

# The Steps to War

Researched and written by [Susan W. Morris](#) in 2011

*This article begins with a brief chronology of the First World War 1914 - 18 which might be helpful as a reminder of why / how so many nations found themselves dragged into conflict. Two further sections then follow:*

- *Enlistment from Effingham, describing the Effingham men who enlisted for service in the war, and*
- *The Campaigns, describing the campaigns they fought in.*

## 1908 onwards

A period of increasing turbulence among peoples *inside* the south and eastern borders of Austria such as Bosnians and Serbs; also adjoining countries *outside*, which included Russia, Balkan states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia; the Ottoman Empire. Nervousness and threat. 1912-13: First and Second Balkan Wars.

## 1914

### 28 June

Assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by Serbians.

### 5 July

Austria told its ally Germany that it wished to punish Serbia and would shortly issue an ultimatum. If this was not complied with, Austria would invade Serbia. But it feared Serbia's ally, Russia.

Germany said – go ahead, if Serbia refuses and you do decide to invade, Germany will support you.

### 23 July

Austria-Hungary issued the ultimatum to Serbia (punish all those in the plot, stop arms and explosives crossing the border, stop encouraging nationalist propaganda, allow Austrian officials into Serbia to help crush revolutionary movements.

Serbia agreed to all except the last. Austria treated this as non-compliance.

### 26 July

Austria declared war on Serbia.

Russia did begin to mobilize.

Germany had given a promise, and suddenly had to decide what to do, quickly. It asked Russia to demobilize. Russia refused.

Germany's problem was that Russia had another strong ally, France. If Germany was not careful it could eventually be attacked on both sides simultaneously. It decided to mount a fierce and terrible sudden attack on France, to knock it out first. After seeing to that, German armies would turn back east to help Austria deal with Serbia and Russia.

### 1-2 August

Germany declared war on France and Russia, and attacked France first.

### 2 August

Since 1839 Britain and Germany had had a pact that Belgium would be allowed to remain neutral. The Germans asked Belgium's permission to march through into France (i.e., effectively a request for Belgian support). Belgium refused. The German army marched in anyway and tried to head through Belgium for Paris.

Britain demanded that the German troops withdraw. This was refused.

### 4 August

Britain declared war on Germany.

### October

Turkey (the Ottoman Empire) decided that Germany would probably win, so declared war on Britain and France. This drew the Middle East into the conflict, because the Turks attacked Egypt, the Suez

Canal, and the British oil-fields in Persia. Britain had to mount two separate campaigns (in Palestine and in Mesopotamia) to answer this threat. By the end of the war 600,000 men were committed in Mesopotamia and 500,000 in Palestine.

### 1 April 1917

Incensed by continual losses of American civilians and merchant shipping sunk by German action which continued despite warnings (famously, the British liner *Lusitania*, sunk on 7 May 1915 had included 118 Americans), the USA declared war on Germany.

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## Enlistment from Effingham

*This is a brief analysis of when and how the Effingham soldiers signed up. How old were they? Had they been soldiers before? Were they conscripted?*

### Who went to war?

125,000 troops were initially dispatched across the Channel to France and straight into battle with the German army. The first exchange of hostilities occurred as early as 21 August 1914. These soldiers were men who were either already serving in the regular army, or who had completed their term of active service 'on the Colours' during the past 5 or 6 years and were now 'on the Reserve', ie could be called back if needed.

Currently we know very little about the service histories of the 70 (approximately) Effingham servicemen who fought and survived [1]. Although their stories are missing from the following account they should not be forgotten. Those we do know something about [2] are the 19 fallen whose names appear on Effingham's memorials [3]. Of these, the following were in the first line sent to fight:

**Bessell** (age 38 in 1914; civilian but had been a captain in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Volunteer Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers before the war; working on the London Stock Exchange at the outbreak of war)

**Bullen** (age 30; regular service with Grenadier Guards had ended in 1912; working as a Constable at the outbreak of war)

**Taylor** (age 29 in 1914; in 1911 had been in the 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers serving in Cairo)

