

READING MATTER

2014 FLANDERS TOUR OF REMEMBRANCE



Mel Bishop



STAR

SUPPORTERS' TRUST AT READING





In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead, short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.



John McCrae

Around 50 men who played football for Reading FC at some point during their careers served with the forces during the First World War. At least twelve of these players made the ultimate sacrifice. Of the twelve, seven are buried in Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemeteries (CWGC) in France or Belgium (Ben Butler, Allen Foster, Jack Huggins, Alexander McCurdie, Edward Mitchell, Heber Slatter and Freddie Wheatcroft). Of the other five, James Comrie and Joe Dickenson have no known grave and are commemorated on CWGC monuments to the missing (at the Menin Gate and Le Touret respectively). The tenth, Len Hawes, died on a hospital ship of wounds sustained during the attack on Scimitar Hill in Gallipoli. He was buried at sea and is commemorated on the CWGC memorial at Helles in Turkey. Alfred Hall, who served in the New Zealand forces and played for the Biscuitmen in the Western League before emigrating, died in hospital in Walton on Thames, where he is buried.

Walter Tull, who was a professional on the books at Northampton Town and was the first black officer in the British Army to command white troops, was killed in March 1918 and is commemorated on the Arras Memorial had played two games for Reading FC (defeats at both Fulham and West Ham) in the curtailed 1916-17 season and so becomes the 12th Reading player to die in the conflict.

STAR will be honouring the centenary of the deaths of these players by laying wreaths at the Memorial Wall at the Madejski Stadium as near to the anniversary of their deaths as we can; this will start on 25th April when we shall be laying tributes in memory of Jack Huggins and Joe Dickenson who were killed on 26th April 1915 and 19th May 1915 respectively.

A number of the men, both those who died and many that survived, have remarkable stories; for example Joe Bailey, who before the War had formed a deadly strike partnership with Allen Foster, after recovering from wounds, was commissioned into the Suffolk Regiment and became the Regiment's most highly decorated officer. Joe went on to score Reading's first Football League goal. Angus Seed was awarded the Military Medal for rescuing wounded colleagues whilst under fire. Fred Bartholomew, who served with the Footballers' Battalion, played in every position during his Reading FC playing career; went on to be a trainer and groundsman and retired after 53 years' service with the Club.

STAR firmly believes that the stories and the memory of these extraordinary men from an extraordinary time should be preserved.

THE GATHERING

Friday 30th May 2014 dawned grey and slightly on the chilly side. On cue at 6:15am, our coach arrived and thirty-five bleary eyed passengers climbed the stairs to claim their preferred seat and settle in. To some, the coach was new; to others, a rekindling an old friend and acquaintance. She was at one time our coach of choice for our many short and long journeys around the country to away games.



The journey commenced. Madjeski Stadium and Reading were soon miles behind us . We settled deeper into the leather seats and watched the world outside glide pass.



THE OUTWARD JOURNEY

Ahead of Friday's morning rush hour we made swift progress and reached Dover in good time. Check-in procedures were negotiated easily and we joined the queue for the ferry. After a short wait we started to board our P&O ferry for Calais. Spirit of Britain. Flag ship of the fleet. New, large and comfortable.



Most settled down for the ninety minute crossing and with calm seas tucked into a good breakfast. With the French coast in front of us and the British coast behind we docked at Calais and re-joined the coach for the journey through Picardie to the Somme.



Mel Bishop

VIMY RIDGE, THE CANADIAN MEMORIAL

The taking of Vimy Ridge stands as a great feat of arms, courage and sacrifice. After two unsuccessful Allied attempts to dislodge the Germans from their heavily fortified positions, four divisions seized the ridge on 12th April 1917 after four days of intense fighting. This marked an important turning point in the war.

Vimy Ridge has become a place of remembrance to those Canadians who fell in France and have no known graves. 11,285 missing are inscribed on the monument by name and rank.



Also at Vimy Ridge is a series of well preserved Allied and German trenches. These are well defined and as you walk around the site one becomes all too aware of how close the two sets of trenches were. Under these sets of trenches are a series of tunnels. These were dug by both the Allies and the Germans to try and gain the upper hand during the conflict.



