



Battledress Times

The General Newsletter of the Herts at War Project

Comments & Copy to (jontywild@hertsatwar.co.uk)

August 2021

Firstly apologies for the lack of news. With various people moving house, getting new businesses off the ground and writing books etc. there have just been too many distractions – oh and there was that other thing what was it now? . . . it's on the tip of my tongue . . . oh yes COVID!

Anyway hopefully we are back now, and this newsletter will bring you up to date.

Below you will find:

- • HAW Project what is coming?
- • A special offer
- • Research and an online meeting
- • Bringing A Death Penny Home – Can You Help?
- • News of HAW led change in one man's CWGC records, thanks to Paul Johnson
- • British War Veteran?
- • For Ever With The Lord – The Tragic Story Of Petty Officer Denis Francis Reginald Gomm

Herts At War Project what is coming?

What we hope to re-start or get back to over the next few months or so:

Monthly Talks: We want to get back to these, but at the moment we do not know when that will be. We need to approach the University of Hertfordshire when the time is right for them. We will keep you informed of any progress.

Boots on the Ground Tours: We hope to organise these in-house, both for your pleasure and enjoyment and ours! We think that the situation is still too fragile for this year, so we are tentatively thinking of late May or September next year. We would welcome any expressions of interest and any thoughts you have on tour themes, destinations. Also any other comments on preferred durations etc. In the meantime read on. . . .

Virtual Tours: We are considering commissioning some Hertfordshire' based tours to be guided as live on-line tours. You may not know anything about these but if you visit the videos on battleguide.co.uk or battleguide.co.uk/live-tours-main you will get an incite as to how good these can be. They are unique tours which are accessible to anyone in the world with an internet connection. If you read the special offer below you can have the chance to experience a live tour at half price now.

Special Offer

Battle Guide Virtual Tours have been kind enough to arrange a special half price offer for the HAW Project followers. You can see any publicly available live tour from the current programme or any On-Demand recording for just £10.

- • To view the Live Tours currently programmed visit to view visit the shop (battleguide.co.uk/shop/).
- • To see what On-Demand tours are available, visit battleguide.co.uk/archived-tours/ and then purchase a 'Catch-Up Tour' from the shop and either, add the tour title to the 'Additional Information/Order notes' field on the checkout page, or email bookings@battleguide.co.uk.

Do not forget to add the coupon code: HAW1418 at the checkout!



Research and an online meeting

Our research has not stopped during the period of apparent inactivity. Just in the last few weeks alone we have published another 300 new or revised biographies, however we need to push on.

There are three things I would like to focus on now:

1. Photographs of memorials – the whole memorial, the names that appear and its setting (e.g. the outside of the church that it is in). We have great need of all the Barnets, Hoddesdon, Bushey, Bushey Heath and Oxhey. There are many others needed so if you would like to help get any of these or any others that are nearer to you, please email jontywild@hertsatwar.co.uk and I will send what details we have.
2. Transfer of existing biographies – these are generally in Word form, and need to be copied and pasted into our database – this is a gentle introduction to our research and working with the HAW database.
3. New biographies – these can be just the minimum research, e.g. just CWGC information or any additional research that wish to do – help will be given.

I hope that you will help, if you will or would like to think about it in the future, consider joining us in the following meeting and/or contact me (Jonty Wild) as above.

Online meeting: Now that most of us have tried on-line meetings or at least chats with friends, we thought why not use that facility too?

At the moment the idea is to provide a chance for researchers (new and old) and those who might be interested in research to chat. Nothing too serious, not a tutorial on what to do, maybe a little mutual support and help and, if we identify something that needs to be tackled in a different way, we'll see if we can organise that.

If you are interested and there is no commitment to undertake any research, we will be meeting on 23/9/2021 7pm. We will start with limited numbers to see how it works, so if you are interested, please email jontywild@hertsatwar.co.uk to book a place.

Rifleman Frederick Biffen - Bringing A Death Penny Home – Can You Help?

Rifleman Frederick Biffen was born in 1898, the son of Thomas Thackery & Mary Elizabeth Biffen. His father ran a Grocery business in Royston, Hertfordshire, but by the time of the 1911 census the family were living at 108 Whinbush Road, Hitchin.



He served with the 1st/6th London Regiment, a Territorial Army unit, which was part of the 174th Brigade, 58th (2nd/1st London) Division, and was killed in action during operations near the village of Sailly-Laurette on the 29th August 1918. His body was not recovered from the battlefield and his name is recorded on the Vis-En-Artois Memorial and on the Royston war memorial.

A lady has contacted the Herts at War project as she currently holds his Death Plaque and would like to return it to his family. We have made contact with a very distant relative of the Biffen family but, as she lives in Australia, she felt that there may be closer family members who like to receive and hold the plaque.

Do you know a member of the Biffen family? Perhaps you could contact us as we would very much like to reunite the plaque with Frederick's family. Contact: pauljohnson@hertsatwar.co.uk.



Changes to CWGC information for Frederick John CHALKLEY - L/11580 - Middlesex Regiment

During the process of undertaking HAW Project research we occasionally find errors in 'official' information. In this case Paul Johnson, our lead historian, found an error in this man's service number:

"Frederick John Chalkley of Knebworth, Hertfordshire, died of wounds on the 24th January 1915 and is buried in the Ration Farm Military Cemetery, La Chapelle-d'Armentieres, His Service Record and Soldiers Died entry show that his Regimental Number was L/11580. The CWGC online records, taken from the Graves Registration Report, shows him as 1580, which is incorrect."



