

# ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY WAR HERITAGE GROUP

TUESDAY 20 October 2015  
5.15 pm in the WILSON ROOM  
PORTCULLIS HOUSE

## MINUTES OF THE MEETING

**Present:** Lord Faulkner (Co-Chairman), Lord Clarke of Windermere, Lord Cope, Louise Ellman MP, Baroness Golding, Dr Andrew Murrison MP, Madeleine Moon MP, Lord Selkirk, Lord Shipley, Lord Soley, Lord Tope.

**Apologies for absence:** Jeffrey Donaldson MP (Co-Chairman), Earl Attlee, Viscount Brookeborough, Graham Evans MP, Meg Hillier MP, Lord Watson.

**In attendance:** Dr George Bailey (BCMh), Simon Bendry (FWW Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme), Vice-Admiral Mike Gretton (Battle of the Atlantic Memorial Trust), Frances Moreton (War Memorials Trust), Dr John Peatty (BCMh), Captain Chris Pile (Battle of the Atlantic Memorial Trust), Howard Simmons (Battlefields Trust), Colin Wagstaff (WFA), Dr Philip Weir, Professor Peter Doyle (Secretary).

### **Chairman's Report**

Lord Faulkner opened the meeting by taking the chair on behalf of Jeffrey Donaldson MP, who was unable to attend this meeting. He welcomed visitors and Parliamentarians, and noted there were three main agenda items.

Lord Faulkner explained that there was a £5 subscription to join the Group in order to support its work. A number of new members were enrolled. Lord Faulkner brought to attention of the Parliamentarians that Commonwealth War Graves Commission was still offering opportunities, in association with the All Party War Heritage Group (APWHG), to visit the war graves in their constituency. Further details have been circulated to members by the secretary. Lord Faulkner then invited Dr Murrison to make his presentation to the Group.

### **Report of the Government's Great War Centenary Programme**

**Dr Andrew Murrison MP** opened his presentation with a brief update of the National Programme on the Commemoration of the Centenary of the Great War. Dr Murrison explained that he was the Prime Minister's special representative, and that had been involved in the commemorations as long as the Government had been involved, commencing with the Prime Minister's speech on the subject. He noted that prior to this there had been some criticism of the Government's approach, but explained that preparations for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics had taken some time.

Dr Murrison explained that Government's approach to commemoration has three main themes: remembrance, youth, and education. These themes were selected so that there was a legacy, as there was a real danger that consideration of the war could shift from the contemporary to the historical, with the loss of living participants. It was therefore considered important to pass this on through schools, with education relating to the war wrapped up with its legacy. He explained that a great deal of thought had been given to this matter, with consideration that it would be wasteful if we were to reach Armistice Day in 2018 without cementing this in the public conscience. However, there is a need to identify what is meant by this legacy.

Part of it is raising the meaning of the Great War in the public conscience; data suggests that this has indeed happened in the first year of the centenary. There are also estates, with war memorials renovated to support the legacy. Until recently, such memorials have quite often been forgotten about or overlooked, but now many of them have been renovated. The National Commemorative Events that have been held so far have been high profile ones, with much coverage in the media, and with the BBC in particular doing an excellent job. The event held at Mons on 4 August 2014 was one of great poignancy, and was handled sensitively and with success. It was extraordinarily good, representing both sides in the conflict. With this success, however, there is a feeling that interest may have tailed off. Notwithstanding this, the commemorative events at Gallipoli in April 2015 was also well done, and was sensitive to Anzac issues.

Dr Murrison then looked forward to 2016. He was aware that for Britain, 2016 was to be a significant centenary year, with both the naval battle of Jutland and the Battle of the Somme – and its fateful first day – to mark. With regard to the first day of the Somme it is evident that the public may not be fully aware that the battle raged on for a full 140 days after that day the battle. In view of this the National Commemoration will take into account the full campaign, marking each one of the days of the Somme, and this will be done with the successor military units whose forebears fought in the battle. Dr Murrison explained that this is very much an Anglo-French event, with much opportunity for collaboration with French friends and partners to jointly commemorate the battle. Indeed, he would very much welcome thoughts on what else could be done to support the event, perhaps using schools to get engaged in debate at home, with all school children who wish to get involved able to do so on a regional basis. There will be an announcement soon.

