



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

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May 2008

AMBLECOTE'S SOLDIERS OF THE QUEEN

Geoff Longmore has loaned a wonderful Victorian photograph which we reproduce here both in full (centre pages) and in detail. This shows a group of riflemen in military uniform, although in a



fairly relaxed pose, on what is now the Stourbridge War Memorial Athletics Ground. These almost certainly comprise of one or more of the Volunteer Companies that proliferated across Britain in the mid-late 19th century. Formed in the
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AMBLECOTE'S SOLDIERS OF THE QUEEN

A wonderful Victorian photograph reveals a group of Amblecote 'Volunteers'

FATHER AT THE FRONT

The letters of an Amblecote Vicar present an eye witness account of the German offensive of 1918.

SUMMER EVENTS - Seen back page for details.

FATHER AT THE FRONT

Amblecote Vicar's Great War Letters of Exactly Ninety Years Ago.



actly ninety years ago the Great War was entering its penultimate phase. On March 21st 1918, German forces attacked the British and French in an effort to split their armies from each other. The British

would, it was assumed, retreat north in order to protect the English Channel; whilst the French would reel south to protect Paris. Once the interests of the British and French were divided, Germany could then negotiate with – or fight – each side separately and ‘win’ the war. The Germans were, in fact, desperate. The British naval blockade, slow to take effect at first, was by now reducing Germany to a social and economic shambles. American involvement on the Allied side, although it would take time to be effective, represented a potentially overwhelming force. Meanwhile, revolution and the collapse of Russia in the east freed up additional armies which the Germans could bring to bear on the Western Front. The spring of 1918 was Germany’s ‘do or die’ moment.

The initial attack, which took place during a ‘lucky’ dawn fog, went exactly as planned. New German storm-trooper tactics maximised German strengths and exploited Allied – and especially British – weakness. Within a few hours German troops had broken through all the old trench lines of 1914 – 17 and the British were in desperate retreat across open country.

Essentially, the next few days involved a push by the Germans to completely split the British and French by reaching the French coast – or at least the main railway lines – and a desperate attempt by the British and French to bring enough force to bear to stop them. This latter scenario was in fact the eventual outcome. The German advance outran the ability of its rear to provide support, yet at the same time Allied defence was just strong enough to prevent a breakthrough. The German armies ended up with the worst of both worlds; overextended lines and no clear victory.

During this time of course, many Amblecote men were serving in the British Army in France. Indeed the Society’s 2006 publications *War Memorials of Amblecote* list those who were killed during this period of fighting. However, many others served and survived, and some recent researches in the *Country Express* archive in the Local History Collection at Stourbridge Library has revealed some fascinating letters from one of these. This was the incumbent vicar of Amblecote, the Reverend Henry Milton Crabbe who served as a Chaplain in the Worcestershire Regiment. Crabbe regularly sent letters back

to his parishioners which were printed in the Parish Magazine. Unfortunately a run of these does not – so far as we know – survive, and only those letters subsequently re-printed in the *County Express* can be found. However, these include those for February, March and April 1918 – spanning the period of the German advance – and providing a fascinating insight into the chaos and shock that surrounded the sudden and unexpected change from the static trench warfare of the previous three years.

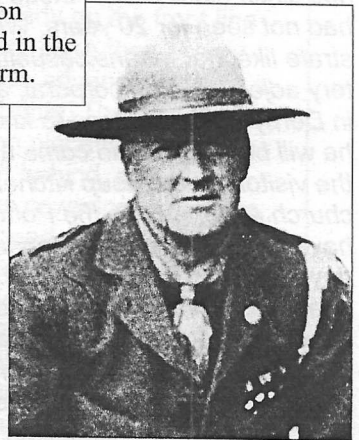
The three letters are reproduced here in full. There is no doubt that some further research could greatly enhance their historic value. For example, to which battalion of the Worcesters was Crabbe attached, and from where and by what route did they retreat in 1918? Indeed, are there any further letters from Father Crabbe in the *County Express* archive? Further research needed!

