

# WFA SUFFOLK BRANCH

Branch Briefing  
September 2022

Our Website : [www.suffolk-wfa.org](http://www.suffolk-wfa.org)  
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## Tonight's talk

Dr Vivien Newman

**Nursing through shot and shell: women medics at the front**

### THE DAY A WARLORD CAME HOME

**Kim Smith recounts the time Earl Kitchener caused a frenzy in Suffolk**

He became a national hero for avenging the death of General Gordon of Khartoum in 1898 and was the poster boy for recruitment in World War One, but what is lesser known about Horatio Kitchener is that his roots were in Suffolk. In fact his full title was Earl Kitchener of Khartoum and Baron of Aspell.

His mother was Frances Chevallier, whose family founded the famous Aspell Cyder company at Aspell Hall, near Debenham, in 1728 (the “y” in the spelling indicating that it is double fermented). And his father, Colonel Henry Kitchener, had connections in the county dating back to the 16th Century.

Kitchener was born the couple's third child in 1850 and his early life gave no hint of the notoriety he would achieve as he was apparently shy, sensitive and unathletic. However, he was determined to follow in his father's footsteps and obtain a commission into the Army on merit. He got his wish in 1871 when he joined the Royal Engineers.

After the brutal murder of Charles Gordon, the former British Governor-General of Sudan, at the hands of Mahdi tribesmen in Khartoum, Kitchener was sent to recapture the country. He eventually defeated the Mahdi at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898 (well known to fans of *Dad's Army* as the place where Corporal Jones learned “they don't like it up 'em”).



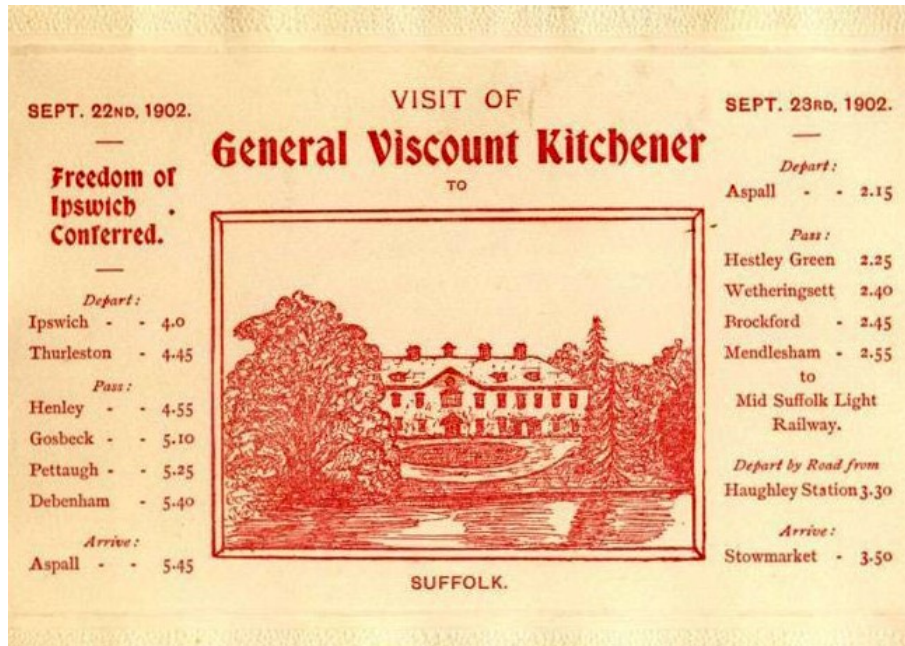
The eyes have it: Kitchener was renowned for his piercing stare



Big apple: The warlord was related to the family behind Aspell Cyder

His subsequent military career included a key role in both Boer Wars (in which he controversially established concentration camps for civilians), being appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army in India and Consul General in Egypt. World War One was still over a decade away when he made a huge impact locally by opening the Mid-Suffolk Light Railway.

