BACK TO THE FRONT PROJECT – PUTTING THINGS IN CONTEXT

It is important to understand how this project came about, and how things grew from the very early days and it is hoped that the sections below explain how the project's objectives were achieved.

INTRODUCTION

The Back to the Front Project officially started in 2016, when four friends visited the battlefields of the Western Front in France and Belgium. However the seeds for the project were planted several years before.

In the late 1950's my mother worked as an Administrator/Book-keeper for a small company (H.V Adams of Croydon) on a part time basis. At times Mr Adams would work from home. He had a big house and garden in Selsdon. We lived close by in Riddlesdown near Purley in Surrey. My mother will would from his house, and during the school holiday, on some days she would take me along. Whilst she typed in the house, I would play in the garden. I particularly remember making a "camp" under the waterproof cover that was draped over a garden settee that swung in a frame. I would stay outside when it rained and keep dry and cosy inside my little camp. One day Mr Adams gave me a book to look at — "The Western Front, Then and Now". I was fascinated. The "Then" was during the First World War, and consisted of black and white photos of scenes in villages and parts of the battlefields between 1914-18. The "Now" was set in the early 1930's, showed pictures of the same locations at that time. From that point I wondered where these places were and where exactly was the Western Front? It was several years before I found out.

In 1964 the BBC presented 26 episodes of the "Great War", and I watched every single one. I even took notes. My interest in the Great War was re-kindled, however although I studied the origins of the War as part of my History "A" Level course I didn't really have much of an idea of where the battles took place, or the timelines or any great detail of what had happened.

I continued through University at Aberystwyth and Bath University Management School, then periods working for Kodak, Hemel Hempstead Basketball Club, British Aerospace, and latterly at Canada Life. It was at Canada Life that I met John Simpson (aka "Simmo"). Canada Life took over Albany Life in 1998 or 1999, and John joined the team in IT, where I worked, as the Telecommunications Manager, and we became colleagues and friends.

He explained that he had been adopted at a young age, but recently his blood mother had got in touch with him and he had re-connected with his family and had found out that three Great Uncles had been killed in action in the First World War. We talked about it over lunch several times. John wanted to find out more about the War and the Western Front and one day arrived in the office with a catalogue for Leger Coach holidays. Leger had started five day coach tours to the battlefields and my interest in the Great War was re-kindled once again. I can't remember which year it was – possibly 2001 – but off we went for a day on the Somme, a day at Waterloo and a day at Ypres with a battlefield guide. We were hooked. I bought Lyn McDonald's book "The Somme" whilst we were on the trip, and that started me reading whatever I could get hold of on the subject of the Great War. Canada Life acquired Royal Sun Assurance's Group business in 2002, and I travelled back and forth to Bristol working on commissioning a new office as part of the take-over. I spent a lot of time on trains and in hotels on my own, so I bought and read more and more books on the subject.

It must have been at this time that I started to find out if any of my family had served in the Great War. My mother mentioned that her brother and my uncle, Harold Scholefield had been called up (conscripted) after the end of the War in 1918, and joined the Grenadier Guards. He had worked as a

Bank Clerk, nd was selected for the Guards (so my mother said) because he had "nice hands". Although he had served in the Army of Occupation that moved into the Rhineland after the Armistice, he hadn't served in the action of War. I couldn't find anyone on my father's side of the family. Although there were several of the family that would have been eligible for service I guess that they became exempt as they probably worked in the London Docks or at the Woolwich Arsenal making munitions. I knew that my grand-father had worked there throughout the War.

Without a family connection, I needed to find someone that I could research in more detail, and so it was that one day I found myself at the War Memorial in the churchyard of St Lawrence Church in Abbots Langley. I wrote down all of the names on the War Memorial of the men that had failed to return from the First World War. The Memorial included surnames, and initials, so in some cases it would be difficult to trace some of the individuals without a first name or names. I wanted to find someone as quickly as possible, and in those days it was quite difficult to find details for these men — much more difficult than now without the internet and such tools as Ancestry.

