

THE COLLEGE AT WAR - A SHORT HISTORY

Each day, discovery.



ELTHAM COLLEGE





| Preface

Given our school's location in south London, Eltham College found itself inextricably involved in the wars of the last century – from 'volunteers' receiving their call-up papers and the partial evacuation of the school down to Taunton during the Second World War to escape the 'Blitz' through to students and staff having to take serious precautions against the very real risk of bomb damage.

This booklet sets this out with some anecdotal and photographic accounts of how the school, like so much of society at the time, was caught up in the world wars of the twentieth century, and how we remember "the fallen" from our community and beyond in our annual Act of Remembrance.

Each day, discovery.



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Introduction

The first thing anyone sees on entering Eltham College along the drive is the War Memorial on the exterior wall of the Chapel. “To the Memory of the Old Boys and Staff of Eltham College who gave their lives in the World War 1939-45” reads the inscription between the two columns of 79 names.



The War Memorial on the exterior wall of the Chapel

When the memorial was unveiled on 30th November 1947, Headmaster Geoffrey Turberville read out every name, slowly – each one a memory to him and those present at the ceremony. (The actual stone was carved by an Old Elthamian named Edward Folkard.) Inside the Chapel is a memorial plaque to the 34 OEs who died in the other great conflict of the 20th century, the First World War.



The memorial plaque inside the Chapel to those who died during the First World War

It is these names – of “the fallen” of both wars – that are of course uppermost in people’s minds on Remembrance Day. However, the school’s relationship with the wars of the last century is a complex one, and also encompasses how pupils and staff on the “home front” coped with the disruption of war, both in this country and abroad – and how a distinct vein of pacifism has at times also been prevalent in the school stemming, in part, from its missionary heritage.



| The First World War: OEs on the “Front Line”

Some 120 former pupils of the school fought in the Great War and 86 returned. Twenty of those who served were honoured for outstanding bravery, one receiving the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross) and twelve the MC (Military Cross).

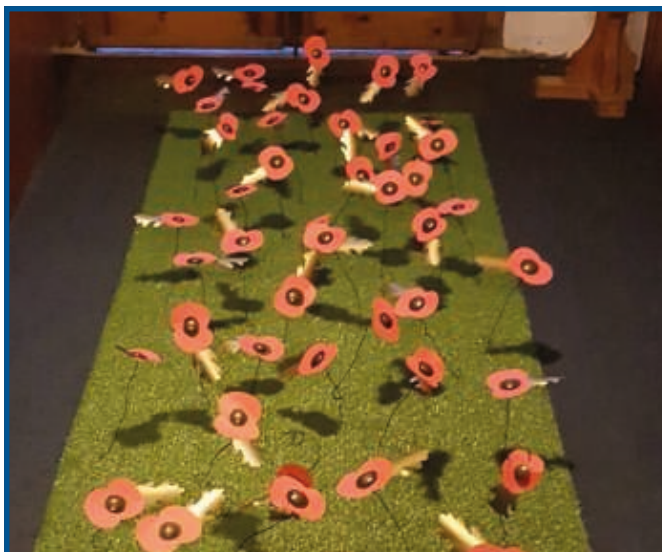


An extract from the photo of the 1910-11 1st XV rugby team

The extract above from the photo of the 1st XV rugby team (1910-11) demonstrates the toll – three of the four boys shown were killed in the war. Eric Claxton (left) and Arthur Carnegie (right) were both killed in 1917, with the *Elthamian* honouring them as being “among the finest men that our school has turned out... the news of their death has brought a great heartache to all who were privileged to know them”.

Eric Claxton won the Blackheath Cup for Sporting Achievement in 1913 and 1914 (and still awarded today), while GM “Gogs” Rawlinson (second from left) won it in 1912, when it was first awarded. He was killed in 1916 – “one of those who,” according to the tribute paid to him in the *Elthamian*, “give [a school] life, reality, resilience, and through whom it is renewed from age to age.” William Summers, second from right in the group, survived the war and, like many OEs, later became a clergyman.

Another noted OE who served in this war was Leslie Gracie. At school, he was captain of cricket and rugby and won every single senior event at sports day in 1915. After a term at Oxford, he volunteered for military service and was posted to the Western Front where he won a Military Cross in 1917 for leading his men to safety on the battlefield despite incredible danger. His parents were missionaries in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and he wrote many letters to them describing his wartime experiences. He survived the war and in the 1920s, he captained Scotland at rugby. He later won a military OBE for his service in Italy, another difficult military campaign, during the Second World War.



In 2018, Lower School pupils made this installation in the Chapel that commemorates – through 34 poppies (each with a gold leaf) – the 34 OEs who died during the First World War. The project was co-ordinated by the Gerald Moore Gallery. Red card, garden wire and military buttons were used to create the poppies which were then positioned into green Astroturf to resemble a field of flowers for the fallen. Messages of remembrance were written on the petals of the poppies.

