

Christmas Truce

DECEMBER 1914



Image supplied by the Imperial War Museum

By the time winter arrived in 1914, the British Army and its French and Belgian Allies were bogged down in a stand-off against the Germans on the Western Front. Opposing trenches, packed with hundreds of thousands of men faced each other in a long line that stretched from the border with Switzerland all the way to the English Channel.

Fierce fighting

Fierce fighting continued between the armies despite the onset of winter, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. By Christmas, 20 men from Marlow had already been killed in the War, most of them on the Western Front.

Christmas Truce

There had already been a small number of truces arranged between groups of opposing soldiers in December, but these began to increase in the run-up to Christmas. Then on Christmas Eve opposing British and German soldiers began to talk to each across the divide of No-Man's Land about the possibility of a Christmas Day Truce.

On the following morning, soldiers from both sides along the Western Front emerged from their trenches and met up to talk and exchange gifts and souvenirs rather than fight. Some even played football. In almost all cases, this seems to have been initiated by German troops, either through messages or song. Some soldiers also used the short-lived ceasefire for the more sombre task of retrieving and burying the bodies of colleagues who had died in No Man's Land in recent fighting. Some historians have estimated that as many as 100,000 British and German soldiers took part in the unofficial truce.



A snapshot taken by a British officer showing German and British troops fraternising on the Western Front during the Christmas truce of 1914

Image supplied by the Imperial War Museum

Unwarlike activity

When the British commanding officers became aware of the events on Christmas Day, they issued orders saying that "such unwarlike activity must cease". In any case, the truce was short-lived and fighting quickly resumed. The truce was not repeated in subsequent years of fighting on the Western Front, in part because soldiers feared being disciplined for such activities and in part because the continuation of fierce fighting led to feelings of bitterness on both sides. We can't say for sure whether soldiers from Marlow participated in the truce, but it is likely that as many as 400 spent that first Christmas of the war away from their homes in trenches on the Western Front.

British and German officers meeting in No-Mans's Land during the unofficial truce of Christmas 1914

Image supplied by the Imperial War Museum





New Court Images supplied by Mike Eagleton



Nesta Liston

The Home Front

NOVEMBER 1914 - JANUARY 1915

By November 1914 the country was a couple of months into the war. Although life continued much as normal in Marlow in many ways, the impact of the war was beginning to be felt.

Belgian refugees

By November 1914 there were 25 Belgian refugees, mostly women and children, living in Marlow. They occupied three houses which had been lent by local people. The town continued to provide offers of clothing and furniture. To thank local people, in November 1914, the refugees planted designs of forget-me-nots in the flower beds. These read 'We thank you' and 'Vive L'Angleterre'.

Prizes all round

In November 1914, Wethered Brewery gained champion gold and silver medals for their beers.

The following month, prizes were given out at Marlow's Annual Fat Stock Show, where the exhibits were of 'excellent quality'. Because of the War the prizes were on a much smaller scale than usual, the number of entries was down and the evening dinner was not held.

Work for Women Fund

By December 1914, 371 articles, mostly clothing, had been made by the Work for Women Fund since the outbreak of war. These items were sent to soldiers at the front, wounded Belgians at Bisham Abbey, Belgian refugees and some 'necessitous cases amongst the poor of our own town'.

Children's Christmas Party

A Christmas party was organised by the local War Relief sub Committee for the children of those Marlow men who were fighting and for the Belgian refugee children. 190 children filled the hall which 'was gaily decorated with bunting' and the Allies' flags. They were entertained by a popular London ventriloquist and sang some 'capital' renderings of songs such as 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'. They each received some chocolates and the party closed with rounds of cheers for the King and the men who had signed up.

Floods

As a result of heavy rainfall, the river flooded in January 1915 despite the attempts of Thames Conservancy to dredge the channel, remove obstructions and improve the locks. The riverside meadows and the railway line were under water, as was the road to Quarry Woods.

Fallen Heroes

FOUR MARLOW MEN KILLED ON THE SAME DAY – 1 NOVEMBER 1914

The First Battle of Ypres in autumn 1914 was the first major battle of the war that the army was involved in. There was huge loss of life and four Marlow men were killed on the same day, on 1 November 1914.

The four Marlow men killed on the same day, 1 November 1914, at Ypres were:

Private Albert Chandler
Private Gilbert Dunn
Private George Edwards
Rifleman Robert Forrest

They are all remembered on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres, Belgium.

Albert Chandler and Gilbert Dunn

These men were part of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, although there was a big age gap between them. Albert was born in 1880 and Gilbert some 17 years later, in 1897. They both came from large farming families. Albert had four siblings and Gilbert had seven. Neither was married when they signed up. Albert was 33 when he died whereas Gilbert was only 17.