I'm not too certain how I came on Walter John Edward Owen, but I must have mentioned this name to a good friend, Roy Barnes. Roy had been born and brought up in Abbots Langley, and when I mentioned that Walter had lived at the Wooden House in Trowley Bottom. This address was of interest as we lived at Trowley Bottom, so I was beginning to get a connection. Roy told me that a great uncle of his had lived at the Wooden House. It transpired that the Wooden House where the great uncle had lived was in Shirley Road, quite near to our house at Mainspring, Langley Lane. However, a few weeks later, when having a beer with Roy at the "Unicorn" pub in Abbots Langley, he raised the subject of Walter Owen once again, as a man in his 80's had come into the pub. He was Lenny Owen, and Roy introduced me to him. He had had a few too many beers, but explained that he was related to Walter and the Owen family and that their Wooden House was a farm building on the old Mainspring Farm, which is where my house was now. So Walter lived at the bottom of my garden.

With this information I had found my man and over the next couple of years I did what I could to research him as well as those that had been Killed in Action from the Village. This must have been between 2001 and 2004, as in 2004 I had suggested to Simmo that with mine and his new-found knowledge about the War and the Western Front we should organise our own trip to France and Belgium and seek out the resting places of his great uncles as well as find out more about the men from Abbots Langley that still lay out there. John had continued to read about the War, but not at the same pace as I had, but together we had a lot more knowledge than when we went on the Leger coach tour a few years before. We started planning the trip, but then John found that he was unable to go. Instead I went with Jonquil (my wife), and two friends Kay and Clive Blackman. We travelled to the Somme and stayed in a B&B for a few days before driving up to Ypres and staying at Varlet Farm. Jonquil, Kay and Clive had no knowledge of the War and had really come along for the trip, and suffered me driving all over the place finding locations where the Abbots Langley men had served. We also visited some of the iconic locations — Newfoundland park, Tiepval Memorial, Menin Gate, Hooge, Tyne Cot, Essex Farm etc etc etc.

It must have been in 2005 that I found out about the Western Front Association (WFA). My local branch was at Little Chalfont, and I attended a couple of meetings on Saturday afternoons. At one of their meetings it was announced that a three day seminar would take place in Ypres to discuss the German Gas attack at Ypres in the spring of 1915, some 100 years before. It was relatively cheap to attend so I decided to go. What a fantastic experience and something which spurred me on to find out more. The speakers were from all over the world and were top notch. I learned so much.

In 2003 Canada Life was taken over by Great West Life, an enormous Canadian Financial organisation, and by 2005 the GWL Management had decided that the IT function of Canada Life in the UK would be transferred to the Canada Life Offices in Dublin, and that Simmo and I would be made redundant along with the others in the UK Technical Services Team. Our redundancy dates were set for the summer of 2006, however I was subsequently offered a new role as a Senior Project Manager, but Simmo left the company at the end of June 2006. This was sad news for many reasons, and we set to planning a trip to the Somme as we had realised that the 1st July 2006 was the 90th anniversary for the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916. We started the planning in November 2005, and I started making trips to the National Archives to check out War Diaires and maps, and started amassing a lot of detailed information about Walter Owen's time in France and Belgium, and also about other men from the villages. It all helped with planning the forthcoming trip. In May 2006 Simmo asked if I minded if his friend Phil (Buttigieg) came on the trip. Only a couple of weeks before we set off Simmo asked if I minded if Phil's Uncle Michael (Lewis) could come too. We had four places in my Volkswagen Passat car so it wasn't a problem, and so on the morning of 30th June 2006 the four of us set off for a voyage of discovery to stay at the Ibis hotel at the centre of Arras, and to visit the Lochnagar Crater ceremony at 7.30 on Friday 1st July.

