War Memorial Memories

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

As village war memorials go, the Merriott one is quite basic. It stands close by the church, nestling among the ancient, tumbling, lichen-mottled gravestones, a simple cross on a stepped plinth, fashioned from local hamstone in the early 1920s and now, like All Saints church itself, looking as though it has been there for ever.

Two sides of the upper, square section bear the names of some forty-two servicemen who died during the war years. The other two sides are blank, and forever may they stay that way.

The war memorial names were, and still are, very familiar to me. I sat in All Saints Church on Armistice Sundays in years gone by, perhaps as a wolf cub or boy scout having previously paraded around the village behind the Crewkerne Silver Prize Band, and heard them solemnly intoned so many times that I practically knew them off by heart. Even now, they invoke a strange rhythmic recall in my head, almost like mentally recalling a well-loved but rather melancholy poem.

Village War Memorial

Of the thirty-two WW1 casualties, at least eighteen were killed in action and are buried in France or Belgium. Ten of these have no known grave and, hopefully, rest somewhere in a *'foreign field that is for ever England'*. Seven died of wounds or perhaps other war related causes, five of whom are also buried in France or Belgium and four in All Saints churchyard.

If you hail from Merriott and are of my generation, you will know the majority of the names on the war memorial are the names of people like you and me but of a slightly earlier time. They were born and lived in houses we knew, perhaps where we later lived, who maybe sat at desks in the same classrooms as you and I once sat, and in the same church and chapel pews. They were boys and young men from our village who went off to

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war and in most cases didn't come home again. And if you read the census details published on Sue Osborne's genealogy website of the families and the homes they left behind, the horror of war, particularly WW1, and the effect it had on ordinary village people becomes all too evident.

Of the homes they left behind, take Tinker's Lodge for instance. In my young days, this was a group of three cottages on the southern outskirts of the village, accessed from the Crewkerne road by a footpath across one meadow and along the edge of a second. My pal Leonard Pitman lived in one; Bob Elswood's family in another. But before them, one of the Tinker's Lodge cottages was home to another Elswood family, the family of Albert and Thomas (Bert and Tom, more likely), brothers both killed in action in France, one in 1916 and the other two years later. Thomas is buried in Belgium; Albert has no known grave. Another cottage was the family home of Henry Greenham. Henry was also killed in action just one month before the end of the war and was buried in France. He was just 21 years old.

Then there's Broadway, in those days a very narrow street of terraced cottages many of them thatched, not the non-descript chicaned, car-cluttered, characterless thoroughfare of the present day. It was a street where the occupants shared wells and outside toilets and much else besides, and where everyone knew everyone else – I know this because I was born and grew up there. Gossip was rife. Be sure then that when Fredrick Lacey, aged 19, who lived in one of the cottages, was killed in Flanders, all the neighbours would have heard of the sad news almost as soon as his mother and father. The delivery of the dreaded telegram from the near-by post office would not have gone unnoticed and, no doubt, many a neighbourly tear shed in sympathy.

William Osborne (standing) and Arthur Gibbs

Not surprisingly, the memorial includes a preponderance of long-established village family names. In the WW1 list, there are four people with the name of Lawrence – Albert, Fred, Harry and Thomas. They were not brothers but it's highly likely they were related in some way. Similarly, there are three Osbornes, and two Pattemores. Local names do not feature quite so strongly in the WW2 listing, although it includes a Mitchell, a Samways, a Lawrence, and again two Osbornes, Henry and William, but they were definitely not related to each other. William Osborne was my father's boyhood pal and the photograph opposite is of them taken soon after they enlisted in WW1, in the Somerset Light Infantry. William (Billy) also served in WW2 and was still serving when he died aged 46 in 1942. He is buried in All Saints churchyard.

There are two Gwatkins listed who were not Merriott people of long-standing but whose