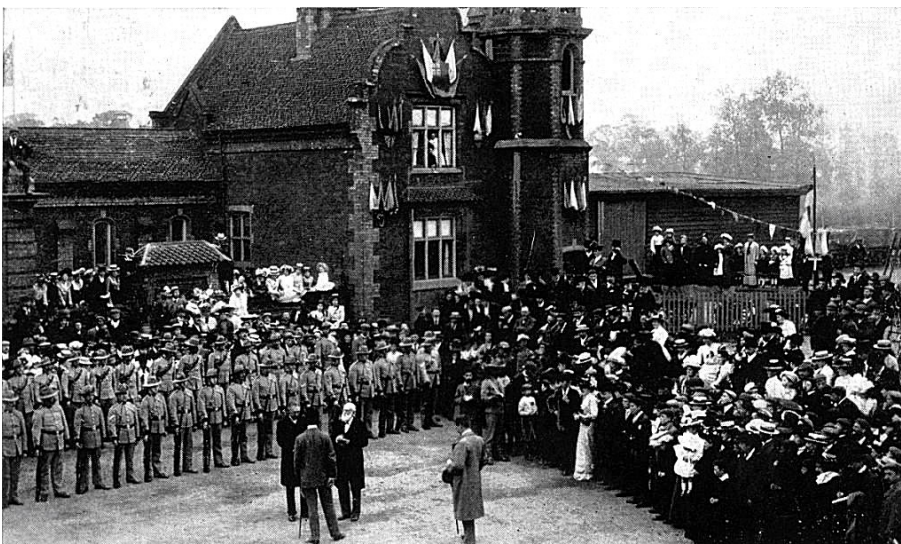
In September 1902 Kitchener's cousin John Chevallier invited him to make a return visit to Aspell Hall, where he had spent a good deal of time as a child. As a director of the new line, which was intended to open up the agricultural area between Haughley and Halesworth and provide a link between the two existing Great Eastern main lines, Chevallier realised the publicity value of getting his VIP relative to become its first official passenger.



Busy boy: Kitchener's 1902 visit schedule, including the opening of the Mid-Suffolk Light Railway

At the time no stations had yet been built and only one section of the track, near Mendlesham, was complete. So Kitchener and the other dignitaries had to wait trackside for a contractor's locomotive, pulling two carriages, to arrive. The carriages were on loan from Great Eastern and had been festooned with flags and bunting to mark the occasion.

A huge crowd of onlookers turned up, including parties of schoolchildren who had been excused lessons for the day. All vied to catch a glimpse of Kitchener, and it's said some irritated him by trying to touch his coat-tails. After he boarded the train it steamed to a temporary station just outside Haughley. There he toasted the line's success before being taken to Stowmarket by chauffeur-driven car.



Railway line-up: Suffolk Regiment soldiers joined civilians to see him off at Stowmarket Station

Civic leaders, soldiers from the Suffolk Regiment and hundreds of spectators awaited him and speeches were made in his honour. The scene was captured by a local photographer who turned the image into a best-selling souvenir postcard. Kitchener then left for London on a mainline train, cheers ringing in his ears.

When Kaiser Wilhelm threatened the peace of Europe in 1914, Britain was without a Minister for War. As a military heavyweight, Kitchener was asked and immediately launched an exhaustive recruitment campaign. He was persuaded that using his name and face on posters would fill the ranks. Surprisingly the one we are most familiar with today, showing him pointing and bearing the slogan “Your Country Needs You”, was not widely used. It has since become iconic and was even reproduced on a £2 coin issued to mark the 100th anniversary of the war in 2014.

Nevertheless the campaign was a huge success and, by Christmas, more than one million men had signed up to what became known as the Kitchener Army. In fact he was credited with creating a force capable of holding its own against even the most ferocious foe.

A shortage of artillery shells and the failure of Gallipoli in 1915 saw his reputation tarnished so the following year he embarked on a top secret mission to Russia that would surely redeem it. Sailing from Scapa Flow on board HMS Hampshire, it was to be the old soldier’s last hurrah as the ship struck a mine and sank. He was presumed drowned along with 600 crew.

The fact that his body was never found led to conspiracy theories, the strangest being that a sinister organisation called The Unseen Hand had killed him to stop him helping Tsarist Russia stay in the war; others (including his sister) believed he had taken refuge in a cave; yet more swore he was a prisoner of the Germans.

Numerous mementos of him were made and sold to a public who felt that if his memory were kept alive, his spirit would safeguard the country. Others were not so generous about him. Margaret Asquith, the acid-tongued wife of the PM, declared: *“If Kitchener was not a great man, he was at least a great poster.”*

Whether or not you agree with her, perhaps it’s still worth toasting him the next time you enjoy a glass of Aspall’s. Until recently, you could do so in the Kitchener Arms bar established in a vintage train coach on the Mid-Suffolk Light Railway, which was revived as a heritage line in Wetheringsett, near Stowmarket, in 1991. However, the voluntary body who run it have bowed to public pressure and changed its name to the Middy Arms to avoid a link to the notorious concentration camps he endorsed in South Africa. Thankfully, there is still a pub in Ipswich brave enough to bear his identity: the Earl Kitchener in Hadleigh Road.



