HALIFAX MILITARY HISTORY SOCIETY

1066 Hastings
1485 Bosworth
1644 Marston Moor
1815 Waterloo
1916 Somme
1944 D-Day

Issue No 2 Winter 2022

Contact Details

Newsletter Editor
David Millichope millichope42@gmail.com Tel: 07415881604

PR Officer
Alan Rhodes alan.rhodes@talktalk.net Tel: 01422 647457

Other Committee Members
Rob Hamilton (Chair)
Ann Wilkinson (Secretary)
Graham Bradshaw (Minutes Secretary)
Elaine Beach

In this Issue

Editor's Notes

Rob is still undergoing his medical treatment and I'm sure you would all like to join me in wishing him good progress and a speedy return to full health. He has asked me to continue acting as chair in his absence, and it is with pleasure that I am filling in as editor for this the second edition of the Halifax Military History Society newsletter. Most emphasis is still on the First World War, as we might expect for legacy reasons, but there is an item this time on a significant long forgotten local hero from the Second World War. Two of the articles are further examples of that strange phenomenon of otherwise unrelated stories leading back to personal family connections. We also have the mystery of a crested china piece which we hope someone can unravel, an article on the monumental efforts of Fabian Ware, a connection to the Welsh Eisteddfod and the third part of the 'Spies and Saboteurs' series.

It is worth mentioning that submissions are encouraged from all the membership; this is not just a platform for the committee. If you have something which you feel would interest newsletter readers, then could you please submit to the email below for consideration (preferably a Word doc). Images are encouraged and should be included separately (not embedded in the text please) and indicating any copyright information.

David Millichope millichope42@gmail.com

Cockleshell Heroes:
Part 1 Operation Frankton

Graham Bradshaw

Herbert "Blondie" Hasler was a conscientious and inventive officer who had an idea to attack enemy ships in harbour using collapsible canoes, or cockleshells, to penetrate the defences and attach 'limpet' mines to the hull of ships. In May 1942 he was given permission to set up his own special force of canoeists.

Major Hasler with Captain Stewart to rear.

Hasler had a clear idea of what qualities he was looking for in the men he needed to recruit for what was effectively a suicide mission. He selected 29 men from volunteers deliberately avoiding those of exceptional strength, boastful attitude, overt toughness or demonstrable aptitude for commando work. On the contrary he sought, ordinary men, of a certain quiet modesty supported by self discipline, resilience of mind and the ability to think independently. It would appear that Hasler recognised these qualities in Marine David Moffatt a 22 year old from Lee Mount, Halifax. After months of intensive training, he became one of the twelve chosen men who famously become known as the Cockleshell Heroes.

The plan, called Operation Frankton, was for six two-man canoe teams to be deployed by submarine near the mouth of the River Gironde then paddle 90 miles through the estuary and upriver to Bordeaux, a journey of several days.

On the evening of 7 December 1942, as the canoes were being prepared for launching, one was damaged so its crew did not take part. This left ten marines to set off on their paddle up the heavily defended Gironde River. They had been told that they would have to make their own escape through occupied France into Spain and back to England. None of the men spoke up when they were given the option of pulling out, even though Hasler told them that no one would think any less of them if they did.

David Moffatt
Courtesy of his nephew,
David Moffatt jnr

Around midnight the team encountered very rough sea conditions near the river estuary causing one of the canoes to capsize forcing its two marines to try to swim to the shore. The remaining four crews continued, but only two made it all the way to the port of Bordeaux where they managed to damage six enemy ships.

Only two of the marines ever made it back to England. Six were captured by the Germans and Hitler's infamous 1942 Commando Order meant that they would be shot even when in uniform. Two were shot within two days of capture and another four three months later.

The significance of Frankton reportedly led Winston Churchill to say he believed the raid could have shortened the war by six months.

The former MP Lord Paddy Ashdown in his book " A Brilliant Little Operation" draws attention to the extraordinary bravery, endurance and determination of the young men involved "just a good cross section of average young fellows": a milkman whose best friend was his horse, a man who went on to be a London bus driver, a Glasgow coal merchants clerk. "In an age of easy living when we are rarely faced with the need to choose between ourselves and something greater, they should be an inspiration to us all."

