

The Day Sussex Died

Sound Architect Creative Media Project Manager Susanne Crosby

There were many different battles in the First World War. The Battle of the Boar's Head however, using the 11th, 12th and 13th Battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment, known as the South Downers; resulted in a shocking loss of life for Sussex families, all in one day: the 30th June, 1916.

Students from St Catherine's College in Eastbourne worked alongside Eastbourne PALS and Sound Architect Creative Media to find out about this day, and the men that fought in this battle, which is known as "The Day Sussex Died".



The Battle of Boar's Head

By Chris Richards, Eastbourne PALS

Lowther's Lambs



Lord Kitchener, the secretary of State for War had realised at the beginning of the war that large numbers of new men would be required for the British Army if it was to win the war and had begun the call for volunteers in August 1914.

Many ex-army officers were determined to do their bit for King and Country and asked permission from the War Office to raise Battalions of volunteers. One of these was Colonel Claude Lowther, MP for Eskdale and owner of Herstmonceux Castle. He served as a 2nd Lieutenant with the Imperial Yeomanry during the Boer War.

In September 1914 he gained permission to raise a Battalion of Sussex men and was so successful that he was able to raise three Battalions by the end of February 1915

Southdowners

Based at Cooden, the Battalions underwent initial training. Now officially called the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Southdowns Battalions, the units were officially embodied into the regular British Army in April 1915 when they were finally issued with full British Army kit, sent to Kent for further training, and now called the 11th, 12th and 13th Battalions of The Royal Sussex Regiment.

The Battalions transferred to France a year later in March 1916, and by June 1916 the Battalions had experience in trench warfare although they had not yet taken part in a major attack.

Diversion from the Somme

As part of the preparations for the planned major British attack on the Somme the British Commander in Chief General Haig had instructed that raids, artillery and other diversionary tactics were to be employed in the British northern sector to keep the German Army unsure of where it should send its reserves in anticipation of the major attack it knew was coming.

In the 39th Division sector this was interpreted as an opportunity to launch a Brigade attack and the three Royal Sussex Battalions of the 116th Brigade were chosen for this action.

The 11th, 12th and 13th Battalions were as yet untried in this type of action but Brigadier Hornby was adamant that they were to be used for this particular attack: 11th in front, 12th second, 13th in the rear.

11th and 13th Battalions

The Commanding Officer of the 11th Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Grisewood, was so incensed by the lack of preparation and unsuitability of the plans that he protested and was promptly relieved of his command. The 11th Battalion was relegated to a supporting role with the 13th taking over in front.

The attack was planned for the day before the Somme offensive and its objective was to take out a German salient at Richebourg near Bethune in Northern France. The 12th Battalion was to attack on the left with the 13th on its right with half of the 11th Battalion as carrying parties to bring up supplies and equipment.

Commemoration: Richebourg, 30 June 2016

A group of students were permitted to officially attend the centenary commemorative services in Richebourg in France on 30th June. The students also laid a wreath and paid their respects.

"It was quite good when we visited the cemeteries, because we could see for ourselves how many people there died, but even though we weren't friends with Germans at the time, there are still some Germans buried in British cemeteries, so it's nice to see that even in the devastation, people still cared. We were in quite a small cemetery but there were something like 800 graves, and there were people from loads of places in there: Canadian, unknown soldiers, yet they are there and they are all remembered."

"It was quite overwhelming in the ceremony. We were all experiencing it together, all from different places, but we were all together experiencing the same thing."

"I think it's good that we are learning about it, so that it doesn't happen again"

"Getting permission from the Mayor of Richebourg was quite overwhelming, that he was going to let us remember people who we didn't know, but who we put interest into finding, and I think some of us have become quite connected to some of them."



