



ROYAL BRITISH LEGION



Malmesbury Branch

One Hundred Years of Service



Field of Remembrance outside the Abbey 2017

Malmesbury and Sherston Branch Royal British Legion

The ex-servicemen who returned to Malmesbury after the First World War wanted to improve the opportunities for social activities and in May 1919 formed the Ivy Branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers. The Federation had been founded in April 1917 by the radical Liberal MP, James Hogge who was opposed to the notion that any man capable of civilian work must be fit for military service. Unfortunately it also had a strong anti-officer bias, only being open to other ranks. In Malmesbury the branch initially attracted more than 100 members under the chairmanship of ex-Sergeant Sidney Kite. Within a year membership of the Federation rapidly declined and a post of Comrades of the Great War was proposed. Although this was open to all ex-servicemen, non-political and non-sectarian, it had receiving funding from Conservative Party supporters but its main purposes were welfare and remembrance. At the end of June 1920 Charles Gale,



Members of the Ivy Branch at the Market Cross in 1919. Several wear the Silver War Badge (above right) awarded to discharged disabled soldiers. The town's first war memorial can be seen through the left arch attached to the Tolsey Gate. Commissioned by Capt. McKirdy this is now inside the Abbey.

who had been a founder of the Federation branch, led the formation of a post of the Comrades. This quickly attracted 69 new members and 38 were transferred from Cirencester. Lt. Col. Morrice was commandant and the committee contained a number of officers but also included ex-Sgt. Maj. W. G. Perry, Sgt. Bunting & Charles Gale. The Comrades supported the Lord Kitchener Memorial Homes in Chatham, Kent for those needing a change of air.

Both of these local organisations closed in anticipation of the formation of the British Legion. The Federation part-funded an outing for members to Cheddar Gorge & Weston super Mare and was wound up in June 1921. The Comrades closed that July, giving £5 to Arthur Pike who was paralysed and £8 3s. to the Cottage Hospital. On 10th November the Malmesbury British Legion branch was formed with Major Charles Holland as Chairman. Major Holland turned his home, Lea House, into a training centre for disabled officers.

One of its first social activities was a boxing match in the Town Hall in 1922, a precursor to the formation of the Boxing Club. The Legion decided to form a social club and leased the premises at 9 Ingram Street formerly occupied by Frederick Hughes, a builder. Membership built up slowly until in 1929 36 new members brought the total to 86 ex-service-men plus 80 honorary members, civilians and women.

In 1930 the branch had its Standard dedicated. Membership continued to rise and from 24 June 1933 a new clubroom was opened in premises lent by Percy Jackson in Cross Hayes behind No. 12 High Street, with an intention to purchase. This move was timely as two years later the old Ingram Street clubhouse collapsed! A wider range of social activities including billiards and skittles was now possible. Welfare became more important and in August 1939 parties of children were sent to a holiday camp in Brislington near Burnham on Sea. The Legion played a part in the preparation for war by encouraging recruitment, particularly for the expanding Territorial Army, and providing members for local defence. Considerable sums were raised during the war by selling refreshments in the club.



The Ingram Street Social Club in 1986

At the end of the war Sir Richard Luce bought the Social Centre in Ingram Street for the Legion (now Cartmell Court). 50 new members joined and a Welcome Home Fund was set up. Membership increased to more than 300 and an active social programme began with a Rally in 1947 followed by a week of fundraising around Remembrance Day. The following year the Women's Section was founded led by Mrs. Besly. Major Anthony Turnor became President in 1950. Fetes were held in the grounds of the Grammar School and a children's party was held annually at St. Joseph's School in the early 1950s. However the

clubhouse needed repairs and was not well supported. The club subscription rose from 6d. per annum to 3s. in addition to the ordinary membership fee of 3s. Wiltshire County Council's Youth Club used part of the premises and their rent contributed to repairs and renewals. But the Legion Club continued to lose money so it was closed in 1956. The following year the children were treated to a cinema show instead of a Christmas party.

