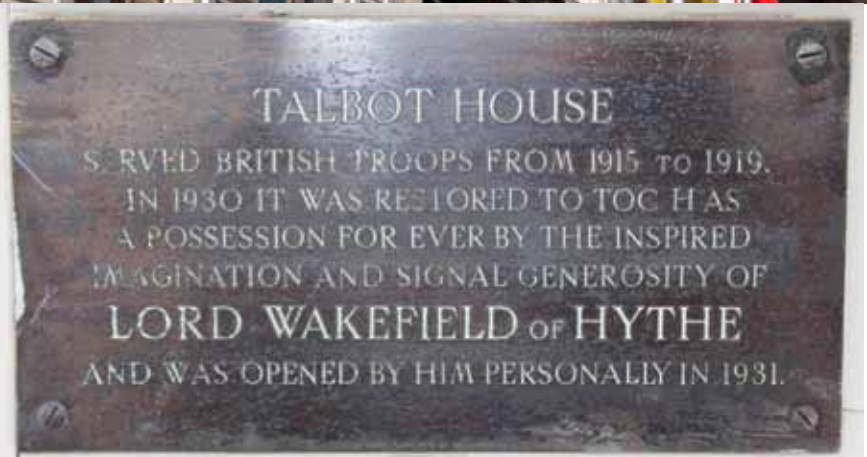


My Favourite History Place

Richard Hughes introduces us to Poperinge



Poperinge is a cheerful place. It is a cheerfulness which defies its location yet resonates with its history. It is a small town just ten kilometres west of Ypres and all around is the debris and memorabilia of slaughter. Yet somehow Poperinge is a cheerful place. It is a community which bustles with purposeful activity. In the Grote Markt there are queues at the bus stop, the shops and cafés are busy with customers, everyone seems out and about involved in business and those who are not sit in the cafés watching the world go by. Even in the midst of the Great War Poperinge was a cheerful place; indeed that was its purpose for Poperinge was 'Pop', the location of legend which provided thankful periods of pleasure and relief to the soldiers living and dying in the trenches close by. Edmund Blunden called it 'one of the seven wonders of the world.' It was an oasis of sanity in the midst of carnage. Life in West Flanders is gentler now but Poperinge still maintains the atmosphere of a place concerned with the pleasures of life.

The most famous visitor attraction in Poperinge is Talbot House which is just a stone's throw from the Grote Markt. In this tall, handsome townhouse set against the road the Reverend Tubby Clayton established a centre of respite for troops of any rank; it truly was the 'Every Man's Club', the term which is still proudly proclaimed on the notice above the door. Within its welcoming walls shattered souls could find simple material pleasures like cups of tea, cakes, books but above all there was a serenity and humour in the place which is still clearly apparent. On average 5,000 men a week passed through its door. It remains a wonderful place to visit and indeed to stay for there is a comfortable and friendly bed and breakfast facility available. The army signallers' code for Talbot House was Toc H and this term provided the name for the international Christian organisation established after the war to enable the spirit and purpose of Talbot House to live on beyond the boundaries of the war and Poperinge.

Some officers imbued with the ideals of Talbot House but less keen on the absence of alcohol within it decamped to a neighbouring hostelry to which they gave the name 'Skindles' in honour of the rather raffish hotel in Maidenhead. A plaque indicates the location of 'Skindles', just along the road from Talbot House. Other soldiers favoured the bars and cafés in the Grote Markt, the most famous of which was La Poupée, presided over by Madame Cossey and her three striking daughters who were features in the minds of many soldiers as they trudged back wearily to the front line. Several of the bars and cafés of Poperinge which were so popular with the

men released from the front line are still very much in business.

Yet Poperinge should not be seen as just a welcome centre of respite and pleasure. What makes it such a fascinating place is the existence of another layer. Behind the large, handsome town hall there is a small yard where stands the execution post at which deserters from the front line were shot. Alongside are the cramped cells which housed those arrested for minor civil disturbances, usually drunkenness, but which also constituted the fetid area where deserters spent their last night alive. This sombre area is just across the road from the lively bars and cafés. It needs to be remembered too that Talbot House, so symbolic of the power of goodness in the worst of adversity, is named after Gilbert Talbot, a young officer killed close by at Hooge, whose brother recovered his lifeless body by personally dragging it back from No Man's Land.

Poperinge offers a fascinating and layered vision of the Great War but it is not lost in history and is clearly a vibrant small town rejoicing in the present. It is appropriate that it is the hop-growing centre of Belgium and has a popular beer festival

each year. In the nearby hamlet of Westvleteren the Trappist monks of St Sixtus Abbey brew what many connoisseurs consider the best beer in the world, Westvleteren 12. So the pleasures and the pains of life seem to work alongside each other, as they always have done, in this remarkable little corner of West Flanders.

Richard Hughes retired as head of history, St John's School, Leatherhead in 2006, and continues to examine for Edexcel and take First World War battlefields tours. He is a member of the West Surrey branch of the Historical Association.

If you would like to tell us about your history place in a future edition of *The Historian*, in about 700 words, please email: alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk

Women's Football: the early years in the First World War in ten tweets

It is a summer of sport, commemoration and chaos. So to bring some togetherness on all of that, the ten tweets in this edition are on women's football in the 'olden days'



The Theatrical Ladies Football match at Tottenham, north London, in 1912.

Summarising an event or person using ten statements of only 140 characters (including spaces!). Compiled by Paula Kitching

-  The first home international women's association football match took place on the 9 May 1881 England v Scotland (0 – 3).
-  Grimsby claimed to be the first women's football club side, while the British Ladies Football Club (BLFC) was founded in 1895 in London.
-  During WWI women's football was promoted by factory welfare officers as a way to keep the new female workers healthy and safely occupied.
-  With 900,000 women working in munitions factories, football was a cheap and easy sport. The players became known as the Munitionettes.
-  The Football League suspended all of its matches for male players at the end of the 1914-15 season so that the men could volunteer to fight.
-  Women factory workers began to organise local teams and matches to raise money for veterans. Large crowds began to attend the games.
-  The Dick, Kerr's Ladies F.C. team of 11 factory workers from Preston became international celebrities & the most successful women's team ever.
-  The Munitionettes' Cup was created Aug 1917, the 1st winners Blyth Spartans beating Bolckow Vaughan of Middlesbrough 5-0.
-  After the war when the men returned the women's teams were disbanded and women were now told football was unhealthy for them.
-  1921 the FA 'banned' women's teams from playing football on League and Association-affiliated grounds – not until 1971 was it lifted.

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