Crabbe was one of almost three and a half thousand army clergymen serving in 1918. The Great War Chaplains (and especially those from the Church of England) have received something of an historical bad press over the years, especially at the pen of the likes of Sassoon and Graves, whose poetic interpretation of the conflict – and distain for religion - probably tells us more about their own Edwardian angst, and the Britain of the 1960's that re-discovered them, than the world 1914-18. This revisionist view of the Chaplains is undoubtedly an unfair one. Theirs was a position both invidious and essential. On the one hand the presence of God could certainly be questioned in the slaughterhouse of the front line, on the other there were very few who did not reach for spiritual succour in extreme moments. The Chaplains were well aware of this of course, and by 1918 were carrying out a vital and under sung role; part welfare officer and part priest.

The first letter reproduced in the *County Express* of March 23rd

1918 described 'routine' life in the trenches. By early 1918 the stalemate of the Western Front had become so literally entrenched that men had begun to believe the war would go on for ever. Each summer since 1915 had seen attempts by both sides to break the deadlock by frontal attacks all of which had, more or less, failed. Crabbe, writing in February, described the daily, and dangerous, grind of trench life. Both side's front line troops would 'keep their heads down' in as much as their commanding officers would let them, although were constantly reminded of the war by oc-

The Rev. Henry Milton Crabbe, photographed in the 1920s in Scout Uniform.



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asionally shelling and raiding. Crabbe describes setting up a soup kitchen, probably a mile or so behind the lines in a battalion headquarters, although close enough to the front to attract a bought of intense shelling during which some men were killed and wounded. This was the epitome of the Western Front from late 1914 to early 1918. On occasions fighting was indeed intense; but for the most part death was an aerial bourn, unexpected, random matter of simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“O.C. Soup” Vicar of Amblecote’s Post.

In his letter to the parishioners of Amblecote the Rev. H.M.Crabbe writes from ‘in the field’ on February 22nd: - “When I last wrote I think I was just going up to the line. There I spent eight very happy days. I had a tiny sand-bagged shelter close to the kitchen, and had my meals with the two doctors at the advanced dressing station across the road. As “C.C.Soup” which my friends dubbed me for the time being I had a corporal and six men who made and served the soup free gratis and for nothing for the benefit of all comers. Boiling hot soup was going on all day and night and on occasions we provided for as many as seven or eight hundred men within a few hours. Jolly good soup it was to! I managed to rig up a few rough benches outside, and whilst the men sat and drank their soup, we were able to have a bit of a chat before they went back to their work in the neighbourhood, or marched in companies into the line or to a camp further down the road. We had a fairly peaceful time except for one day’s terrific shelling. Four men were badly wounded as they were sitting drinking their soup, and I as sorry to say one of my fellows in the kind act of getting some tea for a few who had taken refuge was wounded by a splinter from a big shell which fell close to the kitchen and has since died. One of those who came to take cover was a doctor whom I had not seen for 20 years. We had been great pals at school. Of course a strafe like that means casualties, and the next day I was busy in the cemetery adjoining. The corporal, a very nice lad, comes from near my old home in Derbyshire. We used to know the vicar very well. I am hoping very much he will be spared and come and see me at Amblecote some day. Amongst the visitors to the soup kitchen was the organist to Fr. Murray’s famous church at Longton in the Potteries. Since I have returned to my battalion we have been on the move repeatedly, although in the same locality. After six days in the most comfortable camp we have ever struck, we are moving again this afternoon to another a short distance away. We have been having a most wonderful spell of weather for February – very sunny and mild and comparatively dry with occasional frosts at night. This is a welcome change from the intensely severe cold of this time last year.”

