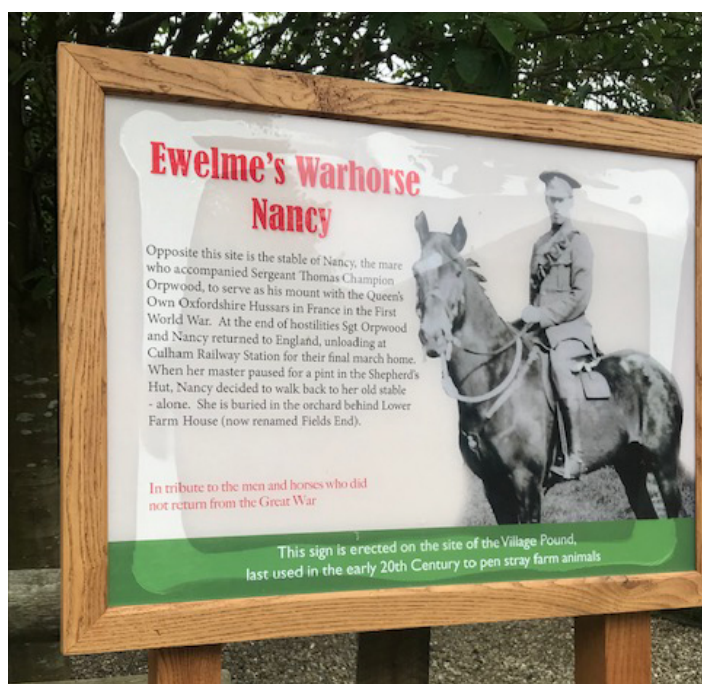


## Nancy the War Horse

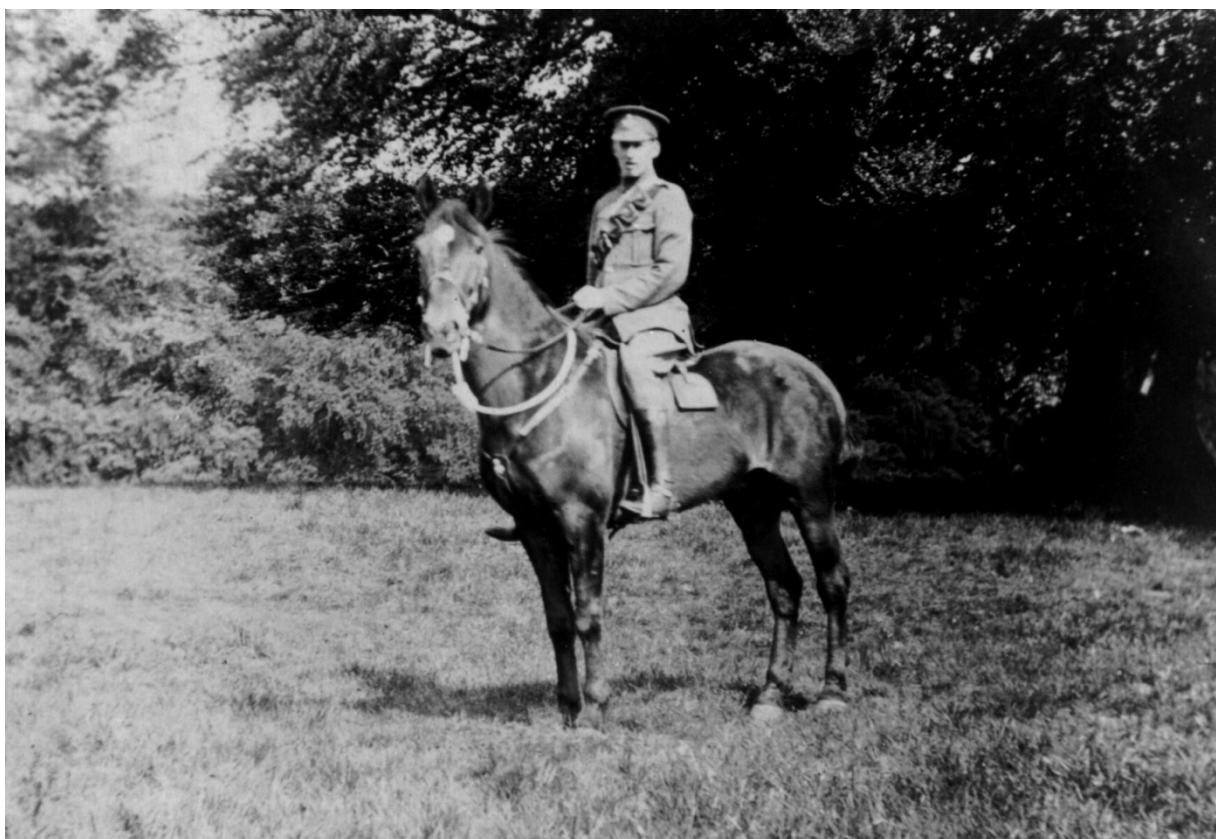
Ewelme attained national publicity in the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 issue of The Daily Telegraph. Columnist Charles Moore wrote an informative item regarding the proposed unveiling of the memorial to Sgt Thomas Champion Orpwood and his 16.1 hand high bay mare Nancy - Ewelme's own warhorse. (For the local news, The Henley Standard published an illustrated report of the event in the April 19<sup>th</sup> issue).