Looking forward, Dr Murrison noted that there will be events to mark the Battle of Passchendaele in 2017, followed by 'Amiens to Armistice' in 2018. He explained that Amiens is particularly important as it helps us to understand how victory came about.

Finally, Dr Murrison noted that it was important to understand that there is regional engagement in commemoration, engagement that has taken place spontaneously without input from funders. With so much going on, it is difficult to get a clear idea of what is happening. It helps to show that the public are much more involved with the commemoration than was expected. He noted that the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has been generous in helping with many local events, and he would encourage colleagues to help develop HLF funding options. There are other bodies too, who have been involved directly, for example in arts funding, and all of this helps to enrich the tapestry of the commemoration.

**Lord Faulkner** thanked Dr Murrison for his illuminating account, and invited Parliamentarians to speak on the subject.

**Lord Clarke of Windermere** added his thanks to those of Lord Faulkner, and expressed the view that this was very encouraging. Turning to the Somme, he noted

that there were many local battalions from many regiments involved in the battle, with huge interest in their home boroughs. He considered that County Archives are under pressure at present to assist with local historians' requests for information. With this in mind, Lord Clarke wondered whether it was possible if information could be given to the Archives that spread over the full 141 days of the battle, supplying information on local battalions that could be supplied to these archives.

**Dr Murrison MP** agreed that this was a good idea, and explained that there had been a timeline drawn up by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) that will be used as a basis for commemoration. This will be of value to successor regiments who wish to take part in this, with visits to sites on the Somme that will be of relevance to each particular regiment or battalion.

**Madeline Moon MP** expressed her admiration for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). She noted that the CWGC has found neglected graves, and has been actively working with families. This was particularly the case in Bridgend, with many local links that became an important event locally. In her view it is important to get local museums involved, and to that end it would be valuable to let them know what the detailed plans were. Mrs Moon explained that while it was easier, perhaps, to let the larger institutions know, it was in fact through the local museums where many of the most important connections could be made. Finally, she noted that it was also important to look outside of France, as, for example, local Bridgend regiments served in Africa, where conditions were equally tough. In her view, this is not an aspect of the war that is well known, yet the resilience of the soldiers in these campaigns should be remembered as a lesson, rather than being effectively 'buried in history'.

**Dr Murrison MP** agreed, and expressed the view that the point about the other fronts was well made. He also noted that as many as 101 separate battles could have been marked in some way, but that this was more difficult, and as such, just six were selected to reflect the National involvement. Instead, other organisations were encouraged to take part to help mark these other campaigns.

**Madeleine Moon MP** continued, expressing the view that these campaigns did indeed deserve some level of recognition, and that the BBC might be best placed to assist here?

**Dr Murrison MP** explained that it was indeed difficult to get the BBC involved in covering these regional events, with the corporation largely focussing on comprehensive coverage of the main events.

**Madeleine Moon MP** considered that it might be possible for regional BBC units to cover regional stories, with, it was suggested, BBC Wales covering Welsh regiments.

**Dr Murrison MP** added to this debate by explaining that there will be a Schools' debate that will be held on a regional basis in 2016, within the big regional centres. The BBC will indeed cover this, and this will provide an excellent means of dealing with the story across the country.

**Lord Cope** then spoke to emphasise the importance of the Home Front in the Great War. He noted that the war had significant effects at home, particularly with the development of the Ministry of Munitions under David Lloyd George. Turning to the previous discussion, Lord Cope agreed that there were large numbers of local battalions that 'went over the top' on the Somme, and he strongly supported the idea

that information should be given that would assist in greater understand of who fought where.

**Dr Murrison MP** expressed his agreement with this, and noted in addition that there was also involvement from overseas (including other Commonwealth) troops. It was his hope to meet with the relevant High Commissioners in order to mark this involvement in some appropriate manner.