The incredible story of David Moffatt, the "average young fellow" from Lee Mount, will be in the next issue of the Newsletter. From attending the old St Mary's School, to joining St Bernard's Church Scouts, working in a Halifax dyeworks and going on to train and take part in one of the most daring and challenging raids of the Second World War.

A true Halifax hero.

Based on the book
"A Brilliant Little Operation: The Cockleshell Heroes and the Most Courageous Raid of WW2",
by Paddy Ashdown.

Empire of the Dead

Peter Walls

This article is extracted and adapted from the official website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
https://www.cwgc.org/
This also very relevant to our next speaker Dr. Sarah Ashbridge, a forensic archaeologist and Research Worker at the Royal United Services Institution, who will be speaking to us at our 9 March meeting

Never had a nation, let alone an Empire as vast and multicultural as the British Empire, attempted to commemorate all their war dead from a given conflict. No template existed for the task of commemorating the dead on such a mammoth scale. Everything we now take for granted, every facet of remembrance, had to be worked out, debated, costed and delivered. That they are remembered at all – in some cases more than a century after they died – is largely thanks to the vision and determination of one man.

COMETH THE HOUR… At the age of 45, Fabian Ware was too old to fight when the First World War started in 1914, but he was determined to "do his bit" and he became the commander of a mobile unit of the British Red Cross, initially attached to the French sector of what we now call the Western Front. Fabian was shocked by what he found. The sheer number of casualties was without precedent.

By Bassano - http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw53167/Sir-Fabian-Arthur-Goulstone-Ware, Fair use,

There was no system in place to bury the dead or record or mark their final resting place. If men were buried, it was usually by their comrades and their grave marker was likely to be a temporary wooden cross. Many more bodies were simply left where they were – in no man's land. Fabian became determined that the dead would not be lost or forgotten. His vision chimed with the times.

Under his dynamic leadership, his unit began recording and caring for all the graves they could find. By 1915, their work was given official recognition by the War Office and incorporated into the British Army as the Graves Registration Commission. But Fabian was still not happy. What would happen to the graves once the war was over and the Army had left France and Belgium? He became convinced of the need for an independent organisation that would reflect the spirit of Imperial cooperation evident in the war and the permanence of commemoration. Encouraged by the Prince of Wales, he submitted a memorandum to the Imperial War Conference in 1917 suggesting such an organisation be created. It was unanimously approved and so the Imperial War Graves Commission was established by Royal Charter on 21 May 1917, with the Prince serving as President and Ware as Vice-Chairman.

ESTABLISHING PRINCIPLES The Commission set the highest standards for all its work. Three of the most eminent architects of the day - Sir Edwin Lutyens, Sir Herbert Baker and Sir Reginald Blomfield - were chosen to begin the work of designing and constructing the cemeteries and memorials. Rudyard Kipling was tasked as literary advisor to recommend inscriptions. Ultimately, the Commission emphasised equality as the core ideology, outlining the principles we abide by today. The dead were to be buried where they fell – there would be no repatriation of remains – and, rather than a cross, a standard headstone would be used to mark the graves of the dead. For those with no known grave, great memorials to the missing were created to ensure they would also be remembered.

THE IMPOSSIBLE TASK To start, there was the mammoth task of identifying hundreds of thousands of war dead, many of whom had been hastily buried in ad hoc battlefield graves, or whose records may have been inaccurate, fabricated or, at times, missing entirely. Even the very idea of treating the war dead equally was considered controversial. Some families were desperate to bring their lost loved ones home and railed against the policy of non-repatriation laid down by the Commission. For others, the need to cater for different religions caused anger from a predominantly Christian Great Britain. A petition of over 8,000 signatures was raised to register protest at the decision to use rectangular headstones rather than cruciform shaped markers. These factors, combined with the prevailing attitudes of colonial powers at the time, meant, in practical terms, some compromises or imaginative solutions were inevitable.

