



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Rain has finally started to fall in this part of Somerset, although I think it will be a while before the parched brown grass starts to regain its green colour.

It's been another busy month, with a trip away to watch the European Athletics in Birmingham meaning I've now gathered photographs of WW1 graves in four more counties: Worcestershire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Warwickshire.

I've also completed my WW1 Diploma from the Centre of Excellence, an interesting course, and proof (to myself, at least) that I seem to know what I am talking about!

This month's issue features a beautiful war memorial on the Somerset coast, a grave in the Orcadian capital, Kirkwall, and a surprising find in one of Europe's drought-affected rivers. And sticking with Scotland, we look at a stunning remnant from World War Two.

The autumn series of talks will be starting up soon. First, though, I will be attending the Drayton Street Fair on 5th September, so if you're around, come and say hello: you will find me in the History Marquee.

Until next time.

Richard

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Death and Service:
Volumes 1-3 are available in
paperback and eBook.



AMIDST THE HOLIDAYMAKERS

A recent trip to the Somerset coast to record some more Video Diaries for the [YouTube Channel](#) found me back in Brean. Once a quiet fishing village, the coast between here and Burnham-on-Sea is now a holiday haven, with at least a dozen holiday parks situated within the three-mile stretch of sand dunes.

St Bridget's Church would have been quite isolated in its time, and its proportions suit what would have met the spiritual needs of the small community. There is one Commonwealth War Grave within its graveyard – that of Private Lot Evans of the Royal Garrison Artillery – but seven men in total sacrificed their everything for King and Country. All are commemorated on an unassuming but beautifully crafted memorial just inside the main gate of the churchyard.

The monument, as so many hundreds of others, was erected in the years after the Armistice. Standing at just under 2m tall, it features an inscription, which includes the names of seven men – Ivor Champion, George Dibble, Lot Evans, Sidney Giblett, Metford Phillips, Richard Starbuck and William Webb – and notes that the memorial was erected by the parishioners of the village.



But for me at least, it is the detail in the sculpting that is the most moving. The monument features the figure of a soldier in uniform, holding a flag in his right hand and an olive branch in his left. The details of all of these are beautifully carved, but, sadly, I've not been able to find details of the sculptor. The Historic England, however, notes its 'good quality carving.'

The back side of the memorial is plain, which is a shame, and its position, on the pathway to the church entrance, means that it is only really visible from the churchyard itself.

The thousands of holidaymakers, therefore, are missing a real treat, and the memorial – and St Bridget's itself – are well worth a visit.



GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

St Magnus Cathedral
Broad Street
Kirkwall
Orkney
KW15 1DH

Name: Cooper, James

Rank: Private

Regiment: New Zealand Auckland Regiment

Date of death: 24th June 1915

Age at time of death: 35

Cause of death: Died of wounds

Private James Cooper, a native of Kirkwall, died in the Red Cross Hospital at Netley last Thursday from a wound received at the Dardanelles. Private Cooper, who was 35 years of age, was a son of Mrs Cooper, School Place, Kirkwall (with whom much sympathy is felt), and of the late Capt. Charles Cooper. After being employed for some time in a shop in Kirkwall, he decided to follow his father's vacation [sic] and went to see for some years, during which time he served in the Naval Reserve. He was in New Zealand when the war began, and at once enlisted in the 6th Hamaki Coy. With the New Zealand contingent he went to Egypt and took part in the fighting with the Turks near the Suez Canal. In April the contingent was sent from Egypt to the Dardanelles, and towards the end of that month Private Cooper received a gunshot wound in the left arm. With other wounded he was sent to the base hospital at Alexandria, and thence, after a few weeks, was sent home to the hospital at Netley. In all his letters home he wrote cheerfully and made light of his wound, but the nurse wrote that the wound was a serious one. At Netley the arm was amputated. Private Cooper gradually sank and died last Thursday.

[Orkney Herald: Wednesday 30th June 1915]

James Cooper was born on 9th October 1879 in Kirkwall, Orkney. He was one of seven children - and the youngest of three sons - to Charles and Jane Cooper. With her husband being away at sea a lot of the time, Jane was used to raising her family on her own.

