

Remembering Ryton



A World War 1 German officer and a British 'Tommy' inch towards each other across No Man's Land, hands nervously outstretched as an offer of friendship. Other men and boys follow, greeting each other with sweets and mugs of tea. They start a 'kick about' with a football and soon the game is in full swing.

But this is not the famous truce in the trenches in December 1914, despite the ragged tinsel Christmas tree. This is the recreation ground in Ryton on Dunsmore, Warwickshire, in September 2014.

To mark the centenary of the beginning of the First World War in 2014, HOPE Together drew on the story of the Christmas truce for its Greater Love campaign. Inspired by this, the Ryton History Group co-ordinated a series of events for the weekend of the Heritage Open Days (heritageopendays.org.uk).

'For most of 1914 the men who are commemorated on our village war memorial were still living here', said Steve Garrett, chair of the history group. 'So we wanted to focus on what it was like for them at the outbreak of the war and consider how life has changed. In 1914 Ryton was a village of farming families, although a few of the men had started working in new local factories.'

Steve scoured the census for 1911 online to find names from the Ryton war memorial and discover what those men were doing before they went to war. Of course, some were boys not quite old enough to work in 1911. Recollections from long-standing village families and research in the local record office were added. Over time it became possible to build up a picture of each soldier's life: their family, schooling or occupation, where they lived in the village.

From the list of their occupations, and others in the village also gleaned from the census, the idea for The Way We Were, a flower festival in St Leonard's parish church, was born. Arrangements were created by each of the village's interest groups, inspired by the jobs and employers of 1914: bicycle and silk factories, bakery, market garden and brickworks.

One arrangement showed life in a rural cottage at the end of the nineteenth century (reconstructed in the church's bell tower room) while the village WI focused on the women's suffrage movement. And, of course, each of the men listed on the war memorial were honoured with their own arrangement, accompanied by two A3 laminated panels: one his war record, the other an outline of whatever was known of his life before 1914.

'We invited the village children to come to see the flowers and learn about their village in the past. They entire school came, and in costume!' explained Steve. 'The older children in particular were fascinated that we knew about the people on the war memorial as teenagers – young people not much older than themselves and to whom they could relate.'

Alongside the flower festival, the church arranged themed worship, including a 1914 Evensong, and a WWI sing-along evening with a scratch choir singing the verses of well-known musical hall songs, like Daisy, Daisy and Pack Up Your Troubles, with the audience joining in the choruses.

'Everyone, whatever his or her religion or lack of it, is invited to participate in Remembrance,' said Revd David Wintle, Rector of Baginton with Bubbenhall and Ryton on Dunsmore (St Leonard's). 'At the core of

Remembrance is the silence and the words either side of that silence are – deliberately it seems – neutral, so you can bring into that silence whatever you want or need: prayer, remembering or imagination, even blankness or horror or confusion. You can bring your Christian faith, or your Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or pagan faith, or your lack of faith. But it is a silence in which we all share.

‘For the Church, Remembrance is a bit of a balancing act. We mustn’t sanitise or glorify or trivialise war: we must acknowledge that war is evil, but also that those who are caught up in war are mostly just like us, no better and no worse: sometimes they *are* us. At the same time, we must dare to offer, to those who may not always wish to hear it, a message which is distinctively Christian: that in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, the sins of individuals and of nations can be forgiven. Paradoxically, in the very act of Remembrance we can let go of the past and look to the future.’

Four years on and Ryton is gearing up for another weekend of remembering in September 2018. ‘We always remember those who were lost in the war on Remembrance Sunday so we wanted to do something a bit different for the Heritage Open Days,’ says Steve. ‘In 2018 we can’t ignore the sacrifices, loss and grief that followed World War 1, nor that it was not the ‘war to end all wars’ in the end. But today we live in relative peace and this is a close community.’

The war memorial has been renovated by the parish council and Ryton History Group, St Leonard’s Church and the community groups in the village are together putting on another flower festival, Remembering Ryton: Peace & Reconciliation 1918-2018. This time Coventry Cathedral’s Reconciliation Ministry team have been invited to work with the local school to bring greater understanding of the causes of conflict and engage in peace-making activities.

The church is holding festival worship to remember, give thanks and pray for peace. There will be re-enactors bringing a World War 1 camp to help people understand life for the more than 40 Ryton men who went to war while the WI are making a village poppy trail to remember the ones who did not make it back. Finally, the village are all invited to a street ‘peace party’ to build up the community and strengthen its cohesion. This will end with eighteen young people parading through the village, each carrying the identity of a man commemorated on the war memorial, brought back from the dead for one weekend, but remembered in Ryton forever.

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