



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

Volume 13 Issue 2

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March/April
2017

Saturday 25th March—at the Balsam Centre

Summer is nearly here !

It must be nearly summer because our first trip of the year is just a few weeks away. We have chosen Swindon this time as there is lots to do and it is not dependant on the weather as would be a visit to the coast. Our trip is on **1st April leaving Wincanton at 9 a.m.** and the cost will remain at £12 (children £6). As well as the many opportunities for shopping in the town centre there is an impressive Designer Outlet Shopping area which is very close to the town centre. There are several museums including the Steam Museum of the Great Western Railway and the Museum of Computing. If the weather is good a walk along the fully restored Wilts & Berks Canal would be nice and Lydiard Park on the edge of town is impressive in spring. Anyone who is fortunate enough to have a bus pass should bring it.

Visit to the Houses of Parliament on 8th May

Our tour visit to the Houses of Parliament on **8th May** is full but I do have 10 seats available just to visit London. I am also taking a waiting list for cancellations so if you are interested let me know. We will leave Wincanton at 7.30 a.m. to enable us to connect with the first group visiting the Houses of Parliament at 11.45 a.m. The cost of this trip is £15 due to the expensive cost of the coach to London. If you would like just to visit London there will be plenty of time to see the sights. The tour of parliament is free and should be very interesting. We will make a very quick comfort stop at Fleet Services if requested. We should be home around about 7.30 - 8 p.m. depending on traffic. I would appreciate all those on the confirmed list and those wishing to just visit London, please pay me as soon as possible as I need to pay the coach company in advance. Cheques payable to Wincanton RBL.

Joint Coffee Morning and Regional launch of Advice & Information Drop In from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m.

Our scheduled Coffee Morning on 25th March has turned into a very interesting event. We will be combining the Coffee Morning with a presentation by Julie Walsh our Advice & Information Officer for Somerset. Julie will launching the new "Outreach Drop in Centre" which will be located at the Balsam Centre every 3rd Tuesday of the month from 9.30 a.m. until 11 a.m. As well as us having our usual Coffee Morning, Julie will be telling everyone what she intends to be doing in Wincanton. The aim is to provide advice and welfare to serving military personnel and veterans and their dependants. The launch will include activities for children provided by Forest School, there will be craft activities and refreshments available. We will have our usual Coffee Morning gathering in the Balsam Centre Café. Julie will be offering advice on many subjects at her future "Outreach Drop In". These include Social Support, War Pensions and Appeals, Independent Living & Care Homes, Family Breaks, Membership, Social Support & Money, Benefits & Debt. Julie's advice sessions at the Balsam Centre will be every 3rd Tuesday of the month from 9.30 a.m. until 11 a.m.

Eileen Cruickshank

Sadly Eileen Cruickshank passed away on 11th December aged 92. Eileen had an exciting early life when during the Second World War she served in the WRNS, for much of the time at the Trincomalee RN submarine base in Ceylon. Eileen was awarded the Burma Star.



Continuing anniversaries of the Great War

Of course, this year is the 100th anniversary of events that took place in 1917, one year before the First World War finally ended. The Nation will officially commemorate the 100th anniversary of the **Third Battle of Ypres (also known as Passchendaele)** on 30th and 31st July. It was on 31st July that the infantry made their first attack of the battle which finally ended on 6th November 1917.

Four soldiers shown on the Wincanton Roll of Honour in the parish church were killed during this appalling and futile battle - Pte. Harold Coombe on 26th September, Pte. Gerald Cronin on 4th October, Pte. Reginald Hill on 9th October, and Pte. Charles Mullins on 1st August.

On July 31, 1917, the Allies launch a renewed assault on German lines in the Flanders region of Belgium, in the much-contested region near Ypres. The attack begins more than three months of brutal fighting, known as the Third Battle of Ypres - but known to many as the Battle of Passchendaele. While the first and second battles at Ypres were attacks by the Germans against the Allied-controlled salient around Ypres—which crucially blocked any German advance to the English Channel—the third was spearheaded by the British commander in chief, Sir Douglas Haig. After the resounding failure of the Nivelle Offensive—named for its mastermind, the French commander Robert Nivelle—the previous May, followed by widespread mutinies