At the Official Ceremony in Richebourg, laying the wreath

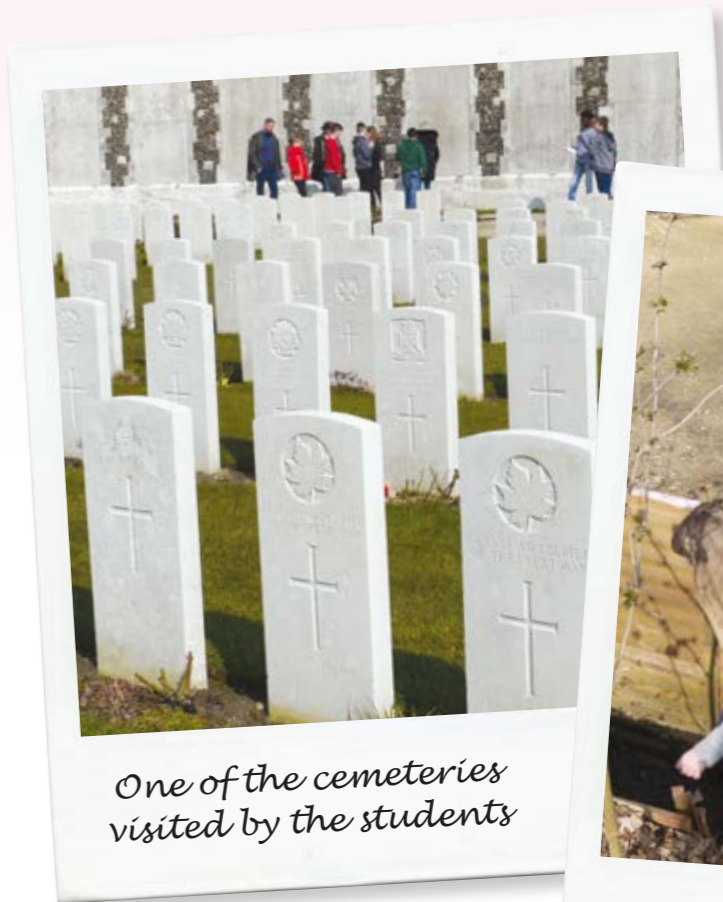
Paying respects at Nelson Victor Carter's grave

Visiting the Trenches in Flanders

80 students from St Catherine's made the trip in March to visit Flanders fields: battlefield tour and cemeteries.

There are a large number of cemeteries, and each one is significant in size. Some are vast. It is humbling, standing there, looking all around and all you can see – to the horizon – are gravestones. And each stone represents a human life. This small experience starts putting the tragic loss of life of the First World War into perspective.

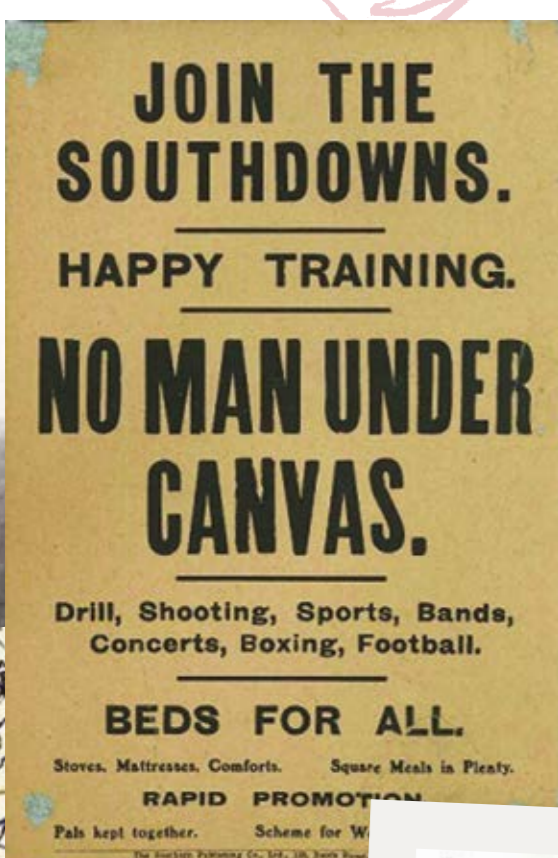
The students also went into trenches: real First World War trenches; maintained in the old fashioned ways to keep their authenticity.