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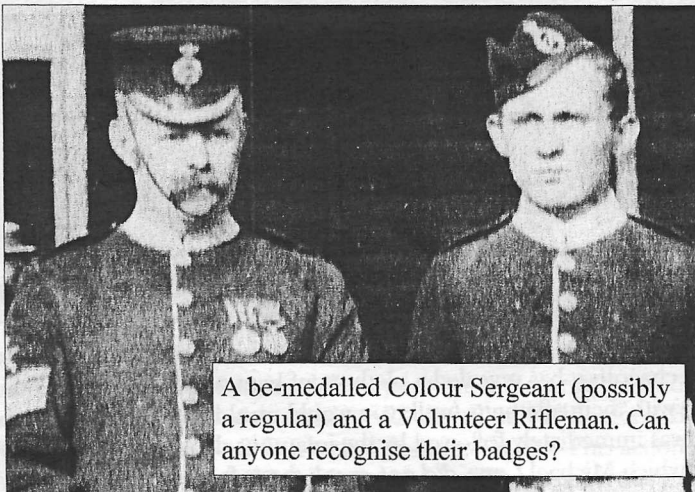
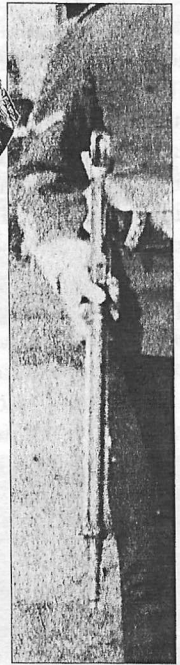
AMBLECOTE'S SOLDIERS OF THE QUEEN

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1850's as a home defence organisation in response to fears of war with France, volunteer cavalry and infantry sprang up, locally raised and funded, right across the United Kingdom. The former tended to be the preserve of rich country landlords (with their farmhands as the Troopers) providing yet another set of social events at which they could indulge their passion for horses and dressing up; whilst the infantry tended to be rather more working - or at least upper working - class. Both types of Volunteers possessed a remarkable amount of independence, reflecting their local origins and self-funding, although were expected to cooperate on an occasional basis in manoeuvres with regular troops. As time went by, and particularly as the threat of invasion receded, the Volunteers became something of a social institution in most towns and villages. Military skills were of course honed, with weekly meetings for drill and rifle practice, but the Volunteers' social manoeuvres in the local pub or at grand picnics were considered equally important by members. However, the government were happy to indulge these organisations, and for some sixty years the Volunteers formed a vital, if sometimes doubtful, arm of national defence.

In Stourbridge in the 1880s and 90s, from which period this picture probably dates, there were two companies of Volunteer Infantry. I Company 1st Volunteer Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment, and D Company 1st Volunteer Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment,

The Martini-Henry rifle. Standard firearm of the British Army in the late 19th century.



A be-medalled Colour Sergeant (possibly a regular) and a Volunteer Rifleman. Can anyone recognise their badges?

both possessing around 100 men. Although it is not yet possible to determine which, if either, of these is featured in the picture; is nevertheless highly likely that one or other is represented.