Money talks:  
A commemorative £2 coin  
bearing Kitchener’s  
Your Country Needs You  
image was minted in 2014

## GET TO KNOW YOUR FELLOW ATTENDEES: Kim Smith

### Ed Erbes



Ed has ancestors who fought on both sides in World War One, including a great-uncle who died on the Somme

It's time to shine the spotlight on one of Suffolk WFA's most familiar faces, the ever enthusiastic Ed Erbes. The former computer programmer turned IT support worker first became interested in World War One as a boy, when he watched ground-breaking TV series *The Great War*.

A co-production between the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the Imperial War Museum, it was made in 1964 to mark the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities.



The startling title sequence for *The Great War* TV series that got Ed interested in the conflict as a boy

Narrated by Michael Redgrave, each of the 26 episodes began with a title sequence featuring a startling image of a uniformed skeletal corpse by the entrance to a dugout. However, what really struck a chord with viewers was the chance to hear, for the first time, testimonies from combatants. Many of those men, including a handful of Germans, were then still in their late 60s and early 70s.

This led to Ed, in common with most of us, researching his family tree. *"There is an Erbes on the French Arras Memorial, one at Pearl Harbour and one from Vietnam, but I don't think they're related to me,"* he says.

Fascinatingly, he did discover ancestors on both sides of the divide, though. His maternal grandfather, Francis Ernest Needham, served with the Leicestershire Regiment in Palestine and was mentioned in dispatches by General Allenby. While his paternal grandfather, Frederick Erbes, was a Pole who served with the Austro-Hungarian forces on the Italian front.

Both survived and Frederick went on to become a captain in the Polish Army who, despite being 68 when World War Two started, was called up again to take a desk job. Tragically he was executed by the Russians after being taken to Ukraine as a prisoner of war. He is believed to be buried in a mass grave in Kiev.

*"I did go out there on a tour, but didn't get a chance to visit his grave as I was worried about missing my flight home,"* reveals Ed. *"I planned to go back, but for obvious reasons I doubt that's going to happen now."*

A great-uncle on his maternal grandmother's side was killed at the end of the Battle of the Somme in November 1916. William Mighall, a publican's son from Market Harborough, was a private with the 97th Company of the Machine Gun Corps. He lied about his age to sign up and was only 17 when he died. The teenager is buried in Waggon Road Cemetery, Beaumont-Hamel.

*"I was able to visit his grave on a Holt's tour,"* says Ed. *"Billy had been out there for a while and I have some letters he sent home. The last one says he'd had an exciting night moving his machine gun all over the place."*

As we all know, such sentiments were common. Nevertheless they make a poignant epitaph for young men who thought they were setting off on a big adventure.

**LEST WE FORGET** Kelvin Dakin

**3421 (later 200980), Sergeant Mark Ford, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Suffolk Regiment**  
**Killed in action 26<sup>th</sup> September 1917**

Born in London in 1885, Mark Ford married Alice Winifred Matthews in Paddington in 1904.

By 1910 the family had moved to Hollesley where Mark worked as a Cook at the Hollesley Bay Labour Colony. They lived at Moors Farm.

He enlisted in the Suffolk Regiment with the original number of 3421 and crossed to France on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1915 as Lance Corporal.

He was wounded in 1916, by then with the rank of Sergeant, and entitled to wear a wound stripe. (War Office Casualty list 21/09/1916)

On the 24<sup>th</sup> September 1917 the Battalion moved up to reserve trenches at Clapham Junction and the following day moved into the front line to take part in a planned attack.

Battalion War Diary  
26<sup>th</sup> September 1917

*An advance could not be made before 5.45 am owing to the Bn on the left not being ready and at about 5.30 am the shelling became most intense and heavy casualties were suffered.*

*The heavy shelling, thick mist and darkness caused confusion and it was impossible for the men to keep touch but Platoon rushes were made and some Platoons made progress.*

*Captains Lake and Scrimgeour with about 20 men succeeded in reaching the front line and later made a further advance capturing 2 MGs and 13 prisoners who gave valuable information.*

*Bn began to reform around Bn HQ on LONE LANE.*

Sgt Ford is buried at Hooze Crater Cemetery and commemorated on the village memorial.

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

**Talk at the Norwich Branch**

**4th October**

*Stuart Hadaway. "Pyramids and Fleshpots: The Egyptian, Senussi and Eastern Mediterranean Campaigns, 1914-16"*

**Our next month's talk**  
**Wednesday 12th October**

**Philip Stevens : Gallipoli (part 1) — part 2 in November**

Please send any contributions for the **Branch Briefing** to:  
David Hedges, 99 Cliff Road, Felixstowe, Suffolk, IP11 9SA  
telephone: 01394 272677 and email: david.j.hedges@btopenworld.com  
Next Committee meeting: tba  
Approach a committee member if you want any issue raised.