

Those who survived

Hello, I'm **John Edward Saunders** and I was at the unveiling of the war memorial in 1921, standing proudly in my RAF uniform to represent those who fought in the air. We didn't become 'the boys in blue' until later. Peter Jennings represented the Army and Stan Smith the Royal Navy. We were the lucky ones, *we'd survived!* And I'm happy to say that family members still live in the village today.

Getting through the war was no mean achievement. I was an air mechanic serving in France. I enlisted on the 6th April 1915 when I was 25 - and it was the Royal Flying Corps back then of course. I was already married by then, to Louisa Wilks, sister of Arthur Wilks who later gave the village some of his farmland to form Wilks Park.

I was a carpenter by profession and a village lad. You can see why my carpentry skills would have been useful as an air mechanic because the planes were mostly made of wood in those days. In fact a lot of aircraft parts were made in the chair factories down in High Wycombe.

I'd lived with my widowed mother, and my sister, along Austin's Row (that's near where your vets surgery is today) before my marriage in 1913. Marrying Louisa meant that I'd married into a large Flackwell family, and at least 12 Wilks men from the village went off to war and sadly not all of them returned.

Virtually every household in the village had at least one member of the family who was in uniform and quite often considerably more than one. The **Lewis** family had 6 sons doing their bit for King and Country and miraculously 5 survived with only **James** being the unlucky one. However, few families were left unscathed by the war because many of the men returned with severe wounds that they would never fully recover from. And some families who remained complete, with their loved ones returning safely home, found that they were left feeling terribly guilty that they had been so lucky. Yes, everyone was scarred one way or another.

What's good about the war memorial is that the names aren't placed in any order of seniority. Just like the Commonwealth War Grave memorials, it's alphabetical. All men are equal – in death at least, if not necessarily in life.

The Imperial War Graves Commission, founded in 1917, ordained that what was done for one should be done for all and so all Commonwealth War Grave Commission headstones are of a similar size and construction. These headstones were provided free of charge but the inscription at the bottom was of the family's own choosing and cost three pence halfpenny per letter - that's why some tributes are shorter than others. But those headstones weren't created until 1920. They were made to replace the wooden crosses which were first used, but which would have eventually rotted over time.

Of course things were very different when we survivors got back. Not all of us had a job to return to and that led to financial worries and a certain amount of resentment. It was hardly a land fit for heroes. And of course our wives and sisters had found their independence whilst we'd been away, bringing up the household by themselves, going out to work in the factories or helping in the hospitals or schools, and fund raising, all that sort of thing. And it was an independence that many didn't want to lose, however glad they were to have us back!

Some of the men had children who scarcely recognised their fathers when they returned home, and fathers who hardly knew their children. It was hard for us to adjust back into

normal family life again. And, of course, quite a lot of the men had returned severely wounded and for them life would never be the same again.

That's where the friendship of us survivors really helped. Many's the time we'd meet up for a yarn over a drink in our local pub, chatting about our experiences with fellows who had experienced similar things – you couldn't do that with a wife or a girlfriend in the same way you see – they'd not been there. And we'd also share our problems over unemployment, poor health, housing and such like.

And that's why the British Legion came into being, although we had to wait until 1928 to have our own proper Legion meeting place in the village.

The British Legion was created on 15th May 1921 (it didn't become the Royal British Legion until fifty years later). The tradition of an annual two minute silence in memory of the fallen had already been established. The first ever Poppy Appeal was held that same year, with the first Poppy Day on 11th November 1921.

It's main purpose was to care for those who had suffered as a result of service in the Armed Forces during the war, whether through their own service or through that of a husband, father or son. The suffering took many forms: the effect of a war wound on a man's ability to earn a living and support his family, or a war widow's struggle to give her children an education.

In 1921 there were two million unemployed. Over six million men had served in the war and 725,000 never returned. Of those who came back, one and three quarter million men had suffered some kind of disability and half of these were permanently disabled. Added to this figure were the families who depended on those who had gone to war - the wives and children, widows and orphans as well as elderly parents who had lost sons who had contributed to the household income.

There were very few families in Flackwell Heath who didn't fall into one or other of these categories.

Of course our old village rivalries continued. Flackwell Heath and Loudwater each had to have their own British Legion hall! Just like they had to have their own war memorials.

If you look through the list of village men who went to war and returned home you'll be surprised at the number of lads who made it through to the end. Wounded may be, but we survived.

5 mins