BACK TO THE FRONT STARTS – SOMME 2006

Although I didn't know it at the time, the trip to the Somme was the "official" start of the Back to the Front Project. Simmo, Phil, Michael and I left Abbots Langley at 5.00am on the morning of Thursday 30th June, bound for the Channel Tunnel and an Ibis hotel at the centre of Arras. We were up early the next day and attended the Lochnagar Crater Ceremony, arriving at La Boiselle at 6.30am. Each year the opening day of the Battle of the Somme (1st July 1916) is commemorated at 7.28am with a ceremony around the crater of an enormous mine that was exploded just before the British troops went "over the top" at 7.30pm. In 2006 it was the ninetieth anniversary of this event. After the ceremony the four of use drove around the Somme battlefield finding and visiting many cemeteries where men from the Parish of Abbots Langley are buried. In doing so we also visited a number of the iconic sites on the battlefield. I drove my car, with Simmo map-reading (no Sat Nave at that time). When we located a cemetery, Simmo, Phil and Michael would rush out of the car, find the Cemetery Index (usually a paper file kept in a small cupboard in the cemetery wall adjacent to the entrance gate), and check the location of the grave we were seeking, and then would track through the graves until they found what we were looking for. I would follow, taking photo of the Cemetery entrance (including it's name), and then move on to photograph the specific grave. We would then spend some time at the cemetery having a look at the other graves, and also using my notes to see what had happened in the area to cause the deaths – maybe a battle or just the fact that the cemetery was adjacent to a Casualty Clearing Station. We followed this process throughout the four days of the trip, and more or less the same process throughout all of our trips to the battlefields.

On returning from the trip I sifted through the information that we had collected and filed away the photos and the notes, and throughout the following winter worked out the details for our next trip.

In November I once again attended the Ypres Seminar, and this time added a couple of days on to the trip, and spent the time visiting a lot of the places where Walter Owen had been in the areas around the town. I also made an appointment and visited the Cloth Hall Museum archives and made good contacts with the archivists.

YPRES 2007

The trip to the Somme had been a "one off" trip, but we all enjoyed it so much that everyone wanted to follow it up with another trip. Simmo and I were the ones with an interest in WW1,

whereas Phil and Michael were more or less there for a weekend away. I can't say that their interest in WW1 increased throughout our trips but they both put in a lot of work to help with the research of the Abbots Langley soldiers. In June 2007 the four of us repeated our trip to the Somme, but this time went to the Belgian battlefields around Ypres.

2008 - WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

Whilst I was able to amass a lot of information about the soldiers from the Parish that appeared on the War Memorials, I started to wonder about the men that came back and had survived the War. This group are not remembered anywhere. Had anyone recorded who they were ? Also what about women from the Parish ? There were none on the War Memorial and no records of anyone going to the War. Surely some women had served, possibly as nurses.

I had been a member of the Abbots Langley Local History Society (ALLHS) since it started in 1994, and by this time many people knew of my growing interest in WW1. At one of their meetings Audrey Ashby (the Society's Journal Editor) gave me a photocopy of the Abbots Langley Roll of Honour for January 1917. She had been given the copy by someone who had found it but didn't know where it had come from. The Roll of Honour listed several hundred men from Abbots Langley and gave details of their rank, initials, surname, and military unit. Suddenly my list of men from the Parish had grown from the 80 or so on the War Memorial to over 300 names. Of course most of these men were the ones that came back. But where did the list come from – nobody seemed to be able to help. But the extra men allowed me to carry out more research. But still no women. It was around this time that I also started to think that each of these men had their own story – where did they live, what work did they do, what were their first names, were they married and had any children, were they related?

It was maybe at this time or perhaps a little later that I decided that if I did nothing else with all of this research I would at least write something about each man, so that the Roll of Honour would become something that was not just a list of names.

We didn't organise a battlefield trip in 2008, as Simmo and Phil had other holiday plans, but we did talk about going somewhere in 2009.

In November 2008 Jonquil and I went to see the Chipperfield Dramatic Group's production to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the end of the Great War. Two historians from the village had worked with a script-writer from the Dramatic Society to produce an evening of drama and song reliving the Great War period in Chipperfiled. I immediately though that we could do something similar in Abbots Langley as we had a vibrant History Society and some good Drama and Music groups.

2009 - VERDUN

In June Simmo, Phil, Michael and I visited Verdun and explored the battlefields around the town. This time Phil drove, and there was little local interest in the trip, however we did spend some time on research on the route to and from Verdun.

I continued my research throughout the year and in June Pam Rastall (Administrator at St Lawrence Church, Abbots Langley) contacted me to show me a folder of information that had been researched by her colleague Lorraine Perry. Lorraine had found out something about all of the men on the War Memorial, and from her work I realised that John Owen (for who I could find nothing) was a brother of Walter Owen. Where had all of this information come from ? The answer was that the Roll of Honour for the Parish was published in the Parish Magazine on a monthly basis throughout the Great War. The photo-copied Roll of Honour that Audrey Ashby had given to me in 2008, was a copy

of the January 1917 Parish Magazine listing. I had now found out where this information had come from, but for some reason the information for 1918was missing.

