

WFA SUFFOLK BRANCH

Branch Briefing
August 2022

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Tonight's talk

Ken Delve : RFC/RAF IN WW1

WHEN THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN A SWORD Kim Smith

Kim Smith reads between the lines of war poet Edmund Blunden



Edmund Blunden in
uniform during
the Great War

When extracts from a previously unpublished verse were recited by Boris Johnson to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day, it shone a long-overdue light on Long Melford war poet Edmund Blunden.

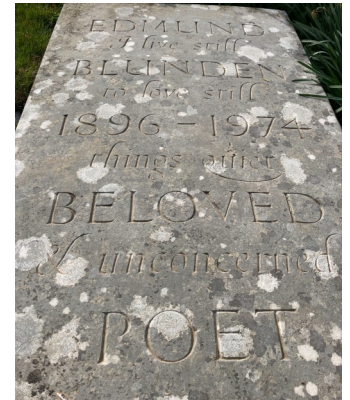
Although he penned mostly first-hand accounts of his experiences as a soldier in the First World War, he was moved to compose *V Day* (Victory Day) to mark the surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945.

Its words are not triumphalist, but reflect the perspective of someone who survived the horrors of the Somme and Ypres and ends with a line of poignant realism: "*We have come through.*"

Blunden, who is buried in the graveyard of the magnificent Holy Trinity Church, spent more time in the trenches than any other First World War poet. However, he was overshadowed by Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and the like until the Imperial War Museum retrieved *V Day* from its archives.

Ironically, it was Blunden himself who brought Owen great critical acclaim when he published a new collection of the tragic second lieutenant's work in 1931. It aroused an interest in the 25-year-old – who was killed exactly one week before the signing of the Armistice – which has never subsided.

Blunden's own Great War poetry was more restrained than that of Sassoon or Owen, but his hatred of the conflict and his grief for the dead was just as intense. He also expressed dismay at the destruction of the French countryside, a theme missing from the output of his contemporaries. He was unusual, too, for acknowledging that amid the slaughter there were moments of happiness.



His grave in Holy Trinity churchyard, Long Melford

After the Treaty of Versailles was ratified on 28 June 1919, thus officially ending hostilities, he claimed he only survived because his short stature made him an inconspicuous target.

Edmund Charles Blunden was born the son of two head teachers in London in 1896, moving with his family to Kent shortly afterwards. He won a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford, but postponed going to university as he was commissioned into the Royal Sussex Regiment in 1915, serving in France and Belgium from 1916 to 1919. In January 1917 he was awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry after bringing supplies of hand grenades to the front line under heavy fire in November 1916.

In 1928 Blunden published his chronicle of the First World War, *Undertones of War*, which gained him a wide reputation that was further enhanced by his collection *The Poems of Edmund Blunden 1914-1930*, published in 1930.

Between the wars Blunden earned his living as a literary journalist, as a Professor of English Literature at Tokyo University and as a fellow and tutor of English at Merton College, Oxford, from 1931-1943. After leaving Merton, Blunden twice worked for the *Times Literary Supplement* before being appointed Emeritus professor of English Literature at Hong Kong University in 1953. He won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1956, and returned to England in the early 1960s. He was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1966, but he was forced to resign in 1968 due to ill health.

His final years were spent with his third wife, Claire Poynting, and their four daughters in Grade 2-listed Hall Mill House in Hall Street, Long Melford, now a successful bed and breakfast known simply as The Mill. Living opposite Holy Trinity Church, he was inspired in 1966 to write what is regarded as the seminal guide to the cathedral-like place of worship.



The poet's home is now a sought-after bed and breakfast property called Mill House



A plaque hangs outside Mill House celebrating the Blunden link



A new development in the village has a street named after him

In 1951 Blunden was made a Commander of the British Empire in recognition of his work. He died of a heart attack at Hall Mill House in January 1974. He was 77. In a moving tribute at his funeral, Private AF Beeney, who served under Blunden as a regimental runner, laid a wreath of poppies on his coffin.