A rather more definite fact that can be deduced however, is that the rifle the

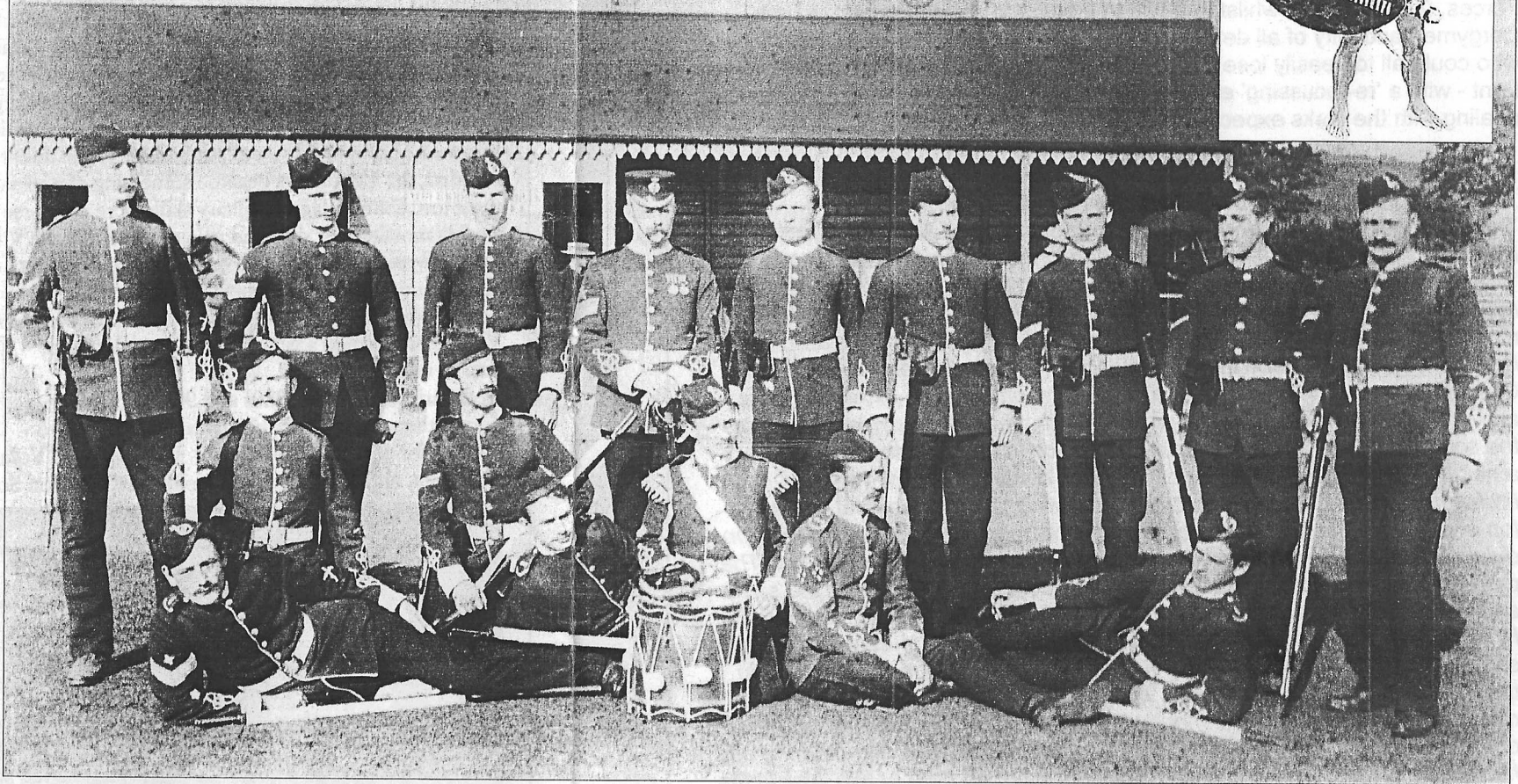
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men are posing with is without doubt the Martini-Henry, adopted by the British Army in 1871 and used with considerable success for over 20 years. Technically known as a 'falling block, single-shot breech-loading action rifle' the Martini-Henry possessed a lever beneath its stock which when pulled both ejected a spent cartridge and opened the breech for a replacement. British troops - regulars and volunteers - spent hours practice loading; with experts (known as 'Efficients') able to hold spare cartridges between the fingers of the 'loading hand', which they could feed into the breech one after another. Of course, the Martini-Henry also mounted a fearsome bayonet - a standard weapon of the British Army (and the English Army before it) which, despite a bad press during WWI, in the right hands could prove chillingly efficient. The most famous actions fought with the Martini-Henry came during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, when around 15,000 British troops fought some 40,000 Zulu warriors, with defeats and victories on both sides. Indeed, at the beginning of the conflict the British Army experienced its greatest defeat at the hands of native troops when some 850 out of 900 British were killed at the

Battle of Isandlwana. One myth that has endured is that the British troops were unable, due to a shortage of screwdrivers, to access their Martini-Henry ammunition boxes and were hence overrun. Recent battlefield archaeology has revealed a plethora of bent screws, alongside numerous cartridge cases, at the site of each soldier's position; indicating that troops simply smashed the ammunition boxes open with their rifle butts (well, you would wouldn't you..) and that the sheer imbalance of forces - tens of thousands of Zulus to only a thousand British - resulted in inevitable defeat. Isandlwana was immediately followed by the infamous defence of Rorke's Drift when 139 British soldiers held off four to five thousand Zulus. This action inspired the famous 1960's film *Zulu* during which Michael Cane *did not* speak those famous words "Stop throwing those bloody spears at me". Whilst during the less famous film *Zulu Dawn* about Isandlwana, the much superior exchange between the raw recruit; "Why us Sergeant?" and the grizzled Sergeant; "Because were 'ere Son.", really did form part of the dialogue as they gripped their Martin-Henrys in the face of the advancing native horde.

