

St Albans Diocese and the 1914 WW1 commemoration events.

The year 2014, and indeed the four years from 2014 – 2018 offer an unusual opportunity for outreach and engagement with our communities as the events of the First World War are remembered on their centenary occasions.

2014 and 2015 also mark the 70th anniversary of some key World War Two dates, for example the Normandy Landings in June 1944 and the final peace in 1945.

Background

The First World War (WW1) began on 28 July 1914 and lasted until 11 November 1918, although in the UK the arguably most significant forthcoming date in 1914 is 4th August, which is when the UK declared war on Germany.

The early part of WW1 did not involve conscription- it was introduced in January 1916 - but the generally jingoistic view of assumed British military supremacy led many men and boys, a significant number of whom were under-age, to volunteer. A key concept from mid-1915 onwards for what became known as *Kitchener's New Army* (as opposed to the regular army - 'The Old Contemptibles'), were '*Pal's battalions*', in which local firms, country estates etc., raised a group of between 500 – 1000 men to serve together. This was based on the belief that extant relationships and management hierarchies could beneficially be translated to the battlefield.

With the exception of the most recently built churches, there are a vast number of memorial tablets in the places of worship in the Diocese which remember local men. As well as these, most towns and villages have a local war memorial, and in St Albans, almost uniquely, there are ten 'street' memorial plaques listing just a few names of men from that road or neighbourhood.

Bedfordshire had a 'regular' regiment at the outbreak of war which was hugely supplemented by territorial, reserve and 'new army' battalions as the war progressed.

Hertfordshire had a 'yeomanry' regiment, drawn from the working men on the land and intended originally to be a mounted unit. Like most yeomanries however, the Hertfordshires served dismounted.

Certain of Hertfordshire's WW1 colours (their battle flags) remain in the Hertfordshires' chapel in the north aisle of the Abbey, and those of the 1st Battalion are laid up in All Saints Hertford.

The regiments served with distinction on the Western Front and at Gallipoli. Nine Victoria Crosses were won by these two regiments, most of them posthumously.

Because of the two regiments' proximity, men from Herts and Beds were frequently found serving in the 'opposite' regiment. There are numerous locations in the counties that recall and commemorate the service and sacrifice of these men. One example is Lydekker Park in Harpenden, donated by the sister of two Bedfordshire regiment brothers who died in action with no known grave. The Tree Cathedral at Whipsnade was designed and built by WW1 veteran William Blyth as a memorial to fallen comrades and as a symbol of peace.

Locations in Beds and Herts were used extensively for training, billeting and mustering of troops.

Cultural and theological impact

Because of the local 'pals' recruitment described above and the mass mobilisation of WW1, it made a huge impact on virtually every town, village and church in the diocese. Local connections and stories number in their thousands. There is a clear connection to be made between WW1 and later/current conflicts and the continued elusive struggle for peace.

Great Britain entered WW1 with a sense of supremacy and almost an assumption of victory. This position was rapidly changed by events in 1914 and 1915, when successive defeats in France, the horror of trench warfare and the humiliating repulse of the allied fleet in the Dardanelles contributed to the erosion of confidence in the Government, military management and to some extent the Church. The emancipation of women was hugely accelerated by the conflict, as engineering, agricultural and infrastructure roles in the UK were necessary taken over by women due to the absence of men and the sheer losses.

WW1 made an immense cultural impact on western Christianity. The practice of cremation was 'forced' into common use and the theology of bodily resurrection was challenged in the light of thousands of casualties with no known graves. Wounded men returned to a depressed economy and an ill-equipped support network, and also to a changed view of war. The resulting political reluctance of the UK to face another horrific world conflict is considered by some historians to have contributed directly to the rise of fascist elements in Europe and ultimately to the Second World War.

After WW1, some 30,000 war memorials and commemorative plaques were erected in the UK and the Church was centrally involved in the work of reconciling and interpreting the senseless slaughter for a shocked population.

Only very recently has the contentious issue of 'cowardice' and executions in WW1 been addressed. 306 men were shot in WW1 for desertion, cowardice and related matters. Some 80,000 men were identified as having symptoms of a psychological type that at the time had no explanation. Eventually, 'shell shock' was acknowledged. A law passed in November 2006 pardons men in the British and Commonwealth armies who were executed in World War One. The law removes the dishonour with regards to executions on war records but it does not cancel out sentences. http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_one_executions.htm

Churches and Communities

An obvious focus are the still extant memorials to local battalions or individuals in our churches. As well as 4th August and Remembrance Sunday in 2014, other occasions that link to specific actions could be marked with short dedicated acts of worship or incorporation into main services.