DEVILLE WOOD, SOUTH AFRICAN MEMORIAL

Also known as Devil Wood by the British Tommies, the taking of the woods by the Allied Forces came at great cost to life. The whole wood has been replanted but visitors are advised to stay to the paths as the area is still littered with ordnance and human remains. Only one tree, a hornbeam, survived the ordeal and still grows.

The South African Memorial records the names of officers and men who fell in the War who have no known grave. Inside are some impressive bronze wall plaques and various artefacts.



THE FOOTBALLERS' BATTALIONS MEMORIAL

This memorial was provided by the generosity of the players, staff and supporters of the English and Welsh Football League Clubs and is dedicated to the officers and men of the 17th and 23rd Battalions of the Middlesex Regiment who served their country.



ALLEN FOSTER, GUILLEMONT

From the Footballers' Memorial we moved onto the battlefield where Allen Foster fell wounded. Allen played for Reading Football Club between 1911 and 1915. A cross and poppy floral tribute were laid by his great niece Gail Lowe who had joined us for the trip.



FREDDIE WHEATCROFT, ANNEUX CEMETERY

After leaving Guillemont we visited Anneux Cemetery where we laid a wreath on the grave of Freddie Wheatcroft. The son of a grocer, he trained as a schoolteacher, and combined his football career with teaching. On 26th November 1917 Freddie was wounded whilst commanding a platoon of the 13th Battalion, East Surrey Regiment and died of his wounds near Bourslon Wood, Cambrai.



EDWARD MITCHELL, BETHUNE TOWN CEMETERY

A new day dawned which brought us to our first visit of the day. Edward played for Reading during the 1912-1913 season. A former professional soldier, he re-enlisted as a gunner when war was declared and tragically died of his injuries on 6th January 1916.



JOE DICKENSON, LE TOURET CEMETERY

From Bethune we journeyed to Le Touret where we laid a floral tribute to Joe, another former professional soldier. Joe served with the Grenadier Guards and was killed on 19th May 1915 at Festubert. He has no known grave so he is remembered by an entry on the Le Touret Memorial.



**RONALD POULTON PALMER,
HYDE PARK CORNER (ROYAL BERKS) CEMETERY
PLOEGSTEERT (PLUG STREET)**

Ronald was not a football player but a rugby player. By the 1913/1914 season he was Captain of England. He was also a member of the Huntley and Palmer dynasty. Ronald was killed on 5th May 1915 at Anton's Farm, near Ploegsteert while strengthening the dugouts in Trench 40.



**BERKSHIRE EXTENSION CEMETERY
AND PLOEGSTEERT MEMORIAL**

Within the Berks Extension Cemetery stands the Ploegsteert Memorial listing the names of over 11,000 Commonwealth service men who died with no known graves in this sector. Most did not die in big scale battles but from day-to-day trench warfare that characterised this part of the line. The memorial was dedicated on 7th July 1931.



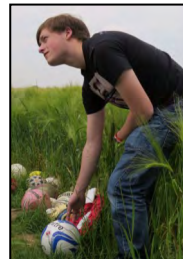
PLUGSTREET EXPERIENCE, PLOESTEERT

A short walk from the Berkshire Extension Cemetery is a new interpretive, interactive museum that takes the visitor through the history of the Great War from why it started to its end. The whole history is illustrated with films, display boards and battlefield artefacts. All of the group that visited agreed that the museum was well worth the visit.



1914 CHRISTMAS TRUCE (KHAKI CHUMS) CROSS

The cross is situated down a narrow lane, just passable for the coach. Here we laid a scarf on behalf of the supporters and a match ball donated by Reading Football Club. The cross marks the occasion of a football game being played but not where it was played during the impromptu week long truce. The Christmas truce was soldier initiated and not officer initiated. It was not repeated.



**ST. JULIAN CANADIAN MEMORIAL
'THE BROODING SOLDIER'
ST. JULIAN**

During the second Battle of Ypres, 24th April 1915 became notorious for the Germans' terrifying tactic of unleashing chlorine gas on to Canadian troops. When the yellow-green cloud arrived countermeasures were insufficient. No names appear on the memorial. 2000 officers and men are buried in a nearby cemetery.



**JACK HUGGINS,
PERTH CEMETERY (CHINA WALL) YPRES**

Jack was a teacher while playing for Reading. In September 1914 he enlisted and joined the Durham Light Infantry. He was initially reported missing but had actually been killed on 26th April 1915 during the Battle of St. Julian. He was buried by the Germans. His remains were moved after the war.



