

Wokingham Remembers

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OUR PAST

Childhood heroes, legends of the silver screen and the First World War

After researching the life stories of the local men who served in the Great War, a group of local historians are now telling the story of how these men and their families lived their lives in Wokingham's rural community. This week's contributor is **MIKE CHURCHER** who co-founded the Wokingham Remembers project with Sarah Huxford in 2010

WHO were your childhood heroes of the silver screen and did you ever know the true stories which lay behind them?

Today we have a triple billing of some of our old film heroes and how their stories were intertwined with the First World War and even Wokingham itself.

The real stories of these greats are larger than any of the films they starred

in; so sit back and be amazed at these legends born out of the Great War.

In August 1914, Harry Coleborne a vet from Winnipeg in Canada, was on his way to join the war in Europe. His train had stopped off for a break in White River, Ontario and was approached by a bear hunter who had a cub for sale.

Harry felt sorry for the frightened young bear and handed over the required



Harry Coleborne with Winnie the bear and John Cowan, of HMS Formidable, with the infamous Lassie, who became a Hollywood legend.



\$40. By the time they had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and reached England, the bear (by now named Winnipeg after Harry's home town) was growing at an alarming rate.

Although Winnipeg was showing herself to be an intelligent and good tempered mascot while on manoeuvres at Salisbury Plain, Harry had decided to lend her to London Zoo on the condition that he could collect her if he should survive the war.

Winnipeg was an instant hit at London Zoo and visitors would join long queues to see her playing with her keepers. One of the visitors was a man who was accompanied by his small son and they too fell in love with Winnipeg.

On the journey home they shared stories about the bear they called Winnie. The son was Christopher Robin; the father was AA Milne and the legend of Winnie the Pooh was born. Harry did indeed survive the war and on seeing the bear happy at her home in London, made the loan permanent until her death in 1934 at the age of 20 years.

Another animal intertwined with the war and our own memories was a dog that went on to literally save one of the world's most famous film companies.

As the Germans were being pushed back from France in 1918 a young American soldier, Leland Lavoy Duncan, came across an abandoned and very frightened German Shepherd puppy.

Maybe because Lavoy was himself an

orphan, he adopted the tiny bundle and name him Rin Tin Tin after the lucky dolls the French children gifted to the American soldiers.

Eventually Lavoy returned home to America and found himself looking for work in Los Angeles. When he saw a film team struggling to manage a wolf during a new film they were making, Lavoy offered the services of 'Rinty' as a solution and the rest as they say, is history.

From an orphaned dog of the Great War to an actor of super star fame, Rinty made 26 films, had 18 stand-ins, his own chef and single 'handedly' saved Warner Brothers from the brink of bankruptcy.

There were eventually seven incarnations of Rin Tin Tin (after the original Rinty died in Jean Harlow's arms in 1932) and legend has it that he was the outright winner of a best actor Oscar, which was hushed up due to the enormous embarrassment it would have caused.

If you do not remember Rin Tin Tin at the Saturday Morning Pictures, you will surely know of this next legend and it is mixed up with a story of one of our local servicemen.

On New Year's Day of 1915, 17-year-old Roland Woods of Plough Lane, Wokingham, was aboard HMS Formidable when it was struck by a German torpedo. 547 men, including Roland were lost that night.

Fishing vessels from along the Dorset

coastline collected survivors from the frozen seas and a number of bodies which had also been found were placed in the cellar of The Pilot Inn, a local pub in Lyme Regis.

Lassie, the Landlord's half bred collie started to worry away at one of the bodies, repeatedly licking the face and whining to the her owner. Eventually a young sailor by the name of John Cowan began to stir and after a visit to the local hospital, made a full recovery.

The story became legend and was a tonic for the British press who were in desperate need of a 'good news story'. And so the (disputed) story goes that eventually the Lassie tale reached Hollywood and a new heroine was born. There we have three legends from childhood and all of them connected to us, to the Great War and even it seems to the men of Wokingham.

The Wokingham Remembers project is proud to tell the stories of the heroes of our childhood and also those of Wokingham's not too distant past. The overriding desire of this set of articles is to connect these tales with your own knowledge and the memories that make up who you are and this place we call home.

■ If there are stories you can share with us which tell of your memories of a Wokingham now past please send them in to mike@wokinghamremembers.com and we will do our best to pass them on to other readers of The Wokingham Paper.



Wokingham's Electric Theatre in Broad Street, which is now a branch of Nationwide.

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