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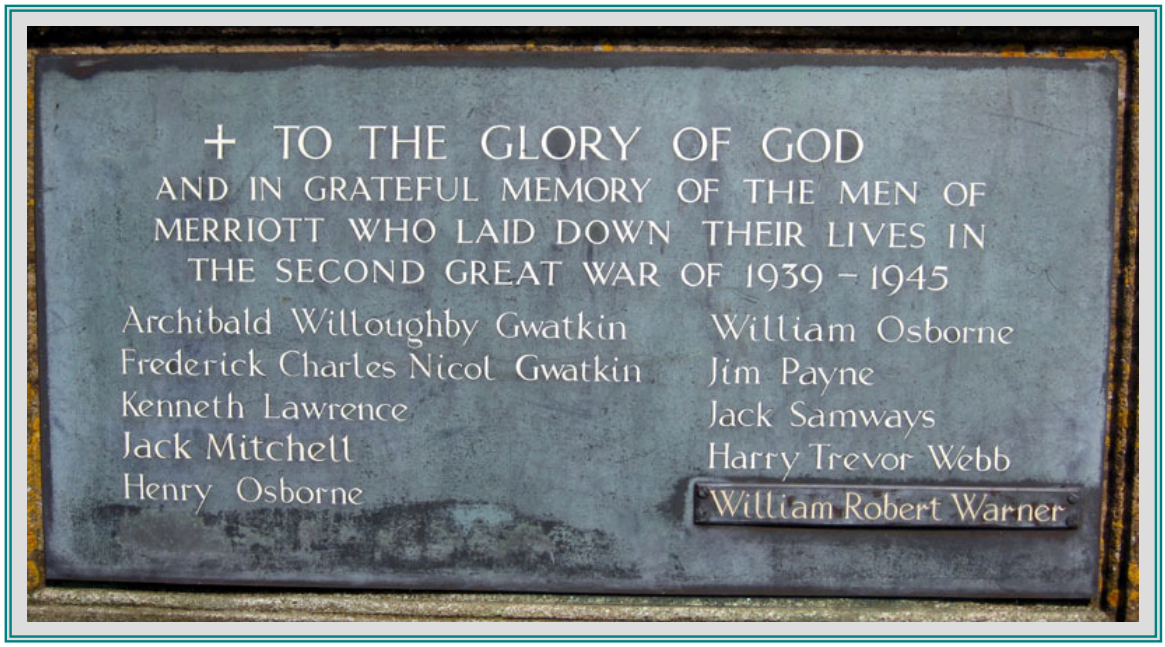
parents lived in Merriott House and were therefore relatively well-to-do. The two sons, aged just 21 and 22 were killed in Burma on the same day in March 1945 when the end of the war was in sight. I recall the news of the deaths of the Gwatkin brothers spreading around the village like wildfire. They are both buried in a war cemetery in Burma, as is William Warner.



War Memorial Inscriptions

William Warner's name was added to the war memorial after the others, on a separate plate, seemingly riveted in position as an afterthought, which it was. I know how this

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came about. The census details show that the Warner family originated from Colchester. They came to live in Merriott during the war and stayed on afterwards, at least until the early 1950s. Two of William's younger siblings went to the village school at the same time as I did. Because the Warners were not a long-established Merriott family, and William had never been resident in the village, he was not included in the original listing. His father, also called William, who I got to know well in later years when I worked alongside him in the tool room at Merriott Mouldings, successfully challenged this decision and so, eventually, his son's name was added to the war memorial. (William Warner's name does not appear on the Colchester war memorial but he is included on the website listing of Colchester Heroes which you can see on http://www.camulos.com/war/s-z.htm If you click on William's name you can see his service record which included surviving the attack on the battleship Repulse, later being taken prisoner by the Japanese and his death as a prisoner of war at the age of 21. If you scroll down beyond the list of names, you will see a special memorial entry.)

Finally, note the entry for Harry Trevor Webb, someone I mention elsewhere in a chapter about Merriott scouts. Trevor, as he was known, was an airman but was lost at sea. In the chapter, I recount how Trevor's parents eased their sorrow by generously using the money collected by his shipmates to benefit the next generation of village boys, myself included.

I've mentioned individual cases but this in no way detracts from the sacrifice and sorrow associated with each and every name listed on the memorial. Similarly, it is well to remember those who returned home, survived their wounds, mental as well as physical, and the experiences that changed their lives for ever. In WW2, for instance, two Merriott men were prisoners of war. One, Harry Strickland, was held by the Germans; another, Eddie Hunt, by the Japanese. I remember the welcome home Eddie received, his cottage in Lower Street bedecked with goodwill messages and festooned with bunting. But let me lighten the tone a little and tell you about the armistice parades I mentioned earlier, those of the 1940s, the ones that I experienced. I can't remember in detail any particular parade so this is an amalgam of memories that I hope will give you an impression of what they were like.

At their peak they were quite lengthy affairs; just about everybody in the village might be involved. Heading the parade – after the band, that is - came the British Legion standard bearers, followed by a large contingent of British Legion men, all ex-soldiers of the previous conflict, be-medalled and no doubt proud to be marching again. Closely behind them came members of the local branch of the Women's British Legion, equally strong in numbers. Below are two pictures taken in 1948, which show the British Legion standard bearers and their escorts. The following men's contingent is just out of view but you can see the considerable number of women present, shown again in the second picture. This particular parade appears ready to set out from the recreation ground, something of which I have no recollection whatsoever; I can only recall parades that started from Knapp, as I have described below.