One of the cemeteries visited by the students



Exploring the trench system

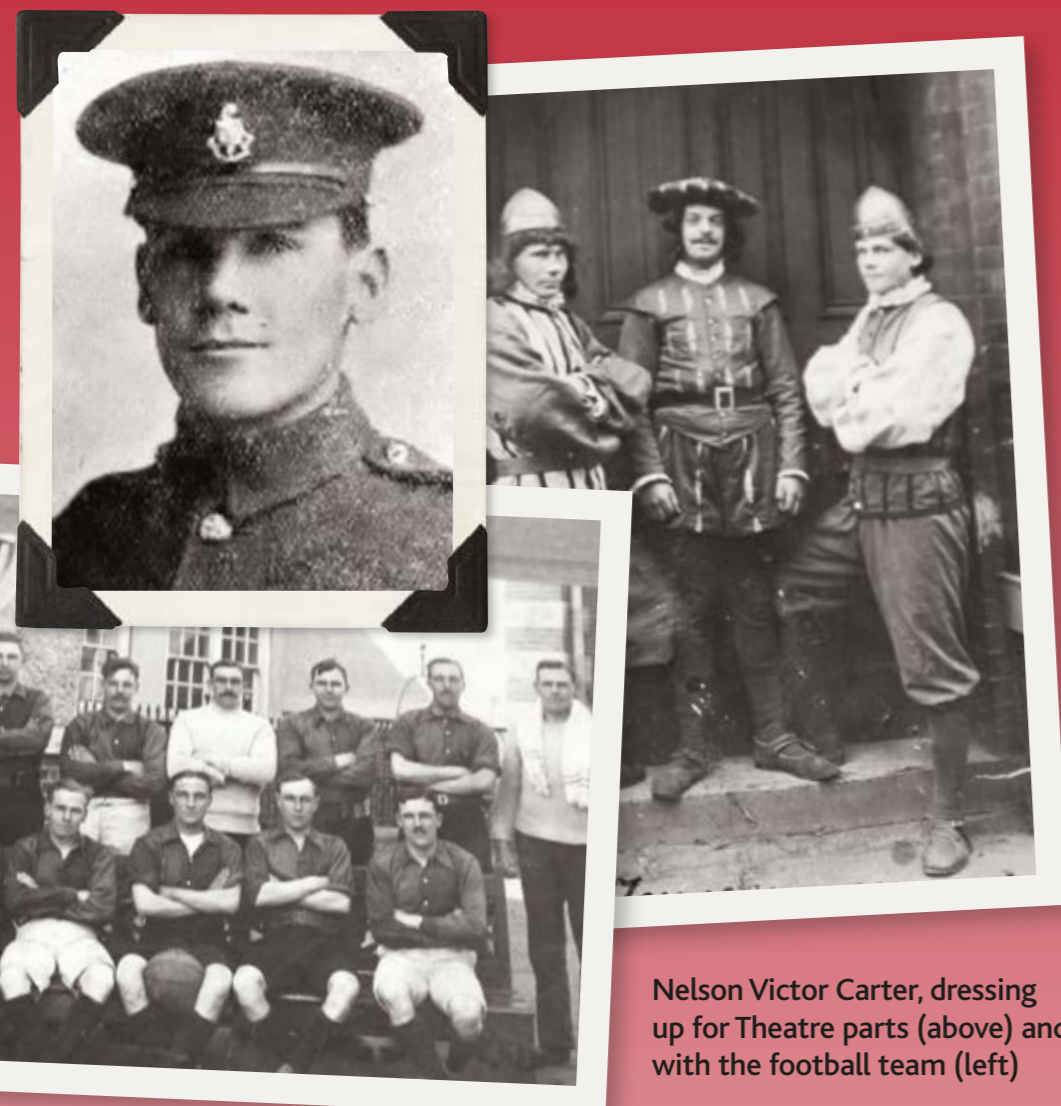


Below: Southdowns men at Cooden Camp, Bexhill. Despite the poster, they were indeed under canvas. One student wrote a book about the project



Heroes' Stories

Through various events, including hosting "World War One Day" at the Redoubt in Eastbourne, many people came forward with memories, family connections, and memorabilia to share through interviews.