THE RESULTS

JAMES COMRIE THE MENIN GATE, PANEL 12 YPRES (WIPERS)

Jimmy was born in Denny, Stirling in 1881 and for the 1906-07 season became a Biscuitman. He joined the 7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers and was sent to various locations around Ypres. He died on 9th August 1916 and has no known grave. His name is recorded on the Menin Gate.



YPRES TOWN CENTRE

We now had a few hours to explore Ypres Town Centre; a short walk away. This is dominated by The Cloth Hall which houses the In Flanders Field Museum. There are numerous restaurants, souvenir shops, chocolatiers and an Italian ice cream shop. Here you can buy Smurf Ice Cream!



THE MENIN GATE MEMORIAL YPRES (WIPERS)

Menin Gate Memorial is a funereal monument to 90,000 British and Empire Forces who fell but do not have a known grave in the often desperate defence of Ypres.

A plaque on the memorial reads 'Here are recorded the names of officers and men who fell in Ypres Salient but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death.' There are 54,896 names recorded on the memorial. The remaining names can be found on the nearby Tyne Cot Memorial.

Another inscription on Menin Gate reads 'They shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.' This is the very least these men deserve.



THE MENIN GATE MEMORIAL THE LAST POST CEREMONY

Every evening at 8pm throughout the year the Last Post Ceremony takes place in the memory of all who gave their lives during the Great War. The ceremony is organised and conducted by The Last Post Society comprising a short service followed by the sounding of the last post by members of the local fire brigade and a minute's silence. Wreaths by various and ever-changing individual societies and groups are then laid.

STAR laid a wreath to the memory of all of the Reading players who fell. Chairman, Paul Ellix, was asked if he would lay the wreath on STAR's behalf. This duty he accepted and joined the ranks of other wreath layers on that evening to spend a moment of silence in remembrance.





Allen Foster



Joe Dickenson



Edward Mitchell



Freddie Wheatcroft

Pictures from
The Parsons
Collection

The picture
below is of the
1908-1909 team
with
Freddie
Wheatcroft and
Jack Huggins



Jack Huggins



In 2011, two trips were made to the World War One Somme battlefields. The first to go were Brian McDermott, Ady Williams, Mick Gooding and Trevor Senior. This trip was followed later in the year by members of STAR who followed in the previous trip's footsteps. On both trips military historian Jon Cooksey was our guide. During the STAR trip he commented "It is very easy to get overawed by the numbers and statistics of this war because the numbers were so great, but behind every statistic is a human story. When you bring anyone who has a real link to the club and the people that we are talking about it becomes so powerful, evocative and emotional." He went on to say, "The roots of any family, any community, any club are very important. I think that Reading Football Club has already proved with its management, ex-players and supporters that it cares about its roots and the history of its players. Reading Football Club really cares by the way it behaves and way it conducts itself."

This caring goes back to the war years when Joe Dickenson wrote from the Somme the following "It's unfortunate to have Stevens injured in this period. I hope you have a good understudy. If you don't, tell me, you know I'll be there. I only wish that I could. I would love to have just one more game with you. I used to think I'll be home by the end of the season, but all my hopes have gone now. Shall I be home next season?"

With the 2014 trip we were continuing to care about our roots and hopefully pass them on to the next generation to take care of. Our players who died in both World Wars are an important part of those roots and must never be forgotten for their sacrifice.

Paula Martin said on one of the trips, "These were real people who were really part of the community. You can't comprehend just what it was like. If you were put into their position do you think that you could have done that?"

We have already had inquiries asking us if we will be running another trip. The answer, so far, is yes. Thoughts of an itinerary are under discussion. Initially we are considering a three day trip in 2017. This time starting in Normandy, then moving to the Somme area; paying our respects to those players whom we did not cover on this trip, including two former players who have come to light since our return.

May we take this opportunity to say a thank you to all who came.

THANK YOU
MELANIE BISHOP, KIERAN ELLIX, PAUL ELLIX,
OUR TRUSTY DRIVER IAN DENISON,
ALAN SEDUNARY FOR HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THE PLAYERS
AND EVERYONE ELSE WHO HELPED.



HORSEMAN
of Royal Berkshire

READING FOOTBALL SUPPORTERS' SOCIETY LIMITED