"THE SINGLE BIGGEST BIT OF WORK SINCE ANY OF THE PHARAOHS!" But after the first "experimental" cemeteries were built in 1920, the public came to appreciate what Ware and his fledgling organisation were attempting to create. The Commission embarked on one of the largest building programmes ever seen. The mammoth task of creating the First World War cemeteries and memorials would not be complete until 1938 and just one year later, they were asked to commemorate the dead of a Second World War.

The Wandering Death Penny

Stuart Wilkinson

I have long had an interest in death pennies – large bronze discs which were given to the family of men killed in the First World War. As these are treasured by families they do not often come up for sale, so when one was offered at a local auction, I purchased it. Along with the penny was the dedication scroll, war medal and a cutting from a newspaper.

The trooper was not from my locality and was in a regiment far away from my hometown, but I was just happy to possess such a poignant relic.

Bronze WWI death penny and medal – William Little

I woke in the middle of the night thinking about the name on the medal. William Little was not a common one, and I remembered a relative with the same name. On investigating the gentleman concerned I found that he was actually my great uncle, and I once met his widow, and knew his daughter and granddaughter.

So, the relic has come back to the family and will be a cherished memento.

Can you help identify this unusual piece of Crested China?

Alan Rhodes

Most readers will know that I collect crested china souvenirs but illustrated here is a mystery piece.

Manufactured by Grafton in Stoke-on-Trent as model 428 sometime in the first quarter of the 20th century and retailed in Bath, this figure is not recorded in any of my reference books.

It seems to represent a clergyman, probably Roman Catholic as his hat is a galero - the colour would indicate the rank - a cardinal's would be red. Father Brown of the TV series wears a black capello romano which has the more usual rounded dome.

I haven't a clue what the "Pacifist PAMS Brethren PAMS" inscription refers to; but the model could be a caricature of an individual priest or a fictitious character. First World War pacifism or conscientious objection might be a clue but I have drawn a blank when trying to find a matching reference. I don't think the Bath crest is relevant but I could be wrong.

Smith Hindle

Rob Hamilton

In January we received a request for information, via the Halifax Antiquarian Society, from the Memorial Museum of Passchendaele. They are trying to locate the original burial locations of the Canadian soldiers who are commemorated on the Menin Gate and Tyne Cot memorials to the missing. As part of this project they are also trying to get as much information about each soldier as they can.

One of those men was Smith Hindle a native of Stainland who was killed in action on 30th October 1917 serving with the 49th Canadian Infantry. On his enlistment papers into the Canadian Army he gave his date of birth as 12th September 1884 and his next of kin as his sister, Mrs Tasker, of 239 Willow Mount, Bairstow Lane, Sowerby Bridge hence the reason for the museum contacting the Halifax Antiquarian Society.

Although the name is quite unusual we had a little difficulty in tracing Smith as the only man with that name who hailed from Stainland was born in 1876 some 7 years earlier than the date claimed on the enlistment papers.

In the 1881 census 14-year-old Smith Hindle is recorded as living at Northgate, Holywell Green with his mother, Emma and his sisters, Mary and Hannah. He was employed as a cotton piecer. In 1901 Smith, aged 24, was living with his now married sister, Mary Tasker and her family at Bairstow Lane, Sowerby Bridge. His employment was given as cart driver. By 1911 Smith was still with his married sister's family at Bairstow Lane and his occupation had changed to Insurance Agent for the Prudential. It is believed that shortly after this Smith emigrated to Canada.

We can only speculate on the reason for Smith lying about his age when joining the Canadian Army but the most logical reason is that he thought a 37-year-old man would be unlikely to be sent overseas so he knocked 7 years off his age to ensure he was sent to the Western Front.

Although Smith's death was not reported in the papers his family ensured that his name was included on the Stainland (Wesleyan) Methodist Church Memorial. The Memorial was rescued by Alan Stansfield, one of the members of our society, when the church was demolished and after spending some time in his garden shed, is now displayed at Bowling Green School.