Nelson Victor Carter, dressing up for Theatre parts (above) and with the football team (left)

Nelson Victor Carter

Nelson had been in the Army twice before and been unlucky to be invalided out twice. On the first day they started recruiting he joined up again. He was one of the first to sign up for Southdowns, shown by his number: SD 4.

As he had been in the Army before, he was put in charge of training. He was active in many different areas: in entertainment; dressing up in the theatre, and also in boxing, as he was very muscular and tall, he won the Sussex Regiment Heavyweight Cup. He was also involved in football and the football team.

He seemed to have quite a sense of humour, in his letters home to his wife Kitty he says "I'm getting as fat as a little pig" describing the 'luxury' that he was living in.

The Battle

Nelson commanded the last platoon of 12th Battalion to go over the top as part of the 4th wave attack. He and four or five men got into the German support line and he captured their machine gun and turned it on the enemy. When they were called to retreat back to their own trenches he was aware of casualties and went back over the top into no-man's-land to find the wounded men and bring them back, carrying them on his back. He did this six or seven times before being fatally shot by a sniper.

For these acts of incredibly bravery, Nelson Victor Carter was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, which was presented to his wife, Kitty. "His conduct throughout the day was magnificent." – London Gazette.

The letter from his Captain, to Kitty reads: "On every occasion, no matter how tight the hole, Nelson was always cheerful and hopeful and never spared any pains to make the men comfortable and to keep them cheery. It is difficult to imagine a man better qualified to lead his comrades into action."

The Victoria Cross (replica) awarded to Nelson Victor Carter for incredible bravery. Below: letter from Nelson Victor Carter to his wife: Kitty



Spyke Baker in discussion with students

Frank Loveland

Frank was a chimney sweep from Eastbourne, who had also fought in the Boer War. As an older man, the other men in his company referred to themselves as "your boys". He was also in the Salvation Army and a musical man, and as a practical chimney sweep was also called on to attend weddings. Frank survived the Battle of Boar's Head but had shrapnel wounds in his leg. Nelson Victor Carter lived "down the twitten" away from him, and he was the one to bring Nelson's personal belongings back to his family. *With thanks to his daughter, Mrs Esther Dobbin and her son Mr Geoff Dobbin who were interviewed.*



Walter Mark Patching

Walter Mark Patching had previously been in the Army for 12 years, fighting in India for which he had campaign medals. He signed up straight away when he knew the Army needed men. Chris Patching began discovering this story of his grandfather's brother, when his own daughter began a school project. Walter Mark Patching survived this battle of Boar's Head, but did not survive the War: he was later killed on the Somme.

Chris came along to the World War One Day at the Redoubt to learn more about the Battle of Boar's Head and share the story of what he has learned so far. *With thanks to Chris Patching who was interviewed.*



Top: map of the area showing the "Boar's Head" Above: 12th Battalion, the Royal Sussex Regiment

Frank Whitcomb

Frank lived in Petworth, West Sussex. He survived the Battle of Boar's Head but was very badly wounded: he had shrapnel wounds to his leg, shoulder, chest and face. He took years to recover from this, and while he did, he had a small stuffed toy dog called Jack as a mascot to help him through. He got married after he returned from the War, and lived to the age of 80, still with shrapnel inside him. His grandson Andy Wall met him.

Andy came along to the World War One Day at the Redoubt to learn more about the Battle of Boar's Head and share the story of his grandfather.

