

Finding the fallen

CLIVE HARRIS asks for readers' help in his efforts to remember Addicks who fell in the First World War

"The majority of the boys left to take part in the greater game overseas" - Charlton Athletic handbook 1927/28

Next year sees the start of four years' centenary commemorations for the 1914-18 war.

For many of us this war is from a bygone age, a black-and-white age, where our innocent relatives smiled back at the camera and marched without hesitation into the largest, most costly conflict our nation has experienced.

Seldom do we pause to try and understand why they went to war. Scarcely do we consider the real and proper threat that faced their way of life in the summer of 1914.

As a nation we seem content, instead, to focus solely on the casualty lists that dominate our modern perception. We are aware of the Somme, Passchendaele and Gallipoli, but only in that they conjure up thoughts of misery mud and machine guns.

During the recent debacle against our Bermondsey neighbours, a fellow east-stander commented that "the pitch looked like the first day of the Somme".

Unaware of my day job as a military historian, he appeared not to know that the battle of July 1st, 1916, the most costly in human terms in British army history, was fought on a balmy summer day and that no-man's-land was dominated by uncultivated crops, as opposed



First club secretary John "Jim" Mackenzie (right), pictured in the 1906/07 Lewisham League third division champions team group, joined the merchant navy in 1908 and went down with his ship in 1917

to the lunar landscape our psyche has us believe.

This aside, I understood what he was getting at.

So what has all this got to do with our club? At the time we were a thriving amateur side that had risen sharply through the local leagues in the nine years prior to the war.

No less than 12 out of the 13 leagues contested had been won, alongside five cup competitions, by the time the AGM was held at the Bugle Horn pub on May 28th, 1913.

This date I single out as it was decided to make the jump from junior to senior amateur football, a significant decision in our history and one no doubt made easier by the "Woolwich rejects", as our grandfathers called them, moving north of the river to Highbury.

One notable absentee was the founding club secretary and original 1905 East Street boy, John Mackenzie, a native of Dundee. He had been a key member of Charlton's early days before he went to sea in 1908, a

voyage from which he was never to return.

When war was declared on the August 4th, 1914, it was intended that sporting life should carry on. Charlton made their first FA Cup appearance in 1915, losing a replay 2-1 to Dartford amid a controversial decision to give up home field advantage in pursuit of increased gate revenue. Even then, it seems, we were guilty of not taking the competition seriously!

Shortly after this, falling gates due to extended working hours at the Woolwich Arsenal and growing numbers of supporters and players enlisting in the colours, forced the suspension of the club for the duration of the war.

As the 1938 publication *The History of Charlton Athletic 1903-1937*, by "Charltonian", puts it: "Then the war put a stop to the activities of the club but a restart was made in 1917-18, when the club made an even greater name than previously."

Any Charlton fan with an interest in our history will know of Richard Redden's excellent tome, which informs us "thirty staff enlisted in the Army during the war and three were killed".

The late and sorely missed Colin Cameron, club historian par excellence, quotes the figure as "four were never to return".

Perhaps fewer Charlton fans will own a copy of Anthony Bristowe's *Famous Football Clubs - Charlton Athletic*, published in 1951, which also puts the number of war dead as three.

Often a subject for discussion between fellow supporters and military history buffs Ben Hayes, Nick Hannam and myself, we wondered why these men had never been named.

Was it enough for them to be recorded as merely a statistic in our club's rich and at times illustrious past? Surely, after

almost 100 years, it was time to bring them in from the cold and add them to the Albert "Mosky" Mills, Sam Bartrams, Eddie Firmanis, Derek Hales and Clive Mendocas of our past. After all, was not their sacrifice off the field equal to many of our heroes' achievements on it?

Finally, part-prompted by Colin's sad passing and alongside an exciting project to unveil a permanent war memorial at The Valley we are attempting to "do our bit" to rectify this.

To achieve our aim of naming the three (or perhaps four) men, we need your help.

Supporting Charlton Athletic is often as a result of family legacy. Stories passed down by generation from grandfather to father to son often contain nuggets of information not found in the history books.

In the loft those discarded boxes of fading programs and club handbooks may offer up the clues we need.

When our club was at its lowest ebb, many of us remember the frequent raids on a decaying, deserted Valley. These often turned up paperwork left discarded by our then owners in their haste to uproot us to the far flung corner of SE25.

