

# JANUARY MEETING

## *1st Talk*

### **Walmer Castle and the Great War**

Rowena Willard-Wright

Senior Curator for English Heritage in the South East

Reported by Alan Lee

With the main hall heating out of order the meeting was held in the smaller side room. Owing to the inclement weather only just over 20 members were able to attend the January meeting. They had the good luck to hear two knowledgeable speakers both present excellent talks.

Rowena explained that there were still many areas where she would like to do further research and she would like to present her work as a display at Dover Castle later this year.

The post of Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports became vacant in 1913 after Thomas Brassey, 1st Earl Brassey retired. King George V and his Prime Minister Henry Herbert Asquith then agreed to Lord Beauchamp being appointed. Asquith stipulated that he should be allowed the use of the castle when he required it.

After the start of WWI in 1914 Asquith saw the potential of Walmer Castle as a venue for confidential meetings that was close to the continent. After the start of the war neither his wife Margot nor his son Anthony wanted to stay there as they did not like the sound of the gunfire.

In October 1914 Margot and Violet (born Helen Violet) his only daughter travelled to meet the Belgian King and his military command. Even at this early stage Violet was one of the minority of people who thought that it would be a long war. They visited a hospital near the front line at Béthune, two of only a handful of women allowed close to the fighting. They noted that the casualties were treated on their stretchers and whilst still wearing their blood stained filthy uniforms. They were told that this was because the hospital rarely stopped in any location for longer it 24 hours that could not carry bed-clothes or night-shirts. The one thing many of the wounded asked them for above all else was for a cigarette. Violet conveyed this and more in letters home to her father and to Rupert Brooke.

Rupert Brooke, a war poet, came to public attention when "1914 and other poems" was published. This was a collection of five sonnets the most well known being the fifth one 'The Soldier'. The poet died on 23rd April 1915.

Violet's brother, Rupert and many of her friends joined the Naval Division. This had been set up by Winston Churchill to provide the navy with an infantry force.



*Violet Bonham-Carter*

*After the death of Rupert, Violet's long time love, she married Sir Maurice Bonham Carter on 30th November 1915. In 1964, she was created Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury. She died of a heart attack on 19th February 1969 aged 81.*

Towards the end of 1914 Asquith took over Walmer Castle for three months. On 20th December 1914 Violet, now back in England wrote to Rupert to say what a wonderful Sunday it had been at Walmer and longed for him to be there with her. Present that day, among others, were Asquith's Field Marshalls Kitchener and French. Both had a great dislike for each other. At one point Asquith had to step between them to prevent them coming to blows.

Rupert Brook made his only visit to Walmer when Violet invited him to a large house party on 2nd and 3rd January 1915. On 7th January 1915 Asquith called the first of a series of war conferences at the castle. It was here that the ill fated Dardanelles campaign promoted by Churchill and Lord Fischer was agreed.

Henry James, honorary president of the American Motor Ambulance Corps, visited Walmer - Asquith later stood as guarantor for his naturalization to become a British citizen.

The American Ambassador Walter Page visited in March 1915 and was informed that we would take Constantinople within two weeks. It was this failure, the tragic Somme campaign and the Easter Uprising in Eire that led to the end of the Asquith government.

On 10th December 1916, with his wife Margot, Asquith visited Walmer for the last time. Here he became seriously ill. The stress of recent events had caught up with him.

After watching the many British warships off Walmer on the evening of the 12th December 1916 a telephone call from the War Office for the Prime Minister was taken by Margot. She wrote down this message "Germany, together with her Allies, conscious of her responsibility before God, their own nations and humanity, have proposed this morning to the hostile powers peace negotiations".

Margot took the message through to Henry who was awake but bedridden. She stood by the window and read him the contents.

The proposal had come from the German civilian administration but sadly their military still wanted to continue with the war.

For Britain, although this was not the end of the war, it was the beginning of the end, a phrase that Churchill was to use during the Second World War.