

Surrey remembers

Every November, the nation comes to a standstill to mark Remembrance Day, a time to honour those who sacrificed their lives to protect our freedom. With that in mind, historian Stephen Roberts has been busy searching out the stories behind a few of the names on our war memorials here in Surrey



REMEMBRANCE is clearly a sad occasion, but this year I challenged myself to do something positive and uplifting: to bring some of the names etched into our county's war memorials back into the light, by telling their stories. As we remember the dead of two World Wars and other conflicts, I wanted to find out who these people were. Where did they come from and what did they do? And who did they leave behind?

To do this, I undertook an odyssey around some of the county's many memorials (Surrey has over 4,200 war graves and commemorations for those dying during World War One alone) and then set about discovering the narratives behind the names.

Dark shadows

With the commemorations earlier this year to mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, this seemed a fitting place to start my research – especially as this was a battle that symbolised the horrors of warfare in World War One perhaps more than any other. More than 19,000 British and Commonwealth servicemen died on the first day alone (July 1, 1916). That battle lasted four-and-a-half months, until November 18, by which time British casualties (dead, wounded, captured, missing) totalled an eye-watering 420,000. It was the worst calamity to befall the British Army.

The Thiépvall Memorial in France names those lost in the Somme battles with no known grave – including Richard Trelawny May, aged 26, who is one of more than 70 names also listed on the war memorial in Byfleet. 'Mentioned in despatches', meaning he was singled out in an official report for his gallant or meritorious action, he fell on July 7, the battle's seventh day. A Surrey boy, educated in Guildford and Godalming, he left Oxford qualified in 'Jurisprudence' (the law) and became an articled clerk (trainee solicitor). He was sporty too; an accomplished shot and long-distance runner. His address was given as Pine Lodge, Weybridge, which was probably the family home. Parents Charles and Katherine mourned a talented son.

A few miles down the road in Epsom, an 18-foot high Celtic cross of grey-granite is the town's main memorial. It lists 264 men and, intriguingly, one woman, who died in World War One. Annie Mary Bell was a probationer-nurse in the Horton (County of London) War Hospital in Epsom when she died from enteric fever (typhoid) aged 33. The hospital was an asylum from 1899, but was commandeered to treat military casualties during the war, so she would almost certainly have contracted the infection from a patient. Annie was buried in the Ashley Road Cemetery on April 14, 1916. Her death was the second among nursing staff in just over a month, causing distress to patients and staff alike. It is believed Annie was a schoolteacher before the war, her selfless actions leading to her own demise – a reminder that not all of war's victims fight in the front-line.

Elsewhere, interpretation of Ewell's Dipping Well memorial, in the High Street, tells us much about what happened to Surrey men fighting in World War One. Of 80 Ewell men who died, 63



The story of Richard May, listed on Byfleet's war memorial, is one of several we unearthed

"Of 80 Ewell men who died, 63 perished on the Western Front. The youngest casualties were two 17-year-olds, Edward Clark and Isaac Newton Mason..."

perished on the Western Front. The youngest casualties were two 17-year-olds, Edward Clark and Isaac Newton Mason.

Edward Clark, who died from his wounds on April 17, 1918, was born in Ewell in 1901, one of six children of Robert, a groom and gardener, and Clara. Having attended Ewell Boys' School from 1908 to 1915, Edward enlisted, aged 16, by adding two years to his age, so desperate was he to 'do his bit'. He was 5' 5", fair-haired, with blue eyes, and was a labourer. He sounds like the kind of lad who would have been 'scrumpping' in the orchards.



Above:
The peaceful surrounds of the World War One memorial in Epsom's Ashley Road cemetery

Edward's service records were destroyed during the 1940 bombing, an unwelcome connecting of two conflicts, so we don't know much more than that. We do know though that Edward's older brother, Robert, was also killed in May 1918.

The other 17-year-old commemorated on the memorial, Isaac Newton Mason, clearly had scientifically-minded parents. Isaac was born in New Malden in 1899, one of nine children of Thomas and Emily, his father, a Civil Service clerk, doing well enough to employ two servants. By 1907, Isaac was also a pupil at Ewell Boys' School, moving on to Epsom County Council School in 1912. When war broke out, Isaac enlisted in Wimbledon, sadly losing his life in the Somme's latter stages, on October 7, 1916. We'll never know whether he had the talent to become a scientist himself.

All seven officers listed on the Ewell memorial started in the ranks, which shows that casualties amongst officers were high, and they needed replacing. Another revealing fact is that most casualties occurred not in 1916, the year of the Somme, but in 1918, the year the war was won. For Britain, 1918 was the deadliest year.

Local lads

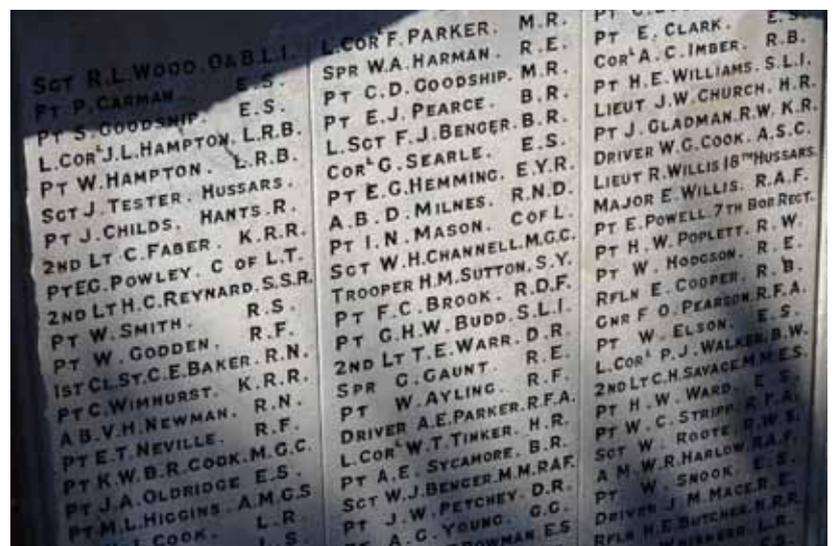
Tilford is a small village with a famous green, but it also has its memorial, a white stone cross, surmounted by a carving of Jesus, facing the rising sun from the east. It was dedicated to 29 men who fell in World War One.

