
THE WIPERS TIMES

Newsletter of The Royal British Legion Brussels Branch



Welcome to the new issue of the Wipers Times. It largely focuses on the end of the Second World War in Europe when millions of people rejoiced in the news that Germany had surrendered and that the war that had cost so many lives and caused huge suffering and privations to entire populations was finally over.

In villages, towns and cities all over Europe and across the world, people celebrated Victory with street parties, dancing and singing.

However, the war was still raging in other parts of the world, and before peace returned and people could finally begin to rebuild their lives, many more would suffer and die.

Articles look at life in Britain and occupied Belgium, where rationing was introduced to support the war effort and coupons needed to purchase essential goods like food and clothes.

We are especially grateful to Colin Puplett for his substantial and entertaining contribution. He was five years old when his father was called up for duty. The first part of Colin's wartime memories provide a glimpse into the past and help us understand what it was like for a child to grow up in wartime Britain.

We have reports on the commemorations that took place over the summer including at Evere Cemetery where our distinguished branch member Count Henri d'Oultremont was presented with a much-deserved certificate of appreciation.

Other reports cover this year's annual commemorations of the Battle of Mons that were held at different locations including St Symphorien cemetery, where the first and last British casualties of the war were laid to rest; the annual commemorations to celebrate the Liberation of Brussels; and the annual ceremony held at Parc des Muses in Molenbeek to pay tribute to the Brigade Piron.

Jean-François Husson reports on a recent visit to Westerham cemetery near Sevenoaks, Kent, where he paid his respects to the Belgian soldiers buried there.

Dennis Abbott reports on the 81st Tank ceremony to commemorate the Liberation of Antwerp.

The newsletter coordinators wish to offer their sincerest thanks to the many branch members who contributed to this richly illustrated issue.

Michael Whitburn & Scott Wilson, Newsletter coordinators







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Contributions

If you wish to make a suggestion or propose an article for the next **Wipers Times**, please send an email to Michael Whitburn (michael.whitburn@vub.be) and Scott Wilson (scofranwil@hotmail.com).

Website and social media

-  Bookmark our **website**: <http://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels>
-  Join us on **Facebook** [Royal British Legion Brussels](#)
-  Follow us on **X** [@RoyalBrussels](#)
-  Follow us on **Bluesky Social** [@rblbrussels](#)
-  Watch our videos on **YouTube** [@royalbritishlegionbrussels](#)
-  See our photographs on **Instagram** [royalbritishlegion.bxl](#)

Back issues

Back issues of the **Wipers Times** filled with news and stories relevant to our branch can be downloaded from the website.

A word from the Chair



Dear friends,

I hope that you all had a great summer break, even if it went by a little too quickly.

The rentrée is always a busy time for the branch as members take part in commemorations to mark the anniversary of the Liberation of Belgium by the Allies in 1944.

Alain Brogniez, our Facebook coordinator, recently posted some wonderful original Movietone news footage by cameraman Ken Gordon showing the wild scenes of [jubilation in Brussels](#) after the arrival of the Welsh Guards and Piron Brigade. It's pandemonium. In one clip, a woman is trying to do the can-can and gets in the way of a chap burning an enemy flag (3:53). He isn't happy and I daren't lip-read the ensuing exchange!

The plummy-voiced commentator, Lionel Gamlin, confidently predicts that the "welcome to the troops is something that will never be forgotten".

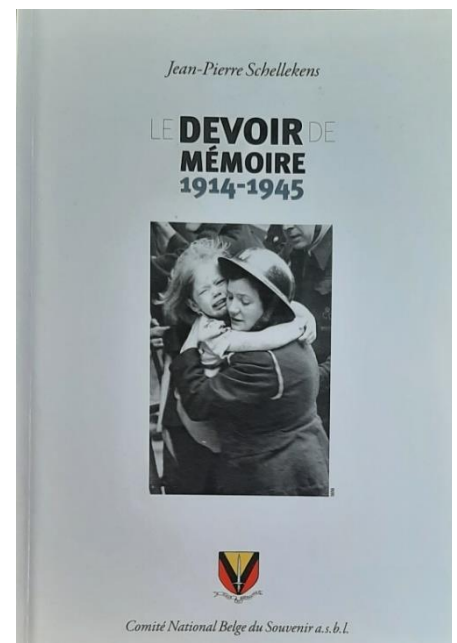
While the numbers who remember the heady events first-hand continues to dwindle, the liberation – and the sacrifices it took – have indeed never been forgotten in Belgium.

