

Roll of Honour – telling the stories of World War One

'He was one of the many straight, clean living boys from that school who answered their country's call, and now with them lie in a foreign soil, to the everlasting glory of the land that bore them.' - CO for Charles Ablin died 11.11. 1918

"Has anyone ever researched the Roll of Honour in the school?" an innocent enough question at the time. My brother and I were on a trip to the battlefields of France with the Western Front Association, visiting several cemeteries, hence the question. John is a parent of an "Old Boy" and I currently teach History at the school. "I don't know" said I "if I research them you've got to visit and photograph them". Two gauntlets were well and truly thrown down and I am now left to reflect, why is it that some of the most significant things you do in life are often unplanned?

At first we thought we were dealing with 106 names that are commemorated on the board next to the organ, which in itself a memorial to the boys and men from the High School and the Technical School which preceded it. This expanded quite quickly to 107 when I went back to school magazines and discover a repeated reference to Paul Hilleard who is in the main school register and also attended evening classes to complete his Matriculation. He was remembered on the memorial in Wickford, his home town, and at Essex County Cricket Club because he played for them. I then got a team of present students to help find the names of "our boys" as they soon become known, on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website. This provided a basic identity, date of death, regiment, rank, and sometimes army number for most of them. Sometimes even a next of kin's address was mentioned. This really is very easy to use site and I would encourage anyone with even the most basic computer skills to go and have a look there if they think a family member died in either of the world wars. This was about the stage I was at in November last year when, as some of you may remember, I wrote an assembly which gave some background to the names that were specifically read out. (I was not, and still am not focusing on World War Two but I did a similar thing for those who were to be mentioned – but more of that later).

The next stages involved a thorough, or as thorough as I could manage, search of old school records. They are not all logically archived and this was not an easy task. Almost nothing existed pre 1904 except a few magazines, "The Tech". Frustratingly, it seemed very unfashionable to mention people by name in those days but I did glean a few things and even some articles a, hilarious account of a "Rugby Football" match by Ernest Porter, a game of which he clearly disapproved and two pieces written by H.E. Dudley who was editor at one time of "The Southendian". His poem "In Memoriam" published in 1915, took on a special poignancy in the light of his own sacrifice later; he was due to have become a priest. Entry registers provided some useful information about dates of birth, dates of entry and exit from the school, home addresses and – a sign of the time – father's occupation. It was at about this stage that we, John by this time was involved in the research as well as the photography, started to realise where things were becoming problematical. Not everyone was on CWCG. Not everyone even after 1904 had a school record. As I said before, not everyone was even on the wall!

The next stage of research was an enormously helpful book from Southend library which is a collection of the obituaries for the fallen of Southend who were mentioned in the Southend Standard but guess what! This was not complete either! (Only one hundred copies of this book edited by Jarvis were ever produced so if you know of the whereabouts of one the school library would love to know). As well as a lot of useful detail and fascinating contemporary comment, this also provided the names of another *three* people whose families claimed attendance at the school but for whom there appeared to be no evidence. If anybody knows more about Geoffrey Cuthbert Blissendon Emmett, Frank Louis Osborne, or Francis Soal, please let us know. (I have only recently ascertained that Osborne was a pupil teacher for a while and that Emmett and Soal attended evening classes).

We now realised this was not a jigsaw of 106 pieces but at least 110 jigsaws all of indeterminate size. Also by this stage a pattern had begun to emerge, some people were missing from everything, others were popping up everywhere, and information provided itself in abundance. John's experience as an amateur genealogist linked him quickly to a few families, Chris Sorrell, great-nephew of Bernard Sorrell and Gill Duggins great

niece of Stanley Haves quickly made themselves known to me through school. One particular character who was quickly traced in detail right through to exactly what he was doing the night he died, including his love of fruitcake, was Cecil Cattell. He was only sixteen years old when he volunteered. His family kindly provided copies of his letters, he died in a well documented and famous battle and in an event of conspicuous bravery by his company and.....Oh! If only they were all that easy!