The 100th anniversary in 2014 both of the beginning of WW1 and of the Diocese could lend itself to 'then and now' events where parishes organise an evening at which the local history group etc., is present. Encouraging locals to bring photos, memories and linking it to the church in the midst of that community could be an excellent outreach opportunity. Local historians and those with a military interest could be encouraged to get involved and to research local stories.

Schools

Local war memorials

There could be an excellent initiative in providing a resource pack for schools to research about the local war memorial, or the memorial in the parish church. This could tie in with open churches, then and now photos etc.

A specific service of remembrance around 11th November might be planned for schools.

Local 'heros'

A sub-set of the above. Most war memorials have officers of high rank or even Victoria Cross winners. These are easier to trace than lower ranks and lend themselves especially to primary level activities.

Contacts and groups

The Western Front Association <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/> The WFA has thousands of UK members organised into local branches, and along with the Imperial War Museum is one of the most active organisations in the plans for 2014 -18.

The Royal British Legion has branches all around the diocese and is active in the more formal remembrance areas and the poppy appeal etc.

Uniformed groups such as Scouts, guides, brownies and beavers etc will undoubtedly be involved in local events although there is little being publicized about planned activities at present.

Hertfordshire University has a 'heritage hub' which is planning a series of public events over the next four years. <http://heritagehub.herts.ac.uk/>

Help for Heros

This relatively new and very successful charity is essentially doing what the young British Legion once did. Although its focus is not primarily heritage/remembrance, it will be using 2014-18 as a major hook for its activities and it has growing local units all round the country.

<http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk>

The Commonwealth War Grave Commission Database

This is a free online resource for finding the names and location of those who fell in both world wars. With the huge resurgence of interest in family history and heritage, the database has allowed thousands to find links with family who died in the wars. If this facility is used in a parish setting, there are clearly pastoral considerations in the event of individuals finding new and sometimes unsettling information about e.g., fathers, grandfathers and uncles etc. <http://www.cwgc.org/>

The Armed Forces Covenant

A recent development has been The Armed Forces Covenant. Quoting from the website, this seeks to establish a 'relationship between the nation, the state and the armed forces. It recognises that the whole nation has a moral obligation to members of the armed forces and their families and it establishes how they should expect to be treated. It exists to redress the disadvantages that the armed forces community faces in comparison to other citizens and to recognise the sacrifices that they have made. At the local level, 'community covenants' are being signed across the country bringing military and civilian communities together.'

At the time of writing (November 2013), the Church of England is considering whether to sign up to this covenant. In developing local remembrance initiatives it will be useful to check progress.

<https://www.gov.uk/the-armed-forces-covenant/>

Local help and assistance

As suggested above, local history groups could be an excellent resource and involving them could also be an outreach opportunity.

Individuals in the congregations with an interest in military/family history could be encouraged to act as coordinators.

The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire regiment (since renamed the Anglian regiment) museum is in Wardown Park, Luton.

<http://www.lutonculture.com/wardown-park-museum/>

Steve Fuller maintains an excellent website which goes into individually-named detail of those who served with the Bedfordshire regiment in WW1. The site has also now been extended to include the Hertfordshire regiment. Steve is an expert in this area is available to talk to groups.

<http://www.bedfordregiment.org.uk/>

Capt Andy Crooks, Bishop Alan's chaplain, is a WW1 researcher and member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides, and is happy to provide pointers on local research.

chaplain@stalbans.anglican.org

Key anniversary dates

June 28th 1914. Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated in Sarajevo. This is widely considered to be the pivotal catalyst for the complex sequence of events which led to the First World War.

August 4th 1914. Great Britain declares war on Germany.

September 2014. Some battalions of the Bedfordshire regiment are deployed to the Western Front.

August and September 2015. Elements of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment in action at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli.

January 27th 1916. Conscription introduced in the UK.

1 July and 18 November 1916. The Battle of the Somme. At its height, hundreds of 'death' telegrams were being delivered to towns and villages in the UK on a daily basis.

April 6th 1917. The USA declared war on Germany.

December 9th 1917. Jerusalem is captured by allied forces from the Ottoman (Turkish) Army.

October 4th 1918. Germany seeks an armistice.

November 11th 1918. Germany signs a surrender, ending World War One.

The above dates are selected from a fuller list at:

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/timeline_of_world_war_one.htm/

Liturgical resources.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland supply a range of liturgical material for remembrance.

<http://www.ctbi.org.uk/233/>

The Royal British Legion offers some free downloadable resources.

<http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/remembrance/how-the-nation-remembers/>

Andy Crooks. November 2013.

chaplain@stalbans.anglican.org