

# WFA SUFFOLK BRANCH

## Branch Briefing

October 2024

Our Website : <https://suffolk-wfa.org.uk>

Our Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/WFASuffolk>



## Tonight's talk

Timothy Bowman : Irish recruitment to the British Armed Forces

### Major Tonie Holt David Hedges

Many older hands will have heard of Tonie. Unfortunately he has died at the ripe age of 91. There follows the obituary that I have copied from the Telegraph, I hope they do not mind.

Tonie was a major player in the rekindling of interest in Battlefield Tours post WW2. The obit is not correct in saying they were the first commercial battlefield tour company in the world. When I opened up Maison Blanche souterraine in 2004 we found 1000 items of graffiti on the walls, of which about sixty are customers of Thomas Cook tours, no doubt many of the WW1 veterans, who wrote their names on the walls, adding dates from the 1920's and 30's (they seem to have stopped visiting around 1937 as war loomed).

But it is true Tonie and his wife Valmai started touring again post WW2, inspired by Rose Coombs book *Before Endeavours Fade*, the first post war guided tour book of the Western Front.

This was a time of much anti-war sentiment with Vietnam, Make Love Not War (which I seemed to miss out on), Lions Led by Donkeys etc.

Indeed the buglars at the Menin Gate would often play for many evenings with not a single person listening.

I first went on one of Tonie's early tours to Normandy in about 1984, followed my many more including The Somme, Arnhem, Waterloo etc. The Normandy tour included several veterans who, when presented with a dish of oysters, exclaimed 'we're not eating this muck !'

One tour Tonie had arranged a reception with the local French Resistance veterans. Unfortunately we were being filmed by a German film crew from a TV channel with a theme of "Crazy groups going on crazy holidays" !! Needless to say they were not well received by the French and soon departed.

## Major Tonie Holt

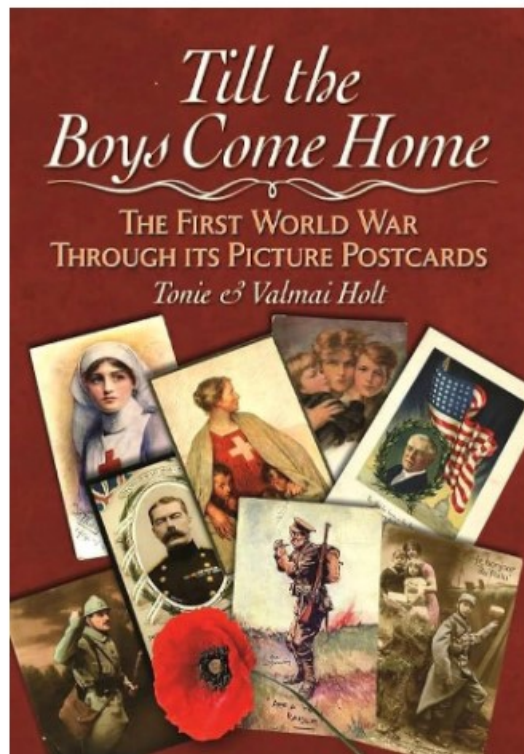
Pioneer of battlefield tours who helped thousands of people make pilgrimages to war graves

MAJOR TONIE HOLT, who has died aged 91, was, with his wife Valmai, a pioneer of the modern battlefield touring industry.



Holt: books on his postcard collections did well

It started with their collection of postcards from the First World War, which became *Picture Postcards of the Golden Age: A Collector's Guide* (1971). Then with *Till the Boys Come Home: The Picture Postcards of the First World War* (1977), and *The Best of Fragments from France* by Capt Bruce Bairnsfather (1978, edited by the Holts) they found a gap in the market. Like many of the Holts' subsequent publications, these have rarely been out of print.



When they decided to lead a tour of Great War battlefields in partnership with their first publishers, Purnell & Sons, in order to promote their books, they also found a gap in the tourism industry.

Major & Mrs Holt's Battlefield Tours was the first commercial battlefield tour operator in the world. Over the next four decades they and their expert guides led groups to sites relating to the

Normandy landings, Arnhem, Vietnam, Gallipoli, the Dambusters' Raid, the American Civil War, South Africa, Colditz, Crete, Tunisia, and Egypt; in the 1990s they were among the first British tour operators in Crimea.