Dating to the mid-late 19th century; what was the occasion that warranted this fine Amblecote photograph? Close examination of uniforms, ranks and various badges reveals that most if not all of the men are designated marksmen, whilst slight variations in dress suggest they may have been from at least two different units. Was this a shooting competition, held either on the sports ground or, as has been suggested, in a nearby sand quarry?

Zulu warrior with a captured Martini-Henry rifle.



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Crabbe's second letter printed on April 13th 1918 is dated March 21st 1918 – the very day of the German attack. Clearly Crabbe was well behind the lines at this point and it was only a day or so later (as evidenced by the third letter), as he returned to his battalion, that the full implications of events caught up with him. Nevertheless his comments on 'Chaplains School' are very interesting. This would certainly have been the château in St. Omer where Bishop Llewellyn H. Gwynn set up what he termed his 'Bombing School for Chaplains' after taking spiritual charge of the Western Front in July 1915. Gwynn had the support of the C in C of the British Forces, General Haig, whilst in addition commanding the respect of both clergymen and laity of all denominations. The château provided Chaplains – who could all too easily lose their spiritual bearings amidst the horrors of the front - with a 're-focussing' experience, as well as provide practical advice in dealing with the tasks expected of them.

The Chaplains' School
Rev.H.M.Crabbe at the Chateau.

The monthly letter of the the Rev.H.M.Crabbe, vicar of Amblecote, dated March 21st from 'in the field' and published in the Parish Magazine says:-
"My Dear People – I am afraid I am rather short of interesting news this month from the war area. Events have been following more or less their normal course for the battalion. But for myself the month that has passed since I last wrote has been made less monotonous through my second visit to the Chaplains' School from which I returned last night after an extremely happy and profitable week. Since I last went through what the army calls a 'course' the school has been moved from a busy place in the town to the outskirts of a neighbouring village some four kilometres distant. It is now very well housed in a large château standing in its own grounds of several acres on top of a hill, so that nice fresh, crisp air and a beautiful prospect over the undulating countryside air is included in the benefits bestowed on visitors. The programme of services, lectures and discussions were very much the same as before – all very enjoyable, practical and helpful. Canon Cunningham C. F. of Farnham, the professor of Beautiful Thoughts (B.T.'s) as we call him, is still chiefly responsible for the spiritual side and the charge of the house in the hands of a priest, an Irishman, brimful of delightfully natural wit and humour, which refuses to lie dormant whether he is lecturing or conducting one of the quiet days. The D.G.C. (Bishop Gwynne) celebrated one morning and had breakfast with us. He is a true Father in God. An hour or two free in the afternoon were spent in exploring the adjoining countryside bathed in sunshine, surely never more so attractive as in the month of March. The Chaplains' School truly meets an unutterably inestimable need. From its peaceful, cheery, deeply devotional atmosphere a padre, spiritually exhausted from unavoidably curtailed and irregular devotions and the lack of opportunity for



March 1918. The old front lines of 1914 - 17 were overrun by the advancing Germans in a matter of hours, and the British armies were fighting a desperate retreat.

anything but very scrappy readings, whilst all the time trying to give forth of his best to his comrades in khaki goes back to the line, the hospital or the base with fresh inspiration and zeal for the vision of "The Kingdom of God for England and England for the Kingdom of God."