*Photograph of Cecil Cattell on the Menin Gate, the caption reads:
"Cecil Cattell, aged 16, with the respects of his old school
Southend High School for Boys"*

The next stage was Regimental War histories, the National Records Office and Hendon Air Museum. Friends at the Western Front Association were also generous with their advice and support. Generalised history books will contain information about what campaigns were taking place on any specific date but rarely down to brigade/regimental level. We wanted to know at individual level, whether someone was on the front line, in reserve, on the right or left flank etc. We wanted to put their part into the perspective of the bigger picture. What exactly did their death contribute to the war effort? I personally hate the bland retrospective opinion which summarises their sacrifice as "pointless" or "unnecessary slaughter". They *did* win the war, in their day they rarely questioned whether it was "worth it": their families were proud of their son's contribution and that is what we aim to record. History comes to life when you make it personal, people come to life if put them in the context of their history.

Enough about my feelings on the nature of History. War diaries take you to the original hand written daily accounts of what a particular battalion was doing. These are generally as good as the people writing them, and the amount of activity on a particular day. The reality is that some men die on an otherwise uneventful day by an unlucky shell or bullet and that unsatisfactory answer is all that can be given. Others did not die at the front at all. One died in York Rd. whilst riding his new motorbike whilst home on leave, another falls off his bike and under a train, and one reports for medical treatment then disappears, never to be seen again! But I don't want to give away too many of the extraordinary stories here. Apart from the personal letters and photos that families like those of Cecil Cattell, Stanley Haves, Albert Klemp and Bernard Sorrell (among others) to whom we are extremely grateful, the information we have collected is in the public domain *if* you know where to look. Every boy's story has now been collected except one! Gunner Harry Fuller remains a mystery, we cannot, in spite of school records, census returns, army records, and inspired guesswork come to a conclusive decision as which one of several possibilities he is. There is no perfect fit and no complete and reliable source, so if anyone knows anything about Harry, please make contact to enable us to do him justice. The aim is now to publish our findings as a book and where we have found little, like with poor Harry, that is

what we will record. Perhaps something will yet emerge for him before we decide to "call it a day" and go to print.

As I write this John and I have about ten more stories to write up, but apart from Harry the others are known to us. Officers records at the National Archive have yet to be searched, but we are now mainly on a refining process. John has visited, photographed and put poppies on more than half of "Our Boys" now, starting with those in France and England. (Sponsorship to visit those in Greece would be very welcomed!) We might just have to pass on Alexander Dunkley in Basra for the time being, but my son who serving there at the moment knows to be on standby should it become safe enough to go there. A nice story of the impact of these visits came earlier this year when John went to the Menin Gate to commemorate Cecil Cattell, Arthur Clark, and Paul Hilleard (the one missing from the Roll). As we had a photo of Cecil He left this at the foot of the panel with the message "Cecil Cattell, aged 16, with the respects of his old school Southend High School for Boys" and a British Legion wooden cross. After the pictures were take he retired to a nearby café and watched as within minutes several school parties stopped, looked at the photo, pointed to the name and clearly had a discussion on the role of boy soldiers in the war. A few days later the school office contacted me to say they had had an email from an old Southendian who had been visiting the area and had also seen the photo and message, much to his surprise and appreciation.

Everything so far has been stored in two ways, electronically as a spreadsheet and on paper in a folder of anything that was photocopyable; therefore the file will never be closed. If anything comes in after the print deadline it will be logged and catalogued as described and saved for the second edition! Yes that was a joke (I think), because I know many want us to make a start on World War Two. In the same way that the WW1 archive will remain open, the World War Two folder on paper is already open. It might prove to be a more problematic project as some of the records from WW2 are only open to families and descendants, so if you know that there is someone from the WW2 side you would like remembered in detail, please start your research soon. At last years memorial service I was able to find out enough about those being remembered that day, to hopefully, for a few moments, give these men back their personalities. This is actually my main driving force. When you read the words of those men and I listen to my son today, you realise that life, death and self sacrifice is not what concerns these men. In all wars they are driven by a sense of duty and for good to prevail over evil; to protect those who cannot fight for themselves. All they ask for is recognition and to be remembered for doing their very best.