In August 1905, tragedy struck the family:

At an early hour on Friday morning last, the town of Stromness was thrown into a state of alarm by the report that a sad burning fatality had taken place on board the barquentine Brazilian on Ness patent slip. To accurately describe how the accident took place is impossible, but from careful enquiries we learn that on Thursday evening Captain Charles Cooper, belonging to Kirkwall, accompanied by an acquaintance, left the town and went on board the vessel, where they lit a fire and made a cup of coffee, after which friend left him. At that time the fire was very low, and no danger apprehended. At an early hour of the morning, the vessel was observed to be

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on fire, and an alarm given. In a short time the fire hose from the town was on the scene, and two streams playing on the burning vessel. The fire was fortunately confined to the cabin and companion way, where the rescue party discovered the body of Capt. Cooper terribly burned and disfigured, to such an extent that it was quite unrecognisable... There can be no doubt but that death was caused by suffocation, but what led to the fire is not known. It is supposed, however, that after the friend left the vessel, Capt. Cooper had taken the paraffin oil flask to put some oil on the nearly burnt-out fire, when possibly an explosion took place, and the cabin got suddenly full of smoke.

[Orkney Herald: Wednesday 16th August 1905]

Charles was 64 when he died. Jane brought his body across the island, and he was buried in the family plot in the churchyard of St Magnus' Cathedral.

By this point, James was serving in the Royal Navy. The exact details are unclear, but he seems to have bought his way out, after completing six years. He travelled to Australia, and worked as a cook for a while, before moving on to New Zealand, setting up home in the town of Thames, on the country's North Island.

When war was declared, he was quick to step up, and, joined the Auckland Regiment of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. His service papers show that he was 5ft 7ins (1.7m) tall and weighed 159lbs (72.1kg). He had brown hair, grey eyes and a medium complexion. He had a tattoo of a naval coat of arms on his right forearm, and one of a full length woman on the back of his left forearm.

Private Cooper's unit left New Zealand on 16th October 1914, heading for Egypt. As the newspaper report stated, he moved from there to Gallipoli, before being medically evacuated to Egypt, and then to Netley Hospital, Hampshire.

After his passing, the body of James Cooper was taken back to Orkney for burial. He was laid to rest in the family plot at St Magnus' Cathedral, reunited with his father after ten years.



CAMP 60 AND THE ITALIAN CHAPEL

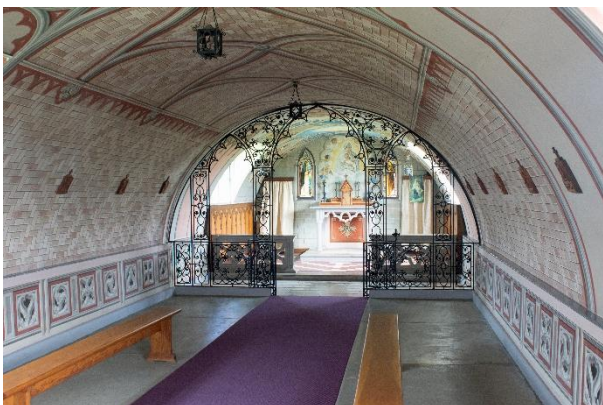
With the Second World War raging across Europe, POWs were taken on both sides. While the Axis forces used camps on the European mainland, dozens of camps were set up across the United Kingdom to house German and Italian troops. These were often in remote locations, sometimes connected to army or air bases, where accommodation blocks were already in place.

Constructed in the second half of 1941, Camp 60 was set up on the Orkney island of Lamb Holm. Overlooking Scapa Flow, it would house around 500 Italian troops who had been taken prisoner in campaigns across North Africa. The men were put to work building civilian causeways linking four Orcadian islands to the archipelago's mainland.

While an internment camp, the Italian soldiers – who were overseen by camp commandant Major Buckland and Major Fornasier of the Italian Tank Corps – made sure the site was as homely as possible, laying concrete paths and building a makeshift theatre.