Eleven years after his passing, he was among 16 war poets commemorated on a stone at Poets' Corner in Westminster. The inscription it bears came from a verse by Wilfred Owen. It reads: "*My subject is war. The poetry is in the pity.*"

Aside from Blunden's poetry, he is remembered as an avid cricketer, a sport he eulogised in his 1944 book *Cricket Country*. The charming tome conveys the character and appeal of the game. Blunden's biographer Philip Ziegler went as far as describing his devotion as fanatical.

No less than George Orwell, another wordsmith with Suffolk links, reviewed the book and called Blunden "a true cricketer". He explained: "*The test of a true cricketer is that he shall prefer village cricket to 'good' cricket... [Blunden's] friendliest memories are of the informal village game, where everyone plays in braces, where the blacksmith is liable to be called away in mid-innings on an urgent job, and sometimes, about the time when the light begins to fail, a ball driven for four kills a rabbit on the boundary.*"

Surely there can be no better evocation of Blunden's passion than that?

THE WESTERN FRONT FROM THE AIR Paul Smiddy

Raised on Biggles novels, and with a relative being one of Britain's earliest Aviation pioneers, it was almost inevitable I wanted to be a pilot; I have flown from the age of 16. No doubt help by Capt. WE Johns, my interest in WW1 is foremost in the air war.

My flying sport causes me to go to France several times in the Summer flying season, and if my destination is East of Paris it usually takes me over the Somme battlefields. Thus was the case in July, when I had cause to fly to Chateau Thierry, at the South West corner of the Champagne region. To the NW of that town, at Belleau, there is a magnificent memorial to the US troops in the Aisne-Marne campaign. This was visited in 2018 by the US President as part of the centenary commemorations.



Chateau Thierry
Monument

... and a Handley
Page 0/400 prop
on show there



But I am ahead of myself: on the way down, after an early start, I was probably not 100% alert when looking down I noticed the landscape showed unusual signs of human intervention. Looking more closely I soon recognised it as the Beaumont Hamel battlefield and the Newfoundland memorial. The closeness of the trench lines was very striking from the air. The majesty of Thiepval never fails to impress.

With Northern France having had as dry a summer as East Anglia, crop marks are particularly evident at the moment. And on my return I noticed significant signs of shell holes East of Albert. My British flying colleague had stopped at Albert on the way down (to clear customs), and had been engaged in conversation with an old French gent tinkering in a hangar on his flying machine (the French manufactured version of the WW2 Fiesler Storch), who assured him that there were tons of ironmongery (explosive or not) under the airfield itself. (There is now a large Airbus factory just North of the airfield).

As on every flight across the area, it reinforced what a narrow band the WW1 fighting in this sector encompassed – perhaps 20 miles across. One moment CWGC cemeteries are everywhere to be seen, and suddenly the landscape is empty of them.

Paul's pictures including the Newfoundland Memorial Park and the crater at La Boisselle



RE LAST MONTH'S CRISP FAMILY ARTICLE - NIGEL CRISP HAS ADDED FURTHER INFORMATION

Nigel Crisp

Just to thank you and Kim for your efforts in telling of my wife's grandfather in the WFA Briefing on Wednesday. The picture of the little chap in his mother's arms was Hilary's father Reg (who was in the RAMC in Malta during the WW2 siege).

Mention was made of the Kings Langley events but it was the Achiet le Grand gatherings organised by the Somme Remembrance Association which were perhaps the more memorable; in 2007 when the battlefield memorial was unveiled and again at the centenary in March 2017. At both remembrance events the SRA brought in the serving military from the Royal Anglian Regiment, their chaplain and a piped band. Plus family, Kings Langley folk and the two brickies who built the memorial (the masons as the French called them!) The French village folk laid on a good spread – wine, plenty to eat and they knew how to keep it going all afternoon.

With the concrete VC memorials that the government paid for over the centenary, the Kings Langley parish council paid for a second one that was taken to Achiet in 2017 and is now in place at the foot of the French War Memorial in the centre of the village; which is a bit of an honour. There are a few pictures attached if you are interested. We visited Achiet at the end of June this year – over the pandemic a load of wind turbines have 'grown-up' on the battlefield.