**R Wells** (age 21; had signed up for 12 years in the Navy in March 1914)

**Ottaway** (age 20; had been in the Grenadier Guards since at least 1911)

**Whittington** (age 19; by 1911 had signed up aged 16 or younger)

**Scarff** (age 18; had joined up 6 June 1913 aged 17)

Nationally, this first intake also included many public schoolboys who in August 1914 had just left school. Most would have had some cadet training experience while at school. Many decided to put off going to university and joined the army instead. This probably included

**Pauling** (age 19; seems to have joined straight from public school; gazetted in mid August)

Civilians who seem to have enlisted before 1914 was out include:

**Roberts** (age 30 in 1914; enlisted November 1914)

**Scarisbrick** (age 21 in 1914; received a promotion 26 November 1914))

**A Wells** (age 20 in 1914; in France by 14 December 1914)

Finally, it is not definitely known when the following civilian enlisted but it must have been during 1914 or 1915:

**Patten** (age 19 in 1914; died 13 October 1915)

Thus, the information we have at the moment appears to suggest that 11, and possibly 12, of the 19 people commemorated at Effingham were in the army either from the very outbreak of war or shortly after.

During 1915 the appetite for victory was still high and the following four men enlisted during that year:

**Barnett** (age 20 in 1914)

**Smith** (age 18 in 1914)

**Maskell** (age ? in 1914)

**Kemp** (age 16 in 1914)

By the end of 1915, some sixteen months into the war, there was a dawning recognition that to win would require massive, uncompromising mobilization of men and industry. Conscription was introduced by Act of Parliament [4] on 27 January 1916. All voluntary enlistment was stopped. All British males between 18 and 41 residing in Great Britain (excluding Ireland), unmarried or a widower on 2 November 1915, were judged to have enlisted. On 25 May 1916 this was extended to include married men.

Historians have put forward contradictory views about this. One view is, that the numbers volunteering had been so high that in fact there were already thousands of men sitting around uselessly in camps in Britain waiting to be trained, equipped and sent, so that it was in fact totally unnecessary at least at that point; it was an initiative deriving from a political rather than a military motive [5]. A different view is, that if the then current levels of loss were to continue, the supply of men who would be needed several months into the future (ie after the essential training period) was dangerously low, which made conscription essential.

Either way, the draft brought an unpleasant and unprecedented social backlash. Suddenly, thousands of men claimed exemption on various grounds, whereas this 'avoidance of duty' had not previously been experienced. Pacifists and conscientious objectors also became 'visible'. The mood in Britain became much darker as people were now confronted with previously unsuspected attitudes or actions of family, close friends and neighbours. Conscription also led to much more pointed questioning about how the war was being run, and to criticism of the apparently endless loss of life.

Because many service records with actual dates of enlistment no longer exist, it is not possible to say which of the Effingham soldiers who joined the fighting after January 1916 were volunteers or conscripts. But this uncertainty probably applied only to two, possibly three, people:

**?Bayly** (age about 25/26 in 1914; enlistment date not known; died 1917)

**Marchant** (age 18 in 1914; enlisted late 1916)

**Vigars** (age 15 in 1914; enlistment date not known but probably too young to have enlisted much before 1916; died 1918)

By year, the losses were:

1914 – 1

1915 – 4

1916 – 4

1917 – 4

1918 – 5

Died of wounds after the war ended – 1.

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## The Campaigns

*The following account gives the progression of the war (particularly focusing on the Western Front), and sets within this a possible interpretation of what might have happened to each of the soldiers listed on the Effingham memorials.*

*It draws on the following:*

– any surviving information about each serviceman, especially what is known of when they enlisted / arrived in the field of battle and the major campaigns underway that time

– the geographical location of the overseas military cemeteries / memorials where their deaths are commemorated. This does not necessarily tell us exactly where a soldier fell, because a) the position of lines wavered continuously a few yards or miles forwards and backwards; b) they may have been moved to casualty stations some way away behind the line before they died. However, it is an indication of sorts.

