

# FRIENDS OF THE PARISH OF THE ASCENSION BURIAL GROUND NEWSLETTER



*Memorials for Rudolph Cecil Hopkinson and Robert Williams Michel (see p. 2)*

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## DATES FOR 2019

AGM: 7.30 p.m. 13 March at St Augustine's, Richmond Road, Cambridge

*Working parties (all held on Saturdays from 10 till noon):*

16 February      16 March      13 April      11 May      15 June      20 July

*Please note that there are no working parties in January or August*

To find out more about the Friends, become a member, or update your details, please email the Secretary of the Friends, [jptc1@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jptc1@cam.ac.uk) or write c/o Jesus College, Cambridge CB5 8BL.

*Officers of The Friends 2018*

*President: Martin Boyle*

*Secretary: James Clackson*

*Treasurer: Nigel Chancellor*

## Remembering the Fallen of the First World War:

By November 1918 the death toll of combatants in the First World War was fearful, and it was already recognised that, unlike previous wars, every one of the dead must be recorded and, wherever possible, be buried with full honours and a fitting memorial, usually near where they fell. Only when men died of their wounds back home, or where a fatality occurred in Britain, could a memorial mark an actual burial. However, relatives often wanted to remember their dead with other family members, and in the Ascension Burial Ground many are included this way.

The men thus memorialised (no women are included here from this war) come from a good social mix. They include the Cambridge elite (e.g. Erasmus Darwin), leading academics (Prof. Hopkinson); a large number, reflecting the population of this Cambridge quarter, had worked for example as college servants, railway conductors, gas fitters, etc. before joining up. Many also have memorials near where they fell, and also on local war memorials such as St Giles and St Luke's and Cambridge Guildhall, but personal memorials among the soldiers' kin and neighbours must have been a comfort to many who mourned. Their stories, set among the streets where we live, bring home to us the personal nature of every loss.

Information is inevitably fuller and monuments more grand for older and more distinguished men, the two Hopkinson brothers being prominent examples. Lieutenant Colonel Bertram Hopkinson, buried with a massive white marble cross and lengthy accounts of his distinguished civilian and military career, was educated at Trinity Cambridge and King's College London, practised law, and was a consultant engineer and Professor of Mechanisms & Applied Mechanics with a Fellowship at King's. He worked on military aeronautics during the War, but crashed flying solo over Essex in 1918, aged 43. He left a wife and six daughters with his long-suffering mother in Adams Road. His younger brother, Lieutenant Rudolph Cecil Hopkinson, had previously been invalided back from Loos and nursed by his widowed mother, but died of his wounds aged 25 in 1917. His memorial (illustrated on the front page) is carved with touching appreciations from men who served with him, and



*Percy Coppock, killed aged 18 in the Battle of the Somme, is commemorated by a footstone added to the family memorial*

includes an unusual sundial copied from Niddrie Marischal House in Edinburgh.

Other men who came back to Cambridge to die of their wounds include the Rev Captain Angus Mackay, wounded at Arras, 1917, and Robert Williams Michel of the Royal Army Medical Corps (illustrated on the front page). At 57 Michel was the oldest represented here and one of the bravest for, as a medical doctor, he was mortally wounded while rescuing the wounded at Thiepval, 1916. He too was brought back to Cambridge for treatment, presumably to the First Eastern General Hospital (on the site of the University Library), and he left a widow at their home in Cranmer Road. Alfred Wehrle (of the Artist Rifles), who lived with his parents in Storeys Way, died in hospital in November 1918, and was buried with a white marble cross and angel.

The death of Erasmus Darwin, grandson of Charles and only son of Horace and Ida Darwin, who fell at Ypres in 1915 aged 24, was



## Memorials in the Ascension Burial Ground

a well-recorded trauma for the most eminent Cambridge family, represented quite simply on the memorial of his close family. Similar sons of the professional classes, too young to have achieved much themselves, were also added to family memorials. Islay Ferrier Burns of the Machine Gun Corps died aged 20 and lies in an unmarked grave. The son of the Rev. Burns of Westminster College he was educated at the Perse and was studying engineering at London University when he joined up as a Private in 1915. He later trained as a Lieutenant and was killed in 1917. Another young son of clergy to be found on a family gravestone was 2nd Lieutenant Walter Selwyn Orpen of Herschel Road, killed in action in 1916, aged 22.

Our burial ground only commemorates a small selection of the hundreds of soldiers who grew up in the rougher areas around Castle Street but they give a useful reminder of the everyday loss of young sons that was a hallmark of this war. Charles Robert Brooks, a gas fitter living with his parents in 67 Oxford Road, died in 1916, aged 20. He was also commemorated at Thiepval and on the attractive war memorial now moved near to Tesco's carpark on Newmarket Road, but his own grave is unknown. Charles Joseph Burton grew up in Richmond Road and was educated at Pound Hill School (now St Giles' Hall), then emigrated to run a rubber plantation. He was serving with the Australian Forces when he was killed aged 30 and buried at Perrone, on the Somme.

