

Creating a WW1 Exhibition

by Robert A. Duncan



Bob's WW1 exhibition in the David Rudkin Room ran from 6th October to 11th November to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. Sadly, Bob died on the 5th of August 2018 before the exhibition was staged but not before he had written this article for The Emsworth Echo. Thanks to Bob's thorough research and to the hard work of his family and Richard Sanderson the exhibition was mounted and proved to be a great success.

When I started on the World War One exhibition research, I assumed that as there had been so much written about the war, that the task would be fairly simple. Of course doing it for the Emsworth Museum meant that it had to be relevant to Emsworth, and those from Emsworth that had served, as well as trying to cover the extent of the war in Europe, far off lands and on the seas.

The first problem was to decide the limits of Emsworth. Many of those killed lived in Hermitage which is technically not even in Hampshire, but most were related to Emsworth families. Some in Westbourne are related but are on separate memorial plaques, as are some in Warblington, Thorney and Hayling. I concluded that if the name appeared on an Emsworth Roll of Honour then they must be included. If, for this reason, any that should be included are missing, I apologise.

The next problem was to plan the four plus years of war on to just ten display boards in some sensible order, and hopefully with interesting content, pictures, maps etc. For example, what on earth can anyone say about the five months of slaughter on the Somme in 1916 that is new, interesting and worth reading, and a tribute to around 24 Emsworth residents who lost their lives in this seemingly pointless conflict.

Born less than eight years after the end of World War 1, I don't remember anyone ever wanting to talk about it. My father served from 1915 to 1919 in the 2nd Battalion Civil

Service Rifles and he never mentioned the war or his time in it, other than to joke about the time he was employed in a de-lousing squad, de-lousing returning troops in France while waiting to be demobilized himself. Never anything about battles; I think it was too painful a subject to talk about. One of the display items in the cabinets will, I hope, be a copy of a postcard from him from Jerusalem (31st December 1917), together with a very delicate book of pictures and pressed flowers sent by him from there to his future wife; my mother.

On the first board I have tried to explain the conditions for the average working family in 1914, in case the younger generations aren't aware of what normal life was like at home in those pre-war days. Very few homes had gas, let alone electricity. People still cooked on the old coal fired range and, of course, only had outside toilets. This board also covers what led up to the declaration of war, politics and specific events and preparations.

The second board covers the early battles, and rather heavy losses, during the first five months of the war. Emsworth lost some 26 people during this time, the first Emsworth person to be killed being the son of Lord and Lady White of Southleigh Park. Most of the other 1914 losses were at sea and, apart from the Battle of Coronel where seven Emsworth people lost their lives, due largely to U boat activity. The complete lack of understanding of the dangers of submarine warfare among senior naval officers resulted

Continued overleaf

Creating a WW1 Exhibition continued

in many ships being put in unnecessary danger, costing in total over 2000 lives. Another early life lost from Emsworth remained a mystery for 103 years, until the submarine in which the sailor was serving was discovered in 2017 off the coast of Papua New Guinea.

The following boards cover the battles fought during the ensuing years from 1915 to 1918, both on land and at sea, focusing particularly on those actions that resulted in the loss of Emsworth men.

Richard Sanderson is kindly preparing board four, covering the Gallipoli campaign and the war in Palestine and Mesopotamia, as well as board five, The Battle of Jutland, where some 14 Emsworth residents died.

My daughter, Jane Kidd, has assisted me greatly in the preparation of the remaining boards and displays. Our aim was to cover the major European battles of Ypres, the Somme, Arras, Cambrai, Passchendaele, Amiens and others; the U boat war and air warfare. We also want to highlight some of the key advancements in medicine, telecommunications and armaments, which came out of the war and the many diverse roles that women played in enabling the war effort.

The final board will reflect the statistics of the war and its effect on the world in general, together with some events and latent deaths of Emsworth people that occurred in 1919. This board will also include the 'Others' who played a critical role in winning the war. We often forget that the fighting forces were supported by horses and mules (most of the local horses from Emsworth and the environs being requisitioned by the army in 1914) as well as dogs and homing pigeons, all of which played a key part.

