

Memorial Oaks at Wolsingham School

Our World War I commemorative series continues with **Robert Hopkinson's** introduction to what the Imperial War Museum believes is the oldest war memorial in Britain.



Photographs courtesy of Christine Gray

Wolsingham School and Community College, in Weardale, County Durham, celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2014. As part of the celebrations, there was an exhibition, a major feature of which was the story of the Memorial Oaks, which are situated in the playing field which runs next to the A689. The trees have been identified by the Imperial War Museum as probably the oldest war memorial in the country because two-thirds of the original eighteen trees were planted as saplings before the First World War ended in 1918. It was not until the early 1920s that stone war memorials were erected, of which so many fine examples can be seen throughout Weardale and the rest of the country. Our memorial is unique as it is a living tribute which has grown over the years, in direct contrast to the young men the trees represent. Our Second World War memorial is a stone tablet, set into the wall of this hall. Forty oak saplings, cultivated in our science labs from the original trees, are planted in the same field to represent the 40 old boys from this school who fell in the Second World War. Sadly, our 59th tree has been planted since hostilities began in Iraq and Afghanistan. This tree is placed in safe-keeping in front of the Lower School building, in memory of Colin Wall, killed in Iraq in 2003.

The story of the planting of the original trees is movingly related in *Phoenix*, the school magazine, issued in the summer term 1918.

On a damp morning in March, when the mist hung like a thick veil over the whole valley, the solemn ceremony of the planting of the oak trees began. All the school children were assembled for the occasion and silently looked on while the school's youngest pupils planted the trees. 'I plant this oak, hereafter to be called the [name] Oak, in memory of [name], who died gloriously, fighting for his country. These words were delivered in a small quavering treble, as each successive oak was planted. At length the last tree was firmly set in the earth, and each returned to his lessons with thoughts somewhat sobered.

The article went on to reflect how the trees would be a continuing memorial.

For many generations these sturdy oaks will bear silent witness, with their great gnarled stems, to the heroism of our Old Boys... Beneath their shade how many manly boys and happy girls shall grow up, rejoicing in the glorious name of these brave boys. The story of how these boys played their part in this great national struggle will be handed down from one generation of admiring school-fellows to another. The school will ever after have reason to be proud that the moulding of these noble characters has been entrusted to her care... The first duty of the scholar will be to learn to reverence these oaks. The sight of the noble trees will inspire the future boys and girls to follow the same noble path as their predecessors in the school.

Our modern day Remembrance Service tries to live up to this idea: as each of the names of those former pupils who died in the service of their country is read out, a pupil leaves the hall carrying a small wooden cross which is placed in the ground next to one of the trees in the school fields.

Robert Hopkinson, a former secretary of the Durham branch, is currently treasurer of the Cumbria branch. He joined Wolsingham school in 1979 as Head of history and on retirement became a member of the governing body.