In the autumn of 1943, Padre Gioachino Giacobazzi arrived at the camp and, with the support of Buckland and Fornasier, organised the construction of a chapel. To disguise – or at least minimise – the use of Nissen huts for the structure, a façade was added to the entrance by captured prisoner and artist Domenico Chiochetti. Inside the chapel a series of trompe l'oeil frescoes were painted, mimicking the ornate tiles of churches back home, creating a real sanctuary for the troops incarcerated there.

In fact, the Italian Chapel was only in use for a very short time. In May 1945 the POWs were moved to Skipton, Yorkshire, in preparation for repatriation. Today, it is the only remaining building from Camp 60, standing alone on Lamb Holm, visible from across Scapa Flow. The Orkney Islanders have taken it to their heart, and it is maintained and protected: a symbol of resilience and reconciliation.



IN THE NEWS

The ongoing heatwave and drought conditions across a lot of Europe have led to some unexpected consequences.

In the Hungarian capital, Budapest, the water level in the Danube was so low that it uncovered a motorcycle that had lain hidden for eighty years. Alongside the motorcycle – which is believed to be a DKW NZ 350-1 – were the bodies of two German soldiers from the Second World War. Dog tags identified one as a Wehrmacht soldier, while the other was a member of the Waffen-SS.

Formal identification of the two men will understandably take more time, and the work will begin to trace any living relatives.



While this summer's weather is likely to affect the continent in ways we don't yet know, the discovery that has resulted from it will hopefully bring some closure to the two soldiers' relatives.

Meanwhile, the grave of another member of the German army has been rededicated this month in Porlock, Somerset.



Wilhelm Reuhl was one of a crew of four undertaking a reconnaissance flight over the Bristol Channel in September 1940, when their aircraft came under attack by three Spitfires.

The German plane was forced to make an emergency landing on Porlock Beach and, while his three colleagues survived and were taken prisoner, Wilhelm died in the crash. He was buried in the town's Hawkcombe Cemetery, his grave being marked by a wooden cross.

The German War Graves Commission has been working with the CWGC to formally commemorate more than 300 graves of German service personnel who were buried on British soil. In what will be the first of the rededication ceremonies earlier this month, Reuhl was given a formal headstone.

[Image from the BBC News website]



Formally certified!

I was grateful to receive confirmation of my diploma in WW1 studies from the Centre of Excellence this month.

I'm now starting to feel as if I do actually know what I'm talking about!

The Drayton Street Fair takes place on Saturday 5th September in the peaceful village to the south of Langport.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the event, and will have a special 1940s theme. The event will bring together that era's community spirit, commemorating the "Dunkirk Spirit" of resilience and unity with a day of fun and entertainment.

The era is known for iconic fashion, swing music, and big band sounds, creating a lively, charming, and immersive atmosphere.



Among the stalls, crafts and events is the Local History Marquee, shedding a light on the history of the area.

For more information visit [the website](#).

Did you know?

When the Imperial War Graves Commission was originally compiling its list of the fallen, it collated a range of information, where available: name, rank, regiment, service number, date of death, location of grave/memorial, age at time of death.

However, the IWGC did not record the gender of those it commemorated. This means that, while the organisation commemorates both the men and women who sacrificed their all, it is not possible to generate a list of female casualties alone using the CWGC database.

UPCOMING EVENTS (CLICK ON THE POSTER TO LEARN MORE)



Thursday 22nd October 2026 7:30pm

Death and Service:

The Commonwealth War Graves of Somerset

There are more than 800 First World War graves in over 240 cemeteries and churchyards across Somerset.

Each of the names on those gravestones has a story connected to it, a story of family and of tragedy, a story of life on the battlefield and of love on the home front.

The *Death and Service* series of books aim to shed light on the servicemen and women behind the names on these headstones, to bring the long-forgotten names to life again, more than a century after they were lost.

Wellington Museum & Local History Society,
Wellington Prep School TA21 8NT

Monday 2nd November 2026 7:30pm

Death and Service:

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Pensford Local History Group
Pensford Memorial Hall BS39 4HW

Tuesday 3rd November 2026 7:30pm

Death and Service:

The Commonwealth War Graves of Somerset

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Radstock Museum, Chilcompton Village Hall BA3 4EX