The Royal British Legion's head of Remembrance Travel, Colonel Piers Storie-Pugh, recalled that "with his expert eye for detail, the ability to bring the historical past to life and his engaging personality, Tonic was the most consummate battlefield tour operator."

Naturally understated, and generous with his time, whether through his commercial tours or by his quiet philanthropic work, Holt helped thousands to undertake pilgrimages to the graves of friends and family members.

Whenever possible they visited Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries and memorials, and encouraged veterans and their families to attend remembrance services such as the Menin Gate on November 11 each year, to keep alive what they regarded as the true spirit of Armistice Day.

Tonie Holt was born on December 10 1932 in Portsmouth, where his father was a Royal Marines musician, and educated at Sir Roger Manwood's grammar school. He excelled in the CCF, was a school prefect and won his colours for hockey.

Holt attended Sandhurst, where he played hockey for the Army, then having gained a BSc (Eng) he was commissioned into the Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers in 1953.

After service in Germany, and further study at the Army staff college and the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, Holt and his wife decided there was another life to be had besides soldiering in peacetime, and he resigned his commission. They had both begun writing at their schools, and their first published works were for local papers and then for local commercial radio.

In 1984, when the Royal British Legion needed a pilgrimage organiser, Storie-Pugh turned to the Holts. This blossomed into the government's war widows' grant-in-aid scheme, operated by the RBL under Storie-Pugh with guidance from the Holts, which funded war widows and ex-PoWs to travel overseas to pay their respects to family members and comrades.

Holt was also the driving force behind the campaign to save "Toc H" (Talbot House) in Poperinge, Belgium, and championed the preservation as a memorial of Lochnagar, a mine crater south of the village of La Boisselle which was blown up on July 1 1916 at the start of the Battle of the Somme and where a religious service is held each year.

He lent his weight to the creation of a museum at Pegasus Bridge over the Caen Canal at Ouistreham in Normandy, and is indirectly responsible for the other museums and hotels that have sprung up across Europe and in Turkey as a result of the burgeoning industry which the trailblazing Holts started.

Having sold the company in the late 1990s, the Holts continued to write and update a score of bestselling and award-winning guidebooks, doing their own research, travelling all the routes they recommended, visiting the memorials and cemeteries and taking all the photographs.

Arguably, however, their finest books were two biographies, *My Boy Jack?: The Search for Kipling's Only Son* (1998) about John Kipling, the only son of Rudyard Kipling, missing in action in 1915, and *The Biography of Captain Bruce Bairnsfather* (2000), a cartoonist of the First World War.

The Holts also indirectly gave birth to a subgenre of shipborne cruise lectures, which provided employment for retired Navy and Army officers, impecunious academics and would-be authors. Anxious to professionalise their business, in 2001 Holt became a founding patron of the Guild of Battlefield Guides.

In 1958 Holt married Valmai Williams, who survives him with their daughter and son.

**Major Tonie Holt, born December 10 1932, died September 5 2024**

## **RETURN TO SHUTTLEWORTH !**

Ed Erbes has visited the Shuttleworth Collection and has sent these pictures of fine WW1 aircraft .....



..... which has me wondering if we might have a return to a Branch Outing early next year — suggestions welcome !!!!

## DESERTERS Kelvin Dakin

Following last month's talk by Andrea Hetherington I was reminded of the story of James Gaskin and Levi Smith of Bramford.

When I first started researching the names on our memorial, over ten years ago now, that of "**James Gaskin, 1st Battalion, Suffolk Regiment**" was one that immediately caused problems. No CWGC records of a man of that name in the Suffolk Regiment existed. It was possible that this was one of a few errors that occurred in the preparation of the memorial after the war. Records kept at the time acknowledged that when the memorial was completed mistakes had been made but without any details of what they were. These errors were never corrected, with the apparent agreement of the families concerned.

Further investigations into James Gaskin revealed a family of travellers with a close association with the village – some with that surname are buried in our churchyard and lawn cemetery. To cut a long story short I concluded, without any great conviction, that "James Gaskin" should be "William Gaskin" not of the Suffolk Regiment but who had served with the Essex Regiment. There could be many reasons why such fundamental errors were made, not least of all that the family moved around from their habitual base in the parish and at the time of compiling the names there was no-one around to verify details.