In one of those strange coincidences there is a link between the Tasker family and the wife of one of our members who carried out some of the research for this article. On the 1911 census also living with the Tasker family was a baby, Dorothy Ellen Wilkinson. She was the aunt of Graham Bradshaw's wife, Jennifer. It seems that the Wilkinson and Tasker families were good friends and neighbours and when Fred Wilkinson's wife died shortly after giving birth to Dorothy the Taskers agreed to look after the baby until Fred was able to make more permanent arrangements.

The Bardic Chair

Mark Alford

This article was first published in *The Goss Hawk*, the monthly magazine of the Goss Collectors' Club. Additional text and photographs from the Friends of Birkenhead Park, and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

Every August the national Eisteddfod of Wales takes place, alternating between the northern and southern parts of the country. In 1917, with WW1 still raging, it took place in Birkenhead. The month of the Eisteddfod has changed, the days for awarding of certain prizes may be different, but the importance of the Eisteddfod remains exactly the same. And the year 1917, in particular, retains a significance that is unique in Welsh culture.

By midday on Thursday 6th September 1917, the crowds around the Eisteddfod pavilion were standing three or four deep. There was no room to move and it seemed as if the whole of Wales had come to Birkenhead to find out who had won that year's Bardic Chair. Thursday at the Eisteddfod was known as Lloyd George's Day and, as always, the famous politician - the only Welshman ever to become Prime Minister of Britain - had made his speech.

Model of a "Welsh Bardic Chair" by Victoria China

Now it was time for the judgement. But when the trumpets sounded and T Gwyn Jones stood up to announce the decision nobody moved, In bold understated prose, the "Western Mail" later said,

> *The name of the successful competitor was called and no response was forthcoming. The Archdruid, after consulting the records, announced that the successful competitor was Ellis Evans, Trawsfynydd, who had sent his composition in July last. Since then, he had been sent, with his draft, to France and there, like so many others, had laid down his life for his country. Ellis Evans, writing under his Bardic name of Hedd Wyn, had been killed on the opening day of the Third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele as it is better known.*
>
> *Ellis had already made a name for himself in Welsh poetry, having come second in the previous year's Eisteddfod and won several local Eisteddfod at various places across the country. His death in battle shocked not just those present at the Eisteddfod but the whole of Wales. A stunned silence fell over the Eisteddfod field as the news finally began to sink in. The Archdruid summed up the feelings of the gathering when he said, simply*
>
> *"Yr wyl yn ei dagrau ar Bardd yn ei fedd - the festival in tears and the poet in his grave".*

There could be no question of any form of investiture and amidst a funereal silence the Bardic chair, the chair that now belonged to the dead poet, was solemnly draped in a black cloth. Afterwards, the chair, still covered, was taken in solemn procession to Ellis Evans home, the farm of Yr Ysgwrn where he had lived with his parents, brothers and sisters and where, until his enlistment in the army, he had worked as a hill shepherd.

The Birkenhead Eisteddfod of 1917 has gone down in Welsh history and folklore as "The Eisteddfod of the Black Chair". The empty chair, draped in its symbolic black pall, was then - and is now - seen by many as representing the thousands of other empty chairs in houses across Wales. A grieving nation took the story of Hedd Wyn and his tragic death to its heart. The death of Ellis Evans undoubtedly robbed Wales of a significant talent but it is as a symbol of loss, of untimely death, of the futility and barbarity of war, that his story really hits home. It is a story that still has the power to move, to cause emotion to well up in any sensitive reader. He was not a "war poet" as such but the war and its consequences were significant factors in the writing he produced just prior to his death.

Hedd Wyn

The final words of this short article should, really, be Hedd Wyn's, albeit in translation. Written in 1916 they remain a poignant reminder of what had been lost and were almost a foreshadowing of his own demise barely a year later:

"The lads, wild anguish fills the breeze.
Their blood is mingled with the rain."

Yes. I did cry doing this but it makes you wonder why it all happened. The first time I heard this story was on the 'Great British Menu" and the cook made a dish to remember Ellis Evans.

Alan Rhodes

The modern day National Eisteddfod of Wales is traditionally held during the first week of August and all competitions are held in the Welsh language. Large marquees, small tents and pavilions are erected to form the maes or field where visitors from all parts of the country are welcomed. In 1917, for the third time in its history, the Eisteddfod left Wales and arrived over the border at Birkenhead.