Did any of us pick up ancient minutes or memorandums that may hold the key?

Some of us, like the Merryweather family, whose relative Joe was a key member of the club's early history, still attend the Valley regularly.

Did your relative play before the 1940s, and do you have any ephemera that might assist us (to view, not to keep, I feel obliged to add)?

Did any of you know supporters and journalists Morley Farror or Harold Deacon, who wrote a serialised history of the club for the handbooks

between 1967 and 1969?

These articles were very comprehensive yet concise and hinted of a greater knowledge that editorial space did not allow.

We are cautiously optimistic we can solve this, as three of the four are believed to be the following.

Private 245365 Fred Chick, Royal West Kent Hussars, was attached to the 13th Middlesex Regiment. Fred was killed on August 31st, 1916, during the fighting for High Wood on the Somme. He appears in the 1913/14 team photograph dressed as a trainer and is buried in Caterpillar Valley Cemetery just outside Longueval.

He is frequently visited today by Charlton fans on battlefield pilgrimages to the Somme, and scarfs and rosettes have been seen left on his grave.

Ship's Cook John Mackenzie, SS Heron. He was 28 when his ship was sunk on September 30th 1917, residing at 5 York Street. Our founding club secretary joined the merchant navy in November 1908 and is commemorated on the Tower Hill War Memorial for all merchant naval personnel lost at sea.

Our third casualty is believed to be an Arthur Brown, who served in the army and survived the war but died while overseas of the influenza pandemic that proved as costly as the war itself.

His not uncommon name, alongside lack of appearance in any named team photograph, is making it difficult to confirm his true identity and any help in this would be greatly appreciated.

Visits to the local archives and Colindale newspaper library are planned in the coming months, during which we are hopeful of uncovering further information.

There is no doubt that the Great War will feature heavily in the media as we move through 2014-18.



Fred Chick, centre with moustache, pictured in the 1913/14 line-up. He died on the Somme in 1916

Some of it will, I am sure, trot out the same old tired, ill-informed clichés. Some of it, I hope, will provide thoughtful objective insights into why and how this generation that threw off the constraints of Victorian Britain, pioneered flight, the motor car, achieved such far-reaching social reform and partied as hard as those in that lived in the 60s, went to war.

Our club's role in the war was not exceptional but typical. Thirty men went, four did not return. Nationally, the figure was six million who went and

713,000 who did not return.

To put it another way five out of six men came home. The Great War shaped and changed far more lives than it took.

When our boys in red and white came home, they soon identified a new one. They called it The Valley and in 1919 moved in under the guidance and financial assistance of club president and local MP Sir Ioin Hamilton Benn DSO, an honour second only to the Victoria Cross for bravery in the face of the enemy and awarded for his part in the dramatic St George's Day

raid on Zeebrugge.

This move shaped our club's identity that we hold so dear today. It paved the way for Jimmy Seed, whose playing career was interrupted by his service in the 8th West Yorkshire Regiment, during which time he was gassed twice), and "our Sam", whose father L/Cpl S Bartram was awarded the Military Medal for bravery on the Somme, to lead us 75,031 crowds and Wembley triumph.

The last word must go to an extract from Anthony Bristowe's book that makes reference to a rare 5-1 defeat to Liege of Belgium on Armistice Day 1947.

"They had had spent the morning walking around great war cemeteries in the pouring rain, but this depressing experience cannot account for such a clear cut victory by a much faster side."

The manager and flaxen-haired goalkeeper would have known the significance of these sacred places. Now 100 years on let's hope we can at last bring the memory of our boys home.

Lest we forget.

If you have any information that could help Clive, he can be contacted by email at enquiries@battle-honours.co.uk.

Sources

The History of Charlton Athletic 1905-1990 – Richard Redden (1990); Battle for The Valley – Rick Everitt (1992); The Greater Game – Clive Harris (2007); The Valiant 500 – Colin Cameron (1992); History & Highlights of Charlton Athletic – Chas Cooper (1946); History of Charlton Athletic 1903/1937 – Charltonian (1938); Famous Football Clubs – Charlton Athletic – Anthony Bristow (1951); Charlton Athletic official club handbooks (1967, 1968, 1969).