Andy is hugely grateful that his grandfather survived, as there would be no family now if he hadn't. And in testament to that, that stuffed doggy mascot: Jack; is now Andy's prize possession. *With thanks to Andy Wall who was interviewed.*



The little snuff box that Ernest David Pratt made from an old shell

Ernest David Pratt

Ernest was a house painter from Heathfield. He was one of the 634 men to be taken prisoner of war at the Battle of Boar's Head, for three years. He worked on a farm in Germany, and when he came home he reported that he was not fed much and was beaten. He also remembered being paraded through the streets where the Germans spat at them.

He was permitted to write home to say "I am prisoner of war. I am quite well. I will write again soon." He made a little metal box while at the camp which his great grand-daughter Nicola now has, a most precious possession and memory of him. After coming back, the first thing they all did was put on their uniforms and have dinner together. But he never fully recovered. His story inspired Nicola to research the 94 men on the Heathfield War Memorial. *With thanks to his great grand-daughter Nicola Walker who was interviewed.*



Poppy made with buttons by Robyn "to reflect the soldiers' individuality"

Harry Waddingham with his step-great-granddaughter Robyn from the class

Harry Waddingham

Harry was in the Navy from 1932 to 1946 and then on the reserve for a few more years. He then joined the Air Force as a teacher. He is the step-great-grand-father of one of the students in the class. He talked to the students about what it was like to be in a war – as the warfare in the Second World War was very similar to the First World War, this gave the students crucial insight.

Harry was coxon of one of the small boats which rescued soldiers from Dunkirk. He told us about having to keep the boat afloat while going back and forth collecting 600 soldiers, 20-25 at a time. The ship they were on was torpedoed on the way back to Ramsgate, and he was standing leaning on the gun turret on deck, asleep standing up, which probably saved his life, as he was hurtled into the air and catapulted into the sea. It took the ship 3 minutes to sink with 600 souls on board. When he was picked up from the water he was given a blanket round him and a tot of rum. He was actually on three separate ships that were sunk and yet he survived. At 99 years old, he was fascinating.

"in the Navy, if your ship sinks, you go in the water with a life jacket, and you're up to your neck in dirty oily seawater until someone picks you up, or until you decide to go the other way. The choice is yours, how long you last."

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5pm

29 June 2016

2.50am

30 June 2016

3.05am



3 hours artillery bombardment

Major General Dawson decided that the artillery bombardment would take place for 3 hours some 10 hours before the actual assault, to be followed by a 15 minute bombardment up to the time of the attack. The norm at this time was for the bombardment to take place for some hours up to the time of an attack. With no bombardment up to the point of the attack, it gave the enemy lines time to repair any damage, including barbed wire defences.

15 minutes of artillery bombardment

At 2.50am the bombardment started and the Germans responded with a bombardment on the British front and support lines. As some of the 12th Battalion were still in the support line they were savaged by this fire and suffered severe casualties with many not even succeeding in getting into their own front trench never mind coming out into no-man's land and moving towards the German line.

First wave "over the top"

At 3.05am the first of four waves went over the top to attack the German trenches. At first things went well as the smoke used to cover the advance confused the Germans and covered the British attack.

The 13th two right hand Companies Coy's found some wire cut, but the left hand two Companies and the 12th Battalion found the German barbed wire still largely undamaged in front of their attack.

Wind change

Then the wind changed and the smoke drifted across the front of the 13th Battalion which caused them to lose direction and bunched them up as they tried to find a way through the German wire, leaving them exposed to German artillery and machine gun fire.

Around 40 men from the 12th Battalion managed to get through the wire and into the support line and some of the 13th also got in the enemy support line. The men of the 12th Battalion were able to hold the support trench for around half an hour, before they had to fall back to the enemy front line which they held until around 8am when the 35 or so survivors commanded by CSM White, short of ammunition and bombs, fell back to the British front line. Those of the 13th were in a similar position, isolated and short of supplies. Capt. Hughes gave the order to fall back.

8.00am

Fall Back

Over the course of less than five hours fighting the three South Downs Pals Battalions suffered approximately 1000 casualties, over 360 of who had been killed.