In the summer of 2009 I was invited to join the committee of the Abbots Langley Local History Society, and at my first meeting in September I introduced the idea of Back to the Front to the Committee. My ideas were well supported.

2010 - THINGS START TO BUILD

In February Lorraine Perry discovers the missing Roll of Honour for all of the months in 1918, so now we have a complete set. This allows me to expand my research as I now have a list of about 450 names. In an attempt to see if anyone in the local area has any letters, diaries, photos or information about the local soldiers in the Great War I launch Back to the Front in the local press — the monthly "Villager", "My Abbots" magazine and Watford Observer, but I have absolutely zero response. In October I visit the village of Pirton, near Hitchin where a group has researched the stories of the men from the village and have published them in a book, which I purchase. The book is enormous. It's A4 size and similar in dimensions to an old style telephone directory.

2011 - MORE TRIPS & MORE RESEARCH

In April I give my first WW1 talk, when I present the story of Walter Owen, the "Man from the Bottom of My Garden" to the Abbots Langley Local History Society at their monthly meeting. In May and June I make my first attempt to get a "Back to the Front" Team together, and invite some people that have shown an interest in helping to a meeting at Mainspring. Rhydian Powell (a friend), Richard Kennell (from the ALLHS) and Lorraine Perry (from St Lawrence Church) attend, but we find that to get to any more detail for the research we will need to subscribe to such organisations as Ancestry.com, and people either can't afford this, don't have a computer of haven't got the time. So the Team approach doesn't really get off the ground.

In May I receive an invitation from Julie Moore at the University of Hertfordshire's Heritage Hub to attend a get together at the University in June – "Remembering the First World War". The University has realised that the 100th anniversary of the Great War is on the horizon, in 2014-18, and that there are a number of disparate groups in Herts, Beds, Cambs and Essex all researching various aspects of the War. The University is Heritage Lottery Funded to encourage and co-ordinate these local groups and individuals, and at the first meeting they put on an excellent selection of cheese and wine, and a large number of people show up. I have been attending the WFA at Little Chalfont and have also found out that there is a group at Harpenden, and have a few contacts who are undertaking similar research, but the evening at the University is fantastic and I network with a lot of others and make a lot of new friends, all with a similar interest.

In June, I am contacted by Mollie Curry, a lady in her nineties who is living in sheltered accommodation at Tanners Wood in Greenways. Her mother was a nurse in the First World War and married Doctor Alment from Abbots Langley during the War and returned to live for the rest of her life in the village. I arrange to visit her. At last we have a womea to research. When we meet, Mollie passes me a set of photocopies of her mother's diaries from 1915-1917 when she served as a nurse on the Western Front. The originals are held in conditioned storage at the University of Leeds Brotherton Library. I spend a lot of time over the next nine months transcribing the diaries into Microsoft WORD.

In late June, Simmo, Michael and I make another trip to the Somme. This time Phil can't get away so the three of us go without him. When we return I make my first visit to the Hertfordshire Archives at Hertford, and spend a day photographing the Watford Observer, Hertfordshire Advertiser and Watford Illustrated newspapers from 1914-1918. I now have more than enough to work on for the foreseeable future. In November 2011 Jonquil and I make a trip to Ypres and visit many of the WW1 sites. We are there on the 11th November, which is Armistice Day, and of course commemorates the 11th Hour of the 11th Day of the 11th Month of the 11th Year – which was the reason for our trip. After attending the Remembrance Day Service at the centre of Ypres on 11th, we visited a very small cemetery at Brandhoek. Whilst we were there, looking for the grave of a local man, a car pulled up and two soldiers got out, opened the boot, and picked up a wreath. They walked in to the cemetery and laid the wreath at a grave, stepped back, saluted and returned to their car. We walked over and out of interest photographed the grave and the wreath. When we got home I checked out the person in the grave and found it was Captain Oliver Travers from Bedmond.

