

One Hundred Years On

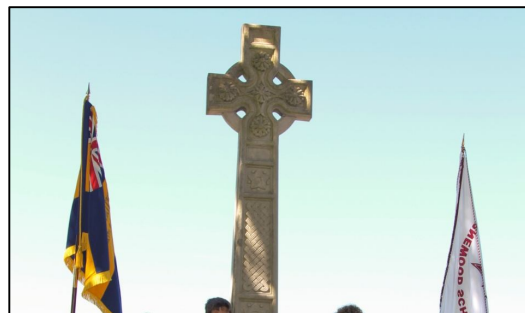
Commemorating the centenary of the First World War

Each of us will have our own specific memories from this year's commemorations for the centenary of the Great War. From dimming the lights back on the night of the 4th August to the 888,236 ceramic poppies at the Tower of London, there have been various tributes to the fallen; some high profile and others more personal. I myself have been touched by several visits to the former battlefields over the past few months, including helping my sister-in-law to find the location her Irish great grandfather who had been killed following some fierce fighting near Ypres in 1915. We were able to find the very spot he fell thanks to an old regimental diary; his family story – that of an Irish catholic who signed up to fight for the British crown as a means to feed his family – made the visit especially poignant. It is in this that I feel the centenary has been successful – one hundred years on from the most unimaginable conflict, my sister-in-law and I were able to make meaningful parallels and connections.

I have been privileged to lead our school's commemorations having been invited to a meeting between our community officer and a representative of our local council. We have plans to continue to commemorate the war in partnership with the council until the one hundredth anniversary of its end in 2018. This article will share our vision.

Student focused and led

From the outset we have been intent on making our commemorations student focused and led. To make it all worthwhile both the school and the local council felt that it was important that our students were able to connect with the events that we were commemorating. As such this formed the basis of what we tried to do. Last summer, the school council nominated representatives from Years 7-9 to act as First World War Ambassadors.



Together these students are leading a number of initiatives with the aim of helping the school and its community connect with the events of 100 years ago.

Curriculum

Our plans began in the History classroom. Like most schools, the First World War features as a key enquiry in our Year 9 programme of study. We have already incorporated a number of lessons into this that enable our students to make a personal connection with the events; Neil Bates' excellent lesson based on the Basingstoke War Memorial has been adapted for New Milton and the Hampshire Deluxe Lesson on Walter Tull connects the experiences of Empire soldiers with our local memorial at Barton-on-Sea to Indian soldiers.

Our new Ambassadors took this a step further, visiting the New Milton War Memorial and researching its names using the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's website. This led us to a startling discovery – which I am ashamed I had not made before! – that there were three First World War soldiers buried in war graves in a local graveyard ... on the other side of the school's boundary fence! Our Ambassadors were fascinated by this and

insisted we visit, and, sure enough, we found the war graves – identifiable by their marble headstones in the usual military style.

We are yet to find out exactly why these soldiers lie buried on the periphery of Hampshire, but our Ambassadors have developed some interesting theories based on the information they have found out. Indeed, I have recently started work on designing a lesson based upon this. I wonder if there are any First World War soldiers buried near your school that you don't yet know about?

Battlefields Trip

We also arranged an overnight visit for our Ambassadors to the battlefields near Ypres and in the Somme. We visited the usual sites that are part of most school tours but were also able to visit several graves and memorials linked to New Milton.

For example, we found the grave of Denys J Bressey in a small graveyard in a Belgian farmer's field whilst also finding the names of those killed and never found on both the Menin Gate and the Thiepval Memorial in the Somme. Our Ambassadors also wrote and left a letter to the Unknown soldier at a grave of their choice. A further highlight was a tour of the preserved trenches at the "Trench of Death" in Diksmuide where our Ambassadors were guided by students from a Belgian school.

Whole School Day of Remembrance

Our school celebrates its "International School" status each summer with a themed day in which students come off timetable and take part in a variety of different activities with students from different year groups. These are often led by teachers from different subject areas and outside speakers and performers. For this year's International Day it was agreed that the theme would be the Great War Centenary and that this would be the launch event for the whole town's own commemorations. Students were able to enjoy activities ranging from First World War rationing cooking, to the experiences of soldiers from different countries, performances of war poetry, signalling and an investigation into Gallipoli. Our Ambassadors presented on their experiences during their battlefields visit, working with representatives from the Town Council including the mayor. They also spent time using online military resources courtesy of a town councillor who has full access. It is hoped that they will continue this work to build up an archive of the experiences of people connected with our school.

When planning our day I had suggested – somewhat facetiously – that we should march the whole school down to the war memorial in order to recreate the way young men had marched off to war on the same roads one hundred years ago. This got us thinking and after much deliberation we decided to see if it was possible. Thankfully the local council were fully behind our plan.

As a result, on a sunny afternoon exactly one hundred years after politicians had discussed and negotiated in the aftermath of Franz Ferdinand's assassination, our entire school marched in uniform through the streets of New Milton down to the war memorial. Drama students performed pieces they had designed themselves showing key events from each year of the war as the school marched by, led by a student drummer. Upon arrival at the memorial, we assembled alongside the town's dignitaries and a representative from the Royal British Legion. Students from each tutor group then read aloud a name from the memorial together with some brief information about the soldier. One of our Ambassadors read aloud his letter to the Unknown soldier whilst one of our Science teachers whose

Great Uncle had been the first teacher killed in battle in the first few weeks of the war read the Ode of Remembrance as the Last Post was played.

This was an extraordinary event, led by our students and creating a memorable experience for all involved. Crucially it also helped each of us connect with the names that stood before us etched in stone as well as the stories behind them.

Newsletter

Our Ambassadors have also begun a series of newsletters to share their work. These are being published every half term and are being handed out through the community and across the school. Each edition includes a summary of the events of exactly one hundred years ago as well as some of the personal stories of those connected with the school. For example the first edition had an account from the Science Teacher reporting on his Great Uncle's sad story. The second edition for November and December reported on the death of the first two names on the local War Memorial as well as the story of the Christmas Truce. The newsletters have been incorporated into our pastoral programme with tutors using them as prompts for discussions with their students.

Before Christmas, our Ambassadors led discussions on the reality of the Christmas Truce and the morality of using it in modern day adverts for supermarkets!

Taking this forward

The vision is for our commemorations to continue through to 2018, with each year focusing on some of the major events – e.g. Gallipoli in 2015; the Somme in 2016 – and the individual stories of those connected with the school. Our Ambassador programme is expanding with our new Year 7 nominating students to be involved and mentored by older students. This summer we are planning a visit to London as part of their role whilst they continue to research for the next edition of the newsletter. We also have some plans to link with our feeder schools over the coming months.

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