**Lord Shipley** added that there had been some talk of a screening of the famous film ‘The Battle of the Somme’, from 1916. If the film could be shown, there would be a marvellous way of showing the battle to the public. He asked if this was indeed the intention?

**Dr Murrison MP** explained that this was with the BBC, working with the Imperial War Museum, and it was hoped that this film will indeed be shown some time on the 1 July 2016.

**Lord Selkirk** enquired after the unknown warriors? Given that a lot of men were not found, with no known grave, he wished to know what was the scale of this?

**Dr Murrison MP** explained that they will be considered, though the precise numbers are still subject to adjustment.

**Baroness Golding** expressed the view that local newspapers are very valuable in carrying stories relating to men who went to war, as this is the case in Staffordshire.

**Dr Murrison MP** agreed that many were doing so, and very well, and that this represented a good thing.

**Lord Faulkner** then opened up questioning to the attendees.

**Dr Bailey (BCMh)** asked whether there had been approaches made to the Canadians about Vimy Ridge, as part of the Battle of Arras in 1917?

**Dr Murrison MP** explained that he had indeed been talking with the Canadians, as it was important to assist partner nations with their own specific emphasis. He explained that the UK Government will give assistance with the Canadians as far as was possible, though he was not aware of what they might want in particular. He noted that there will certainly be ‘top level’ UK engagement in commemoration of Vimy in 2017. One thing that he has been considering is the Canadian use of young people as guides at battlefield sites, and was of the view that a UK version of this might be of value, learning from the Canadian experience.

**Dr Peatty (BCMh)** spoke to give his congratulations to Dr Murrison with regard to 2018. In his view, not covering the Battle of Amiens would be like not covering D-Day in any commemoration of the end of the Second World War.

**Lord Faulkner** thanked Dr Murrison for his illuminating account, and expressed gratitude on behalf of the Group for his work, while noting the involvement of the APWHG in stimulating the initial discussion of the Government’s commemorative activities. He then invited Lord Soley to make his presentation.

## **Fund raising for the erection of a statue to Mary Seacole**

**Lord Soley** explained that he would like to take the opportunity to discuss the funding of a memorial statue to the Crimean War nurse, Mary Seacole. Lord Soley explained that he had been approached in 1979 by a woman who had originally come to Britain from the West Indies during the Second World War. Her approach was made in order to see if it was possible to identify the grave of Mary Seacole, which was not possible. The outcome, however, was that it was agreed that there ought indeed be a statue of the nurse, who had done so much to alleviate the suffering of men during the Crimean War. Lord Soley agreed to get involved in this endeavour, and was immediately struck that there was not a single statue to a named black woman in this country. Lord Soley was aware that the West Indies had come to the aid of Britain in its hour of need. Lord Soley noted that the role of black servicemen and women in historic campaigns has been mostly overlooked and underestimated, and that the raising of the new statue would do much to gain a greater understanding of their sacrifices.

In order to take this further, Lord Soley set up a fund to raise money for a memorial statue. He was of the view that this would require £50,000, and this fund was raised within a year. In fact, the erection of the statue requires much more money and many years of effort, and to date, some £500,000 has been found, much of it from small amounts. The result is that there is now a finished statue, standing three metres high and weighing 17 tonnes. The problem at present is that the construction company that was due to erect the statue has recently made a substantial loss, and there is now a shortfall of some £180,000 in order to finally get the statue up. Finding this money has been a challenge, with many avenues closed on points of detail. However, if the money can be found, this statue will be erected in grounds of St Thomas's hospital, close to parliament, and it is hoped that there will also be a memorial garden to mark the efforts of all nurses in conflict. So might be an idea to have in front of the statue a memorial garden to nurses in conflict.

**Lord Faulkner** thanked Lord Soley for his presentation and encouraged members to support his endeavours in any way possible.

**Lord Cope** and **Baroness Golding** both expressed their admiration for his efforts.

**Lord Faulkner** then asked Vice Admiral Mike Gretton and Captain Chris Pile to make their presentation.

### **Attempts to save the WW2 convoy ship, HMS *Whimbrel***

**Vice Admiral Gretton** and **Captain Pile** thanked Lord Faulkner for the opportunity to explain, for the benefit of the APWHG, the situation with regard to HMS *Whimbel*.