2012 MORE RESEARCH & MORE INTEREST IN THE PROJECT

In January the University of Hertfordshire held their second Networking Meeting, and again it was a great success. I attended, as did two of my colleagues from the Harpenden WFA – Simon Goodwin (who is researching Flamstead) and Doug Kirby (who is researching members of his family). The University had brought in specialists to introduce the attendees to such things as working with radio, getting books published, building web sites and working with WW1 theatre. All subjects were of interest.

Having spent several years collecting masses of information and building my knowledge of all aspects of the Great War through reading, attending talks and seminars and just general research, I now started to try to get some order into the work. Having been introduced to the Parish Magazines which included the Rolls of Honour on a monthly basis throughout the period of the War, I spent a morning at the St Lawrence Church office and photographed every page, so that I could work from the data at my own leisure at home. And that's what I did. I started putting together a spreadsheet which listed every single name on the Rolls of Honour, and then month by month recorded the status of each man. I could also add some names that I'd found which weren't listed by the Church Secretary at the time of the War. This proved invaluable going forward and additional columns were subsequently added with extra information, and new tabs which included records of the individuals' addresses and occupations.

Having submitted press releases to "The Villager", this had been picked up by the editor, Julie Barton. Julie was a member of the local Royal British Legion group, Secretary of the Kings Langley Museum and History Society (KLMHS), and was a Kings Langley Parish Councillor. In April 2012 I was invited to attend a meeting of the KLMHS committee to present how I had approached my research at Abbots Langley. The committee were very interested and amazed at how much work I had done. In the end they realised that they could not match this work as nobody had the time or commitment to do so, and asked if I could research the Kings Langley men for them. I agreed to help. And the Archivists at the KLMHS arranged for me to have access to the Rolls of Honour that had been published in the Parish Magazines at All Saints Church in the village. In addition, Julie, Beverley Ross and Jackie Tuffs agreed to help with the research, and Back to the Front Kings Langley was formed.

In May 2012 I attended a seminar at the University of Hertfordshire presented by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and started to understand the process and what was required if the project applied for funding. In June the University arranged their third networking event, which was again very well attended.

The ALLHS held their bi-annual Archive Day in July at the Methodist Hall at Abbots Langley, and I put together a Back to the Front table. Once again there was very little interest, and it was quite depressing. However Brenda Southorn (President of the prestigious Abbots Langley Gilbert * Sullivan Society) spoke with me, and asked if I could meet with her and see if we could motivate the many very good local singers to perform "Oh What A Lovely War". I did meet with Brenda and members of the ALGSS later in the year, but we found it difficult to see how such a production could be financed, and whilst Brenda and I continued to informally discuss a future production, based on something similar to that which I'd seen at Chipperfield back in 2008.

From 2013 to 2019

The pace of activity ramped up in 2013 and it is impractical to document everything that took place. However, several significant things happened in 2013.

- 1. A Back to the Front Team started to emerge and a few meetings took place
- 2. On 11th September the first meeting of the Kings Langley Back to the Front Team took place. This turned out to a meeting of the full Parish Council, and led by the Chairman Ron Smith, which took he task of fully supporting the project, and started to organise events for the area for 2014. Sadly Ron died soon after the Candlelit Vigil at Kings Langley in August 2014, and the impetus for Back to the Front Kings Langley somewhat diminished. However the success of the 2014 events at Kings Langley and the absence of any significant events at Abbots Langley meant that there was a surge of support for Back to the Front at Abbots Langley and a clamour for the project to do more in 2018 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the War.
- 3. On 8th December I met with Revd Jo Spreadbury and her team at St Lawrence Church at Abbots Langley to discuss the project. It appeared that the Revd Spreadbury wanted to do her own thing in 2014, and we agreed to go our own ways. So without the support of the Church, little interest from the Abbots Langley Parish Council, and little interest from the public at Abbots Langley at any events where Back to the Front had appeared, the main interest of the project turned to Kings Langley, where there was outstanding support, for activities in 2014. Ironically this turn of events led to a resurgence of interest in how Abbots Langley would commemorate in 2018.