"At the going down of the sun and in the morning WE WILL REMEMBER THEM"

Lesley Iles (Staff, 2005 to present)

In Memoriam

(The following was first read out at the 2006 Reunion Dinner.)

L.B. Fox was a chemistry master at our school. He was not a disciplinarian; indeed he was not a well man. Tall, thin and rather gaunt, he lived to a considerable extent on his nerves. But such things tend to go unheeded by carefree youth. I am not familiar today with the behavioural traits of boys in middle school but in our day there were always some, who perceiving a lack of authority were prepared to commit mayhem! To be fair I think that this was born more of mischief than malice but nevertheless when two or three acted in concert, its effect could make a teacher's life at best uncomfortable and in one or two rare cases, devastatingly unbearable. I can remember, on one occasion, Mr. Fox standing at his desk in the chemistry lab., visibly shaking, until at last his eyes filled with tears and he turned away; at which point I think, even the most insensitive amongst us realized that something was badly wrong. Later that day our classroom received an unscheduled visit from Mrs. Alexander who had either witnessed, or been advised, of the distress of her colleague. She entered the room and without berating us, or attempting to identify culprits, sat down and quietly told us the story of L.B. Fox.

Thirty odd years earlier he had been a young subaltern in command of a tank on the Western front in France. Apart from fighting his war in the claustrophobic confines of this huge and often unreliable machine he had

other duties. One of these occurred when the tanks were required to move to another sector of the battlefield under cover of darkness. His role was to guide the driver through a nightmare scenario of smashed armour and ordnance, twisted wire, water-filled shell holes and other scattered debris of war and sometimes perhaps, the bodies of men, which to a tank were no obstacles.

The method of this guidance was for Lieutenant Fox and his fellow officers to walk in darkness, a few yards ahead of their respective vehicles; holding in cupped hands behind their backs, lighted cigarettes, to act as beacons for the drivers peering through a slit in the armour. It is not difficult to realize that one mistake in the dark, a slip in the mud, or a brief inattention on the part of the driver, for the guide to be crushed into the mud by the steel tracks of the leviathan that followed him. This duty, among others, he carried out as well as suffering for endless months and even years, what the poet Wilfred Owen called the "Monstrous anger of the guns", which alone were capable of breaking the minds and hearts of men.

But L.B. Fox endured and eventually returned to this country. He returned home to teach chemistry to the likes of us...Needless to say after this account we looked on him in a very different light, with great respect and a few of our number were suitably ashamed; but sometimes these conversations come a little late!

Some of us were also told later about Jack Newman, Major Newman, who taught geography and was also an enthusiastic organizer of sporting activities and in particular a keen adherent of the school football team. Long before our arrival he had affectionately been given the nickname "Sniffer" because he seemingly had a permanent cold and this condition persisted throughout our time at school. He also provided us with some amusement, in our ignorance, by tending to fall asleep during lessons. Until we learned that these disabilities were the legacy of a mustard gas attack in the great war and that he had not slept at night for more than one or two hours over the intervening years. He of course had been lucky, when many of his comrades had lost their sight or had their lungs destroyed when the noxious clouds rolled across no-man's land and into their trenches.

Then there was Mrs. Alexander herself who's husband, a Lt Colonel I believe, was killed in Flanders Fields. After which, as a widow, for the remaining thirty odd years of her working life continued teaching her particular subject to boys and young men who by accident of birth had avoided the carnage that engulfed her generation. Her subject was, of all things, German! She also, from time to time, escorted groups of pupils on foreign excursions and holidays, sometimes to Austria. Not only on furtherance of their education but in her eyes, the benefits of cultural exchange and the promotion of international goodwill!

So we who received our secondary education during, and shortly after the Second World War, came to learn that apart from the fighter pilots we had recently admired so much, there were other heroes and some of them wore black gowns and unobtrusively walked the corridors of our school.

With fond memories of Southend High School for boys and the sound of distant trumpets.

Robert Arnold (Athens, 1945-1951)