

2017 Remembrance day tribute - Kate Fraser

Remembering the sacrifices made by the former pupils of the Royal High School during the conflicts of the twentieth century is still a pivotal part of school life today. Every year, during the week leading up to Remembrance Sunday, the whole school stops to remember. The school community stops to remember the 1026 former pupils who served with the army during the First World War, 300 of whom were wounded, and 182 were killed. The school community stops to remember the 1243 former pupils fought during World War Two of whom 131 were killed.

The week of Remembrance culminates in the formal Memorial Service which all pupils in S5 and S6 attend. This process of Remembrance remains largely unchanged over the years. Former pupils and important members of the school community are invited. The Rector gives an address. The youngest pupil in the school turns a page of the Book of Remembrance. The School Captain, accompanied by the Vice Captains, lay wreaths at the Memorial Door for those who fell in the First World War and at the Stained Glass Windows for those who fell in the Second. Two minutes of silence and reflection are held and the Last Post movingly played. Indeed, the service is largely unchanged from that described in Schola Regia, in November 1920, 'On November 11th, Armistice Day, the School assembled in Hall for the purpose of holding a short service in memory of the fallen. The Rector read out the names of Former Pupils who were killed during the Great War; and after the two minutes silence had been reverently observed, the Reverend Mr Strang gave a short address. He explained for what high principles these men had died, and encouraged the school to preserve by word and deed the noble tradition of sacrifice and service and the important role the school played in the war'.

Every year the Assemblies try and put a face to the names of those who died in the conflicts. The two Victoria Cross winners from the World War One, Philip Bent and Marcus Strachan, are remembered. The History Department of the school recently managed to track down the Grandson of Marcus Strachan, who wrote a very moving letter to the school, highlighting the exceedingly fond memories his grandfather had of his old school.

Over the past three years, as we move through the centenary of the First World War, there has been particular emphasis on this conflict. In 2014 we remembered the first FP to be killed, 3 days into the war, John Maxwell who had joined the Navy two years before the outbreak of war, He was a signal boy on HMS Amphion, and he went down with his ship when it was blown up by a mine off the English coast on the 6th August 1914. The second FP killed in action was Captain Ernest Mure Glanvill, of the Royal Army Medical corps, who was killed in action on the 2nd November. We have remembered those former pupils who were not killed in direct action on the battlefields. One FP, Captain Mitchell was killed in the Quintinshill rail disaster on the 22 May 1915 near Gretna Green.

We have remembered George Watson. He was the second son of a former rector of the Royal High School, Dr. Watson. He left our school in 1915. Here is some of information shared about him from the School magazine. 'Although he was much too young for the army, he was so anxious to serve that nothing could prevent him. In the beginning of July 1916 he went out to France and volunteered for work with a tunneling company of the Royal Engineers, and it was while he was working with them that he was shot dead by a sniper on the 10th September'.

We have remembered George MacRae, who was a great athlete and played in the first 15. A former school captain, Sydney Riddell also fell. He was very good at maths and played cricket and football as did George Matheson, a former editor of the school magazine. All three pupils have formed part of the Remembrance Assembly over the past few years.

As we approach 2018 we will be remembering the last Royal High School pupil to die in action during the First World War, Private Oliver. He died in September 1918, only two months before the war ended. When he was at school he was keen on all sport and played football and cricket. He won two silver cups at the school games and was described as always being 'a thoroughly clean sportsman'.

Schola Regia has formed the basis of the research for the Assemblies, packed as it is with letters from the trenches, and sadly, memorial notices. It tells of boys in the school putting together parcels and packages to send off to the FPs on the Front Lines, including updates of the progress of the school's rugby teams – sharing the delight when they beat the likes of Watsons and Heriots.

Every year the History department is involved with a trip to the Battlefields of Flanders, which culminates in a very moving and poignant ceremony at Tyne Cot. Current members of the school community gather in front of the memorial to Philip Bent, to pay their respects to a former pupil who lost his life during the First World War inspiring and leading those around him, receiving the highest award for Bravery. Our current school community is ensuring that the Greek inscription above the Memorial Door, 'They died but did not die' holds true. They are not forgotten.



2017 Battlefields trip - Tyne Cot, Belgium