Throughout the year we receive emails from members and friends about ceremonies all over the country. We include them in our [branch calendar](#). Servio-Belgium, the umbrella group for veterans and patriotic associations, also has a comprehensive list on its [website](#).

I was saddened to learn of the death of our good friend and former branch member Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Pierre Schellekens of the Belgian Air Force Reserve, who passed away in Brussels on 1 September.

Jean-Pierre, who would have been 90 in November, was President of the Belgian National Remembrance Committee (Comité National Belge du Souvenir/Het Belgisch Nationaal Herdenkingscomité) and a gentleman of the old school.

Very well-read and much travelled during his professional career, he worked tirelessly to honour the Fallen. I have been re-reading his 2021 book 'Le devoir de mémoire: 1914-1945', which not only explains why remembrance still matters but also speaks volumes about the personal values he held so dear.



Cover of Le Devoir de Mémoire by Jean-Pierre Schellekens

Jean-Pierre had vivid childhood memories of the liberation of Antwerp, when he lived in the city. I was privileged that he recently shared them with me for our [branch history](#) (see section under September 1944 and obituary in the newsletter).

Our Vice-Chair, Jean-Pierre Pede, also recalls a remarkable project that his namesake spearheaded during the centenary of the First World War: to read out the names of fallen soldiers and civilians from all the nations involved in the conflict. Some 12,000 names were read at the first ceremony which lasted the entire day.

Jean-Pierre Schellekens was in my thoughts when I attended the annual RBL Tank Ceremony in Antwerp on 6 September. The service takes place on Jan Van Rijswijcklaan, the very street where he lived as a child and witnessed the arrival of the 11th British Armoured Division.

It was my first visit to the memorial and I must tip my hat to Chair Sid Wilkins and our friends in Antwerp for their superb organisation – and pulling power. VIPs at the event included the Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever, UK Ambassador Anne Sherriff, Mayor Els van Doesburg and the National President of the RBL, Vice Admiral Paul Bennett CB OBE. Several branch Chairs from Britain were also in attendance and we laid the RBL wreath together with Vice Admiral Bennett.

Especially memorable was an intervention by Baroness Regina Sluszný, who talked of her experience as a ‘hidden child’ in the war. A non-Jewish couple, Charel and Anna, risked their lives to take her in at their Hemiksem home for over three years. Her Orthodox parents and brothers meanwhile constantly moved from place to place. Amazingly, they avoided the round-ups. For Regina, who was six when she was reunited with her parents after the liberation, it meant adapting to a family she no longer knew and who spoke a different language. “It was very difficult, especially for my brothers,” she said.

We are so lucky to have such testimonies from the people who lived them.

The occupying forces in Belgium deported nearly 25,000 Jews, including 4,259 children, to extermination camps during the war.

During the summer I visited the Somme with Laura, my other half, and my French in-laws. I’ve been quite a few times over the years, but there’s always something new to see. We visited sites associated with the French including the remains of trenches and shell holes at Soyecourt Wood and the last resting place of Prince Louis Murat, a great-great nephew of Napoleon and great-great grandson of Marshal Ney. Murat was killed aged 19 near the village of Lihons and, unusually, his grave still stands exactly where he fell.

The undoubted highlight of our trip was a visit to the Australian National Memorial and [Sir John Monash Centre](#) at Villers-Bretonneux. Opened in 2018, the latter features 400 screens showing archive and re-created footage to illustrate soldiers’ lives on the frontline and the rear. There are no written panels – you listen to everything via an app on headphones

(available at low cost if, like me, you forget to bring them). The café and shop are pretty good, too.

NB: our branch battlefields tour coordinator Steve Grant is planning a new programme. We'll let you know more as soon as the dates are confirmed. Please support the tours if you can.