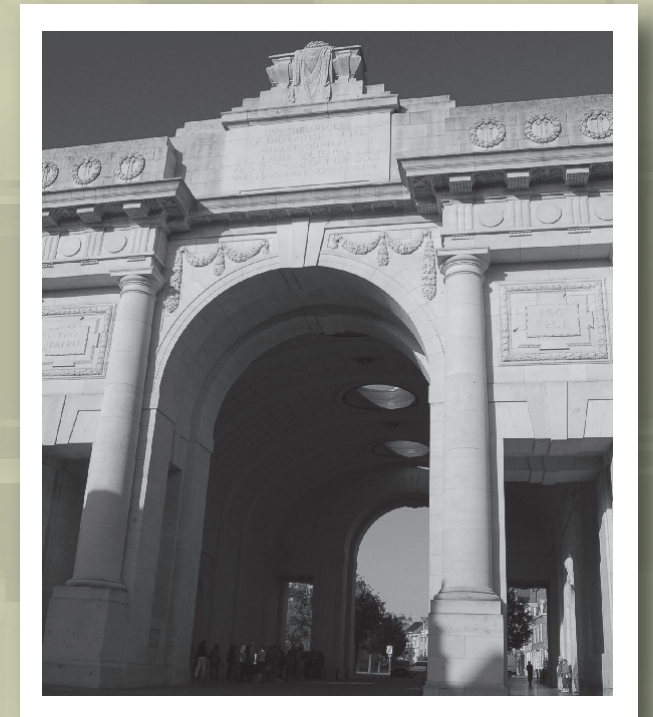
George Edwards

George was born in 1882. He worked as a labourer and was living in Reading with his wife, Ellen, by 1914. George signed up with the Princess Charlotte of Wales's (Royal Berkshire Regiment), left England for France on 31 August 1914 and was killed on 1 November. His younger brother, Owen, was also killed in the war, in July 1916.

Robert Forrest

Robert was born in 1896. He was from a more wealthy background and was brought up in a family with seven staff, his father being a Land Agent. Robert went to boarding school in Harrow on the Hill and, by August 1914, the family were living at New Court, Marlow. Robert was also very young when he died, at 18 years. Although he was reported missing on 1 November 1914 it wasn't until July 1916 that he was officially declared dead.

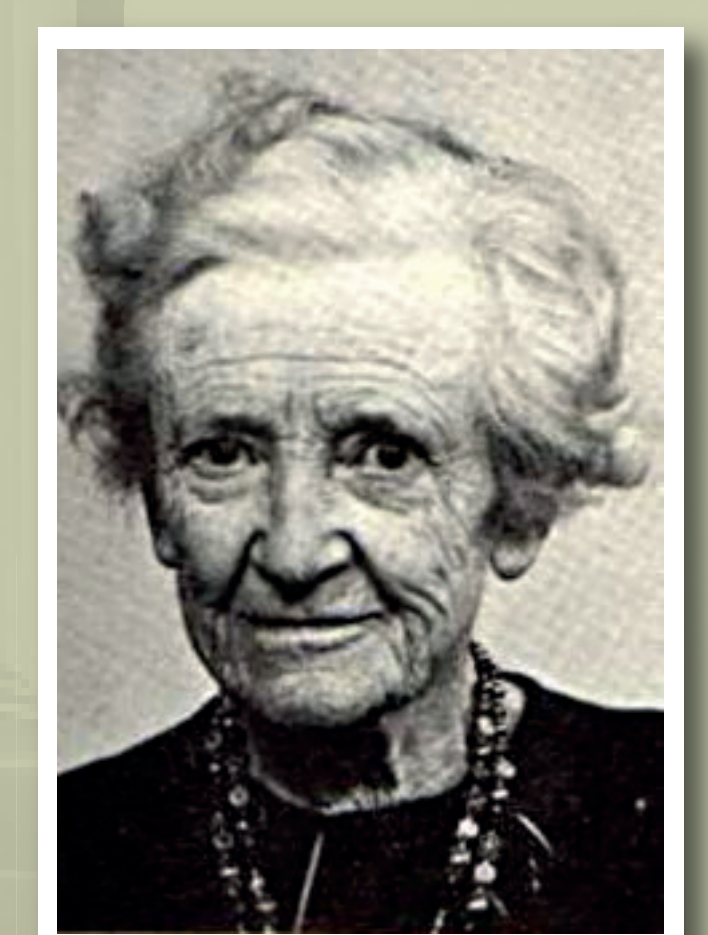
Robert's sister, Nesta Liston, who also lost her first husband during the war, went on to become a generous benefactress of Marlow. She purchased a redundant chapel for use by the town as a public hall, now known as Liston Hall. She also bequeathed her New Court Estate to the town.



The Menin Gate



Ruins of Ypres market square.



Nesta Liston