

VILLAGE ECHOES

The village postman, a road-mender, two gardeners, five farm-workers and a professional soldier – these were the ten men from our parish who died during the Battle of the Somme which began 100 years ago on Saturday 1st July 1916. The first day alone cost the British army over 57,000 casualties, of whom 19,240 were killed – the worst loss of life ever on a single day in the history of our country, and the aspect upon which much attention is often focussed nowadays as a simple point of reference.

For the people of Goudhurst and Kilndown, the killing became a matter of local concern two days later when half of the 6th Battalion of The Buffs, our local regiment, joined in an attack at 3.30am on 3rd July. Over-hasty and inadequate preparation, coupled with serious failings in communications – major factors contributing to the disaster on 1st July – were repeated, resulting in a 75% casualty rate for The Buffs: Ernest Goldsmith and William Maitland from our parish were among the dead. Some tactical and strategic lessons began to be learned and applied after this, bringing elements of success to certain attacks later in July and August, though many lives continued to be lost, including John Barrow from Kilndown. But nothing could prevent many of the casualties caused by persistent shelling of troops going about their daily duties in the trenches: the postman, Sydney Osborne, was killed in this way on only his fourth day at the front. By contrast, our professional soldier, Ernest Brabon, had landed in France way back on 13th August 1914 and come safely through the sort of difficult assaults often reserved for his élite Grenadier Guards battalion – but their attack near Delville Wood cost him his life on 14th September 1916.

George Baker, whose name lives on at properties once owned by his father in Ladham Road, was fatally wounded when his battalion went over the top on 25th September. Ferocious fighting between 5th and 7th October led to the last four deaths among our soldiers on the Somme: a single attack accounted for Percy Penfold of the Royal West Kents and two more men from the ill-fated 6th Buffs, James Luck and William Vousden. Frederick Hammond died at the Schwaben Redoubt, a German strongpoint near the site now occupied by the massive Thiepval Memorial to the Missing – on which his name is carved with 72,000 others. This will be the focal point of formal commemoration ceremonies on 1st July 2016.

The fighting and killing dragged on and, by 18th November, the date officially given as the end of the Battle of the Somme, the Allies had pushed the Germans back off several square miles of French territory. The total casualty list, taking both sides into account, exceeded one million men.

All the men and women from our parish who died in the Great War are being individually commemorated by a series of brief ceremonies held at the Goudhurst and Kilndown war memorials (as applicable) 100 years to the day after their death – see details in the current and subsequent issues of this magazine.

Local History Society
Email: info@goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org
Website: www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org