The First World War: the “Home Front” at Eltham

Far from the ‘front line’, the First World War had profound impacts on the school and its pupils. Many of these impacts were tragic, such as the all-too-regular announcements of deaths of former pupils and staff at the Front. But some were poignant. In the *Elthamian* of 1978, Geoffrey Milledge, who left the school in 1921, recounted that he had recently enjoyed looking through old letters he had written when a pupil at the school during the war, “many of them recalling incidents...long forgotten. One...tells of going along Grove Park Road to see the London buses being prepared for the front. A lot of buses crammed full of soldiers went the other evening and in the morning a lot of nurses went...Yesterday Harmon II and Cochrane II went to where the buses were... Cochrane lit the soldiers’ cigarettes.” (The soldiers were housed in a requisitioned hospital on Marvels Lane – these buildings are now residential apartments although a health clinic still occupies part of the site.)

Another letter states that: “One day we saw an airship when we were having prep. We saw the men in it quite well.” This would have been one of the feared German Zeppelins, whose raids killed 528 people and wounded as many as a thousand over the course of the war, mainly in London.

A ‘Cadet Corps’ was formed at the school during the war. It held its first parade on 22nd January 1916. John Collingwood, a pupil between 1912 and 1920, later recalled that “Some 40 of us were enrolled; we were attached to the Royal West Kent regiment... the equipment we had consisted of two or three old-fashioned rifles, which were allotted to the NCOs, who were all senior prefects. The lower ranks were equipped with wooden rifles, with an ordinary door bolt attached, to represent the bolt action of the real rifle.” This corps didn’t last long though, and it was disbanded at the war’s end – and hasn’t re-formed since.



The Zeppelin raids on London, as reported in the Daily News (Source – Wikimedia Commons)



The cadet corps at the College – (L) outside the front of the school, (R) in the Old Quad



The Second World War

Three OEs who died on active service during the Second World War are today remembered by Cups and Prizes. Howard Pinkham (pictured to the right) is remembered through the Pinkham Cup, awarded by the OE rugby team to the school's "man of the match" in their annual fixture, while Frank Plant and John Pike are remembered through prizes awarded at Speech Day (for, respectively, an essay and art). Over the course of the war a number of OEs were decorated, the most prominent being R.F.C. Durbin who won the British Empire Medal.

At the start of the war, the school's boarders were evacuated to Taunton School (along with boarders from King's Rochester) where their newly-formed house, Eltham House, actually won the school's inter-house rugby competition in 1941. Eltham College teacher, Mr Ocomore, lived at Taunton with the boarders and Headmaster, Geoffrey Turberville, made a number of visits. As for day pupils, those who lived within the designated evacuation zone for children (which included the modern-day boroughs of Bexley, Lewisham and Greenwich) were evacuated first to Folkestone, where they attended Harvey Grammar School, and then Abertillery in South Wales. Two pupils wrote about their experience of evacuation in the *Elthamian* in a piece entitled *Welsh Interlude*: "It was the first time that many of us had been so near to a coal mine...we saw cages ascending and descending the pit and found it very fascinating."

For those who continued to be educated in Mottingham (mainly day boys who lived in what is now the Borough of Bromley) the school must have seemed very empty. OE Douglas Peters, a member of the 1943-4 First Fifteen, later wrote that "before we could play any [rugby] game, it was necessary to scour the playing fields for shrapnel from the previous night's anti-aircraft shell bursts" while Graham Matthews wrote in his 2004 memoir *You're the Doctor, You Decide* that on the train to Mottingham boys carried gas masks and on one occasion a breaktime game of "quad soccer" was interrupted by a German plane flying overhead.

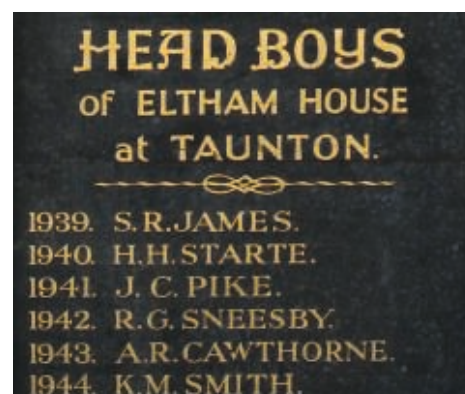
There were shelters under the rugby pitches in the front of the school for use in air raids (though they often filled with rain water) and the writer of a piece in the *Elthamian* from December 1940 entitled *Leading a Sheltered Life* complained of the "concrete space and stagnant air" down there (and in the cellars under the main school building, which were also used for classes). Another part of the school fields was used for vegetable planting as part of the "Dig for Victory" campaign, while senior boys and masters were employed to watch for V2 rockets from the roof and tower. At one point an anti-aircraft barrage balloon made an appearance over the school: according to a piece in the *Elthamian* it "daily hovers over our heads with the placidity of a somnolent cart horse". There were frequent broken windows from air raids and, in October 1940, a bomb wrecked part of the school gym (situated where the sports centre is now). At Speech Day on 18th July 1940, Mr Turberville stressed that it was only through the co-operation of parents, masters and boys that the school had managed to keep going during those dark days.

