



*Quarter One – March 2015*



## *Creeping Barrage*

News & Notes  
from the Herts &  
Beds Branch

### **NEXT PRESENTATION:**

**“ESPIONAGE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR”  
AN ILLUSTRATED TALK BY FORMER CHIEF HISTORIAN AT THE FOREIGN &  
COMMONWEALTH OFFICE, GILL BENNETT  
AT ST. GEORGE’S SCHOOL, SUN LANE (SPORTS HALL ROOM SP101),  
HARPENDEN AL5 4TD  
FRIDAY, 20 MARCH 2015 AT 8:00PM**

Secret intelligence was a growth industry during the Great War, in Britain and other countries. Between 1914 and 1918 both military and civil authorities deployed agents throughout the world to gather information (and spread disinformation) that might help to win the war. Some of these are famous, like Mata Hari or Lawrence of Arabia, some less so; sometimes it was the less famous who were most effective. Former Chief Historian of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, **Gill Bennett’s** talk will cover both the major organisational and technical developments that took place during the war, and some of the extraordinary personal stories of spies professional and amateur, invaluable and inept, working alone or together; as well as their portrayal in literature by the many writers, from **John Buchan** (see above) to Somerset Maugham, who were involved in secret intelligence themselves.

DONATION AT THE DOOR £3.50

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



## Zone Call - Notes from Geoff Cunnington, Acting Chairman and Branch Secretary



A very warm welcome to the March Q1 2015 edition of 'Creeping Barrage'.

Thank you to all of you who turned out in numbers last month to hear Stephen Bourne's very personal view of the role of black soldiers in the Great War. Simon Goodwin reviews the talk below but I thought it worth adding an image which I have found in my collection of naval photographs which shows that black people featured in the navy as well, albeit in this instance as part of a concert party on "HMS Erin" in 1917 – centre of back row in 'exotic prince' costume. The reverse of this photograph states, "On authority from Les Titchener's father who served in the *Erin* at this time, the coloured person in the back row is coloured and not someone blacked-up."



This month we welcome former Chief Historian of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, **Gill Bennett**, who will tell us about the world of secret intelligence and espionage during the First World War. This promises to be a most fascinating talk with references, I am sure, to two of my favourite books and films, "The 39 Steps" and "The Riddle of the Sands" both of which give a flavour of spies and agents and top secret intrigue. Find out more about Gill Bennett's work at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Gill-Bennett/e/B001HOHIKS>.

Gill has also kindly made herself available to present the prizes to this year's winners of the Year 9 St. George's School Trench Diary Competition. The standard of entries has, once again, been very high and we look forward to welcoming the students and their parents to our meeting.

Travel safely and I look forward to seeing you next week.

Geoff Cunnington, March 2015

### BRANCH CONTACTS

#### Acting Chairman and Branch Secretary

Geoff Cunnington  
cunnington19@btinternet.com  
07500 040 600

#### Treasurer

Clive Mead  
clive.mead@btinternet.com

#### Branch Committee Contact

Simon Goodwin  
s.goodwin1866@gmail.com

## Previously at Herts & Beds 20 February 2015 “Black Poppies: Britain’s Black Community and the First World War” - Stephen Bourne”



### Committee Member, Simon Goodwin writes:

Stephen Bourne, a self-confessed “community historian” from Peckham, travelled out to Harpenden, last Friday evening, to talk to us about the British Black Community and their role in the Great War. His talk was centred on research he had carried out whilst writing his latest book “Black Poppies” (published by The History Press in August 2014). His book has been written in three parts:

- (a) Black soldiers and sailors
- (b) The home experience of the wider black community
- (c) Post war riots and unrest in 1919

This is not Stephen’s only book as he has previously written “Mother Country: Britain’s Black Community On The Home Front 1939-45” and “The Motherland Calls: Britain’s Black Servicemen and Women 1939-45” (both also published by The History Press)

In 1914 the United Kingdom was home to 10,000 black Britons, many of African and West Indian heritage, most of whom felt a loyalty to the “Mother Country”. These were mainly based in the seaport towns of Liverpool, Cardiff and the East End of London. Despite being discouraged from serving in the British Army many did enlist and even more contributed to the war effort on the Home Front.

Perhaps the best known black British soldier of the Great War was Walter Tull, the celebrated pre-war footballer, who volunteered in 1914, was commissioned into the Middlesex Regiment in 1917 and was killed in 1918. But, Stephen cautioned us about believing straight away that he was the first black officer in the history of the British Army. Whilst no other, earlier, black officer is currently known of it is quite possible that in the long history of the British Army there has been at least another that we are not aware of.