*Needless to say, the discovery of more information might be able to correct what is conjectured below.*

## 1914

The first army in the field was supposedly called a 'contemptible little army' by Kaiser Wilhelm. It tried to stop the Germans advancing through northern France. It was first sent into battle on 21 August at **Mons** in Belgium and successfully held back the Germans; then again shortly afterwards, it achieved another victory at Le Cateau. Very proud of its new nickname, 'The Old Contemptibles' the British army then in fact had to retreat very fast out of Belgium and into France, heading both south (towards Paris) and also eastwards (to unite with the French army which had been fighting with the German army further east in Alsace / Lorraine).

When at last united with the French, this joint force then stood, turned and was ordered north again to give battle to the German army, to prevent the very imminent invasion of Paris. This was the battle of **The Marne**, (named after a river which runs west to east and joins the River Seine at Paris). It was fought by 2 million already exhausted men along a 155-mile line crossing open countryside in France, from 6 -11 September. The German advance was convincingly halted, and it seemed as if Germany was defeated. On a traditional script, the war should have been over at this point. But the Germans did not retreat and go home. They dug trenches and stayed put. Allied soldiers found they could not advance and drive the Germans further into retreat and out of France. They were mown down in a hail of bullets. Thus began the hideous stalemate of trench warfare on **The Western Front**, which lasted for four years.

In mid-October 1914 the German army decided to try to outflank the western end of the line and force a way into France by coming southwards along the Belgian coastline. The Allies, having hit upon exactly the same terrain to try to go north, encountered the German forces at the first battle of **Ypres** in Flanders (Belgium). For a whole month, both sides poured thousands of men into this battle. Whenever either side forced a gap, the opponents moved up massive numbers by train to stop them. The British position at Ypres was a 'salient' – a place where the Allied trench line bulged forward. This made it appear as if it were pushing the Germans back – i.e. a success - so the line there had to be held in position come what may, at tremendous cost. Unfortunately, the men in the salient were exposed to attack from three sides. (Verdun, grimly held by the French, was another salient which similarly had to be maintained at all costs and experienced massive loss). **Bob Whittington** was *Mentioned in Despatches* for action in Flanders in connection with his role as a stretcher-bearer on 19 October 1914. **Henry Bullen** (1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards) died during this conflict, on 26 October 1914. He is commemorated at Zantevoorde British cemetery, Zonnebeke, just east of Ypres. 'There was much slaughter and no result' – A J P Taylor, *The First World War*. At the end of the battle, pretty much the whole of the original British Army and the reserves were gone, leaving only a bare framework, needing to be filled with new civilian recruits.

## 1915

The next Effingham casualty of the war was not on the Western Front at all, but very far away: **William Scarff** died on 3 February 1915 at **Madras** in India. He drowned, but exactly how is so far not known. On 29 October 1914 his battalion had sailed from Southampton for India, arriving at Bombay on 2 December. The point of this expedition was to enmesh with local British Indian troops. There were then two possible objectives: guard the NW frontier from possible Russian attack, or, move on to secure British oil supplies in Persia (modern Iran), the so-called Mesopotamian campaign. The oil wells were vital for the British navy and merchant shipping. British sea power was a formidable force which (despite some losses to U-boats) exerted such a vice-like grip on shipping movements for much of the war that Germany was slowly but inexorably starved over the four years. Scarff however had died before either of these Anglo-Indian campaigns was underway. He was buried in the Barkacha Military Grave, Madras 1914-1918 War Memorial, Chennai, India.

**Richard Roberts**, who had been a gardener at The Lodge on Lower Road before he enlisted in November 1914, was also part of the Mesopotamian campaign. At age 30 Roberts was by far the oldest of those with no previous military experience to sign up [6], and he had done so very promptly, by November 1914. With his battalion he set off for Mesopotamia in 1915 and reached Iraq, landing at Basra in January 1916. The mission ahead was desperate – relief of a British army which had been under siege since 7 December 1915. This army was surrounded on three sides in a loop of the Tigris River at **Kut-al-Amara** and besieged by the Turkish (Ottoman) army. Three unsuccessful attempts were made to raise the siege, all of which caused heavy loss of British life. In the end, on 29 April 1916 after 147 days of siege, General Townshend surrendered. Surrendering to the Turks was regarded as a massive disgrace for the British but the troops, a mixture of British and Indian soldiers, were in desperate condition. Typhoid was rife as well as terrible weakness from starvation. On 6 May the survivors were forced to begin a long march to prisoner-of-war camps in Anatolia. They were treated with great brutality both on the way and in the camps. 4,250 of the 11,800 who surrendered died.