Achiet March
2017



Achiet le Grand
War Memorial



Achiet le Grand
battlefield

Just a plug! We also mentioned to Kim about my book *Small Town Duty – Tales of Hadleigh's Great War*, but that was rightly over taken by Christopher Cox VC. Plan is, if it comes off, to have the book out in November; although it has a focus on Hadleigh there is an attempt to keep a clear thread focused on duty throughout, so it is not too Hadleigh specific. Mark Forsdike has had a preview!

Thought this might be of some interest.

AN OLD COMTEMPTIBLE Kelvin Dakin

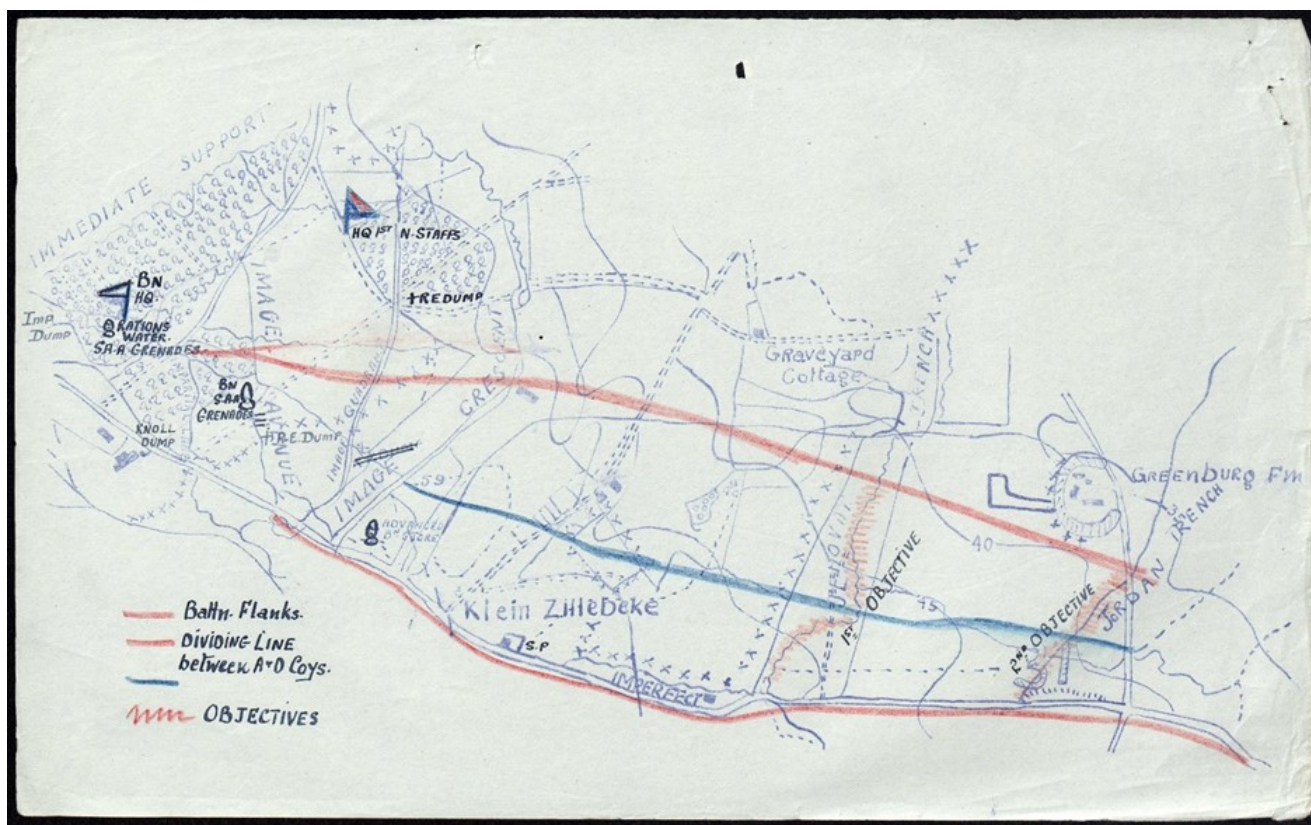
Lieutenant Albert Ernest Frost MC, 8th Battalion, Queens (Royal West Surrey) Regiment formerly Private 8734, 1st Battalion, Scots Guards

Albert was born on the 8th July 1894 to George and Sarah Cook in Tostock - and by 1911 the family was living in Woolpit. Albert was a general labourer.

