

James Estlin

What Impact did World War I have on the Community of Tonbridge School?

Between 1914 to 1918, life at Tonbridge School was completely overshadowed by the events of the First World War. Regular school matters seemed insignificant and unimportant in contrast to the fighting taking place just across the channel. Many boys wanted to enlist, but couldn't as they were too young: 'Not one amongst us wishes not to be doing something either in the trenches or on the barrack squares of England'. Instead they had to remain behind, and 'to continue with the old routine as if nothing was happening, as if not a couple hundred miles from school men were dying swiftly and by degrees' (*The Tonbridgian*, 1914).

Throughout the war, the Tonbridge community was always eager to contribute to the war effort. The school had a considerable roll-call, with many old boys and staff volunteering for service. In addition, those that remained behind were also able to offer a large amount of support. In 1914 the 'Public School Base Hospital Fund' was set up to help provide medical treatment to wounded soldiers. Collections were held every term at Tonbridge, and through financial donations from parents and old boys, the school was able to contribute significantly to its success. In addition, the school organised many rugby and cricket matches against military units, including the Tonbridge Garrison and the Royal Welsh Regiment.

The First World War affected almost all aspects of life at Tonbridge and as a result changes occurred that were both mundane and major, temporary and permanent, tangible and psychological. For instance school fees rose slightly, and the price of the *Tonbridgian* (the school editorial) doubled from ninepence to eighteenpence in five years as a result of the rising cost of raw materials – a consequence of the U-boat blockade. Food rations were temporarily introduced, and there were several personnel changes as masters went off to fight. Tonbridge was now essentially preparing its boys to fight in the war, and consequently the school's cadet force became increasingly prominent, tripling in size. Numerous cadet camps were organised, physical fitness regimes were introduced and extra military tuition was instigated, compulsory for all boys over eighteen.

Tonbridge's role of honour was high, and each death on the battlefield brought with it melancholy and grief. There was defiantly a genuine fear among the boys, many of whom expected to be on the front line themselves within a few years. The Tonbridge community, however, tried to stay positive throughout, viewing each of these deaths as glorious and heroic and often approaching negative situations with true British 'stiff upper lip' humour. A prime example is found in the self-mocking 1917 *Tonbridgian*: 'Lack of literacy may surely be pleaded by the editors this term – the literary half of them have suddenly been called up for military service!'

Nonetheless, the impact World War One had on Tonbridge is still visible today. At the entrance to the school's chapel the names of the 53 old boys and 7 masters who died serving their country are engraved upon a commemorative plaque.

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What do you think about Remembrance now and in the future?

20 million dead; 21 million wounded – the graveyards of Northern France and Belgium tell of the immense sacrifice that 65 million soldiers from across the world made by fighting in WWI. They were fighting for their homes and their families, for the countries they adored, and for a future they believed in – a future we live in today.

These soldiers fought for us, and thus we owe it to them to honour the gallantry and valour they displayed in doing so. We commemorate them out of respect and gratitude for the sacrifices they made, and the hardships faced by their families and friends as a result. Furthermore, by remembering the atrocities of WWI we remember the need to avoid them in the future.

We often take for granted our constitutional freedoms and civil rights, but we must bear in mind that these soldiers fought and many ultimately died to defend such liberties. In remembering their services and sacrifices, we acknowledge our current constitutional and civil freedoms which they fought to preserve. We must ensure such dreams of theirs' are realised.

Remembrance Day provides this opportunity. It allows us to commemorate not only the soldiers of WWI, but all soldiers and indeed civilians who have contributed to war efforts past and present. Furthermore, it infuses, nationally, strong senses of community and patriotism as we celebrate the successes our country achieved as a whole. The annual two minute silence is also one of the few events in which the entire country collectively participates in. Additionally, the 2007 Poppy Appeal raised almost £30 million to support the serving and ex-serving community and this yearly charity event is perceptibly a great way to help living soldiers who have suffered on our behalf.

For these reasons, Remembrance Day should continue as part of our future.