In 2014 two major events were planned for Kings Langley. Firstly a two day Exhibition was arranged at the Kings Langley Community Centre, and secondly a Candle-lit Vigil was staged at the Church Garden and around the War memorial at All Saints Church in the village. Since my school-days I had remembered the words of the Secretary of State, Sir Edward Grey on the eve of War in August 1914 when he said "The Lamps are going out all over Europe", and thought that we could do something to mark this event. I suggested to the Kings Langley team that we should have a candle-lit vigil, and at 11.00pm on the evening of 4th August, 100 years on from the expiration of the ultimatum sent to Germany, we should extinguish the lighting for the event and leave the crowd holding individual candles for a couple of minutes of contemplation. The Kings Langley Parish Council took this on and arranged for an evening of song, poems, prayer at the Church Garden, and Chairman Ron Smith organised for lights to be rigged up on the Church Spire which could be extinguished at 11.00pm. The event was attended by around 800 people, and the impact and effect was fantastic. Abbots Langley people were invited to take part in the event, and in the weeks following enquired of the project why nothing similar had been organised for Abbots Langley. The seeds were set for 2018.

Throughout 2015 and 2016 I completed the research work (as much as the research will ever be completed), and started planning a series of events to culminate in2018. In 2015 and 2016 WW1 events were cancelled as interest had been so high in 2014, there was an adverse reaction in the

following period. Undoubtedly things would ramp up in 2018 as the 100th anniversary of the Armistice approached, and interest would increase once again, fanned by media interest. I planned to hold fire until 2018, but to get together a group to take things forward starting in 2017. I had learned from previous attempts to get a Team together. I decided that I would select people that had shown an interest, represented various organisations, could work together, and could actually make a difference in getting things done. We didn't have a Ron Smith in Abbots Langley, and our Parish Council didn't function in the same way, but we did have interested Councillors, and also had interested members from other organisations that could come together. I also wanted a project which would engage other groups in the parish to do their own thing as part of an overall programme of events. So the Project Team would co-ordinate a programme and not be responsible for doing everything itself.

The new Back to the Front Team started to form in February 2017. Delva O'Regan (Secretary of the ALLHS) and Jane Lay (Parish Councillor and member of the ALLHS) had been involved with the project for many years. They continued with the new Committee. I invited Pam Lewis to join. Pam was the Chair of the Abbots Langley Branch of the Royal British Legion, and had engaged my help with the Legion's organisation of a candle-lit vigil to commemorate the Battle of the Somme and Jutland in 2016. The meetings in 2017 merely formulated the plan, and other members gradually joined the team. Revd Peter Waddell from St Lawrence Church attended the first Committee Meeting and explained that he was fully in support, but couldn't make meetings, and proved a great supporter through the rest of the project. Geoff Cunnington (the Chair of the Western Front Association's Harpenden Branch) joined and then Elaine Johnson (Arts Development Officer at Three Rivers Council) agreed to join. Elaine had organised a couple of local events for the Council and had shown a lot of interest in the project. In November 2017 Pam Lewis stood down as Chair of the RBL and her place on the Team was taken by Liz Burns, who had taken on the role of Chair at the RBL. In mid-2017 Tim Perkins (the Clerk of the Council at Abbots Langley) was invited to join, but was only able to attend a few meetings and have a limited involvement. Finally Wendy Ball joined to represent Bedmond Village. A programme of events was developed, a budget established and a target for funding worked out, and applications made to various funding authorities. The grant applications were successful and (mainly) the plans that I had developed in the quieter days of 2015 and 2016 started to be implemented throughout 2018.

As a result we had a very successful project. There was tremendous interest from the village and the parish as a whole. Each successive activity was planned to interact with and build on previous activities. The information assembled from research was used to create stories and find out where soldiers lived; stickers were distributed to the houses where soldiers lived together with information packs about the soldiers that lived at the properties; walks were arranged to follow routes where the walkers could see the stickers; the information packs contained handbills and programmes detailing all of the other project events and so it went on. Schools were involved, a book was produced and distributed at the Project's exhibition at Abbots Langley, at which those attending were encouraged to book seats for the Project production "Only Remembered", and so everything reached a crescendo with Remembrance Sunday, where promoted by powerful media support and interest a crowd of around 2,000 attended the Service at the War Memorial at St Lawrence Church – probably four times the normal attendance.

Around 200 individuals took part in the project, and the financial support was received from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Abbots Langley Parish Council, Three Rivers District Council and Herts County Council (Sara Bedford's Locality Grant)

Roger Yapp
Project Leader, Back to the Front Project