He enlisted in the Scots Guards in 1913 and crossed to France with them on the 13th August 1914.

On 22nd April 1917 (by then a Lance Sergeant) he was given a permanent commission into the 8th Battalion Queens (Royal West Surrey) and joined them while they were in billets in Nédonchel on the 23rd April. In mid-July 1917 the battalion was preparing for its part in the forthcoming battle of Ypres and had been assigned part of the front line north of Klein Zillebeke.

A sketch map from the Battalion War Diary:
War Diary entry for 29th July 1917:



“The Battalion moved to the trenches and occupied the right sector of the Brigade front, the right resting on Klein Zillebeke and the left adjoining the 1st Bn North Staffordshire Regiment at a point about 350 yards north of Klein Zillebeke. The Battalion was on the extreme right of the Division and joined the 20th Durham Light Infantry of the 41st Division”

At 3.54 am on 31st July the leading companies advanced under a moving barrage. They took their first objective – Jehovah Trench – without opposition and shortly after that Jordan Trench. A number of casualties were sustained from the German artillery during the attack.

The rest of the day was spent consolidating their position while still under heavy shellfire. Towards the evening a heavy rain made the ground conditions very muddy and slippery.

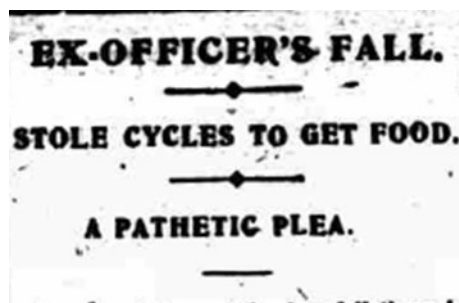
The following day 2nd Lieutenant Frost and a party of 20 men, having been sent back to draw rations, were met by a man from the 20th DLI who told them that one of their posts had been taken by the enemy. It was here that 2nd Lieutenant Frost's action won him the Military Cross.

His MC was Gazetted on 27th September 1917 and the citation published on the 8th January 1918:

“ For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When returning from the front line with part of his platoon which had been acting as a carrying party, he was informed that his battalion was being heavily counter-attacked. Without hesitation he organised his party and led them in the direction indicated, when he observed the enemy occupying a trench in force and apparently meeting with no opposition. He immediately attacked them, and after a severe hand to hand and bombing fight, he succeeded in driving them back, inflicting severe casualties on them as they retired with a Lewis gun which he found and used with great effect. His party consisted of eighteen only, and had ten casualties in this fight. His quick initiative and gallant leadership had far reaching results.”

Albert was discharged in 1919 and found himself unemployed. In order to find work he seems to have travelled around the country but in 1921 he was arrested in Northamptonshire for theft.

The headline in the Northampton Daily Echo of 15th September 1921:



The report stated that Albert was 28 years old and an ex-Army Lieutenant of Church House, Woolpit, Suffolk. He was charged with stealing two bicycles on the 12th September 1921 at a value of £2 each. He pleaded guilty to the charges and asked for other offences committed at Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, to be taken into account. The report also said that he had been mentioned in despatches and had served in the Royal Defence Corps.

Albert had addressed the bench on his own behalf and added ‘with emotion’, *“When you have nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep it makes you do anything.”* After retiring to make its decision the Bench took into account his previous good army record, and his circumstances, and passed a “very light sentence” of one month’s imprisonment.