Many of us are fans of military museums but few, I suspect, have been to quite as many as Rainer Hiltermann, a Brussels branch member for more than 20 years. He visited his 98th military museum in Britain over the summer.

Would you be interested in joining the Brussels branch committee? We are currently looking to fill the roles of Treasurer and Poppy Appeal Coordinator. You don't need to be an expert as training will be given in both cases. If you'd like to know more, please contact Brussels.Chair@rbl.community.

There is much to look forward to in the coming weeks, not least the launch of the Poppy Appeal, which will be hosted in Brussels by the UK Ambassador on 23 October, and our Remembrance Sunday service at Heverlee on 9 November. The latter is always a special occasion so do please make a note of the date in your agenda. More details will follow.

Vietnam veteran and branch member Colonel Bill Bache, who runs the Brussels Battles & Books Club, is organising two unmissable talks at the Fraternelle des Agents Parachutistes with Marc Audrit, author of 'The Belgian RAF Pilot Who Defied the Gestapo' (10 October), and historian Dr Helen Fry, author of 'The White Lady' (14 October). See [branch calendar](#) for more details.

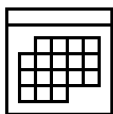
In the meantime, enjoy another fabulous newsletter, put together by Michael Whitburn and Scott Wilson.

Best wishes to you all,

Dennis

Brussels.Chair@rbl.community

Dates for the diary



Check the calendar on the website for new and changed events.

<https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/calendar/>

October	
3 October	First Friday of the Month social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
10 October	Book talk: 'The Belgian RAF Pilot Who Defied the Gestapo' by Marc Audrit. The incredible story of WW2 hero Jean de Selys Longchamps is now out in English. Fraternelle des Agents Parachutistes (Rue du Châtelain 46, 1050 Ixelles), from 18.00. The book signing will take place before the talk begins.
14 October	Book talk: The White Lady by Dr Helen Fry. The British historian presents her new book about intelligence networks in Belgium during WW1 and WW2. Fraternelle des Agents Parachutistes (address above). Registration is mandatory: evenementiel.fraternelle@gmail.com
23 October	Launch of 2025 Poppy Appeal, British Embassy Residence, Brussels (by invitation only)
November	
7 November	First Friday of the Month social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
9 November	Remembrance Sunday service, Heverlee CWGC cemetery
9 November	Remembrance Sunday service, Namur Belgrade cemetery
December	
5 December	First Friday of the Month social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren

Subscriptions reminder

Every single member is critical in helping us to support generations of the Armed Forces community and their families.

By renewing your membership to the Royal British Legion we can continue to provide our services and support.

Your Royal British Legion subscription renewal is due on:

- 1 October for those who joined before 2015;
- The anniversary of your joining date in other cases (the expiry date is shown on your membership card).

The renewal payment can be made from 30 days before the due date and up to 3 months after it. Failure to renew during this period can result in the loss of your membership. Payments outside this period are considered as a donation to the Poppy Appeal.

Amount due: 30€/year (includes 4€ administration fee) or £23.42 (includes £3.42 administration fee).

Please pay your renewal fee to the Brussels Branch bank account:

- IBAN: BE89 2100 1555 2485
- Payee: RBL Treasurer

In the *communication* field please add:

- Your Membership N°XXXXXX
- Your Name
- Renewal 2025-2026.

If you have a UK bank account, you can pay via direct debit, credit or debit card, and other means. Full details are available [here](#).

Thank you for your ongoing support.

Rhoda Grant, *Membership Secretary*



Did you know that you can be a member of up to four branches? If you are already a member of another branch and would like, in addition, to join the Brussels Branch, please get in touch with our Membership Secretary.

The end of the war in Europe and VE Day Celebrations

Author: Michael Whitburn

Just over 80 years ago, on 7 May 1945, the formal act of military surrender was signed by Germany, ending the war in Europe. The next day celebrations broke out all over the world to mark Victory in Europe or VE Day.

In Britain, PM Winston Churchill marked the occasion by declaring 8 May a public holiday.

