



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Branch secretary Arthur Pickup 01963-32952

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Next branch meeting 18th January 2016 at 7 p.m. in the Memorial Hall

AGM

As several key members of the potential committee officers cannot be present (John Pennington – Vice Chairman, Arthur Pickup – Secretary and Martin Holmes – Standard Bearer) I have decided to postpone the election of officers until the January meeting. As simple procedures dictate that they be present when nominated. Also I feel several issues need to be discussed when they are present. As I could not cancel the AGM I will present the chairman, secretary and treasurer AGM report but will not seek election of officers at this meeting. Martin Holmes has already advised me that he cannot physically perform the role of standard bearer this year due to his recent accident and I have found a replacement for him for this coming year, unfortunately the replacement could not be present either.

Tribute to book Wincanton War Dead of the Great War.

The book I have written as a tribute to each of the War Dead of the First World War is finished. As we go to print I am just awaiting a small grant and all the other sponsorship is all in place. The book entitled "More than just names" will be available at several locations throughout the town including Papertrees newsagent and stationer and the Town Hall priced £7.95. All proceeds will go to Wincanton Poppy Appeal 2015/16.

It is hoped that the book will be available for our Social Evening at the Unicorn Bayford and our Coffee Morning - see back page for details. Please watch the Blackmore Vale Magazine and Western Gazette for my press release which both publications have promised to publish. Papertrees have also promised to allow a book launch there.

Joan Whitmarsh

I am sad to have to report that Joan Whitmarsh passed away on 26th September.

Joan was our Poppy Appeal Organiser for many years and along with her late husband John were staunch supporters of the branch. I have fond memories of when I first came to Wincanton of being made to feel welcome and remember Joan plodding up West Hill with her poppies on autumn evenings. One particular year I remember a knock on the door on a very cold evening and it was Joan cheerfully selling poppies. Joan worked at Rutter and Rutter solicitors for 39 years firstly as secretary to Mr. Leslie Rutter and later as probate executive.

Poppy Appeal well under way

At the time we go to print arrangements for Poppy Appeal are well under way and everything seems to be in place. The working group had an evening sorting things out and it looks like they actually enjoyed themselves !

Steve who was also there sent me this photo which he entitled "Poppy Girls" !!!



One hundred years ago - The Battle of Loos

During the last week of September I had the privilege of attending the 100th anniversary commemorations for the Battle of Loos, which took place in the coal mining area of the Pas de Calais in northern France from 25th September until 19th October 1915. The terrain apart from the coalfield slag heaps was totally flat surrounded by several pieces of high ground (e.g. Vimy Ridge) - as was sadly mostly the case the Germans always seemed to occupy the high ground and this was the case at Loos. Tony

The Battle of Loos in September and October 1915 was the British Army's contribution to the major Allied offensive launched simultaneously with the main French offensive in Champagne. The French commander-in-chief General Joffre considered that the numerical superiority of his army, however temporary, would be sufficient to bring about the decisive breakthrough.

While the French were once again focusing their efforts on the heights of Vimy Ridge, the British were expected to advance into the coal basin below, in the sector of Loos-Hulluch on Gohelle Plain (near Lens). Seemingly without consideration for the mass slaughter of his men, General Haig fielded six divisions despite the fact that his troops were exhausted by the fighting in the spring and that his artillery continued to suffer from an insufficient supply of shells. On the other hand, he was sure to enjoy a considerable numerical superiority of seven to one over the Germans in the limited section of the front chosen for the attack. It was the "Big Push".

The Gohelle Plain and the "slag heaps" of Loos.



A continuous preliminary bombardment, which showered 250,000 shells on to the German defences over four days, had little real effect. Before sending in the infantry on the morning of 25 September 1915, the British released 140 tons of chlorine gas from 5,000 cylinders placed on the front line to make up for the ineffective artillery barrage. This was the first time the Allies had used the weapon, coming after the Germans employed gas to terrible effect at Ypres in April earlier in the year, and it was hoped it would annihilate the Germans at Loos who were equipped with only rudimentary gas masks. However a change in the direction of the wind at several points along the front blew the gas back into the British trenches, causing

seven deaths and injuring 2,600 soldiers who had to be withdrawn from the front line. Initially the gas attack created panic among the Germans and close to 600 men were gassed. Despite the setbacks caused by the wind 75,000 British infantrymen still flowed out from the trenches when the order came.

The southern end of the attack was a spectacular success on the first day. The British soldiers, under cover of smokescreens, took the village of Loos, Hill 70 and advanced towards Lens; however their progress was halted through a lack of munitions and the late arrival of reinforcements, and this delay allowed the Germans to retake Hill 70. Further to the north the British advance was slowed by the formidable defences of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, a vast complex of trenches, underground shelters and machine gun nests, but they nevertheless managed to take part of the German front line in front of the redoubt. The German machine guns were particularly deadly for the British, killing 8,500 men in a single day, the greatest single loss of life recorded since the beginning of the war. The next day, on 26 September, German reinforcements arrived in great numbers to fill the breaches.

The British then launched another attack without a preliminary bombardment and this resulted in the slaughter of thousands of infantrymen, mown down by German machine guns. Subsequently the British Army began to abandon the positions it had taken the previous day. The fighting continued sporadically for several days, especially around the Hohenzollern Redoubt, until the British general staff, coming to terms with the seriousness of the reverse, gave the order to retreat. Another offensive on 13 October, opened once again with a gas attack, came to a similarly disastrous end: in ten minutes the 46th Division lost 180 officers and 3,583 men in an attempt to take the Hohenzollern Redoubt !



