



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

Editor Tony Goddard 01963-824193



NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Branch secretary Steve Lee 01963-34374

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Next meeting AGM 13th June—Memorial Hall 7 p.m.

100th anniversary of Battle of Passchendaele

Last year we commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. An equally awful battle took place in 1917 and was known as the Battle of Passchendaele (or 3rd Battle of Ypres) which was reviewed in the last edition of Sandbag. It is being commemorated by the Nation on 30th and 31st July.

In the grounds of the Memorial Hall we planted an oak sapling which I grew from acorns I found at the top of Passchendaele Ridge, now the tree is successfully growing it is an appropriate time to have it dedicated. Five soldiers from Wincanton were killed during the battles: Harold Coombe, Gerald Cronin, Reginald Hill, Charles Mullins and Sidney Thomas.

There will be a commemoration of Passchedaele and dedication of the tree on 30th July at 3 p.m. around the memorial and tree. Although all details have not been finalised I can confirm it will take place with full ceremonial including Wincanton Silver Band, civic leaders and guests of honour. The time and date are firm and I will confirm more details in the next Sandbag.



Armed Forces Day 24th June

Plans are underway for Armed Forces Day which falls on Saturday 24th June. We have booked the Memorial Hall very early this year as it is by far the best location for what we require. We have already had confirmation that Wincanton Silver Band, HMS Heron Band and Wincanton Youth Theatre will be attending so let's hope the weather will be good again. There will be military attendance, cadets groups, stalls and lots going on including a licensed bar and barbecue. As usual the event is free admission and again full details will be in the next Sandbag.

Branch visit to Arras & Vimy

A group from our branch were in France during April prompted by an invitation from the Mayor of Angres, a small town in the Pas de Calais, to attend a ceremony to unveil a plaque to John Cunningham VC of the Leinster Regiment who won the Victoria Cross on 12th April 1917 near Angres. Our standard bearer Terry Williams carried the Union Flag and Steve Lee, the branch standard and I assisted the Mayor, Mme Coupin in the unveiling ceremony. Corporal John Cunningham was awarded the Victoria Cross for :- “conspicuous bravery when in command of a Lewis Gun section at the Bois en Hache near Angres his section came under heavy German fire. Although wounded and almost alone he reached a position near the enemy with the Lewis gun and opened fire in spite of heavy return fire, killing many of the enemy. When counter attacked by twenty of the enemy he exhausted his ammunition against them - then standing in full view commenced throwing hand grenades. He was wounded again, but picked himself up and continued to fight on alone until his grenades were exhausted too. He staggered back to British lines wounded in several parts of his body”. He died from his wounds on 16th



John Cunningham VC

April 1917 and is buried at Barlin a nearby town. John Cunningham's mother, Joanna Cunningham, was presented with his Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace on 21st July 1917. After a reception at the Town Hall the group along with French local officials went to John Cunningham's grave and paid full respects there.

With our French friends we then visited the town War Memorial and placed a wreath as a gesture of friendship.

Interestingly the pipers shown in the picture to the left dressed in Scottish attire are French and the Last Post was played by a French trumpeter.



Somerset connection

Our connection with Angres came about from a contact with M. David Robillard, who is historical coordinator at the town council in nearby Bully Les Mines. During the Great War Bully Les Mines had several British Army hospitals in the town and soldiers who died in the hospitals are buried in the town cemetery. David had located two graves of soldiers from the Somerset Light Infantry, one unknown soldier and one the grave of Cpl. Harold Dixon. The grave of Cpl. Dixon intrigued David as it was originally classified as “unknown” too but had been subsequently amended and named. Between David and I we pieced together the short story of Harold Dixon and this enthused David to research more graves which now form the basis of an exhibition and his town's tribute to British soldiers killed in the area. He also found that a Victoria Cross was awarded to one of the soldiers - John Cunningham VC. Terry Williams who is a member of the Rifles Association also forwarded the short story of Harold Dixon to them. Our write up for Harold Dixon is shown on the adjoining page.

Corporal Harold John Dixon 15218
“A” Company 8th Battalion Somerset Light Infantry

Born 27th April 1895 at Dropmore, Buckinghamshire.

Died of wounds 26th September 1915. Aged 21 years

Harold Dixon was the third son of John and Ellen Dixon of Kempsey, Worcestershire he was born in the village of Dropmore which is on the opposite bank of the River Thames near Maidenhead and was educated at the Devon County School at Barnstaple. At the outbreak of war Harold was a clerk in the Education Offices in Birmingham and enlisted in the Warwickshire Regiment in September 1914. He was transferred to the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and subsequently the 8th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry.

