



Quarter Two – June 2015



Creeping Barrage

News & Notes
from the Herts &
Beds Branch

NEXT PRESENTATION:

“THE ANGELS OF PERVYSE: ELSIE KNOCKER & MAIRI CHISHOLM”

AN ILLUSTRATED TALK BY DIANE ATKINSON AT ST. GEORGE’S SCHOOL, SUN LANE (SPORTS HALL ROOM SP101), HARPENDEN AL5 4TD

FRIDAY, 26 JUNE 2015 AT 8:00PM

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.

At three o'clock in the afternoon of 22nd of November 2014, a life-size bronze sculpture of Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm, and their little dog 'Shot', was unveiled in the garden of the Hotel Ariane in Ypres, a hundred years to the day since they started giving 'golden hour' treatment to Belgian soldiers in their dug-out in Pervyse ten miles away.

Read more:

<http://www.dianeatkinson.co.uk/>

DONATION AT THE DOOR £3.50

www.westernfrontassociation.com



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



A very warm welcome to the Q2 June 2015 edition of 'Creeping Barrage'.

This month we welcome historian Diane Atkinson who will describe for us the lives two previously somewhat unsung heroines of the Great War – Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm otherwise known as 'The Angels of Pervyse". Diane has been a key mover in making sure that these two ladies receive the recognition that they deserve and are commemorated appropriately. I am sure that we will all enjoy Diane's talk.

With the summer approaching, the Branch traditionally takes its two months' leave of absence in July and August, returning on 11 September with the Branch members' evening and AGM. The Branch needs volunteers to act as Committee members and officers are also required. As things stand at present, I would be pleased to continue as Chairman which means that it would be really helpful if someone could take on the duties of Branch Secretary. The principal duty is to select and engage the speakers which is always most interesting and fulfilling. Get in touch if you think you might be interested.

I look forward to seeing you on Friday 26 June and if I don't see you, then may I wish you an enjoyable summer.


Thank you for your support.

Geoff Cunnington

June 2015

Dates for the Diary 2016
The plans for the 2016 programme are underway. Make sure that you make a note of next year's dates here at St. George's School, Harpenden.

Presentations	Fridays 2016
15 January	24 June
19 February	16 September
18 March	14 October
22 April	11 November
20 May	16 December



Previously at Herts & Beds 22 May 2015 “The Camps At Cannock Chase: A Landscape of War” - Stephen Dean



Branch Committee Member, Simon Goodwin writes:

Stephen Dean, the Principal Archaeologist at Staffordshire County Council. Stephen came to speak to us about the two Divisional sized WW1 Military Camps built on Cannock Chase, Staffordshire in late 1914 and early 1915. One of these camps is also the location of the Messines Terrain Model, a topographical map built to scale by men of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade and German Prisoners of War in 1918. The model, which was excavated last year, is believed to be unique in the United Kingdom and is one of only a handful known from the Western Front.

Cannock Chase was identified, by the late 19th century, as a good location for a Military Camp and there are records of manoeuvres taking place there as early as 1878, including reports in local newspapers. The Chase benefited in having only ever had one land owner at a time since the Norman Conquest - which meant that the land was never divided up and permission to use the land only needed to come from one person. In addition, it was centrally located in the country, had good local infrastructure links and took the form of unenclosed heathland (unlike the wooded landscape we might picture in our minds today).

By May 1915 two Military Camps had been built in the Chase, each holding 20,000 men and including a Post Office, Shops, a Hospital, Banks, a Cinema and a Power Station. Additional infrastructure also included over 10 miles of sewage piping. Huts were constructed, not prefabricated, using local labour and some verbal recordings still exist in the Imperial War Museum archives of these workers recollections after the war. The labourers did occasionally go on strike but most of these ended with a large fist fight and then a return to work according to local newspaper reports. A standard gauge railway was also built (known as the Tackeroo) connecting to two major existing lines and further evidence of this has recently been found when the remnants of a wagon were discovered in undergrowth. Indeed, throughout the duration of the War approximately half a million men were trained at the camps.

The camps soon became used as Specialist Training Camps during the war and trained men in a variety of specialist battlefield skills, such as signalling.

By 1917 there was also a German Prisoner Of War Camp located at Brocton Camp, which included a 1000 bed hospital. This upset the landowner, the Earl of Lichfield, who had only originally agreed to the land being used in 1914 with the proviso that under no circumstances would Germans be based there. The prisoners put on theatre productions and even cultivated flower beds – the fact that they chose to grow flowers rather than vegetables suggests that food was not in short supply in the camp.