On Friday April 12th 2019, in warm spring sunshine, a crowd of around 150 gathered by The Pound opposite Nancy's old stable, to witness the ceremony. Lady Sylvia Jay, (at her first engagement as High Sherriff of Oxfordshire), and Simon Orpwood, a grandson of Tom Orpwood, both performed dedicatory speeches to several generations of Orpwood family members, official dignitaries, villagers and interested persons. Also attending were representatives from the Woodstock Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum, RAF Benson, Thames Valley Police Force and the Benson British Legion, with bugler Stuart Henderson expertly sounding the 'Last Post' and 'Reveille'. The Rector, Rev Gilday blessed the memorial before the ceremony ended with the singing of the National Anthem.



Unveiling of the memorial board in April 2019

Simon Orpwood's speech recounted that he was born in Ewelme [1950] and lived here until 1983. [His younger brother David now farms near Watlington]. The Orpwood's had a long association as farmers and major employers in Ewelme. Their great-grandfather, Herbert William, first came to Ewelme in 1880 and farmed Lower Farm [now Fields End], Levers Farm [now Church Farm], Huntinglands, Eyres Farm and Cottesmore Farm with his 3 sons, Herbert James (obit 1964), Tom (obit 1965) and John - killed in action in 1915.



**Nancy with Thomas Champion Orpwood**

Tom had joined the Territorial Army in 1911 with the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars, undertaking to train 28 days a year in local parkland. Simon acknowledged that Mike Cross, from the SOFO Museum, provided essential information regarding Tom's service with the QOOHs which was formed in 1798 at Watlington by the Earl of Macclesfield. Farmers were popular with the regiment because they had their own horses to ride and were disciplined. The Watlington recruits were designated 'A' Squadron, nicknamed "Queer Objects On Horseback"! On August 4th 1914 at 6pm, a telegram was received ordering members to mobilize at HQ, and the next day Tom and Nancy, (plus A and C Squadrons) marched to Reading to meet other Squadrons arriving by train. They became a Brigade, and during August 1914 trained at Churn on the Berkshire Downs, then Bury St Edmunds and Thetford before returning to Churn.

On September 19th a telegram was received from Winston Churchill, (a member of the QOOH since 1902), ordering them to France. They boarded trains to Southampton and then sailed to Dunkirk. They were the first TA to go to the Western Front and come under fire at the end of October around Messines. For the next 4 years the QOOH shared the general experience of all troops fighting around Flanders. On May 29th, 1917, Tom was shot in the left shoulder but was treated on the battlefield and carried on fighting.

The British Army had 25,000 horses in service in 1914, compulsorily purchased 115,000, and then replenished the colossal casualties dying of gunfire, exhaustion and gas by 500 to 1,000 each day. Nancy would have endured awful conditions in the deep heavy mud, but Simon

believed Tom's skill as a stockman ensured Nancy was well looked after. He remembered his grandfather telling him that one day in France he went to draw hay for his mare and the label read 'H.W. Orpwood Ewelme', his father's farm!



#### **Nancy and Sergeant Orpwood**

Tom and Nancy were demobbed on 27th February 1919. They were unloaded from the train at Culham\* and rode the eight miles home. Tom stopped for a pint at either The Lamb or Shepherds Hut and tethered Nancy outside. After four gruelling years away from home, Nancy decided not to linger but continue her way home. Loosing herself she walked back to her stable at Lower Farm. Simon concluded that Nancy was 6 or 7 when she went to war, and she lived out her life at the farm being about 24 when she died in the early 1930's. She is buried in the old orchard behind Lower Farm in the top corner.

All present were invited to take refreshment in the Village Hall, and many accepted. One visitor had read the Daily Telegraph column, and wishing to know more about the QOOHs, had driven from Somerset for the occasion. His long journey was rewarded when he was introduced to Mike Cross, the Soldiers of Oxfordshire expert on the QOOH's.

*(\*Brian Orpwood, Tom's son, related in his memoir that Nancy was unloaded at Watlington Branch Line Station and that Tom stopped at The Red Lion at Britwell Salome. Loosed her and she walked home. Unfortunately, we cannot double check, as Brian died some years ago).*

Simon's full speech is available as a pdf document on request.

*Carol Sawbridge – Ewelme Village Archive*