

The Chiltern U3A Amersham WW1 Memorial Project

– the origins and objectives

The approaching 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War inspired the two Family History Groups of the Chiltern U3A to consider how best to recognise the event on behalf of the local community in Amersham and the surrounding area.

Representatives of the Family History groups agreed it would be appropriate to produce a record relating to the individuals listed on the Amersham War Memorial located in the Garden of Remembrance and the Roll of Honour in St. Mary's Church. The record would take the form of a book containing information on all the individuals named, 98 in total, together with a digital version. The aim was to '**bring our heritage to life**' by researching the individuals' families, their employment, role in the community, as well as their military records and details of the theatres of war in which they fought.

It was agreed that copies of the book would be presented to a number of museums, libraries and archives and a digital version would be linked to the websites of the Amersham Museum and Chiltern U3A.

As costs would be incurred in the preparation and publishing of the information, financial contributions were sought from the Chiltern U3A members and the local community, both individuals and organisations. In addition a successful application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Discussions with the Amersham Museum resulted in agreement to share information and research which helped our project and that of the Museum, whose members were researching what Amersham was like in the early part of the 20th century and details of the people who went to war. Sharing information and research also helped to reduce the costs involved.

The record will serve as a permanent tribute and will be a reminder to the local community of those servicemen from the Amersham area who fought and died and, in some cases, whose final resting place may be unknown and who perhaps lie in a far distant place.

Our hope is that this contribution will achieve the aim of 'bringing our heritage to life' and that it will affirm the assertion of Laurence Binyon's famous poem 'The Fallen':

*"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."*

- the process

Initially, sixteen members of the Chiltern U3A Family History groups volunteered to research a number of servicemen (six each) whose names appeared on the *Amersham WW1 Memorial* and on the *Roll of Honour* in St Mary's Church. Eighteen names appeared on the *Roll of Honour* but not on the memorial. The researchers were: Peter Bright, Chalmers Cursley, Peter Dixon, Hazel Garas, Mike Hitner, Kathie Jones, Richard Jones, Jean Lefroy, Ruth McGill, Bob Meredith, Janet Paterson, Anne Peters, Wendy Phillips, Peter Powell, Gerry Taylor (who initiated the idea) and Gwyneth Wilkie.

The initial major task was to ensure that adequate funds were available to support the research and publication. Bob Meredith led the successful application for a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund

which, together with contributions from the Chiltern U3A membership and the local Community, enabled the work to be completed.

Our researchers began by consulting the invaluable *Buckinghamshire Remembers* website, run by June and Peter Underwood. The site has all the WW1 memorials in Buckinghamshire with a full list of all the names on each, together with a record of the regiment, service number, some personal details, names of next of kin and the date of death and place of burial or commemoration of each serviceman. *Buckinghamshire Remembers* also has Clint's *Roll of Honour*, which has a list of references especially to local newspapers which carried items relating to individual casualties. Researchers then went on to delve into the family history of the servicemen, using birth, marriage and death records, parish registers, as well as information from various censuses. Wartime service was researched using military records kept by The National Archives, regimental museums and archives and the *War Diaries* compiled during the conflict and regimental histories written later. Details of burials and commemorations were found on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website. A full list of our sources is given at the end of the book.

It soon became apparent that no convincing information could be found on four of the names being researched. The names are incorporated in the alphabetical listing and each account gives details of the process of trying to track down these individuals.

With sixteen different researchers it was obvious that some standardisation and editorial control over the written biographies would be needed. To this end an editorial panel was constituted, made up of five of the original researchers – Hazel Garas, Anne Peters, Peter Powell, Gerry Taylor and Gwyneth Wilkie. They were joined by Graham Lewis whose experience of proof-reading and knowledge of military history proved invaluable.

Additionally, the need to bring a focus and direction to the extensive range of tasks involved was recognised and, consequently, a 'Steering Group' was established comprising: Chalmers Cursley, Peter Dixon, Hazel Garas, Bob Meredith, Peter Powell, Graham Lewis and Gwyneth Wilkie. The biographies of the servicemen were each edited twice by different editorial panel members. Gaps in personal and military histories were filled in, facts checked as far as possible and new information added as it became available. Photographs of individuals and places where they lived were added as well as maps and other illustrations. The editors attempted to keep as much of the original writing as possible to maintain the individual styles exhibited by each researcher.

Although the biographies of the servicemen provide the core of the book, supplementary and supporting information was researched and incorporated. We hope that the completed book will contribute to showing how Amersham was affected by the conflict, life in Amersham before the war, the war service and sacrifices of the soldiers who fought and died and the impact of their deaths on the community. Chiltern U3A collaborated with Amersham Museum in researching some of this information.

It is particularly pleasing that this major task of 'bringing our heritage to life' has been achieved as a result of the considerable efforts of volunteers from the Chiltern U3A.