At the beginning of the 1960s Malmesbury was one of the strongest branches in Wiltshire and this was confirmed by it being awarded the Countess of Suffolk Cup for Efficiency. In 1962 Lady Eva Scott McKirdy presented a Cup for the best standard bearer in the Malmesbury group of branches. There were also cups awarded for branch players in the Skit-



Parading up the High Street on Remembrance Sunday 1947

tles League. Other activities included a Thrift Club which allowed members to save for Christmas, Drumhead services, arranging the County conference here and the planting of a tree in memory of Jack Grimes close to the Memorial Garden. Membership slipped below 300 and this continued so that by 1974 it was less than 200. In 1972 repairs were required to the Youth Club for which £500 had to be raised. An association was formed with the Wroughton Silver Band which performed a Remembrance concert and this event still continues with the Annual Poppy Concert.



Derek Tilney became chair- The Women's Section in Cross Hayes 1952

man in 1974 and a seat was provided at Burton Hill. The next year the Women's section had a new Standard and a Field of Remembrance of wooden crosses was laid outside the Abbey. The Countess of Suffolk Cup was retained. Branches had been formed in villages around the town such as Brinkworth, Crudwell (closed 1978), Great Somerford (1931), Hullavington, Sherston (1946-2009) and Sutton Benger, but many of these had closed. Membership in the 1970s was around 170 but this has slowly decreased to nearer 60. For several years premises were rented from the Town Council at 34 Cross Hayes until around 1980. The Ingram Street premises became unsafe and Wiltshire County Council's lease for the Youth Club expired in 1986. The building was then sold and converted into flats. In 2009 the Sherston branch closed and amalgamated with Malmesbury.

Over the years the Branch have been involved in many community activities. After the war films were laid on for the children of the town, first at the cinema and later in the Town Hall. Free oranges and sweets were provided. Many floats were entered in the Carnival procession, includ-



The Green Cross Code Man observing Mike Darwell working on a bicycle with Bill Selby behind. The others are bike owners.

ing one made for the Wiltshire Gazette which won two prizes of £500 Stewards were found to help regulate Carnival events. Bicycles were stamped with the owner's Post Code and a register kept to assist the Police in tracing those recovered by them. In 1976 the Green Cross Code Man, David Prowse, was persuaded to come and share the Road Safety message. He later became famous as Darth Vader in the Star Wars films.

In 2015 a silver 2p coin was found in a Poppy collection tin. This was sold to a coin dealer for £1,350 which increased the sum raised by the Branch's collectors by about 10%.



In August 2018 Wayne Preece and Charles Vernon represented the Branch at the Legion's GP90. That pilgrimage to Ypres and the Western Front was held 90 years after thousands of old comrades and relatives had made a similar trip. The highlight of the event was a march through Ypres town centre to the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing where wreaths were laid.



Remembrance and raising public awareness of the sacrifices made in their name is one of the Royal British Legion's main responsibilities.

In 1920 the second Sunday in November was designated as Remembrance Sunday, and at the afternoon service in the Abbey about a hundred discharged and demobilised soldiers attended. It seems this tradition has continued ever since.



Ian Mace, Branch Secretary, Derek Tilney, Chairman and Charles Vernon, Treasurer at the re-dedication of Brinkworth War Memorial, July 2021.

Please tell others about this Exhibition. You can also help by attending the Annual Poppy Concert at 7.30pm on Friday 12th November in the Abbey. The Wroughton Silver Band and Malmesbury Community Choir will provide the entertainment.

If you have a connection with or simply wish to support the Armed Services, Malmesbury Branch needs you. Most of our members used to be National Servicemen and our numbers are waning. Help is needed with the Poppy collection which is the largest Service charity and supports thousands of serving and veterans families. To join go to:

<https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/things-to-do/membership/become-a-member>

The Royal British Legion is governed by Royal Charter.
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