Work has been ongoing to try and interpret, on the ground, what few maps of the camp survive and to find the footprint of structures. Postcards have proven useful in this regard as they often show pictures of buildings and, at the same time on the reverse, include first hand testimony of what life was like in the

camps. The Hospital, which included 1000 beds, treated those suffering from the effects of gas inhalation and shell shock until about 1924 when it became part of the village of Brindley Heath until that was cleared in 1953.

Rhododendrons still exist on the site despite not being native to the area so must have been planted as part of the Camp. The outlines of some trenches also still survive but the gravelly soils mean that they are seriously eroded. Stephen explained that there is a hope that some Lidar work will soon be done to better see these.

Some of the Rubbish Dumps on the site have also been excavated and the many small items they have yielded have told a great deal about what the men there were eating and drinking.

The Battle of Messines Ridge took place between the 7th and 14th June 1917 and the New Zealanders played a major part in that attack. Whilst the use of models to instruct men ahead of an attack was not new, and was used at Vimy Ridge and Cambrai, the New Zealanders appear to have decided to build a scale model of the battlefield after the battle as some form of a record of their role in the war and of their sacrifice and achievements. The model was compass orientated correctly and was built to scale just outside the Headquarters of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade at Brocton Camp. The model was very detailed and was mostly constructed from concrete and should really be viewed as a commemorative construction because of the inclusion of collapsed buildings in the design.

After the War the model was handed over to the people of Staffordshire and it eventually became overgrown and forgotten – hence the recent excavation to uncover and record it. Post the excavation, the model is now covered over again, with local soil, a rabbit proof layer and a root proof layer.

The state of the two camps today varies significantly. Rugeley Camp now forms part of a Forestry Commission site and, because of that, has suffered damage from large scale ploughing and tree planting. Brocton Camp, by contrast, has been left as open heathland and is the best surviving camp.

The site of Brocton Camp is today owned by the public and is managed by Staffordshire Country Council who enable public access to the site – they even have a hut to visit in a nearby village (the remote nature of the Camp meaning that a hut located on the site would always risk vandalism). Also nearby is the concentrated cemetery containing the graves of approximately 2,500 German casualties from each of the two World Wars.

Simon Goodwin, May 2015

Coming-Up at Herts & Beds 11 September 2015 Branch Members' Evening and AGM

As a Branch regular, this is **your** evening. Describe your area of knowledge and expertise on a Great War topic. Take 15 or 20 minutes or even a full half-an-hour. Maybe some images of a battlefield visit you have undertaken or an obscure field of endeavour and interest that has caught your attention. Come and tell us.

By way of example, we have Branch member Charles Harvey, who has promised us a talk on the role of a Cyclists' Battalion during the Great War – work commitments permitting. This subject covers a somewhat neglected area of the war and let's hope that Charles can find the time to tell us all about it on 11 September.



The Branch is always looking for members to serve on the Committee. If you would like to contribute to the running of the Branch, maybe helping out in sourcing the speakers or perhaps lending a hand with the catering arrangements, then let us know by the end of August.





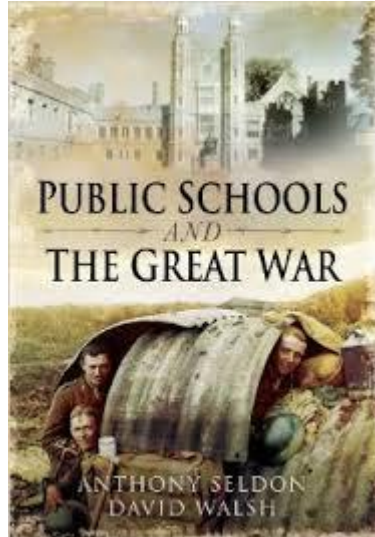
THE BIG PUSH 2015 – ON THE HORIZON

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.

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

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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 3rd 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 underpin aerial campaigns today.

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

Thanks to Branch regular, Pete Bradley, for locating this item of interest. You may want to visit this forthcoming exhibition at the National Railway Museum at York. It is not open until July 2016 but this comprehensive offering covering the vital role of ambulance trains and medical evacuation looks as if it could be well worth looking forward to.



Read more:

<http://www.nrm.org.uk/RailwayStories/WW1/main.aspx>

We can thank Branch Committee member, Simon Goodwin, for this next item. The latest update from the 'Herts At War' project.



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Newsletter.pdf

And from the Archives.....

One hundred years' ago, Fly Class River Gunboats such as *Sedgefly* (below) were built in the UK and shipped out to Mesopotamia in sections to be assembled there for operational duties on the Tigris river. These shallow-draught vessels usually carried one 4" gun as their principal armament.

