

Return of the Unknown Warrior Centenary

Derek Leach

Every year in November, as Chairman of The Dover Society, I lay a wreath by a brass plaque in the former Marine Station, now Cruise Terminal 1. The plaque was the initiative of The Dover Society and was unveiled on 17 May 1997 by the then Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie.

It marks the return home on 10 November 1920 of the remains of an unknown British soldier killed during the First World War. This November will be the centenary of that event and it was hoped to commemorate it in a special way, but that will not now be possible due to Covid-19.

The origins can be traced back to a Mobile Ambulance Unit formed in 1914 manned by civilian volunteers and led by Fabian Ware. Very soon, in addition to recovering the wounded from the front, they began recording the locations where those killed had been buried in haste. With rapidly increasing numbers, this soon became a full-time job and Fabian Ware was given the task of coordinating the work for the whole Western Front. He was given the honorary army rank of Major.

What was to happen to these bodies and remains? There was a demand from the rich for the bodies of loved ones to be returned to Britain, but Ware was adamant that everybody should receive equal treatment. If the poor could not afford the cost of repatriation, then all the bodies should remain near where they fell, in specially created cemeteries. Unidentified remains would be buried with the inscription 'An Unknown Soldier'. The missing with no known grave would be remembered on memorials in the

cemeteries and through special memorials like the Menin Gate, which bear 55,000 names of those missing around Ypres.

Whilst relatives, whose loved ones had been identified could, if they could afford it, visit the cemeteries abroad and grieve by a known grave, how were the relatives of those thousands with no known grave to have some sort of closure? The answer was to break that hard-and-fast rule of no-repatriation to bring back one unknown set of remains.

So it was that on 7 November 1920 the remains of one unknown Tommy from four different battlefields, Aisne, Arras, Somme and Ypres, were exhumed and taken to a temporary chapel, where they were wrapped in Union flags. There, a blindfolded senior British officer touched one of the bodies. That body, inside a plain coffin, was taken to Boulogne with sacks of soil dug from the spot where the soldier had died, so that the French earth that he had defended would cover the Warrior in Westminster Abbey.



*Inside Rail Van used for the Unknown Warrior,
Capt Charles Fryatt and Nurse Edith Cavell*

On 10 November 1920, the body was placed in an oak coffin, loaded on *HMS Verdun* and brought to Dover, escorted by 6 destroyers. People lined the cliffs and other vantage points. National and local civic leaders waited at Admiralty Pier. As the coffin was unloaded a 19-gun salute reverberated from Dover Castle.



Unknown Warrior Grave in Nave of Westminster Abbey

London to Westminster Abbey, where a guard of honour of 100 VC holders was waiting.

A war that had started with *The Times* newspaper printing casualty lists only of officers ended with a nameless, rankless, classless soldier laid to rest among royalty, the great and the good, to represent the hundreds of thousands

The body and the sacks of soil were loaded into a luggage van, which had previously been used to carry the body of Nurse Edith Cavell. It then went by rail to London, with people lining the track all the way. On the following day, Armistice Day, the body went in procession through the streets of

of British troops with no known grave or buried with identity unknown. 200,000 people filed past the grave in Westminster Abbey on that day and half a million within the month. That Unknown Soldier could have been their loved one!

MEMBERSHIP NEWS **Sheila Cope**

Those who attended Dover Girls' Grammar School during the decades from the early 50s to the 70s will remember the two language teachers Beryl (French) and May (German) both surnamed Jones. They were founder members of the Dover Society. Beryl died some time ago but May, who has died recently, continued to proof-read for the Newsletter until two years ago although she had moved to Folkestone in the meantime.

In July, due to publicity on Facebook activated by our Webmaster William, we received an unusual number of membership applications. Other members have also been busily recruiting and we are grateful to them. We therefore number 464, higher than this time last year in spite of the inevitable cancellation of functions. Thanks to our Editor Alan and to our contributors

for keeping the Newsletter going.

One of our recent new members is Josephine Evans who has replaced her husband Roy following his death in August. The couple were true Dovorians with Roy a regular attender at our meetings. We watched Roy's funeral streamed from North Hertfordshire where they had moved to be near their sons. Funeral streaming seems to be one of the good innovations resulting from Lockdown, enabling those who could not attend to watch the service.

Other welcome new members are: Mrs S Morris, Mr N Mayell, E & J Shirley, Mr C & Mrs W Lynch, Miss E Mailliot, S Durbidge, A Newell, P & J Lyons, D Burrige, J Tomlin, Mr J Kennett, Mr K Sansum, Mr J Ward, Mr R Williams, Mrs V Deans and Mr J Harvey.