With the main literary prizes for poetry and prose being awarded under the auspices of the Gorsedd of Bards of the Island of Britain, complete with prominent figures from Welsh cultural life dressed in druidic costumes, flower dances, trumpet fanfares and a symbolic Horn of Plenty, the festival is a colourful event with plenty of activities for adults and children of all ages.

The Gorsedd itself is not an ancient or pagan ceremony but rather a romantic creation by Iolo Morganwg in the 1790s and which first became part of the Eisteddfod ceremonial in 1819. The ceremonies of the Eisteddfod are taken very seriously, and an award of a crown or a chair for poetry is a great honour with the Chairing and Crowning ceremonies being the highlights of the occasion. The ceremonies are presided over by the Archdruid.

Spies and Saboteurs
Part 3

John A Sunderland

Hans von Wedell and his wife

Hans von WEDELL, a tall well dressed aristocrat, was the nephew of a count who held a top position at the Foreign Office and had all the necessary deviousness to run the false passport scam. He was by profession and instinct a con-man, but that was certainly no disqualification from earning his keep as a spy.

He spread the word to Bowery boys and down and outs throughout the city: they could earn $20 for just minutes of easy work, well hardly work. They had their photograph taken and signed a document; it was that easy! Money was no object, and soon queues snaked out into the street. Hundreds of reserve officers successfully used these phoney passports to get on ships leaving New York for Scandinavia, Holland and Italy.

In the beginning the operation worked smoothly but when von Wedell's greed got the better of him the entire network collapsed. One morning he casually announced that the going rate had been reduced to a mere $5. This caused uproar! They believed von Wedell was pocketing the $15 (which he was) so some took their complaint to the authorities. Before trouble arrived on his doorstep von Wedell escaped to Cuba.

On 11 January 1915 HMS *Viknor* sighted the SS *Bergensfjord* and took off six German passengers and two stowaways. One of the these, whose destination was Bergan, was a Mexican claiming to be an American citizen, Rosato Spiro who, after close examination, admitted to be H A Wedell. According to "Satan in a Tin Hat", the biography of Franz von Papen, things did not turn out well for Hans von Wedell:-

> *von Wedell fled to Europe on forged documents. By a fate of irony, the Norwegian ship on which he escaped never reached its destination. He was taken off the boat to be interned in England, but the destroyer struck a mine and went down with its entire crew and its only passenger.*

Here ends the second attempt to disrupt American neutrality.

After his many dealings with the Foreign Office von Bernstorff knew about self-preservation. He quickly sent a coded telegram to Berlin explaining how the passport operation had been exposed, and there was no reason to fear that the Embassy had been compromised. Von Papen had failed again! Despite two bungled operations he didn't have long to wait for his next chance for glory.

A secret cable instructed von Bernstorff to hire someone who had no association to either himself, von Papen or Boy-Ed or any other official representative of Germany, to organise explosions on ships on route to enemy countries. Von Bernstorff passed the order to von Papen with strict instructions - handle this however you think best, but make sure this time the job gets done.

This campaign needed an entirely different person to direct a team in the field. The man von Papen summoned to his office was Paul KOENIG, the detective superintendent of the Atlas Line *(a subsidiary of the Hamburg-American shipping company, commonly known as the Kaiser's Own due to its intricate ties to the imperial government)*. He was a thug and a bully who enjoyed hurting people; just the kind of man to carry out covert assignments for the Secret Service. He became von Papen's police force and business manager of a part of Germany's Secret Service.

Through the autumn of 1914 and early 1915 Koenig enlisted stevedores to plant bombs on ships and paid factory workers $25 to leave bombs under workbenches to cause as much disruption as possible. There were explosions week after week without any regard for innocent workers lives. Then fires began to break out at sea, spontaneously it seemed. Several ships bound for London with full cargoes of food had devastating fires below decks. The SS *Knutsford*, the *Samland* and the *Devon City* all had similar incidents. There were many theories as to why it was happening. Labour disputes, insurance scams and disgruntled crew members were the possible cause, but von Papen knew and at last he could look forward to making his mark and win medals.