Roberts died of typhoid on 13 June and was buried at Kut aged 31 or 32 [7]. The following year General Allenby, a massive contingent of men, and the revolt fomented inside the Ottoman Empire by Lawrence of Arabia, together succeeded in halting the situation and by the end of the war the Turks had been defeated.

Back on the Western Front, the attrition at **Ypres** continued. On 12 March 1915 at Spanbroek Mill near Lindenhoek in Belgium, **Whittington** was again recognized for great bravery and, for his attempts to save wounded soldiers, awarded the DCM (Distinguished Conduct Medal). During April 1915 the British first experienced what it was like to be gassed. Among so many, the next Effingham casualties are particularly poignant. Three young chaps all called Frederick – **Frederick Barnett**, **Frederick Maskell** and **Frederick Kemp** – had signed up together on the same day (actual date not known [8]). In August 1914 they were 20, unknown and 17 respectively. Kemp [9] was one of the two youngest of the fallen named on the Effingham memorial. The nature of his job before the war is not known – perhaps he just left school and joined up. Similarly there is a lack of information about Maskell's previous occupation, but in the 1911 census Barnett was a gardener. After enlistment Barnett and Maskell were both dispatched to the King's Royal Rifles and arrived in France in May 1915. Barely two months later they died somewhere near Ypres on the same day, 30 July 1915, and are commemorated together at the same memorial, the Menin Gate.

Further east along the line, the next to fall was **Archibald Patten**, a former 'garden boy' who was about 20 when he arrived in France in June 1915 and dead about four months later, on 13 October 1915. He is commemorated at the Loos Memorial and most likely he was a casualty of the disastrous battle of **Loos**, named after a small French town, which began in October and lost over 50,000 British soldiers by the time it petered out in November. The terrain identified for the attack was apparently chosen on a map without reference to ground conditions – it was a treacherous area of coalmines and miners cottages. By this stage in the war there had been a huge drain on ammunition and supplies, and many soldiers in this campaign were badly under-equipped. On the first day, the British gas blew back onto the troops firing it. As the battle progressed, men being rushed forward to the fighting could not get through for the hundreds of wounded being brought back from the line. The British commanding officers had different ideas and did not support each other. They failed to seize a small military advantage that did momentarily present itself to them. Loos was not only a defeat, it was seen by many as a disgrace. Nevertheless the fighting continued in this area and in April 1916 **Albert Smith**, aged 20, who had been a 'gardener domestic' at Dunley Hill in the 1911 census, died in that vicinity only two days after arriving at the front. He is commemorated at the Vermelles British Cemetery, very close to Loos.

## 1916

... saw a desperate realization of the effort needed to win and a major onslaught on a different part of the line was planned. The location chosen was the area of France known as **The Somme**, after the river there. General Haig had trained up a new army specifically for this offensive. The offensive was planned to start in August 1916 but in the event was launched at the end of June. For eight days 2,000 guns bombarded the German trenches night and day. On 1 July the British infantry went over the top. But the Germans were mostly in very deep trenches and unharmed, and the barbed wire entanglements blocked the way. Forty-seven thousand British soldiers died on one day. A similar level of slaughter was repeated for months. Here the stretcher-bearer **Bob Whittington** died on 26 August 1916, and a few days later on 15 August so did **Mowbray Bessell**, the oldest of the Effingham fallen. Both are commemorated at the Thiepval Memorial east of Amiens which is some way from the line, so perhaps they died of wounds at clearing or casualty stations.

