

Remembrance Day 2014

The Great War began on 28 July 1914, a hundred years ago, and lasted until 11 November 1918; during the course of it more than 16 million people were killed, 9 million in the military and 7 million civilians. Six days after the outbreak of the war the then Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey was standing at a window in the Foreign Office as darkness was falling; he uttered the words 'The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time'.

In this parish the first lights went out for John and Bessie Taylor of 152 High Street on 24 August 1914 when their son Percy became the Chesterton casualty. Percy had enlisted with the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment along with a whole group of Chesterton men back in 1904. The deal was that they served for 3 years and then remained as Reservists for the following nine years, and so they would have been amongst the first to be called up. Five houses along lived Police Sgt Warren and his family; one of his sons, Stanley, had got married May and had enlisted with the Scots Guards. He was killed in action on 29 October.

By this date a hundred years ago they were our only casualties. But the first Battle of Ypres had already begun in earnest and with it the whole awful catalogue of costly, muddy, bloody warfare was in train.

Next door to the Warrens, at 144, were the Amons. One of the sons, Edward, enlisted with the Duke of Wellington's Regt in 1904 but ended up in the 8th battalion that was involved in Gallipoli – and that was where he was killed this month in 1915. During his pre-war spell in the Regiment he got to know Frederick Gipp from the other side of Cambridge. On 1 January 1914 Frederick married Edward's sister, Irene, here in this church. When war begun he was soon engaged in action in Belgium with the same battalion as Percy Taylor and with Charles Brown who was from no 160 High Street (all of these homes are on the same side of the road between the hearing aid centre and the working men's club). Charles's details read like this:

Born Chesterton, enlisted Cambridge. Plumber by trade. Enlisted and passed fit 31 August 1904, aged 18 years 4 months (well that's what he record says, but I've checked other records, including his baptism here and he was only just 16), height 5 feet 6 inches, weight 113lbs, girth 34 inches, complexion fresh, eyes grey, hair dark brown, religious denomination Church of England. Son of Rebecca Brown, of 160 High Street.

Well, in fact Rebecca Brown died in 1913, aged 53. Robert, her husband, had died in 1903 on 4 November. Perhaps that's why his son got away with enlisting at such a young age. Perhaps it's why he wanted to. I can't help feeling for him, going off to war with no mother and father at home rooting for him. But he was in the company of friends; Percy however, as I have said, died in August, but Frederick Gipp was with him, and I like to think that he was with him to the end because they were both killed in action on the same day, 11 November. Like so many they have no known grave, lost in the mud and carnage; they are commemorated alongside thousands of others on the Menin Gate.

It is at the Menin Gate that every night there is still an act of Remembrance: the traffic is stopped, the Last Post is played on the bugle, a minute's silence is kept and then Reveille. A hundred years on and we still remember. It evokes both a sense of loss, the Last Post marking the end of the day and the coming of night, but also one of Hope, or resurrection morning as the bugle or trumpet awakes the troops to a new day at sunrise; and for us as Christians it also reminds us of the last trumpet spoken of more than once in the New Testament.

¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.

I don't think we have to worry about taking this too literally, but it is a beautiful image. The Thessalonians to whom Paul is writing were clearly worried at the thought that when the trumpet sounds at the end we who are still alive will be stealing a march on those who have already died, who, presumably, because they are still in the grave and therefore further away, will find themselves at the back of the queue as we ascend to meet with our coming King. No, says St Paul, those who have died - and they are probably thinking primarily of those who have died as martyrs - will rise first and will be given the honour and primacy and then we will be caught up with them too: 'and so we will be with the Lord for ever'. We may not quite get all the stuff about clouds and flying through the air but this is Hope fleshed out in a way that Pauls' readers could grasp and that would assure them. And in amongst it is the trumpet. The trump of God shall sound – rejoice.

The trumpet – or bugle – and silence remind us that sometimes words are not appropriate for conveying meaning. It was one of the things that the chaplains discovered in the trenches – they went in with their prayer books and found that the words had ceased to connect with a generation of young men. Actions spoke louder than words; what impressed soldiers was padres who risked life and limb to tend the wounded or rescue them from no man's land, who buried the dead and brought cheer to the living.

Back home many people found comfort in linking the deaths of soldiers with the sacrifice of Christ. A popular picture called *The Great Sacrifice* was of a dead soldier with his hand on the feet of the crucified Christ. The image communicated more than any words could. The clergy were required to bring hope and comfort to those who were facing such loss and despair. And sometimes that was when they were battling with all of that themselves. I was always moved in Waterbeach to see the names of three sons of the man who was vicar there in the First World War. On our own memorial is the name of Andrew Swainson who was son of the vicar here just after the turn of the century. I read of Canon Greville Brunwin-Hales...

ONE example is Canon Greville BrunwinHales, the Rector of St MaryattheWalls, and Rural Dean of Colchester. BrunwinHales was a devoted and popular priest, who did not spare himself during the war. He had two sons, who were killed while serving in the Army and the Royal Flying Corps. Shortly afterwards, one Sunday afternoon, BrunwinHales baptised two babies. Perhaps they reminded him of his sons — certainly, he then went home to his rectory, and suffered a complete breakdown. His wife managed to get him to Eastbourne, where he remained for many months. At first, his curates tried to conceal their rector's illness, but at length they had to tell people. One day, the postman delivered a large envelope to BrunwinHales in Eastbourne. He initially thought it must contain legal papers from his solicitor, but when he opened it, he found a letter of good wishes for his recovery signed by hundreds of people, many of whom he had helped with their own bereavements.

[Church Times, 25 July 2014, p22]

Yes, there was breakdown; there was death on a scale previously unimaginable (100 years before the casualties on both sides of the Battle of Waterloo totalled 47,000 – less than one day's worth at the Somme).

A hundred years ago the lights were going out down Chesterton High Street. The angel of death had visited four homes almost next door to each other. And the lights continued to go out in our

community. 92 sons of Chesterton are commemorated on our war memorial. The shock and sadness here was immense – as it was throughout the land - and you can see it still in the pictures we have of the dedication of the war memorial in 1920, which we will see in a moment.

But after the Last Post, and after the long silence, their Christian faith enabled them to hear the sound of the trumpet again, for death does not and will not have the last word, for we come here week by week to celebrate the Resurrection, reveille, beauty in the end triumphing over brokenness.