteries and at the odd graves dotted around the UK when men, and occasionally women, were buried after dying at "home" to see what families had put on these headstones in their "permitted epitaphs". Then there are the details you see, re ages - the very young and the rather old for military service, names - some unusual, and aliases for what ever reason, the "buried somewhere in this cemetery," the unknown soldier or officer etc. With some epitaphs you can sense the bitterness or resentment of families in the wording used.

Why did the British allow epitaphs when most other countries didn't appear to - or did they? Well many did it seems. Australians have the most epitaphs, New Zealand is said to have none. There is said to be a Canadian headstone which has a Danish inscription for a Danish man who served in in the Canadian forces, but has anyone seen a Welsh headstone with Welsh wording?, The same could be said for Scottish and Irish men killed who spoke Gaelic - are there any headstones out there with Gaelic inscriptions? We've all seen some of the headstones of the Commonwealth soldiers with names in English and Arabic writing and others in English and Chinese symbols, these are inscriptions and if you know your Chinese it can be translated to give a saying.

Did the Germans have such things, probably not or the Americans for that matter, no I can't recall seeing one?

What got me thinking about all this, well recently something cropped up on the internet about a soldier with unusual initials and matching surname - some of you may know this grave in the Bonnay Communal Cemetery Extension, for those who do not - that includes me, this man is Lance Corporal S H A R P Sharpe killed on August 14th 1918 serving with 23rd Battalion London Regiment. He was Septimus Harry Archibald Richard Percy Sharp born in 1883 so in his mid 30's at his death.

Another that I've heard of is the one of a mother who had the following put on her son's headstone - "Will some kind hand in a foreign land place a flower on my son's grave" and it has been honoured by locals in the area it is located over the years. In reality there may well be more than just one with that wording and still cared for by locals.

2nd Lt Hugh Langton, 4th Bn, London Regiment (RF) doesn't have a normal inscription, he has musical notes. He died in October 1917, age 32 and is in Poelcapelle British Cemetery. He was a talented violinist being a pupil of Professors from Prague, Berlin and Russia. There appears to be much debate as to what the notes are/mean on line.

One of the saddest inscriptions is to an Australian, Lance Corporal Harold Gilk. It says - "An only son killed in action on his way to his leave and wedding."

One of the only inscriptions to a woman appears to be to Nurse Nellie Spindler - "a noble type of good heroic womanhood" who is in the Lijssenthoek cemetery in Belgium. That is apart from our own Edith Cavell who wrote her own epitaph, she has her last known words on the flat stone over her remains - Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.

Some families were very bitter, such as those of Private Albert Ingham whose father had the following put on his son's grave - "shot at dawn one of the first to enlist a worthy son of his father". Some wonder how that got past the IWGC/CWGC at the time.

My own family members went for Great uncle James as "We loved thee well dear Jim but Jesus loved thee best" and Great uncle Alfred as "death divides but memory clings"

John Laffin's book *We Will Remember Them* is full of Epitaphs of the Australians, for families whose men died so far away, it was hard knowing they would probably never see the graves or memorials where son's father's etc lay or died, that they needed to express their feelings in words.

Do you have a favourite epitaph in any of the cemeteries you have visited, or spotted unusual things on headstones? Please let us know.

A different form of remembering the dead without words is an American WW2 cemetery we've visited several times over the years, Margraten in the Netherlands, which has a waiting list of people who want to look after a headstone at the site, which is so nice to know. Maybe this happens in other American Cemeteries of both the world wars?

THE WEEPING CROSS OF DELVILLE WOOD

A series of battles took place for Delville Wood but the one fought by the South Africans was considered to be one of the bloodiest battles during the battle of the Somme. It was fought by the South African infantry beginning on July 15th and continued on for several days and resulted

in the deaths of around 2500 men, with many bodies never recovered.

The Africans were told to hold what was known to the men as "Devil's Wood" at all costs to help the British who were fighting next door to the wood, sadly they did with many men blown to bits, hence very few bodies were recovered and of those that were very few are named on headstones.

At the end of the war a Commanding officer of the South African Infantry collected some wood from the remains of the Scots pine which had grown in the Wood before being destroyed in the fighting. Three crosses were made, one went to Cape Town, another to Durban's Cenotaph and the third to Pietermartzburg.

It is this third cross that has the legend of weeping annually close to the anniversary of the Battle of Delville Wood attached to it. No one really knows or can tell how or why this weeping occurs. It was said that with the death of the final survivor of the battle it would stop weeping, but it hasn't.

There are other crosses as memorials to the men of WW1 in other cities around SA but this is the only one that has ever leaked reddish resin and still does 100 years later.

Built after the Armistice the cemetery is made up of men killed in the battles for Delville Wood and Longueval, and burials moved from small sites around the area. Of the 5500 plus men buried in Delville Wood cemetery, well over 3500 are unknown. Many killed at Delville Wood remain on the battlefield where they fell making for South Africans a place hard to deal with when they visit..

L/CP HORACE W MILLER LEICESTER REGIMENT

We have all heard of Walter Tull being a black officer in the army at a time when this was not at all common. But it seems there are others who served.

One was Lance Corporal Horace Wilfred Miller who enlisted pre WW1 as a Drummer and served with the 1/5th Leicestershire Regiment. Died of wounds in September 1915 and listed on the Menin gate memorial, his body lost, in 2022 after finally being identified, a rededication service was held at the Ypers Reservoir Cemetery.

And Finally

Why have I never thought about why the most common WW1 medals were called Pip, Squeak and Wilfred? So it seems Pip is a dog, Squeak is a penguin and Wilfred is a rabbit. Pip being the 1914 Star, Squeak being the British War Medal and Wilfred being the Victory Medal. It is said that after the war, in 1919, the Daily Mirror launched a comic strip featuring the three creatures who were best friends and the public took to them at a time when many were coming to terms with loss and turmoil of that period.