Other participants who paraded at various times included the Merriott Home Guard (a squad of about thirty, many ex-WW1 soldiers), the Red Cross (many well-trained older

girls, my sister Marjorie included), the ARP wardens, boy scouts, wolf cubs and, always bringing up the rear, the village special constables who numbered just three. Harry Chant, the sexton, was one of those and I remember on one occasion he spent most of the parade haranguing we wolf cubs immediately in front of him to *'Come on you bwoys, swing yer arms! Kip in step!'*

British Legion Armistice Day Parade

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The Crewkerne Silver Prize Band did not always lead the parades; indeed, I think there might have been times when there was no band at all. But on at least one occasion the drum and bugle band of the Crewkerne Grammar School Air Cadets took pride of place. How splendid they looked in the their blue uniforms and little forage caps and their white gaiters, belt and gloves. I remember being totally enthralled and rather fancied myself playing a kettledrum - in the front row of course, where everyone could see me. Or maybe playing the big drum, so that I could wear the animal-skin apron. But I wasn't so sure about being a mere bugler.

As I mentioned earlier, the parades that I recall always formed up down Knapp, or rather in Moorlands Road, and headed off along Lower Street, up Shiremoor Hill, and then along Church Street to All Saints church. If the Crewkerne Silver Prize Band was leading, the pace would be rather sedate. Not so the Air Cadets; they were much more lively.

The relative silence that ensued after the parade had formed up and was ready to set off would eventually be broken by the bellowed order to *'PARAAADE .....QUICK.....**MARCH!**'* The big drum boomed and the kettledrums rattled. A few paces later, up went the bugles, white gloves head high, braid dangling.

By the time we got to the bottom of Half Acre Lane, the buglers would be having their first rest but the drummers kept the marching rhythm going, especially the big drum, but by the time we were passing Manor Farm the buglers would be at it again. And so we went on until we reached the church when the order *'PARAAADE ..... **HALT!**'* was given. We then fell out and made our way into church.

The vicar that I can best remember taking the services was the Reverend Elwin although I was also present when his successor, the Reverend Awre, officiated. But as I write, it's the Reverend Elwin I have in mind, a figure of rather stern authority to small boys, who walked with a limp as though he had a wooden leg. Boys often mimicked his walk, of course, because that's what boys do; but not on Armistice Sunday as there were far too many people about!

The church was always packed and at the outset there was a short ceremony involving the British Legion standards. I think they were placed alongside the altar for the duration of the service.

I can remember the hymns that were sung: *O! Valiant Hearts, Eternal Father Strong To Save* and, of course, *O God Our Help In Ages Past*, which must have fitted the troubled times perfectly.

O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!

Whenever I hear these hymns, I still associate them with long-ago armistice Sundays.

After the service, we filed out into what was invariably a grey, cold, damp November afternoon, a procession of clergy, choirboys and local worthies leading the way to the

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war memorial. There followed a wreath-laying ceremony when wreaths from all the participating organisations, and quite a few family ones as well, were laid at its base.

After this, the parade formed up again, parallel with the churchyard and alongside the tithe barn, itself with wartime connections, having served as a billet for British soldiers and, just before D-Day, as a mess hall for our American allies. And it was where, after the war had ended, dances were held to celebrate victory.

For the return route we marched back past the big school to Newchester Cross and by the Blake Memorial Hall that also once served as a billet for allied soldiers and also, as the war progressed, for Italian and German prisoners. Then down over Broadway to Knapp and then a right turn into Moorlands Road where we fell out and it was all over for another year.

The parades, of course, are no more, although my friend Mary Paull, who lives in the village, recently told me there is still a ceremony at the war memorial and the names of the fallen continue to be read out. I was so pleased to hear this because several years ago I happened to be in the village shortly after Armistice Sunday and visited the war memorial. On its plinth, there was one little wooden cross with a poppy attached, and one wreath. Attached to the wreath was a plastic envelope in which was a small card that bore the rain-smudged message *'From The Parish Council'*. This token communal recognition made me feel rather sad, but time passes and it's not inconceivable that it won't be very many years before not even the Parish Council will mark the occasion.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

The war graves in Merriott churchyard. The War Graves Commission website lists four military graves as being in the churchyard. There appears to be only three. It's likely the fourth man, John French, aged 18 of the Somerset Light Infantry, was buried in a family grave

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