

Wokingham Remembers

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OUR PAST

Finding our fallen: visiting the Western Front



Sarah Huxford is a founder of the Wokingham Remembers project, a regular visitor to the Western Front and Gallipoli. Sarah has researched the lives of more than one hundred servicemen who lived in and around the Wokingham area and who died fighting for their country in the First World War. Today, we continue the story of the Turner brothers (see the Wokingham Paper from May 8th) and

with it Sarah shares her experiences of visiting their war graves in northern France.

IN 2010 I began to research the men of Wokingham who were killed in the First World War and co-founded the Wokingham Remembers project the following year.

The stories are deeply moving; with some being killed whilst relatively elderly and some with families, but for the most part they were young men just emerging from their youth.

The census records from 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 enable us to see them growing up from children to finding their first jobs and we watch the family's trials and tribulations as they make their way through often difficult times.

There is also an ominous element to the research because at some point between 1914 and 1918 you know they will die. This is a difficult moment for the researcher especially as we get involved in their story and even begin to address them by their first name.

The stories of these men of Wokingham have also inspired me to take on a journey beyond the research and to visit their graves and memorials

Sarah Huxford, a founder of the Wokingham Remembers project, frequently travels to the Western Front to research Wokingham's war dead and has researched the lives of more than 100 soldiers from the area.



on the Western Front (and beyond). A poppy is also left on behalf of the people of Wokingham to say we will not forget them.

My family and I have been travelling to the battlefields of the Great War for more than 20 years now (we do go on other holidays too!) and this familiarity with the landscape has helped us on this new quest.

This article is therefore to describe some of our experiences in the hope that one day others might take on a similar journey by visiting their ancestor's final resting place and maybe even the men from the local community. It is not a sad journey (although in parts it is) but inspiring when you meet many others who are on the same journey.

Visiting the Western Front

The cemeteries are mainly owned and maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Their remit is to care for the graves of the soldiers, sailors and airmen of the two world wars, in perpetuity.



Arthur Turner, left, and Charles Turner - two brothers from Wokingham who were killed in the the First World War.

Quite a task considering they honour some 1.7 million service personnel in 23,000 locations around the world and also for the many countries who come together to support their mission. Using their website www.cwgc.org it is possible to find out the location of the grave of a great many of the men who died in those wars.

Armed with the location of a grave, a map and a passport you can set about visiting an individual grave. This task has taken us to many areas of France and Belgium and introduced us to many aspects of the history of the Great War.

Not all the fallen men of Wokingham lie in these beautiful Commonwealth war grave cemeteries, many still remain in town and village cemeteries throughout the world. One such man is Arthur Turner. You might remember Arthur's story from the Wokingham Paper's edition of the May 8 and we continue his story by talking about our visit to his grave.

We found Arthur and seven of his fellow Royal Berkshire Regiment soldiers in a small town cemetery, by the name

of Maroilles; near to the French/Belgium border. The fine Portland stone grave markers afforded to each Commonwealth casualty are arranged around a small square plot and set amongst the graves of the local inhabitants.

Arthur was killed after the country had only been at war for three weeks; he was a regular soldier before the war and was one of the first British troops to leave England and travel to France and Belgium on the 12th August 1914.

He and his colleagues were killed during fighting at the bridge over the River Sambre near the French/Belgian border. At that time of course there were no Commonwealth cemeteries and the dead from that action were buried swiftly in a local cemetery.

Arthur's brother Charles had yet to enlist and indeed he did not do so until 1916. It's likely that he waited until conscription came in that year. He was sent not to a local regiment, but to the Worcestershire's and it was with them that he was killed in April 1917 in the Arras area of France.



His body lies in a Commonwealth War Graves cemetery, a lovely peaceful rural place enclosed in a stone wall. He is with more than 300 other British and Commonwealth soldiers killed in that area.

It is beautifully tended, almost like an English garden and a world away from the horror and slaughter that northern France knew in the years 1914-1918. We don't know who the 'Gladys' mentioned on his headstone was, presumably his girlfriend or even fiancée.

They were two brothers from 65 Langborough Road in Wokingham; a street well known to today's local residents and who lie in a soldier's graves in France. We will remember them and the sacrifice they and so many others made.

It is sometimes a difficult journey, but not most of the time and I truly consider it an honour to be able to do so, to have the freedom to do so and to remember so many young men (and women) of so many generations who have fought for our country.

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