

MALDENS AND COOMBE HERITAGE SOCIETY

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 5th JULY 2016

AT NEW MALDEN BAPTIST CHURCH

Mary, greeted all members (54). The numbers were swelled by residents anxious to see the presentation concerning the Fountain Roundabout

The presentation was kindly given by Jean Christophe Chassard a senior planner from Kingston Council. He attempted to explain the rational of the scheme and how it would make the traffic easier, but most people present wanted things left as it was. It seemed to be a scheme purely for cyclists and not other road users or pedestrians. He was unable to answer many of the questions addressed to him, and suggested alternative routes in the area were ludicrous.

There were apologies for absence from Alan Oakley, James Giles, and Cathy Reed

There were two potential new members: Valerie Turner and Christine (?).

The minutes of the last meeting were taken as read and signed, and will appear on the website at a later date.

Mary thanked the church for the use of their meeting place, and for their catering facilities.

The committee reported back on the two summer fairs at Plough Green and Kingston Vale. Although the weather hadn't been ideal, communication with the public had been good and Robin thanked Toby for his help on the day at Kingston Vale.

We were then given a talk on the Battle Of The Somme By Graeme and Nick Howgill.

The Battle of the Somme started on July 1st 1916. It lasted until November 1916. For many people, the Battle of the Somme was the battle that symbolised the horrors of warfare in World War One; this one battle had a marked effect on overall casualty figures and seemed to epitomise the futility of trench warfare.

For many years those who led the British campaign have received a lot of criticism for the way the Battle of the Somme was fought – especially Douglas Haig. This criticism was based on the appalling casualty figures suffered by the British and the French. By the end of the battle, the British Army had suffered **420,000** casualties including nearly 60,000 on the first day alone. The French lost **200,000** men and the Germans nearly **500,000**.

Ironically, going over the top at the Somme was the first taste of battle many of these men had, as many were part of "Kitchener's Volunteer Army" persuaded to volunteer by posters showing Lord Kitchener himself summoning these men to arms to show their patriotism. Some soldiers were really still boys as young as 16, and the majority of men going to battle had no idea what warfare entailed.

Ironically, the head of the French Army, General Foch, believed that the attack in the Somme would achieve little – this view was shared by some leading British commanders such as General Henry Rawlinson. However, orders from the army's political masters in London and Paris ensured that the battle would take place. Just how backward military thinking was then is shown by the fact that the British put a regiment of cavalry on standby when the attack started, in order to exploit the hole that would be created by a devastating infantry attack. British military faith was still being placed on cavalry attacks in 1916 when the nature of warfare in the previous two years would have clearly indicated that cavalry was no longer viable. This shows how conservative military thinking was during this war. Moreover, the soldiers sent to fight on the battlefield were newly recruited volunteers and not trained military personnel. Conscription only began in Britain in 1916 but had been in place many years previously in France, meaning the French conscripts had usually some degree of military knowledge or training. British soldiers on the other hand were at a huge disadvantage and simply were not trained nor prepared for life on the battlefield.

The battle at the Somme started with a weeklong artillery bombardment of the German lines. 1,738,000 shells were fired at the Germans. The logic behind this was so that the artillery guns would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire placed in front of the trenches. The use of artillery was heavily supported by Field Marshall Haig.

In fact, the Germans had deep dugouts for their men and all they had to do when the bombardment started was to move these men into the relative safety of the deep dugouts. When the bombardment stopped, the Germans would have known that this would have been the signal for an infantry advance. They moved from the safety of their dugouts and manned their machine guns to face the British and French. The British soldiers advanced across a 25-mile front.

By the end of the battle, in November 1916, the British had lost 420,000, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans 500,000. The Allied forces had advanced along a thirty-mile strip that was seven miles deep at its maximum. Lord Kitchener was a supporter of the theory of attrition – that eventually you would grind down your enemy and they would have to yield. He saw the military success of the battle as all-important. However, it did have dire political and social consequences in Britain. Many spoke of the “lost generation”, finding it difficult to justify the near 88,000 Allied men lost for every one mile gained in the advance.

In AOB, details were given of the Raynes Park High School 80th Anniversary on 14th July. Members were also reminded of the events that the Society was taking part in during the Malden Fortnight, namely the Craft fair on 9th July, Heritage Walks on the 10th and 17th, and the Slide Show on 14th. Although the last item was not strictly a Society item, it was being organised and promoted by Julian and it hoped it would be supported by members.

Robin mentioned that Heritage Open Days would be taking place between 8th and 11th September and he would send out details nearer the time. The meeting closed with the next one planned for Tuesday 14th September 2016