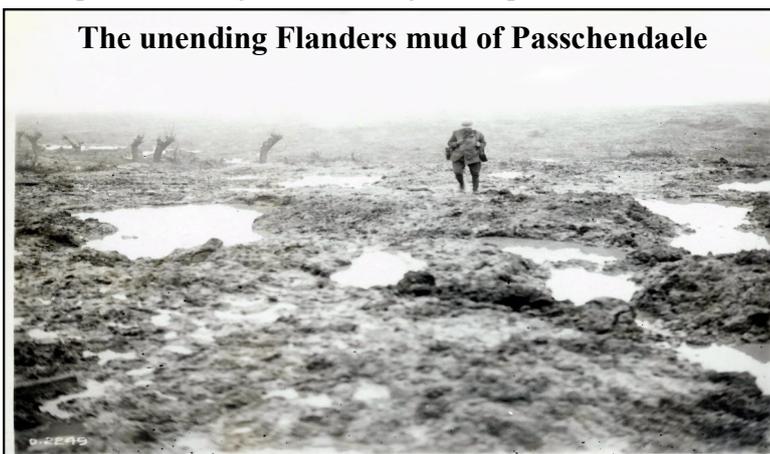
within the French army, Haig insisted that the British should press ahead with another major offensive that summer. The aggressive and meticulously planned offensive, ostensibly aimed at destroying German submarine bases located on the north coast of Belgium, was in fact driven by Haig's (mistaken) belief that the German army was on the verge of collapse, and would be broken completely by a major Allied victory. After an opening barrage of some 3,000 guns, Haig ordered nine British divisions, led by Sir Hubert Gough's 5th Army, to advance on the German lines near the Belgian village of

Passchendaele on July 31; they were joined by six French divisions. In the first two days of the attacks, while suffering heavy casualties, the Allies made significant advances—in some sectors pushing the Germans back more than a mile and taking more than 5,000 German prisoners—if not as significant as Haig had envisioned. The offensive was renewed in mid-August, though heavy rains and thickening mud severely hampered the effectiveness of Allied infantry and artillery and prevented substantial gains over the majority of the summer and autumn. Dissatisfied with his army's gains by the end of August, Haig had replaced Gough with Herbert Plumer at the head of the attack; after several small gains in September, the British were able to establish control over the ridge of land east of Ypres. Encouraged, Haig pushed Plumer to continue the attacks towards the Passchendaele ridge, some six miles from Ypres.

Thus the Third Battle of Ypres (or Passchendaele, named after the village, and the ridge surrounding it), that saw the heaviest fighting—continued into its third month, as the Allied attackers reached near-exhaustion, with few notable gains, and the Germans reinforced their positions in the region with reserve troops released from the Eastern Front, where Russia's army was foundering amid internal turmoil. Unwilling to give up, Haig ordered a final three attacks on Passchendaele in late October. The eventual capture of the village, by Canadian and British troops, on November 6, 1917, allowed Haig to finally call off the offensive, claiming victory, despite some 310,000 British casualties, as opposed to 260,000 on the German side, and a failure to create any substantial breakthrough, or change of momentum, on the Western Front. Given its outcome, the Third Battle of Ypres remains one of the most costly and controversial offensives of World War I, representing—at least for the British—the epitome of the wasteful and futile nature of trench warfare.

It is noteworthy to compare this with the Battle of the Somme in 1916 when 420,000 casualties were sustained—casualties being killed, wounded, missing and taken prisoner.

The unending Flanders mud of Passchendaele



Also battles in the area of Arras 1917

The British Army were also fighting major offensives in the neighbouring areas of Flanders in 1917, notably around Arras. Two soldiers (one of whom was in the Royal Naval Division) were also killed between June and August 1917. A group from Wincanton RBL including our standard bearer, Terry, along with Steve and myself have an invite from the mayor of the town of Angres near Arras to attend a ceremony to commemorate John Cunningham VC of the Leinster Regiment, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for an action near Angres on 12th April 1917. We will also visit the graves of our soldiers - William Deane (killed on 3rd May 1917) and Harry Hamblin (killed on 25th August 1917) and placed wreaths commemorating the 100th anniversary of their deaths. Also with us will be a bugler and Terry's brother Gareth with the standard of the Somerset Light Infantry Association (William Deane was in the 1st Battalion Somerset Light Infantry). Last Post will be



played at William Deane and Harry Hamblin's graves. There will also be a ceremony in Angres commemorating Cunningham VC and a visit to other graves of the Somerset Light Infantry in the area.

Both these soldiers stories were discovered whilst researching my book on our War Dead of the Great War. I have been asked to give a lecture in the summer for Wincanton Historical Society focusing on 1917 and the date looks like being 30th June in the Memorial Hall. I will give firm details in the next Sandbag. Sadly I have not been able to get photos of any of the soldiers killed at Passchendaele, but I continue to check the internet looking to see if they become available - as some others have ! I also hope to update the tribute book when more information becomes available.