It is certain, from official records, that William Gaskin was the son of Louisa Gaskin of Caravans, Bramford Meadow, Henniker Road, and that he died of wounds at the 47th Casualty Clearing Station on the 17th April 1918. It may be that he was named William James or James William, but normally known as James. However, James Gaskin did appear in certain other records:

Ipswich Evening Star, 14th November 1916

### GIPSIES AS DEFAULTERS

At the Samford Sessions today (Tuesday) before Capt M Edgar (chairman), Capt H E Lacon, the Hon S Tollemache, Mr G O Fison and Mr R Corder.

James Gaskin and Levi Smith, two young gipsies, were charged with having failed to register under the Military Services Act.

Police Constable Winterbourne (Bramford) deposed having raided a gipsy encampment in Henniker Road and securing the defendants.

Sergeant-Major Hills of the Recruiting Office, Ipswich said that the defendants were deemed to have been enlisted on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1916, but of course as they had failed to register, they had received no notice papers.

The Bench imposed a fine of £2 in each case, £1 being awarded to the constable and his assistants for their help in securing them. The defendants were then handed over to the military.

Both James Gaskin and Levi Smith are recorded on a Roll of Honour compiled by the former Bramford Branch of the British Legion – James as being killed but Levi as a survivor. Levi turns up in the records again in the Police Gazette of 13th February 1917 listed as a deserter. At the time he was No 194515 with the 68th Divisional Artillery Training Company and had absconded while at Diss on the 4th January 1917, described as aged 23¾ and 5ft 7½in tall. His trade was "Showman" and he had enlisted at Ipswich on the 2nd March 1916 - ie the date when the Military Service Act came into effect. He had an appendicitis scar listed as a distinguishing feature. It seems that whatever time he spent in uniform, he never served abroad.

In the 1939 Register, Levi Smith, born 24th July 1893, is recorded living at 149 Henniker Road – a "Hutment in field" with his wife Kathleen. He worked as an "iron and metal merchant – scrap". He died in Ipswich in 1966. Henniker Road is now part of Ipswich Borough – a small residential caravan site still exists there today.

## HUTTED HISTORIES — UPCOMING TALKS

Pinched from Taff's latest Great War Huts newsletter, here is their speaker programme held on the 4th Wednesday of every month at Brook Farm Camp.

16th October: Tim Godden - Understanding British War Cemeteries

27th November: Helen Frost - Women's Land Army

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### LEST WE FORGET Kelvin Dakin