Paul Koenig

In the early hours of the war the *SS Alert* sailed towards the Dutch Islands near the border of Germany and started dredging. After a few hours it had hauled one of the five transatlantic cables onto the deck. The sabre-toothed saw severed the communication between Germany and its embassies outside continental Europe and its ships at sea. The other four were dealt with in a similar fashion. This act did not restrict Germany's ability to reach its collaborators overseas as it still operated a powerful wireless station at Nauen, outside Berlin, which reached all parts of the world. Germany realised the enemy could intercept the radio communications but as the messages were encoded they carried on regardless.

In London, a room in the Old Admiralty Building became the HQ of the British Cryptographic Service. A group of amateur cryptologists, mathematicians and linguists began to decipher the stream of messages emanating from Berlin. The people in "40 OB" as it was known, made remarkable progress and in a short time succeeded in reconstructing several of the German ciphers. As with 'Enigma' in WW2 luck played its part. British agents managed to get their hands on German diplomatic codebooks which included one for Code 13040, one of the two codes used to send important messages from Berlin to Washington. Then came a breakthrough. They deciphered a message which could affect the course of the war. As we saw earlier, Bernstorff sent and received hundreds of cables to and from Nicolai in Berlin, but something happened on the 5 August 1914 which in the end had a great bearing on the outcome of the war.

The trouble with secrets is that they lose a great deal of their value once they are revealed. If the enemy knows you're reading his mail, he'll stop posting letters. The question was, how to deal with it. This decision came down to Mansfield Smith-Cumming, code named "C", head of British Secret Intelligence Service. It was a message that, if shared with President Wilson, could help nudge America into war on the Allies side. OR, and it's a big OR, its disclosure could alert Berlin and put an abrupt end to Britain's ability to read Germany's secrets. The cable 40 OB revealed that Germany's Secret Service was directing a campaign of sabotage against America.

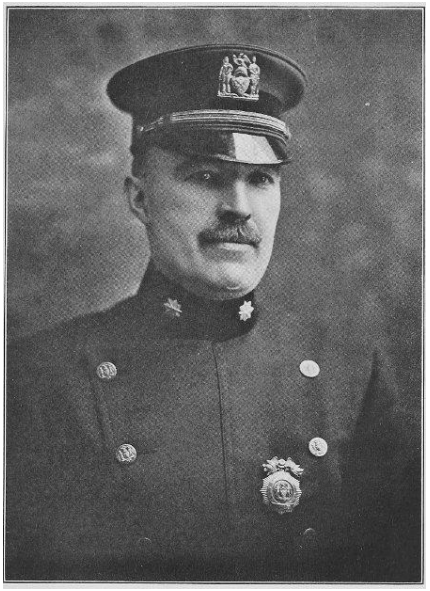
Smith-Cumming weighed the alternatives and, in the end, wrote a carefully crafted message by hand; signed it, as was his custom in green ink with the letter 'C'; and flash wired it to "Head, Section V," the British naval attaché in Washington, Captain Guy Gaunt.

Gaunt passed the information to his liaison officer in the Wilson administration Franklin Polk, who weighed up the options and passed it to Arthur Woods, New York police commissioner.

The information provided no names or operational specifics yet the implications were staggering. It was an attack on the homeland America that could not be ignored.

Woods called in Captain Tom Tunney who was instructed to pick a team of men to begin the hunt for the perpetrators of the bombings. He had nothing to go on, no leads to start his investigation, but knew the shipboard explosions would be based in the New York Harbour area.

One man came to his attention, Paul Koenig, so they put a wire tap on his phone. Koenig's sabotage campaign lacked organisation and discipline. It was amateurish. The bombs were too crude and recruits unreliable. As a result, the factories continued to work at nearly full capacity. Germany had to do something to halt the export of munitions and goods. They needed someone to take over the operation and run it with Prussian precision.



Captain Tom Tunney

In the next instalment

Enter the 'Dark invader'.