Corporal George Baker died on Bonfire Night 1918, less than one week from the Armistice. He was 24 and was the son of Eli and Ellen, of Reed's Cottage, Frensham. Then there was George Novell, 31, a private of the Royal West

Surrey, who was among those who died on the Somme's first day. He was son to Mr and Mrs George Novell of Abbots Pond, Tilford; very much a local boy. Inscriptions may be fading, but the stories have lost none of their lustre.

Over at Englefield Green, there's a new war memorial, unveiled as recently as July 2016, because Remembrance remains relevant today and in the future. One man recalled is 22-year-old John Chookomolin, who died at Windlesham Court Military Hospital, near Bagshot, from pneumonia, in September 1917, having only arrived in Britain a few days before. Chookomolin was a Cree 'First Nation' Canadian, who came to Britain with the Canadian Forestry Corps. During World War One, we had an insatiable demand for wood

Below:
The 'Dipping Well' memorial located in Ewell's High Street



and John and his pals provided lumber for the war effort. He left behind a wife and daughter at 'Nahmekoo Seepee' ('Trout River').

One of the more unusual commemorations is that to the Robertson brothers, Captain Norman Cairns and Second-Lieutenant Laurence Grant. Norman was another in the legal profession, joining the 'Inns of Court Officers Training Corps' in 1914. Captured in April 1917, he died in a military hospital in Hanover, in the June, aged 40. Laurence was a chartered accountant and was on the Ministry of Health's staff. He became another Somme casualty, dying on July 30, 1916.

Around 20 years later, their brother, WA Robertson, bequeathed that memorial obelisks be set up in nine National Trust beauty spots, (four in Surrey), to remember his brothers, each bearing a common text. I visited Frensham Common's. Perhaps this memorial, more than any other, lays bare the familial cost of war. All these men (and women) of Surrey were loved by someone, who remembered.

History repeating

World War One became known as 'The Great War', or 'The War to end all Wars'. It was unthinkable it could reoccur, and yet it did, within a generation. As a result, what often happened after World War Two was the altering of memorials to include those who died in the second conflict.

In Epsom, however, they took a different approach, producing a 'Book of Remembrance'. This bears the names of 342 people, including civilians killed in air-raids. By this stage, war had become 'total war', with communities also in the front line.

That wasn't the only place that I found a tribute a little different from the conventional war memorial. In Guildford's London Road, I came across some concrete blocks, one bearing a commemorative plaque telling me these were anti-tank defences installed in February 1942.' During World War Two, there was a genuine threat of invasion and we had to be ready.



The war memorial in Tilford is at All Saints Church



The new war memorial in Englefield Green

However, the scale of loss is nowhere better illustrated than at Brookwood, near Woking, Britain's largest Commonwealth war cemetery, covering approximately 37 acres. In addition to the main Commonwealth section are American, Canadian, French, Polish and Czechoslovak sections; these were not wars we fought alone.

By the end of my journey, I had uncovered the tales of some remarkable individuals: the youngster who lied about his age; the school ma'am turned nurse; the band of brothers; the First Nation lumberjack; solicitors; accountants; the long-distance athlete; the village lads. Surrey had them all and should remember them with pride. ♦



Brookwood Military Cemetery covers approximately 37 acres

SURREY AND TWO WORLD WARS

World War One:

- The East Surrey Regiment lost more than 6,000 men in World War One, winning seven Victoria Crosses.
- The Surrey's gained three of its VCs during the defence of Hill 60, near Ypres, on April 23, 1915.
- The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment) lost 8,000 men in World War One, and were awarded five VCs.
- The 8th Battalion East Surrey is said to have kicked four footballs on the Somme's first day.
- Woking's Muslim Burial Ground reminds us of the some three million Indian service personnel who fought alongside the Allied troops during the wars.
- Zeppelin L13 dropped 12 bombs on St Catherine's, Guildford, killing one swan, in October 1915.
- Canadian maples at Cranleigh were planted by Canadian soldiers during World War One.
- Belgian refugees were billeted in Guildford, which prompted a visit from Princess Clementine.
- 60 auxiliary hospitals were set up in Surrey alone, including at Clandon Park, near Guildford.
- Surrey resident Flora Sandes was the only lady to serve as a soldier during the war.

World War Two:

- The Vickers aircraft factory, Weybridge, was attacked on September 4, 1940, leaving over 80 dead.
- Bombs killed 25 people in the borough of Epsom & Ewell, with some 170 injured and 106 properties destroyed.
- V1 'Doodlebugs' killed 13 more in Epsom & Ewell, with over 250 injured.
- The remains of a World War Two carrier pigeon were found in a Reigate fireplace in 2012.
- Gatwick was still in Surrey and was an important RAF station during the war.
- The building of Guildford Cathedral was halted by the war, and did not re-start until 1952.
- Medieval tunnels and caves below Reigate Castle were used for stores and air-raid shelters.
- The Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede lists over 20,000 airmen with no known grave.
- Dwight D Eisenhower, supreme commander, D-Day, lived in Kingston from 1942 to 1944.

Share your own wartime stories by writing to the usual address or editorial@surreylife.co.uk