

Reasons to give *thanks*

Out of over 400 settlements in Gloucestershire, there were just three that were fortunate to lose no men in the Great War. Stephen Roberts visits the county's 'Thankful Villages'

Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday are important dates on the calendar in my household. My wife's late father fought throughout WW2 and saw action at Tobruk and El Alamein, so remembering has an added poignancy for us.

Virtually every community in the UK suffered losses in the Great War, so their war memorials naturally become the focus of remembrance every November. What of the small number of villages that have no memorial though?

The term 'Thankful Village' dates back to the 1930s, when it was coined by journalist and writer Arthur Mee to describe a village that lost no men in the Great War.

"Of the estimated 16,000 villages in England, Mee identified 24 that could be called Thankful and guessed that there might be 32. In fact recent research has identified 52 parishes throughout England and Wales from which all soldiers returned" (*Hope and Glory* by Stuart Maconie, 2011). This number has since been adjusted up to 53. There are no Thankful (or Blessed) villages in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

There are only 14 'Doubly Thankful' villages in England and Wales, having had all members of the armed services also survive WW2. Gloucestershire has three thankful villages (Coln Rogers, Little Sodbury and Upper Slaughter), the latter being its only doubly thankful village.

The statistics are staggering and bring home the scale of loss from both World Wars, but from the Great War in particular. When we journey through these beautiful islands, virtually all of the places we come across have a war memorial, but what of places that do not? What, for example, should we make of a place such as Coln Rogers?

The village takes its name from the fast flowing River Coln, which sources in the Cotswolds and passes through Coln Rogers on its way to the Thames, and the knight

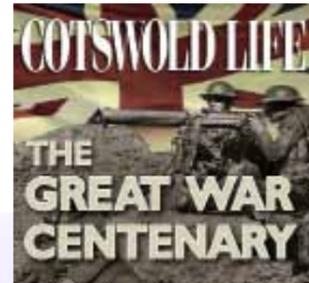


Upper Slaughter

Roger de Gloster, who gave the village to the monks of Gloucester in the early 12th century. The church of St Andrew dates back to Saxon times and inside its porch is a plaque attesting the village's 'thankful' status, with a list of 25 men and one woman who returned safely from WW1. Local names proliferate with three by the name of Portlock, and two of Harris, Hiscock, Pawling and Stevens. The sole lady was Doris Barton VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment), a voluntary organisation providing field nursing services. There is also a B Barton listed amongst the 25 men. With so many shared surnames there must have been incredibly lucky siblings and cousins returning home safely, or as the



Upper Slaughter



plaque puts it, "All of whom by God's great mercy returned safely. Thanks be to Thee O God."

Two miles north east of Chipping Sodbury lies Little Sodbury, known for an Iron Age hill fort and onetime manorial home of Sir John Walsh, who employed William Tyndall as chaplain and tutor in the early 16th century, the same Tyndall who would go on to translate the Bible into English. The parish church is the only one in Britain dedicated to St Adeline and whilst it only dates from the mid-19th century, it's almost certainly modelled on an earlier church where Tyndall preached. Inside the church hang rolls of honour for both world wars, the First World War's commemoration listing the names of six men who returned home; "These served their King and Country in the Great War 1914-18."

Upper Slaughter, two miles from the better known Lower Slaughter, is Gloucestershire's sole 'doubly thankful' village. The River Eye, a fast-flowing brook, dashes through the village, with a ford and a pair of footbridges. 25 villagers returned safely from WW1, although some controversy has centred around the figure of Pte William John Clifford, killed in



Little Sodbury

action in October 1914 and sometimes referred to as 'born and resident' in the village. It seems that this is a mistake, however, and that Pte Clifford's home was Charlton Kings (Cheltenham) where he is recorded on the war memorial. Given what happened in the muddy fields of France it is ironic that a village called Slaughter escaped, especially as the name is said to originate from a Saxon name meaning 'muddy place'.

The parish church of St Peter dates back to Richard I, but the rolls of honour will not be found here, being located instead in the village hall. A wooden board records the names of 24 men and one woman (Driver Agnes Witts VAD) who returned from WW1. Incredibly there were six with the surname Witts, including three awarded a DSO (Distinguished Service Order) and one MBE. To emphasise this village's good fortune no fewer than 36 servicemen went away a generation later and all returned safely, as recorded on the WW2 roll of honour. It didn't end there either, for when German incendiary bombs landed on the village in February 1944, there were again no fatalities. Someone was watching over them.

Over nine days in late July, early August

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2013, Medwyn Parry and Dougie Bancroft rode Triumph Trophy motorbikes for 2,500 miles, in order to visit all of the UK's thankful villages, raising money for the Royal British Legion as they went. On Saturday, July 27, the bikers arrived in Upper Slaughter from Wales, moving on to Coln Rogers and Little Sodbury before heading out of the county the following day, in the direction of Somerset. A slate plaque was presented to each village to commemorate the part it played in the Great War, as these villages have no war memorial.

For every thankful village, however,



St Andrew's Church, Coln Rogers

there are countless others that were not so fortunate. Gloucestershire has a little over 400 settlements in total, so three thankful villages represent only around three quarters of one percent of that total, lest we forget.

One thing I am certain of. At a time when the need to remember seems to get stronger every year, the communities of Coln Rogers, Little Sodbury and Upper Slaughter will be as involved in the act of remembrance as any other place, war memorial or no. ■

Thankful Villages Run website:
www.thankfulvillagesrun.com
Tom Morgan's Hell Fire Corner:
www.hellfirecorner.co.uk