Opening, **Vice Admiral Gretton** explained that the United Kingdom has no national memorial for the Battle of the Atlantic, a battle that Winston Churchill had said frightened him most of all. It was an intense campaign, with some 70 percent of German submariners sent to attack convoys lost at sea. The preservation of HMS *Whimbrel*, the only remaining convoy protection sloop from the campaign, could be a way of remembering it best. This ship had been sold to the Egyptian Government in 1949, and was now available for purchase.

**Captain Chris Pile** then went on to explain that a company was set up in order to open discussion with Egyptians, in order to buy the ship in its dock at Alexandria, including stores and equipment, based on scrap metal price. In effect, it was to be

bought 'as it was lying', with a view of paying for essential repairs so that it could be transferred back to Britain in a fit state. Certainly this would be difficult, as the ship had never been towed. A survey was carried out in 2005, and from this a refit plan was completed. The financial package initially one million pounds to start, £250,000 for the ship, the remainder for the refit, and the Egyptians made aware of this. In addition to this original outlay, there was another one million to bring the ship back to Liverpool, where she would have a reserved berth in Canning Dock. A lot of work was carried out *pro bono* by concerned parties. There was an understanding that once in the UK, it might be possible to apply for HLF funding to further support the project. The City of Liverpool has been particularly helpful, befitting its significance as the centre of operations for the Battle during the Second World War.

Captain Pile went on to explain that the Egyptian position was often shifting, and with political unrest in the region, the attempt went very quiet. Fortunately, it came alive again in 2014 through a intermediary. Initial negotiations started well, with a 340,000 USD offer, which was revised to 410,000 USD. This was then changed from USD to Sterling, thereby greatly increasing the purchase price. On the meantime the Egyptians had removed the original 4-inch guns perhaps, perhaps concerned about top weight, and with this came concerns whether the ship was now beyond economic repair? The Egyptian authorities then announced that the ship would not be released, due to its historic value as an Egyptian naval vessel.

**Vice Admiral Gretton** then summarised the situation. He explained that that there was still an opportunity to return to the ship, though it had to meet three criteria: 1, there should be a clear expression of value in USD (with no additional commission); 2, there was a need to do a further survey of the ship; and 3, though finance is available to buy ship and do the repairs, there is a need to raise money to bring her home. Concluding their presentations, Vice Admiral Gretton and Captain Pile expressed the view that anything the APWHG could do to assist in bring the ship back to Britain would be extremely valuable.

**Lord Faulkner** thanked Vice Admiral Gretton and Captain Pile for their presentations and expressed the view that, as Co-Chairman of the APWHG, he would be happy to write letters of support.

**Louise Almond MP** for Liverpool Riverside declared her interest in the scheme and expressed her view that there was still a chance to get this done.

**Lord Soley** considered that it would be valuable to contact the All Party Egyptian Group, who might be able to communicate the case to the Egyptian Ambassador. It was noted that Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Co-Chair of the APWHG, was also active in this group, as its Vice-Chair (with Sir Gerald Howarth as Chair). Lord Soley went on to suggest that talking to the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce.

**Dr Andrew Murrison MP** asked if it was possible to raise this with the First Sea Lord?

**Vice Admiral Gretton** confirmed that he was supportive of the idea.

**Lord Cope** enquired whether information about the ship will also include its Egyptian service, and if so, would this help?

**Captain Pile** confirmed that it would indeed reflect its distinguished career in the Egyptian Navy.

Lord Faulkner thanked both speakers for their illuminating presentation, and for their efforts in trying to save the ship for the nation. With no further business, he closed the meeting and thanked all the participants for their valuable contributions.

*The All Party Parliamentary War Heritage Group exists to promote and support the protection, conservation and interpretation of war graves, war memorials and battlefield sites.*

*Co-Chairs: Rt Hon. Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Lord Faulkner of Worcester*

*Vice-chairs: Lord Astor of Haver, Lord Clark of Windermere*

*Lord Cope of Berkeley*

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