## 1917

... saw a dreadful low point, if such a concept can be advanced. Persuaded by the French General, Nivelle, that a massive onslaught at one point would break through, the French army planned another huge offensive which was *bound* to work and break the Germans this time. It was agreed that during the run-up to this, British and Canadians would distract the Germans from the preparations. On 9 April the British opened an attack at **Arras** in Flanders (further north than Thiepval) and the Canadians at Vimy Ridge, also Flanders. On 3 May 1917, **Frederick Kemp** died and is commemorated at Arras. Nivelle's offensive began on 16 April but the Germans were aware of the plans and ready for the French. At first there was success, but later the old pattern of massive resistance and entrenchment followed. 150,000 British and 100,000 German troops died.

At the end of this many more thousands of lives had been lost, for no gain. The French army mutinied and marched on Paris. Order was restored only by ruthless discipline. (An aside: by this point Russia and the Russian army were similarly demoralized. In March 1917 the Czar was overthrown. In the

1917 October Revolution, Lenin came to power. Almost his first act was to order a truce with Germany, and in early 1918 a peace treaty was signed).

No new ideas seemed to be available. Failed generals were replaced by others, who themselves failed to find an alternative route to victory in their turn. The British undermined the German lines at Messines by 19 deep mines, which were all blown up simultaneously at 3.10 on the morning of 7 June 1917 with so much explosive that Lloyd George heard it at 10 Downing Street. A British advance of sorts started, moderately successful, but again it was decided to try to break out at the Ypres salient in Flanders. Again, the Germans were ready for it, and strengthened the defences until there were about a million men on both sides. Ypres was fought over for the third time. The offensive began on 31 July 1917. In peace-time this low-lying area had been drained by many dykes and ditches but now these were all gone. The whole area was a hideous sea of virtually impassable mud, and it became known to history as the battle of **Paschendaele**. **Arthur Wells**, who had been described as a 'home labourer' in the 1911 census, fell near here aged 23 on 5 October 1917 having been awarded the MM (Military Medal) in June of that year. He is commemorated at Tyne Cot, the military cemetery near Ypres set up when the Menin Gate facilities became too small.

About six weeks later on 27 November **Noel Bayly** died (aged about 28). He is commemorated at Anneux cemetery. This is west of **Cambrai** (France, just south of the border with Belgium). Since tanks had been proved useless in the Flanders mud, the tank corps had been looking for a hard, flat area for an offensive. They found it at Cambrai, 45 miles south of Paschendaele. Just a week before Bayly died, on 20 November 1917, 381 tanks had succeeded in punching a four-mile wide hole through the German line, but the exhausted British infantrymen could not follow fast enough. Slowly the tanks were destroyed one by one. A whole German army corps was sent to the area by train and it closed the gap. Within days the original trench line was back in place.

Nine days after Bayly's death **Harry Marchant**, described as a 'mate to a carter' in the 1911 census, also died in Flanders aged about 21, on 6 December 1917. This was only about three months after his arrival in France in September. Before the July 1917 Ypres offensive, three great casualty clearing stations had been established near Dunkirk in Belgium, known as Bandaghem, Mendinghem and Dozinghem. The supposition is that Marchant had been wounded and brought back from the front line because he is commemorated at the Mendinghem Military Cemetery.

Two critical events in 1917 were to make a major change to the picture. Russia was now out of the war, so Germany no longer needed to worry about the eastern front and could release men from fighting there. For Germany this was fortunate because on 1 April 1917 the USA declared war on Germany. Germany would need all its resources on the Western Front to repel the (literally) millions of fresh men about to arrive.