Grave of 2nd Lt. John Kipling
"My boy Jack"

British losses at Loos were exceptionally high with 50,000 casualties (including at least 20,000 deaths). Among those lost in action was the only son of Rudyard Kipling, the famous British writer and fervent supporter of Britain's participation in the Great War. Inconsolable, Kipling spent many years after the end of the war searching the Gohelle Plain for his son's body, without success. Finally identified in 1991, the remains of John Kipling are today buried in Saint-Mary's Advanced Dressing Station Cemetery in Haisnes.

Many new units, fighting in the Great War for the first time, were completely dislocated and losses were particularly high among Scottish troops and officers. The German's suffered approximately half the losses of the Allies. At the same time the French offensives in Artois and Champagne were coming to a close amid great disappointment.

The failure at Loos led to the removal of General French from his position as commander-in-chief of the British Army and he was replaced by General Haig on 19 December 1915. Despite the severe setbacks, volunteers continued to swell the ranks of Kitchener's New

Army which was fortunate because by March 1916 the British sector of the front extended from Ypres to the Somme, the French having abandoned Artois to fight in the infernal cauldron of Verdun.

Astonishingly, the grave errors committed by the British High Command at the Battle of Loos were not learnt from and were to be repeated on the first day of the Battle of the Somme which ended on 1 July 1916 in the greatest disaster in the history of the British Army.

The fierceness of the fighting during the Battle of Loos was such that only 2,000 of the 8,500 soldiers killed on the first day of the attack, on 25 September 1915, have a known grave.



Photo taken on exact spot of British trenches
with the flat open ground in front

War Memorial seats

A story which first started as a bad event has now turned into a very heart warming story and one of community spirit in Wincanton. When one of the seats at the Wincanton War Memorial was damaged it appeared to be an act of vandalism but there was a very different side to the incident. It turns out that there was a group of young people who had been taking part in an event at the Wincanton Memorial Hall who had sat on the seat in question and whether there was a little over exuberance, horseplay or whatever but the seat came apart - not as an act of vandalism. They tried to report it to the police but found Wincanton Police Station closed so they contacted the Memorial Hall management later in the week once they realized the incident was thought to be vandalism. They were so upset that they wanted to make recompense and will be trying to fund raise for Wincanton Poppy Appeal as a gesture. Both the seats around the memorial have been inspected and substantial amounts of rot has been found – even though it was said to be seasoned yew and the seats are only 7 years old. This could also have contributed to the seat being easily damaged. After seeing press articles two local businesses came forward with offers of help. Now the final outcome does emphasize the wealth of community spirit in the town and Mintern Fencing and Sheds Ltd and The Bennett's Field Garage have each agreed to install and pay outright for both the seats. Hopefully the seats will be in place for the Remembrance ceremony around the memorial in November.

Social evening at the Unicorn Bayford.

As part of Wincanton Poppy Appeal Launch this year our friend Richard Cummings at the Unicorn Inn at Bayford has promised us a social evening on 28th October. There will be refreshments available and entertainment. You will remember we had an excellent evening with Richard last year and although final details have to be put together we know we can expect another excellent evening. The CAT Bus will be available for anyone wishing to get transport from central Wincanton. Contact me if you wish to take advantage of this. *Tony*

Remembrance 2015

This year Remembrance Sunday falls before 11th November and is in fact **Sunday 8th November** and our usual church parade will take place that day. Assembly is at the Memorial Hall at 2.15 p.m. and march off is at 2.30 p.m. with church service in the parish church at 3 p.m.

As David Hill is recovering from his recent operation I can now tell you that Brian Mitchell, formerly of the Grenadier Guards and County Parade Marshal for Wiltshire has agreed to stand in for David. Another "casualty" recovering from his operation is Martin Holmes our Standard Bearer, fortunately Terry Williams, who has transferred his membership to Wincanton branch is a Standard Bearer for the Light Infantry Regimental Association and has agreed not only to stand in for Martin at Remembrancetime but will continue throughout the coming year.

On Wednesday **11th November** we will observe the National Two Minutes Silence around the War Memorial with assembly at 10.45 a.m. and Two Minutes Silence and Last Post at 11 a.m.

I am pleased to say both David and Martin are recovering well.

Wincanton Racecourse poppy collections

Every year we are granted a Poppy Appeal collection at the race day during the Poppy Appeal period. This year it is on **Saturday 7th November** at Wincanton Racecourse. Traditionally we involve our affiliated cadet units and I have confirmation from our Sea Cadets and Air Training Corps cadets they will be attending - our Army Cadets have been invited but to date I have not had a reply whether they can make it. It is Badger Beer Race Day and Beer Festival that day and it is thought to be a big well attended event. David Hill did oversee this event other years but naturally this year he cannot, so I will coordinate our visit and be there. If you would like to attend this event which in itself should be fun, please let me know - we are hoping to get maximum involvement to capitalize on it. We will be able to get a break and take in the atmosphere.

Coffee Morning 24th October is CANCELLED

Coffee Morning is 24th October in favour of the launch of Poppy Appeal at the Unicorn Inn., If you would also like to sell poppies and have not yet confirmed please contact Sandra - friends and non members are welcome.