The 8th Battalion arrived in Le Havre on 10th September 1915 comprising of 1100 officers and soldiers. They marched over 90 kms arriving at the Hulluch - Lens Road on 25th September at the height of the Battle of Loos and went straight into action on 25th September 1915. A part of “A” Company were searching cellars and dugouts when a section of No. 4 platoon disappeared, in the engagement. “A” Company originally comprising of 227 soldiers totalled only 26 soldiers after the engagement. Corporal Dixon was reported wounded and missing after fighting around Loos on 26th September. A letter from a comrade afterwards stated that he was wounded while trying to get his officer to a safe place in the trench - the officer had just been struck by shrapnel and killed. Harold Dixon's grave in Bully-Grenay Cemetery was originally shown as



“unknown soldier” but he was later identified and named.

The 8th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry was a “Kitchener's New Army” battalion of volunteers and as it happens consisted of several soldiers from Wincanton and surrounding villages. In fact Walter Humphries and Gerald Cronin both of whom are named on our Roll of Honour in the parish church were in the 8th Battalion at the same time as Harold Dixon and it is most likely he would have known both of them. Walter Humphries was killed at the Battle of the Somme and Gerald Cronin at Passchendaele.

It seems remarkable to me that from a chance encounter we have made another soldier less anonymous.

Branch AGM 12th June
sun lounge of Memorial Hall 7 p.m.

We need to elect committee members and formalise branch accounts at our AGM on 12th June at 7 p.m. Would all existing committee members please confirm to Steve if they are willing to continue for the coming year. If there are any members who wish to be nominated for a role also please contact Steve.

Coffee Morning 27th May

We resume our conventional Coffee Mornings again on Saturday 27th May at the Memorial Hall from 10 a.m. until 12 noon. Although we did have a Coffee Morning in March this was to introduce the new Outreach Drop In Centre at the Balsam Centre. On 27th May we are back to “normal” and resume our popular and enjoyable Coffee Morning, please come we have lots to talk about in enjoyable company.

Quiz and Fun Night 22nd June 2017

We are going to have fun on Thursday 22nd June when the Millers Inn will be holding a big quiz in aid of the Royal British Legion. We will assemble at 7.30 p.m. to sort out teams and the quiz will start at 8 p.m. Teams should be between four and six people and the cost person will be £3 each. The quiz will consist of six rounds and will include subjects ranging from confectionary to British grub and music to films, - brain surgeons welcome but not expected. There will be prizes for the winning teams and a super raffle will take place during the break. Some members have already said they will meet before the quiz to have that long awaited summer meal together ! We always have our Christmas lunch and have had several branch dinners at the Millers so we know the food is excellent. As you know there is a beer garden at the Millers so if the weather is kind we can have drinks on "a lovely summers evening" beforehand. We do hope to see you there !

June trip 10th June

The trip in June is our first "seaside outing" of the year and we are going to Poole on 10th June. Departure will be 9 a.m. from the Memorial Hall tickets are the same as always at £12 each (children £6) - list is now open.

Remainder of the summer

For your diary here are our future trip details :- in July we are going to **Henley on Thames on 15th July**. August is to Bournemouth on **12th August** and on **September 23rd** we will go to Winchester.

Branch Dinner 6th October

Another diary date is **6th October** when we will be having our branch dinner at the Millers Inn. It will be a two course meal (main and dessert) and will include tea or coffee. Full details including price and menu will be available next month.

It's that time of year again !

I have just been advised that applications for branch tickets to the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall London on 11th November are now taking place. Tickets cost £10 and are for the evening performance and are restricted to four tickets per branch. It is also possible for you to obtain tickets for the afternoon performance by contacting the Royal Albert Hall direct on 0845-401-4045 and these tickets range in price between £11 and £27. If you are in London attending the Festival of Remembrance or just happen to be in London, it is possible to obtain tickets to take part in the Cenotaph ceremony and march past on 12th November. Please let us know too if you wish to take part.

Poppy Appeal new national record

We have heard from Poppy Appeal that the national total this year is at a new national record and so far this year is standing at £43,515,260 which is up nearly £2Million on this time last year an increase of 4.25%.

Thanks to everyone who helped us with our collections, especially those who stood long hours at Morrison's and our Sea Cadets for excellent results at the racecourse. Below is a letter of thanks received from Claire Rowcliffe, Director of Fundraising

*I wish to express my thanks to you, your Branches and Members, for the support you give to the Poppy Appeal. This year has been another remarkable year, with the total today standing at £43,515,260.45! Compared to last year's figure of £41,741,071.33 year to date, we are currently 4.25% up. This fantastic success is down to a team effort; without your support and working together with the Community Fundraising and Poppy Appeal team, we would not be able to achieve what we have. Year on year, the demand for the poppy increases and each year you and your teams help us to meet that demand. I think we should be truly proud of what has been achieved this year, we have been able to raise such a substantial amount of funds, ensuring that The Royal British Legion can continue to support those who needs us, when they needs us. On my behalf, please will you pass my thanks on to your Branches and Members. Here's to another successful year!
Kind regards Claire Rowcliffe*