Albert married Julia Bradbrook in 1926 and in 1939 the couple are living in Bildeston. Albert is listed as being employed as a Cook by the RAF. Julia died in early 1948 and Albert remarried to Madeline Ellinor in Sudbury later that year. Albert died in 1955 and his funeral was reported in the Bury Free Press on 28th October:

Won MC in the Scots Guard

COMMISSIONED IN THE FIELD

Mr Albert Ernest Frost, of “Maravilla”, High Street Bildeston, whose funeral took place on Saturday, was a 1914-18 war veteran. Aged 62, he served with the Scots Guards in France in 1914, was commissioned there and decorated with the Military Cross.

Mr Frost was a member of the Old Contemptibles Association (Ipswich Branch), a Legionnaire, and had served on various committees in the parish. Formerly he was employed by the Air Ministry at RAF Wattisham.

S A FUNERAL

The service was conducted by Lieut G Stacey (Salvation Army) and Mr A W Hill was organist. Family mourners were: the widow, Mr T Frost (Woolpit, brother), Mr Pleasants (brother-in-law), Mrs E Ellinor (mother-in-law), Mr J Ellinor (brother-in-law), Mrs Howe and Mrs J Ellinor (sisters-in-law) and Mrs A Green. Mr J W Cutting and Master Dale Ellinor were unable to attend. Others attending included: Mr P H Blofield (representing the Ipswich Branch Old Contemptibles Association), Mr Ray (the British Legion), Mr and Mrs G Morgan (Bildeston Horticultural Society) and Mr T Bignell (Sergeants Mess and staff of RAF Wattisham).

There were numerous floral tributes including those from Mr Frost’s former associations.

15701, Sergeant Arthur Ernest Knightley, DCM, 11th Battalion, Suffolk Regiment

Born 1890 in Impington, Cambs, he was the son of Charles and Caroline Knightley. Charles was a farmer and in 1911 Arthur was working for him in Histon.



Sergt. A. E. Knightley, Histon,
awarded D.C.M.

His DCM award was reported in the Cambridge Independent Press on Friday 06 October 1916:

"Another Histon man's heroism at the front has been duly rewarded. Sergt. Arthur E. Knightley having been awarded the D.C.M. This award has been officially announced and is also mentioned in a letter which Sergeant Knightley recently wrote home. In his letter, however, Sergt. Knightley modestly refrains from giving any particulars the deed for which this coveted honour was won, but casually mentions it a "by the way" remark. He does, however, refer to the curious fact that he gained the honour on his birthday. Knightley enlisted quite early in the war, answering the call of Kitchener's Army and was quickly promoted. He is the second son of Mr. Charles Knightley and has another brother serving with the Royal Engineers. Whilst home on furlough during the war, he married Miss Gladys Wilson, of the Mill."

His death was reported in the Cambridge Daily News - Thursday 13th September 1917:

"HISTON - Official information was received on Saturday morning last, that Sergt. Arthur Ernest Knightley had been killed in action on August 26th. A letter had been previously received in the village to this effect from a local lad at the front to his father, and the news was confirmed by the War Office on Saturday. Sergt. Arthur Knightley was in the Suffolks and joined the Colours at the beginning of the war and was quickly promoted. He had once or twice been home on furlough and had only been married since the commencement of the war. His many friends were delighted some months since to hear a heroic action for which he gained the Distinguished Conduct Medal. The report in the "London Gazette" on that deed was follows: "For conspicuous bravery during operations. When a party bombing to the right were driven back and the enemy bombed up the trench, he hastily raised a bombing party, attacked the enemy with great dash, and drove them back 100 yards, capturing a machine gun. He set a fine example." Arthur was the youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Knightley and was held in high esteem by all. He was employed by his father prior to the war."

He is buried at Hargicourt British Cemetery and remembered on the Histon and Impington War Memorial.

THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD

**Talk at the Norwich Branch
Tuesday 6th September**

Taff Gillingham: '1/4th Battalion, The Suffolk Regiment at Neuve Chapelle, 11th/12th March 1915'

**Our next month's talk
Wednesday 14th September
Dr Vivien Newman**

Nursing through shot and shell: women medics at the front

Please send any contributions for the **Branch Briefing** to:
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Next Committee meeting: tba
Approach a committee member if you want any issue raised.