The third letter was printed in the *County Express* on May 18th 1918. It is not dated, but certainly refer to the days following the German breakthrough of March 21st. Without closely researching the position of Crabbe's battalion (a History Society project for the future perhaps... Ian....?) it is difficult to say exactly where these events took place. However, as Crabbe himself probable had little idea exactly where he was for at least some of the time, the contents of the letter well reflect the confusion of these days. Certainly it would seem that Crabbe's Worcesters were not right on the front line on the 21st. The German storm-troopers fairly decimated these units and then quickly moved into the second-line 'battle zone' where British 'redoubts' were expected to hold up any advance for several days whilst re-enforcements were organised. However, despite some epic stands, the battle-zone was quickly overrun (not least because the Germans surrounded and then bypassed strong points), and the British Army began a fighting retreat. It was at this point that all units not already on the front line became involved as Haig and his generals attempted to bring their scanty reserves into position to slow and then stop the German advance. Crabbe's letter starkly reveals two aspects of this phase of the battle. The first, that for the first time in over three years the fight was taking place in open country. The old battlefields of the Somme were quickly left behind, and troops on both sides, more used to spending days and weeks cowering in stinking mud filled trenches, were suddenly manoeuvring at speed across open fields and through intact villages. Several times Crabbe writes of the beauty of the open countryside, even amidst the horrors of the war. The second point is the casualty rate. Whilst in Britain we rightly remember the first day of the Battle of the Somme as the worst day in our military history, the casualties sustained during the 1918 German breakthrough were truly horrific. There are different ways of counting these, but in essence the British lost 160,000 men (to put this into context about half the modern day popu-

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lation of Stourbridge), and the French 77,000. Crabbe's duties during this time – which included a secondment to a military hospital – were first and foremost with the wounded and, of course, the dead. He describes fields full of wounded and of being 'busy in the cemetery'. Throughout Crabbe is aware that the battle is taking place over Easter and gives clues to his whereabouts by reference to this (a useful indicator for further research). His recollection of spending Palm Sunday sheltering in a scratch dugout whilst awaiting the arrival of "Boch Cavalry" makes this the 24th of March; the height of the retreat. Whilst he rejoined his battalion on Easter Monday, April 1st, by which time the Allies were beginning to stabilise their lines. Indeed by April the 5th the German army had reached its final point of penetration – still short of their planned objectives. With 250,000 casualties, no reserves and its best and bravest troops spent, the game was up for the Germany – although it was to take until November before an Allied victory was finally realised.

**When the Storm Burst
Rev.H.M.Crabbe in War Zone.
Ghastly Night in French City.**

In his monthly letter from France to his parishioners, the Rev. H.M. Crabbe, vicar of Amblecote, writes: " I left the Chaplains' School the day before the storm burst and we had a couple of days in the old place before spending a whole day in the train, then I found myself in the old familiar surroundings of 15 months ago. Vague rumours gradually crystallized into hard facts, and without any breathing space – but one fairly good nights sleep, we were soon marching to meet the enemy at one of the most critical points of his advance. This was Palm Sunday. I spent that night more or less in the open with the men, about a mile and a half away. It was about midnight and we had just settled down in the hope of getting a few hours sleep when a runner rushed up breathlessly to say that Boche cavalry had broken through and were charging down the road. The battalion manned the defences , and I joined the doctor in a little hole in the bank which constituted his aid post. I don't remember being much concerned, though I admit at the time, my most hopeful prospect was to find myself a prisoner. However, nothing happened at all, and night passed without further incident. The next morning I was asked to withdraw, which I did under protest and with great reluctance, and was sent to help the wounded at a large hospital, now, owing to the advance, used as a C.C.S. Casualties were pouring in, and the chaplain utterly unable to cope with the situation, gave me a warm welcome, and I set to work. It was a beautiful hospital situated in a lovely valley and previous to the day of the offensive over 20 miles behind the line. I was there one night. The next morning I buried 30, who had died of wounds, and in the afternoon left by the last ambulance car, when machine gun fire was sounding unpleasantly near over the hill side.