## 1918

On 24 January 1918 **William Charles Taylor** died aged 32 in France at Etaples, south of Boulogne, near the port of Le Touquet. This location possibly implies he had been wounded and was being taken back to Britain. By March, however, the British troops still in the field were being subjected to a massive German offensive. Germany had decided that every possible resource had to be used to smash the Allies before the Americans arrived in force. On 21 March 1918 the onslaught began along the whole line from The Somme to Cambrai. It succeeded. The British and French fell ever further back towards Paris. It looked as if a hole would be made between the two armies. **George Pauling** aged 23 fell at this time, on 25 March 1918; we do not know exactly where but after the war his remains were transferred to the Le Cabaret Rouge British cemetery at Souchez which is near Vimy (Vigars was later interred in the same cemetery). The exhausted German soldiers could not keep up the advance however, and stopped to raid houses. The British and French managed to re-group and make a stand near Amiens which stopped the advance. The Germans made two more major attacks which, again, succeeded dangerously at first, but again, then lost impetus and were repelled.

On 8 August the tide turned for the last time. British and American units began an onslaught which ultimately brought about the end of the war. German soldiers were totally drained. Many German sailors mutinied. **Reginald Wells**, the only sailor among the Effingham fallen, having served throughout the whole war, died aged 25 on 23 September 1918 as a result of wounds received in a tragic accident on board HMS Glatton in port at Dover. Glatton was a heavily armed ship which had been on the point of sailing to the Belgian coast to help with this final bombardment when there was a fire and explosion on board. Four days later, **William Ottaway** died in France aged 25, on 27 September. He is commemorated at Sanders Keep Military Cemetery, Graincourt-lès-Havrincourt, just west of Cambrai. Eleven days after that, on 8 October **Reginald Vigars** aged nearly 19 and, with

Kemp, one of the two youngest among the Effingham fallen, died and as mentioned above, is commemorated at the Le Cabaret Rouge British cemetery at Souchez near Vimy.

The Kaiser abdicated on 9 November, and the Austrian Emperor on 11 November. On that day, at 11am on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the German republic surrendered and the guns stopped.

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## NOTES

1. Work on the stories of these soldiers is continuing. Currently a list of 69 surviving servicemen is included in the Minutes of Effingham Parish Council meeting of 19 February 1921. A transcript of this can be seen in ELHG's article *The 'Parish Council Souvenir'*.

2. This account relies heavily on research undertaken by Chris Hogger; he and Mark Eller are thanked for checking the text here. The information being used is as shown on the ELHG website's individual pages for the fallen.

4. The Military Service Act. Its provisions came into force on 2 March 1916. It was later followed by further Acts extending the reach of the power to conscript.

5. For instance, see *The First World War: An Illustrated History* by A.J.P. Taylor, first published 1963, p114: 'The most startling political development of the year [1915] was the move towards compulsory military service in Great Britain. This was not due to any shortage of men. On the contrary, more volunteers were coming forward than could be equipped. Parliament and the politicians [i.e. not the Generals] wanted to do something active to aid the war; and conscription seemed the way to do this ...'

6. Some nine or ten years older than the next youngest, Scarisbrick, who had signed up at age 21.

7. Although his Commonwealth War Grave Commission record says 29. The mis-stating of ages at the time of enlistment was very common, particularly by the very old or the very young. This is described in Robert Graves' autobiography *Goodbye to All That* first published 1929. 'I still have the roll of my first platoon of forty men [Royal Welch Fusiliers]. The figures given for their ages are misleading. On enlistment, all over-age men had put themselves in the late thirties, and all under-age men had called themselves eighteen. But once in France, the over-age men did not mind adding on a few genuine years. No less than fourteen in the roll give their age as forty or over, and these were not all. Fred Prosser, a painter in civil life, who admitted to forty-eight, was really fifty-six .... [others aged forty-two and forty-five] ... James Burford was the oldest soldier of all. [Did not know what the safety-catch on the rifle was; when questioned revealed that he had last done active service in Egypt in 1882] ... 'Weren't you in the South African War?' 'I tried to re-enlist, but they told me I was too old, sir. I had been an old soldier in Egypt. My real age is sixty-three'.

8. We presume they signed up together because their service numbers are consecutive, A/1308 (Barnett), A/1309 (Maskell) and A/1310 (Kemp).

9. Vigers is the other who also died aged 19, but we do not know the actual date of birth to confirm which was the younger of the two.

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## Postscript

[Since this article was written we have also learned much more about the Effingham servicemen described in this article.](#)