

Old Soldiers

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Throughout 2018, the heroism and horror of the First World War was somberly remembered, 100 years from the guns falling silent. Ewelme has inevitably been involved in warfare through the centuries. The earliest Archive reference is in 1415 when Thomas Chaucer provided 37 archers and 12 men-at-arms for King Henry V's French campaign, culminating in the famous victory at Agincourt. It is likely that some archers may have come from his Ewelme estates, as it was a Royal command that all able-bodied men practised with the longbow in the local butts.

From the 19th century onwards, the Archive has more information on Ewelme men who took the 'Queen's Shilling'. An old soldier, Sam Walklin, died in the Cloisters in October 1910 and was given a full military funeral, of which we have several photographs. In April 1855 at the age of 17 he enlisted in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and a month later was on his way to Malta. He served in 5 campaigns - the Crimean War (1853-56); the Indian Mutiny (1857) where he was involved in the taking of Lucknow (1857); in China during the Opium Wars he was at the Battle of Taku Forts (1860). Sam went to the New World for the Red River Expedition [Canada] in 1870, and to Ghana for the Ashanti War he was engaged in the Battle of Coomassie [1874] where he was shot through the knee - leaving him with a lifelong limp. Sam always proudly wore his medals on his Almsman's cloak.

Another well-travelled soldier, Fred Hewett, joined the 2nd Battalion Oxfordshire Light Infantry in 1894 and won the India Medal (1897), with the Punjab Frontier and Tirah clasps added in (1897-8). He returned to Ewelme and became a postman but re-enlisted in 1914 aged 33. Wounded twice, he finally came home in 1919.



Sam Walklin displaying his medals at the 1908 Pageant

The Boer War (1899-1902) saw several Ewelme men 'Called to the Colours' from the prominent Winfield, Munday and Godden families. Newspaper reports kept the local population informed of the war's progress, prompting collections and donations for comforts for the soldiers thousands of miles from home. A thank-you letter came - "*Major Apsley Smith wishes most heartily to thank all those who sent gifts to the Royal Artillery Ammunition Column under his command. He can assure that every non-commissioned officer and man thoroughly appreciated the great kindness and generosity shewn; that the clothing is especially useful just now when the men's shirts are in rags and when the South Africa winter is at its worst, and that only those who have been reduced to horrid Boer tobacco can realise how much British shag is enjoyed.*" Prayers were offered at Sunday services, and at the relief of Ladysmith and of Mafeking in 1900, the church bells were joyfully rung.

However, not all news was joyful. Sgt Edgar Winfield died of disease (probably typhoid) at Standerton, South Africa, on 17th December 1900. A condolence letter to his widow from the Officer Commanding 86th Battery Royal Field Artillery, also informed her that "...*Gunner Noteman bought your husband's spurs, and thought perhaps you would like them as a memento, so asks you please to accept them.*" (The Medal Roll of the 86th Battery R.F.A. notes that Sgt Winfield's next of kin would have been issued with the Queens South Africa medal with three campaign bars, Cape Colony, Transvaal and Laing's Neck).

Thomas Winfield joined the Hampshire Regiment, and George Winfield the Royal Berkshire Regiment, in which he was promoted to Corporal - but reduced to Private for 'breaking out of barracks'. In 1901 Cedric Maxwell of Saffron House was killed and is commemorated by the family's donation of the Reredos in St John's Chapel. Staff Farrier John Godden served in the 7th Queens Own Hussars in the Matabele Expedition. After the war he settled in South Africa and joined the Transvaal Police. He married, but some years later he brought his wife and daughter Gertrude back to Ewelme. He re-enlisted in the R.F.A. in 1914 but succumbed to his wounds in Middlesbrough Military Hospital in December 1918 aged 46. Of the twenty Ewelme men who died in the First World War he is the only one buried in Ewelme Churchyard.

The Great War broke out unexpectedly, and Ewelme men joined in the national rush to enlist, believing it would 'be all over by Christmas'. During the four-year war, one hundred and eight local men took up arms, eighteen of whom joined the Royal Navy. Many had been employed by the two major farmers [Lawson and Orpwood]. Herbert Orpwood's workforce was drastically reduced, compounded by his two sons Tom and John also leaving for France. 'Jack' Orpwood was shot by a sniper on the Western Front in 1915 having been in combat for less than a month. His name is on the Menin Gate.

Joe Gilbey, at only 5ft 1 inch tall, escaped a sniper's bullet. He served in the Royal Horse Artillery riding the lead horse on a mobile gun. If the horses foundered in a shell hole he remembered the officers shouting '*Save the horses!*' The men trapped underneath could be quickly replaced, trained gun carriage horses could not!

The Military Medal for Bravery in the Field and recommendation for a commission was conferred on Corporal Arthur Champion (from Cottesmore) serving with the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars (in which Jack Orpwood's brother Tom was serving with his mare Nancy). Corporal Champion was subsequently promoted to 2nd Lieutenant in the R.F.A. Tom came home from France as a Sergeant indicating he had to finance Nancy's repatriation himself. The present Orpwood family believe they arrived at Culham, not Watlington Station as Tom's son Brian Orpwood remembered, so maybe the pub where Nancy left Tom to walk home alone was the Shepherd's Hut, and not the Red Lion at Britwell Salome. Although the details are blurred by the passing of time, it is a remarkable story of service and survival by horse and rider, worthy of a modern tribute.

The youngest casualty remembered on Ewelme's war memorial is 17 year old Arthur Shepherd, who joined the Royal Navy at 16 and was killed in the 1916 Battle of Jutland when HMS Defence blew up

A survivor of the Royal Flying Corps was Almsman Major Harold Fellowes-Pryne. Described as a World War I flying ace in the newspaper coverage, in 1983 at the age of 91 he was taken for a pleasure flight at Enstone (kindly arranged by Ewelme's Champion Glider pilot the late Chris Wills). Harold said he didn't recognise the 'dashboard' but he did remember watching Louis Bleriot make the first Channel crossing by plane in 1909!

Ewelme Village Archive