The **Battle of Arras** (also known as the **Second Battle of Arras**) was a British offensive from 9th April to 16th May 1917, British troops attacked German defences near the French city of Arras on the Western Front. There were big gains on the first day, followed by stalemate. The battle cost nearly 160,000 British and about 125,000 German casualties. For much of the war, the opposing armies on the Western Front were at a stalemate, with a continuous line of trenches stretching from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. The Allied objective from early 1915 was to break through the German defences into the open ground beyond and engage the numerically inferior German Army in a war of movement. The British attack at Arras was part of the French Nivelle Offensive, the main part of which was to take place 50 miles to the south. The aim of this combined operation was to end the war in forty-eight hours. At Arras the British were to divert German troops from the French front and to take the German-held high ground that dominated the plain of Douai. The British effort was a relatively broad front assault between Vimy in the north-west and Bullecourt in the south-east. After considerable bombardment, Canadian troops of the First Army in the north fought the Battle of Vimy Ridge and captured the ridge. The Third Army in the centre advanced astride the Scarpe River, making the deepest penetration since trench warfare began and in the south, the Fifth Army attacked the Hindenburg Line and was frustrated by the defence in depth, making only minimal gains. The British armies then engaged in a series of small-scale operations to consolidate the new positions. Although these battles were generally successful in achieving limited aims, these were gained at the price of relatively large numbers of casualties. When the battle officially ended on 16 May, British Empire troops had made significant advances but had been unable to achieve a breakthrough. New tactics and the equipment to exploit them had been used, showing that the British had absorbed the lessons of the Battle of the Somme and could mount set-piece attacks against fortified field defences. The Arras sector then returned to the stalemate that typified most of the war on the Western Front, except for attacks around Lens, culminating in the Canadian Battle of Hill 70 in August.

Continuing our popular trips

I had some nail biting last year with numbers of people attending our monthly trips but I am confident we have enough wishing to go to make the trips viable. I do need your cooperation, please, confirm early to enable me to plan. The problem is I have to pay the coach company in advance when I book and although we do have a separate social fund to back me up I must get around 30 people to make it happen. I also do not want to put the price up as this is a discouragement to everyone. So I am keeping the price at £12 (£6 for children). That all being said here are our forthcoming trips in addition to those shown on the front page are :-

10th June. We are going to Poole, although this destination is very popular we have not been there for four years so I think it is time to make that trip again. We will depart at 9 a.m. from the Memorial Hall.

15th July. Is Henley on Thames. Several members asked me if we could go there again in the hope of repeating a fantastic trip several years ago. To be honest I had forgotten Henley and I do agree it is a fantastic place for a day out. We will need to leave at 8.30 a.m. as it is slightly longer than usual and we will need a comfort stop on the way.

Trips will go on until September or October and I will confirm destinations of the later trips once I can assess potential interest in trips in general.

Our very sad winter continues

I am very sorry to have to report two more of our prominent members have passed away. Fred King who was a great supporter, passed away on 17th February. Fred along with Val attended many of our trips and was a regular attender at meetings and social events, even recently coming along in his buggy. He will be sadly missed. Our sincere condolences go out to Val on her sad loss. Fred's funeral is at Yeovil Crematorium on 3rd March at 3.20 p.m. Roy (Rowland) Cook our long standing branch stalwart passed away on 24th February. Roy too was a regular supporter and took part in events a few years ago. Roy's funeral is at Yeovil Crematorium and takes place on 9th March at 12 noon.

Poppy Appeal current total stands at £13,052

Forthcoming year

We have another exciting year coming up and I will let you know some of our plans !

We did not have an Annual Branch Dinner last year but Steve and I are meeting with caterers to find if it is viable to hold the event this year. Plans are that it will be in the Memorial Hall on the first Friday of October (**6th October**) as has been the custom on previous years.

We have been told that the breakpoint is normally 40 people attending and we strongly believe we will achieve this. Once this has been confirmed I will advise everyone.

Other good news is that we have had confirmation that HMS Heron Band from Yeovilton will be attending our Armed Forces Day event on Saturday **24th June**. We have also invited Wincanton Silver Band again and are hopeful they too will be there. Last year we were entertained by Wincanton Youth Theatre Group and they too are coming and we know they will inject a spirit of fun into the day. Full details will be in next Sandbag. We are also confident of good attendance by our two military units The Commando Helicopter Force and the Army Air Corps - both are aware and hope to attend.

We have decided to return to the Memorial Hall which is our favourite venue (last year it was fully booked but we have booked it for this year).

Planning for Armed Forces Day is ongoing and updates will be forthcoming.

As mentioned in the centre pages, **30th July** is the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele. The oak tree sapling we planted a few years ago is going to be dedicated on Passchendaele Day with a full ceremony.

With so many events taking place, I will only confirmed the two Coffee Mornings that are booked which are **27th May** and the Poppy Appeal Launch Coffee Morning on **29th October**. It is highly possible that there will be more Coffee Mornings but we are conscious of over saturation of events in the summer as well as the monthly coach trips.

Local area diary events

22nd April. The Rifles to exercise Freedom of Christchurch.

18th June. Veterans Parade in Weymouth marches off at 10.45 a.m. at the Esplanade.

2nd July. Fovant Badges Memorial. Service starts at 2.15 p.m.