The effects of the war were also felt in far-distant lands. In the last edition of the OE magazine, *Plane Talking*, we recorded the memories of Walford Gillison, who was born in Wuhan in 1935 and was the son of missionaries sent to China by the London Missionary Society. When Japan declared war against the United States and Britain in December 1941, he and his family were interned in a camp in Japanese-occupied China. When the war was over, Walford remembers American planes dropping barrels of food and medicine for the released prisoners. He finally joined Eltham College in 1946 and has written about his experiences in his book, *An English Schoolboy in War-Torn China*.

Another Elthamian caught up in this conflict was Eric Liddell, well-known of course as an Olympic runner winning gold at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. He served as a teacher and missionary in China from 1925, and was interned by the Japanese army in a camp in Weifang on China's east coast where he taught science and Bible classes to children. His captors apparently offered to release him due to his sporting accolades, but he refused this offer and died there of a brain tumour in February 1945 (and is one of the names on the school's war memorial).



Howard Pinkham remembered



The school's honours board for Head Boys of Eltham House



Barrage balloons over London, of the same type seen over the school (source - Wikimedia Commons)

Since 1945

The second half of the 1940s was dominated by recovery and reconciliation after the catastrophe and damage of the war. At Eltham, an exchange link was established with a school in Essen and a German boy came to the school as a boarder for a couple of terms.

The establishment of a Centenary and War Memorial fund led to the purchase of the OE sports ground at Foxbury. Since that time, the school's most prominent former pupil to have served in the armed forces has been Adrian Nance, who left in 1973 (and who was Guest of Honour at the 2008 Speech Day). He was a survivor of the sinking of HMS Sheffield during the Falklands conflict of 1982 and he was awarded an OBE (military division) for his service aboard HMS Cardiff during the 1991 Gulf War. He went on to become commanding officer of HMS Ark Royal and an influential figure in the Armed Forces Christian Union.

In some ways, the role in the navy of such a prominent OE is appropriate, for the buildings occupied by the school since 1912 were formerly those of the Royal Naval School, many of whose pupils were sons of naval officers serving in Greenwich at the Royal Naval College (whose Chapel is still used as a performance venue by the school).

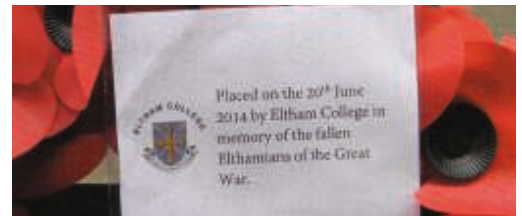
However, Commodore Nance's story is unusual for, in peace time, relatively few OEs have gone on to seek careers in the military and, unlike many other all-boys' (or formerly all-boys') public schools, the school has never maintained a regular CCF (Combined Cadet Force), largely because of its missionary heritage.

That said, there had always been a wreath-laying ceremony at the war memorial on Remembrance Day, and for many years the History Department has taken Year Nine pupils on a tour to the battlefield sites of the First World War: on the 2014 trip wreaths were laid at cemeteries in honour of OEs Arthur Carnegie and Eric Claxton and the "fallen Elthamians of the Great War". This in some way complements the streak of pacifism that has sometimes been current in the school's history: Geoffrey Turberville served in the First World War and was seriously wounded (and would have bled to death had he not been dragged from the battlefield by his sergeant), but he subsequently held pacifist views which seem to have permeated the school – in 1936 a pacifist discussion group was formed and pupils often wore white poppies on Remembrance Day.

Bill Scott, Deputy Head for thirty years between 1922 and 1953, spent part of the First World War in prison as a conscientious objector, as did long-serving Maths teacher Frank Ade, who was also at the school for thirty years (between 1927 and 1957). One of the school's most noted former pupils was the MP, peace activist and co-founder of CND, Fenner Brockway, who was shortlisted for the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize and who died in 1988 at the age of 99. As editor of the *Labour Leader*, then the country's most prominent socialist newspaper, he had publicly opposed the sending of troops to France in 1914 – including, of course, those men who had been pupils at his former school.



Commodore Adrian Nance (R) at the 2008 Speech Day with Headmaster Paul Henderson (Centre) and Chair of Governors David Robins (L)



The wreath laid during the 2014 Battlefields Trip



The statue of peace campaigner Fenner Brockway OE in Red Lion Square, Holborn (Source - Wikimedia Commons)

Remembrance Today

Every year, the school joins in an act of remembrance. Shortly before 11am on the 11th day of November, a Service of Remembrance is led by the Chaplain who is then joined by the Headmaster, staff and students (and sometimes by OEs who served in the armed forces) in front of the war memorial on the exterior wall of the Chapel, where they bow their heads for two minutes to remember those who have gone before them. This year has been no exception and, even in the resurgent pandemic in November 2020, a remembrance ceremony took place by the war memorial. The Eltham College community of students and staff remember together.

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them."

– Laurence Binyon, Poet, 1914

Gloria Filiorum Patres



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