#### October 1914 Casualties at Neuve Chapelle

#### War Dairy entries, 2nd Battalion, Suffolk Regiment

October 27th 2.30am

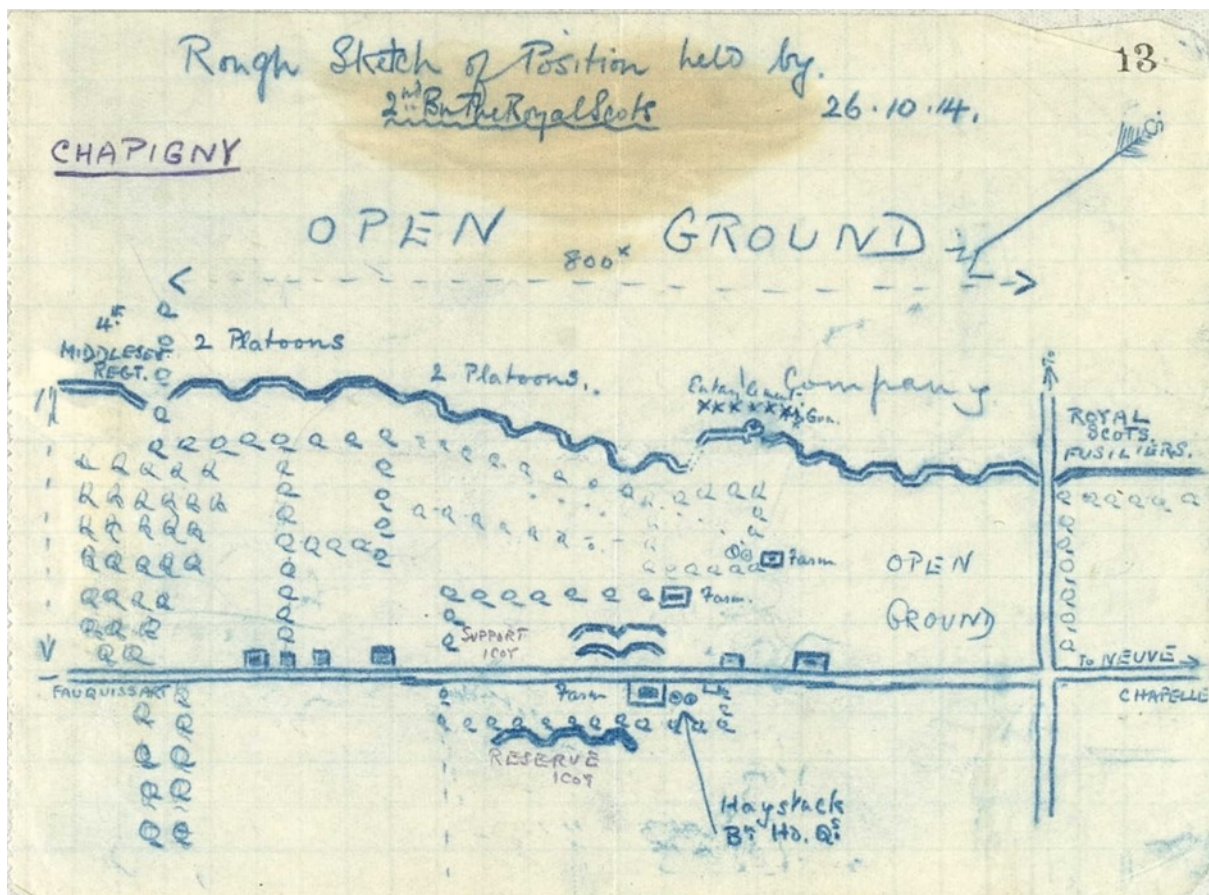
*"Paraded to relieve ROYAL SCOTS and marched to their position EAST and parallel to RUE TOL-LOGE<sup>1</sup>.*

*A & B coys were put into firing line; which was about 400y from the enemy. C & D coys were in the Reserve about 600y further back.*

*In the middle of reserve coys behind two haystacks was Battn HQ.*

*Rations etc were issued in barn. All quiet during the day. At 7.0am heavy burst of firing from both sides. At 11.30pm the same thing occurred again."*

(A sketch map found in the 2nd Bn Royal Scots War Diary of the positions that 2nd Suffolk took over at Neuve Chapelle on the 27th October)



## October 28<sup>th</sup>

*"Lieut FRASER<sup>2</sup> shot through the lungs by a rifle bullet. Pte Gray killed by a rifle bullet<sup>3</sup>."*

## October 30<sup>th</sup>

*"Improved entrenchments.*

*Two ½ hour bursts of fire during the night. Heard enemy digging.*

*Pte's Smith<sup>4</sup> and Pryke<sup>5</sup> killed by rifle bullets."*

Notes:

(1) Spelling error - Rue de TILLELOY

(2) 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Eric Gordon Fraser recovered from his wounds and went on to become CO of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion in the BEF of the Second World War (see right)

(3) 3/9198, Charles William Gray, of Vauxhall, London. Commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial.

(4) 6304, John Smith, of Ashley, Newmarket. Commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial and the Ashley-cum-Silverley War Memorial

(5) 6788 Charles Pryke, of Naughton, Suffolk. Commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial and the Naughton Village War Memorial.

Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser - Friday 31 May 1940



**THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD ....**

**Talk at the Norwich Branch  
Tuesday 5th November**

**5th November Bryn Hammond - Franco-British co-operation in practice.**

**Our next month's talk  
Wednesday 13th November**

**Ross Beadle : Cambrai**

Please send any contributions for the *Branch Briefing* to:  
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telephone: 01394 272677 and email:david.j.hedges@btopenworld.com  
Next Committee meeting: tba  
Approach a committee member if you want any issue raised.