The endless stream of returning transport and the procession of civilians carrying what little they could save, some driving a car or two, or a wagon carrying their household goods, had died down and mounted pickets had taken up positions on the bridge over the river. As I left the hospital, now deserted except for one or two medical orderlies, I noticed a couple of tins of petrol by each hut ready for firing the place at the last moment. I am thankful to say that all the sick and wounded even the most serious cases, had all been evacuated. An hour later I found myself in a well known cathedral city. We were to take over an enormous hospital. Wounded were arriving by the hundreds in an unending stream of cars, to say nothing of 'walking wounded' who had tramped miles through the night. I was busy from 8 p.m. until 6 the next morning, till the hospital was crammed to overflowing, everything possible being done to alleviate the suffering of the men. But it was a ghastly night. Three severe bombing raids in our immediate neighbourhood, brought in to us their toll of killed and wounded, and the following day I was again busy in the cemetery. Before nightfall the hospital was again evacuated of wounded, and we were standing by waiting for orders. After a couple of hours sleep I woke about midnight to find everyone dressing hurriedly. Outside there reigned a most uncanny silence, a great contrast to the bustling noise everywhere the previous night.

I got into a lorry which became separated from the rest of the convoy, and we lost our way, but dawn found us in a secluded valley where a great number of C.C.S's had congregated. Here in the fields in the morning sunshine were rows and rows of stretcher cases, waiting to be carried to the ambulance trains which followed one another continuously for the next few days. After a couple of hours sleep in a barn, thanks to a good French villager, I found plenty to do in ministering to the needs of those brave fellows. During the next two days, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, I came into contact with hundreds of them. Chiefly visiting then on the trains. Easter saw us on the move again and I spent Easter in a delightfully peaceful French village. On Easter Monday morning I started to find my battalion from which this special work had separated me, and I joined them towards evening. They were afraid I had become a casualty, and were about to report me missing. Since then we have been continuously in the line. I was glad to find our casualties during my absence had been comparatively light."

100 YEARS AGO IN AMBLECOTE...

On Saturday 7th of March 1908 the newly formed Stourbridge Rugby Club played their first match on the Amblecote Athletics Ground. According to a report there was fine weather but a poor attendance! Stourbridge won 30 points to 0, their opponents being Moseley Harlequins.



VISIT TO HALFPENNY GREEN VINEYARD

In answer to several questions asked at the April meeting (please phone the Secretary on 01384 894446 if you have any others).

DAY OF THE WEEK: THURSDAY.

DATE: 8th MAY 2008

TIME: MEET AT 7:00PM AT THE VINEYARD

VENUE: HALFPENNY GREEN VINEYARD

ADDRESS: Halfpenny Green Vineyards, Tom Lane, Halfpenny Green, South Staffordshire, DY7 5EP.

HOW TO GET THERE: There are several routes and a map is advised, however the easiest route according to the AA (barring unknown roadwork) is;

From Amblecote Church Hall

Distance 7.6 Miles

Turn left out of Church Hall Car Park onto Vicarage Road.

At traffic signals turn right onto A491.

At traffic signals continue forward (signposted Wolverhampton).

At roundabout take 2nd exit onto A449

At traffic signals turn left onto B4176 (signposted Bridgnorth)

Continue forward onto Bridgnorth Road

Continue forward onto Tom Lane

Arrive Halfpenny Green Vineyards (on the right).

MEAL: Will still consist, so far as we know, (as advertised in the December 2007 Newsletter) of Winemaker's Platter of ham and cheese, freshly baked bread, pickles, coleslaw and salad plus desert and coffee. Vegetarian option for those who requested it.

FINISH TIME: Don't know I am afraid, but no-one will be kept captive.

SUMMER WALK

Meet on the School Drive Car-Park (opposite Amblecote British Legion).

LEAVE 7:15PM SHARP. APPROXIMATE TIME 1½ HOURS.

The Society's Summer Walk (bring your brolly if its anything like the last one) will take place on Wednesday the 11th of June and will follow a route up Collis Street and across the Playing Fields to take in some ancient open land as well as a view of the temporarily open hill top of the former Corbett Hospital site, before crossing the A491 at our new set of Vicarage Road traffic lights and returning via the Canal Arm.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF GLASS 2008 August 22nd—25th

There will be a considerable heritage contribution to this year's Festival, including Heritage Walks, Talks and Exhibitions. Keep an eye/ear on the local media for details or visit www.ifg.org.uk