

Archaeology of the WW1 Trenches - Marlow & Berkhamsted

It is, of course, 100 years since the commencement of the First World War – “the war to end all wars”. As a fitting tribute, AIM arranged a talk on 18 September on the subject of the archaeology of First World War trenches. This event was supported by the Marlow Remembers World War One Association, a community group set up to raise awareness of the impact of the War on the town.

One of the most striking archaeological monuments associated with Marlow is the set of First World War training trenches at Pullingshill Wood near Marlow Common. There are amongst some of the best-preserved trenches in the country. They have been the subject of previous investigations undertaken by AIM as part of the ROMADAM (Recording of Marlow and District's Ancient Monuments) project during 2005.

AIM member Dave Greenwood described how AIM had approached the task of researching the origins of the trenches, surveying the extensive area covered by them and producing a subsequent plan of them. The research was, in itself, a significant task involving examination of a number of maps and aerial photographs plus extensive research of newspaper archives and other sources. These revealed that troops from the Grenadier Guards arrived in Marlow in May 1915 for the purposes of training. The trenches were dug soon after that, involving the support and labour of local people. The camp at Bovingdon Green remained in existence until bad weather in November forced its closure, at which time the billeted troops moved into the town. So we have good reason to believe the trenches were in use during the summer and autumn



of 1915, but we can't be sure whether they were used much after that period.

Dave described the elaborate layout of the trenches and how they conformed to guidance issued by the Army concerning their construction and features. He did highlight, however, that there was a difference of opinion amongst the experts who were consulted about which part of the trenches constituted the “front line”.

We then heard from Norman Groves and Brian Shepherd from Berkhamsted about the investigations they have been undertaking in relation to the First World War training camp and associated trenches near their town. Berkhamsted was used throughout the war by the Inns of Court Officer Training Corps to train lawyers and their clerks from the city so that they in turn, as qualified officers, could train and lead their men on the field of battle.

Norman described how the Training Corps had a long history in the British Army and was affectionately known as “The Devil's Own” following an initially derogatory comment by King George III about the Army having a regiment full of lawyers!

The camp occupied by the Corps at Berkhamsted was an extensive one and existed throughout the War.

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Casualty rates on the Western Front amongst officers were far higher than amongst other ranks so there was a constant supply of new recruits to the camp to be trained up in advance of going to the front. Over 130,000 men were interviewed for posts in the OTC but only 13,000 were recruited – such was the high threshold set for the quality of individuals to act as officers.

Norman and Brian made extensive use of photos from the period to bring vividly to life the experiences of men in the camp and the range of their activities, including social and sporting as well as the military training they completed. They supplemented this with poetry readings and journal extracts from officers billeted at the camp, in particular Walter Wilkinson (aka “Wilkie”). While it was clear that the men made good use of their time at the camp and integrated well with residents of the town, there were many difficulties associated with their training.

There were frequent shortages of rifles and ammunition and the soil was not conducive to the digging of training trenches. The men were expected to participate regularly in night-time exercises that did not conclude until the early hours and still needed to be ready for inspection at 6am the following morning.



*Norman Groves, Dave Greenwood
& Brian Shepherd*

Training trenches stretching to over 7.5 miles in length were an integral part of the camp at Berkhamsted. Dave Greenwood and Gerry Platten from AIM have used their experience of mapping the Pullingshill Wood trenches to assist Norman and colleagues in Berkhamsted in similar endeavours. To date, the local history and archaeology group have been able to map only 600

metres of these trenches but their work has brought vividly to life the experience of soldiers based there during the war.

Andy Ford

A warm welcome to our new AIM members

Jessica Jourja
Nic & Katy Stewart
Lucy Enderby

Ergian Musto
Dominic & Serina Helps
Joanna Lloyd