It can be difficult to identify the contribution of black servicemen during the War, not least because Army Service Records have no section for “Race” to be recorded in. Certainly some photos do exist of blacks and whites side by side in the British Army.

Many stories surrounding white troops also have their parallels in black troops and Poperinghe Cemetery contains the grave of an

underage volunteer, shot for desertion, 17 year old Private Herbert Morris.

To help answer a call for more men, in October 1915 the British West Indies Regiment was established and by the end of the war over 15,000 men had volunteered to join it. Of this number 697 were wounded, 185 lost their lives and 6 were decorated during the conflict.

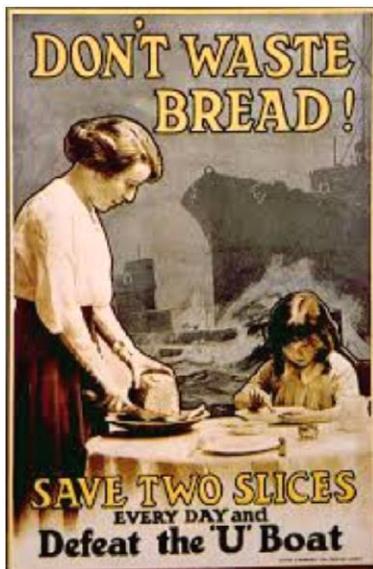
Black women on the home front really only had two career paths open to them before the war, becoming a Seamstress or going on to the Stage. Mabel Mercer (b. 1900 in Staffordshire) was one of the latter.

By the end of the War, it is estimated that Britain’s black population had risen to 30,000, as many black servicemen who had fought decided to make it their home. This did lead to problems as they, and their families, on occasion came under attack from white ex-servicemen and civilians increasingly resentful of their presence during a period of mass unemployment. Indeed, in June 1919, a black resident of Liverpool, Charles Wooton, was murdered in a local dock. This friction led to John Archer (ex-Mayor of Battersea) saying, weeks after the war had ended, that “if [black soldiers] were good enough to fight then they were good enough to enjoy the benefits of being British Subjects”

Certainly the post Armistice experiences of many black soldiers was not good and some based at Taranto, Italy in 1919 were treated very badly being put on menial duties such as cleaning out the latrines of Italian Prisoners Of War and many having their free time to go into the local towns restricted. This all led to a number of them mutinying and this story was later retold in a 1999 Channel Four film called “Mutiny”. Some, after being demobbed, were also encouraged to resettle in Cuba as labourers to stop them agitating for Independence back home.

There are still remnants of the BWIR presence in Britain as seen in Seaford, East Sussex where 19 of its men are buried with CWGC headstones. This is where the Regiment arrived and was based early in the War and the significant change in climate and other factors may well have resulted in deaths.

Simon Goodwin, February 2015



## Coming-Up at Herts & Beds 24th April 2015 “Domestic Women on the Home Front”

Professor **Maggie Andrews** will focus on how the war caused shifts in the role of women looking at changes in domestic responsibilities, the impact of food shortages, letter writing, gardening and charity work which facilitated the more well-known areas of women’s wartime contribution such as nursing and working in munitions. She is Professor of Cultural History at the University of Worcester whose work covers the social and cultural history of twentieth century Britain and the representation of that history within popular culture. A key focus of her research is domesticity and femininity. She is the author of a range of publications including a feminist history of the Women’s Institute movement and an exploration of the history of the inter-relationship of broadcasting, femininity and domesticity in twentieth century Britain. Her current work relates to domesticity and the Home Front in World War One and Two; she is currently writing a monograph on Women and Evacuation in the Second World War to be published by Bloomsbury Academic.

Maggie has a strong commitment to public engagement; from 2008-2013 she worked with the National Memorial Arboretum and Nottingham University to convene a series of seminars on *Remembrance, Commemoration and Memorials in Contemporary Culture*. These seminars, which were initially funded by the Royal British Legion, led to a jointly edited book, *Lest We Forget: Remembrance and Commemoration*, and a special remembrance edition of the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*.

Prof Andrews is Co- Investigator on the AHRC funded WWI engagement center Voices of War and Peace: The Great War and its Legacy <http://www.voicesofwarandpeace.org>, leading on the theme of gender and the home front. She also works with the Worcestershire WW1 100 Heritage Lottery Funded project and undertakes a range of media work. Maggie is an AHRC-funded adviser to the BBC in the West Midlands on its World War One at Home project <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01nhwgx> and the historical consultant for the Radio 4 Drama Home Front <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03thbcj>.