Paul provided evidence and we received the following response after assessment:

"Having investigated this case, I have confirmed your findings that the service number for Private Chalkley is L/11580."

As a result, I have now amended our internal database and this change should replicate on our website within the next 24 hours or so, please do feel free to check."

I have also placed a headstone amendment request into our works programme which will be assessed by one of our works teams when they are next on site."

If an amendment in situ is possible this will be carried out in due course however if a replacement stone is required this will add some time to the process."

Well done and thanks to Paul, as with our records and little correction or piece of additional information helps.



British War Veteran?

I recently purchased this plaque. Has anyone else come across one of these or any information about them? The title is a bit misleading as the plaque reads: "British War Veteran, British Great War Veteran of Americas 1914-1918" so it is actually for American War Veterans of the British War (strange!) but that is all I know. Were these plaques given out or bought by the veterans? Were they intended for mounting on their houses or where? If you know anything more, please pass on the information to me via jontywild@hertsatwar.co.uk.

For Ever With The Lord – The Tragic Story Of Petty Officer Denis Francis Reginald Gomm

The men and women of Hertfordshire who served throughout two world wars, and who lost their lives during their service are buried, and commemorated, in military and civilian cemeteries across the globe. One such burial can be found in Norfolk, a county in which the impact of war would be reflected upon the lives of both a father and son.

At the end of August 1918, the 1st/6th Battalion, Black Watch (Royal Highlanders), part of the 51st (Highland) Division, were involved in an action between the eastern outskirts of Fampoux and the village of Gavrelle, in an effort to recapture trenches lost to the German spring offensive of March 1918. Among the attacking troops was Private Francis William Gomm, a former chemical labourer, whose home was in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. He had been conscripted in July 1916 but had not mobilised until June 1917, initially joining the 103rd Training Battalion. Prior to leaving for France, he



had married his sweetheart, Louisa Doll, in the autumn of 1917. With his training completed, he was posted to the Royal Highlanders, arriving on the Western Front in April 1918. On the 15th June 1918, as Francis stood guard in the trenches near Ecurie, he became a father to his only son Denis Francis Reginald Gomm.

As the Battalion entered the front line positions an artillery shell exploded close to Private Gomm, causing deafness to his left ear for which he was evacuated to the rear. Eventually, on the 2nd September 1918, he was transferred to the UK where he was treated for his condition at the Norfolk War Hospital near Norwich, Norfolk. His injury was sufficient enough to cause him to be discharged from the Army, and he returned to civilian life where he took up his old job and settled with his wife and child at 111 Gossoms End, Berkhamsted.

Life for the Francis and Louisa appears to have been like so many others between the wars, earning a living, raising their child, and making every effort to avoid the crushing effects of the great depression. By 1939, they were still living at the same address and their son had left his job as a telegraphist with the Post Office and entered service with the Royal Navy.

Like so many other service personnel throughout the war years, Denis met a young lady, a Telephonist, Patricia Dorothy Georgina Saw, who had been born in Uxbridge, Middlesex, but whose family had moved to Lickey End, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. The couple married in Berkhamsted in the Autumn of 1940 and it is uncertain how much time they spent together before Denis returned to his base at the former Royal Naval Hospital in Great Yarmouth, known as HMS Watchful, a Naval information centre and administrative quarters.

There are no records currently available to provide precise details on the life of the couple, or if the war had any impact upon their relationship but on the 28th April 1942 Denis Francis Reginald Gomm died at HMS Watchful as the consequence of an Intracranial Haemorrhage and laceration of the brain caused by a bullet from a service revolver. The local coroner recorded an open verdict on his death and Denis was buried in Old Caister Cemetery, Norfolk, on the 2nd May 1942, not far from where his father had been treated for his injuries in the Great War. Patricia Gomm was now a war widow at the age of 23. But this is not the end of the story.

A little over a year later, on the 16th September 1943, Home Guard officer, Lieutenant Leslie John Henry Harrison, aged 22, of 37, Greenmeadow Road, Selly Oak, attended a Home Guard supper at Marlbrook, Worcestershire. At the end of the evening, somewhat worse for wear, instead of returning to his barracks at Rednal, he opted to drive an Army lorry and give a lift to two American officers and two female civilians, one of whom was Patricia Gomm. Near the King of Diamonds Club, Marlbrook, there was a collision between the truck and a car, driven by Oliver Rose, a 44 year-old, from Ward End Road, Birmingham, a Corporation gas inspector, who was driving home a party who had been entertaining troops at Worcester. The two vehicles collided and the truck overturned, killing Patricia.



Although the front axle of the car was broken, none of the occupants were injured. Both drivers claimed they had kept to the proper side of the road, and Harrison said he saw no lights on the car, and only noticed its dim outline 12 to 15 feet away. Rose stated he was driving on sidelights because it was a bright moonlight night. The chairman (Dr. F. W. J. Coaker) said the Bench could only conclude Harrison was not keeping a good look-out and he was fined £5, with £11 12s. costs, and his licence was suspended for a month. No mention was made of Patricia's death.

For an unknown reason, Patricia was not buried until 15 January 1944, when she was laid to rest, alongside her husband, in the Caister Old Cemetery, Norfolk, she was 24 years old.

Remember Them.