Private Hurbert William Button had been employed as a conductor on Street Railway, living with his parents on Castle Street. He was killed at 24 and buried in Ridge Wood Military Cemetery, Belgium, and remembered too on his grand-parents' grave. Private Percy Caldecoat, another Castle Street boy of 19, died as a PoW just before the Armistice in 1918, and was buried in Germany (Worms (Hocheim Hill) Cemetery). Percy Coppock was 18 when he was killed on the Somme in 1916 and buried nearby in Gommecourt Wood and was later added as a footstone to the family memorial (see facing page), as was Ernest Taylor, aged 20. Alfred Hall was 19 when he was killed in 1917 leaving a widowed mother. His name and fate were added to his father's grave. Private H J Hatton lies in Barenthal Cemetery in Italy after being killed in action there in 1918, with his name added to his widow's memorial

when she died in 1963. Private Charles Albert Cobbald of the Machine Gun Corps (Infantry) died in Britain and is the only one buried here in an official War Grave (photograph on this page). Only 19, he had lived with his parents on Histon Road and worked as a college servant.

Our last good Cambridge man is Private Wallace Henry Rolph of the Cambridgeshire Regiment. Christened in St Giles, he grew up in Gloucester Street (under Shire Hall site) then Bermuda Terrace, worked his way up to College Butler's Assistant and had a family of his own in Norfolk Terrace. He died of wounds in 1918 and is buried and commemorated at Fins New British Cemetery, on the Somme, as well as here with his family, near to the chapel in Ascension Burial Ground (photograph on next page).



*Gravestone of Charles Albert Cobbald*

We should also remember those killed on the German side but, unsurprisingly, none are known in this cemetery. However, two eminent men who served with enemy forces but later

## Caring for God's Earth *by Martin Boyle*

In October, the diocese of Ely arranged a meeting in Cambridge entitled "Caring for God's Earth: advice and guidance on how to make churches and churchyards greener spaces". Some talks on the agenda seemed interesting so I enrolled and went along to see if I could learn anything that might be helpful to our work in the burial ground. The morning talks concentrated on teaching, care of buildings and the use of green energy and other topics which were all interesting but had little bearing on our burial ground as it does not contain a church.

The afternoon session was of more relevance. There was a talk on the care of trees, which did not specifically apply to the Friends but gave helpful advice on responsibilities and safety when working with trees in a cemetery. There was also an excellent talk by a Rebecca Evans from the Norfolk Wild Life Trust on the subject of churchyard conservation. Plenty of good practical advice on encouraging wild life in graveyards but, as I listened, I realised that much of what she said was familiar. She was, in fact, recommending many of the same practices that Rod has been following in the Ascension Burial Ground for years.

In the discussion that followed this talk, one thing I managed their graveyards in the best way to encourage the growth of wild flowers. It appears that only 3% of the wildflower meadows that existed before 1930 have survived today and that churchyards often form a valuable reservoir of many of the species of native meadow flowers. Both Rod and Rebecca Evans recommend not cutting or mowing the grass and other growth until the wild flowers have had a chance to seed. This means that when cutting eventually takes place, there is a mountain of cuttings to dispose of. It is important that these are removed and not left lying on the ground because, as they the nutrients they contain seep back into the soil and help fertilise growth the following year. One of the features of wild meadow flowers is that they flourish much better in lean soil; a product of their origin in ancient meadows that had an annual rotation of both haymaking and heavy grazing over many years. Very different to the heavily fertilised and treated grassland

today that is so damaging not only to the flowers but also to birds, hares, bees and so much other wild life. When I mentioned that we had a problem with both cutting and disposing of our summer growth, I did not get much sympathy from other delegates. Most advice I was given on mowing and scything was impractical and did not take account of our rough ground with hidden gravestones and other obstacles that have already written off one of Rod's mowers. As for the cuttings, it turned out that everybody else's wild life area formed only a small part of a normal grave yard usually with a church at the centre. No problems for them with removal or composting. Nobody else was dealing with a wild life area that includes the entire 1½ acre site we deal with in our burial ground. This only goes to show the importance of our monthly working party in clearing the undergrowth by hand and to emphasise how lucky we are to have Rod with Carl and their vans to shift all our cuttings to rot elsewhere.

The main lesson I take from the day is what a valuable asset we have in the burial ground, and the way it is run, that combines both the religious aspect of a cemetery but also provides such a rich wildlife sanctuary in the middle of fast developing Cambridge. The Friends have a vital role to play in preserving this latter feature of the burial ground as its maintenance passes from the Parish to the local Council.



*Memorial to Wallace Henry Rolph, died of wounds in 1918 and buried in France, here named on the family grave*