## THE BIG PUSH 2015 – ON THE HORIZON

FUTURE BRANCH PRESENTATIONS AT ST. GEORGE'S SCHOOL, SUN LANE (SPORTS HALL ROOM SP101), HARPENDEN AL5 4TD. ALL MEETINGS START AT 8.00PM. TEA, COFFEE & BISCUITS INCLUDED IN £3.50 MINIMUM DONATION ON THE DOOR.



### 22 May

#### The Camps at Cannock Chase

**Stephen Dean** is a Principal Archaeologist at Staffordshire County Council. His presentation will review the two divisional-sized Great War camps constructed on Cannock Chase during late 1914/early 1915, their infrastructure and the range of services provided by the camps. Discussion will also focus on the recent excavation of the Messines terrain model, built by the New Zealand Rifle Brigade with the assistance of German PoWs in early 1918. This model is thought to be unique to the United Kingdom for this period and is one of only a handful known from the Western Front.

[http://www.cannockchasedc.gov.uk/site/custom\\_scripts/HeritageTrail/visitor\\_centre2.html](http://www.cannockchasedc.gov.uk/site/custom_scripts/HeritageTrail/visitor_centre2.html)

### 26 June

#### The Angels of Pervyse: Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm

Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm spent most of the War saving hundreds of soldiers' lives by giving basic first aid just a hundred yards from the German trenches at Pervyse. They received 17 medals for their bravery and became known as the 'Madonnas' and 'Angels of Pervyse': they are two of the iconic women of the Great War in the company of Edith Cavell and Mata Hari. A project is underway with the aim to unveil a statue to mark the centenary of the arrival of the women in the village. This talk by **Diane Atkinson** will describe their lives, their works and the project to commemorate them. Diane taught history at secondary schools in London before moving to the Museum of London, where she worked as a lecturer and curator, specialising in women's history.

### 9 October

#### Public Schools and the Great War

**David Walsh** will analyse the contribution of British public schools and their alumni to the war effort and examine the effect of the war on those institutions during the war itself and subsequently. David Walsh taught history at Tonbridge School in Kent, retiring as Deputy Head in 2009. He has subsequently written two books - 'A Duty to Serve: Tonbridge School and the 1939-45 War' (TMI 2011) and 'Public Schools and the Great War: A Generation Lost' (Pen and Sword 2013) with Anthony Seldon. He is a member of the WFA and occasionally takes groups of friends on battlefield trips.

### 13 November

#### The Battle Bus Project

A 100-year-old London bus has been converted into a First World War 'battle bus' for a commemorative tour of Western Front locations in Belgium and France. During the Great War, more than 1,000 London buses played a vital role transporting troops to and from the front lines, removing the wounded and those due rest periods, and bringing in new soldiers. They would often travel at night, in convoys of more than 70 vehicles, and many of the drivers were the same men who had driven them in London. Before the breakout of war, the 'battle bus' served on route nine from Mortlake garage in south west London, and took passengers from Barnes to Liverpool Street. **Tim Shields**, project manager of the restoration project, will describe the conversion of the bus which was made possible by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant; additional funding was provided by the London Transport Museum Friends and public donations.

### 11 December

#### 'Suicide Club' to 'Butchers': The Palestine Brigade RFC/RAF 1917-18

**Stuart Hadaway** will describe how from 1914 until the summer of 1917, the RFC in Egypt and Palestine had struggled with outdated aircraft and inadequate resources against a German force that was smaller but much better equipped. In the summer of 1917 this all changed, as an infusion of modern aircraft allowed them to turn the tables on the German Air Forces even as they too were reinforced. The RFC would play an important role in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Gaza from October to December 1917, and would then grow over the following year until it was able to become a decisive element in the Battle of Megiddo in September 1918. In the process, they developed principles and techniques that still under-pin aerial campaigns today.

## Tail Spin - You Might be Interested In.....

### The Mobbs Memorial Match at Bedford Blues Rugby Ground on 1 April 2015

Edgar Mobbs was a well-known rugby player who captained England and the Barbarians before the war and who had a distinguished military career before being killed in action at Zillebeke in 1917. There has been an annual match in his memory since 1921. This year the match is scheduled to take place at Bedford; around 2,000 spectators are expected and as well as rugby events there will be military stands and the band of the Royal Signals.

<http://therugbyhistorysociety.co.uk/mobbs.html>

<http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/Bedford-Blues-Mobbs-Memorial-Match-returning/story-25900342-detail/story.html>



### Ox and Bucks Branch Regional Seminar 12 September 2015 – “Transportation during the Great War”

<http://www.wfaoxbucks.co.uk/16.html>



### “Trench Lines” – The New Email Newsletter from the Western Front Association

<http://us2.campaign-archive2.com/?u=b727059489ecdacccf6340260&id=a4386bd656&e=f88af2786d>