People held parties, danced and sang in the streets. Huge crowds gathered in London, both on Whitehall to hear Churchill speak and outside Buckingham Palace where King George VI and the Royal Family appeared on the balcony.

There were street parties – large and small – all over Britain, in villages, towns and cities like those in Birmingham (*left*) and Llandudno (*right*). The little blonde girl on the far right (aged four at the time) is none other than Brussels branch Chair Dennis Abbott's mum, who still lives in the same street.



<https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/nostalgia/gallery/vj-day-9849705>

For many though, celebrations were bitter-sweet.

Amidst the street parties and rejoicing, many people were mourning the death of relatives and friends. Families were worried about those still engaged in combat in East Asia or who had not yet returned from their service or were in captivity, like Cpl George Puplett, the father of long-standing branch member Colin Puplett whose wartime memories you can read in this issue of the Newsletter.

For many of the widows that the war had produced, the noise and jubilation as people celebrated VE Day was too much to bear and not something they could take part in.

There was also an air of anti-climax. The hardships of the war years had taken their toll on many people and left them with little energy for rejoicing.

In Britain, the strain of air raids, the strictures of wartime life and the impact of rationing all left their mark on a weary population who knew there were more difficulties yet to endure.

The final months of the war in the Pacific saw heavy casualties on both sides but ultimately ended in victory for the Allies. Japan's leaders agreed to surrender on 14 August after two atomic bombs had been dropped on the country, and the surrender was signed on 2 September.

Although many things slowly began to return to normal, it took time to rebuild and shortages were still felt; clothes rationing lasted until 1949 and food rationing remained in place until 1954.

Peace brought its own problems. The huge economic cost of the war resulted in post-war austerity in a practically bankrupt Britain and the far-reaching political effects of the conflict ranged from the fall of the British Empire to the onset of the Cold War.

Adapted from <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/10-photos-of-ve-day-celebrations>

Rationing in Britain during and after the war

Author: Michael Whitburn

In January 1940, the British government introduced food rationing. The scheme was designed to ensure fair shares for all at a time of national shortage.

The onset of rationing was a direct response to the threats posed by war. German U-boats prowling the Atlantic made it perilous for merchant ships to bring food to Britain. More than 2,500 ships carrying supplies were sunk with the loss of 30,000 British merchant seamen.

Rationing began with bacon, butter and sugar, before quickly expanding to include meat, cheese, eggs, milk and a variety of other staples. Each person was issued a ration book and the contents of that book determined what they could buy. For instance, a typical weekly ration for an adult might include four ounces of bacon, two ounces of butter and eight ounces of sugar. Such meagre portions forced cooks to be inventive, stretching ingredients as far as possible and finding creative substitutes for items that were unavailable.

The impact on daily meals was immediate and profound. Gone were the days of lavish Sunday roasts and hearty full English breakfasts. Instead, meals became simpler, often centred around vegetables, which were more readily available. The scarcity of meat led to an increased reliance on plant-based meals, a shift that would influence British cooking long after the war ended.

In the spirit of “make do and mend”, British cooks developed inventive recipes during the war, many of which have since become iconic symbols of the era.

Among these, Woolton Pie stands out as perhaps the most famous (recipe available online).

Named after Frederick Marquis, 1st Earl of Woolton, who was the Minister of Food during much of the war, Woolton Pie was a vegetable pie designed to be nutritious and filling while using the limited ingredients available. The pie typically included potatoes, carrots, turnips, and swedes, all diced and cooked with a thick vegetable stock, then topped with a crust made from wholemeal flour and margarine. It was a dish that could be adapted to whatever vegetables were at hand.

<https://inostalgia.co.uk/wartime/history-wartime-rationing/>

The Ministry of Food was responsible for overseeing rationing.

Every man, woman and child was given a ration book with coupons. These were required before rationed goods could be purchased.

Basic foodstuffs such as sugar, meat, fats, bacon and cheese were directly rationed by an allowance of coupons. Housewives had to register with particular retailers.



Queuing outside a greengrocer in Wood Green, North London in 1945. © IWM D 25035

Unlike today, shopping during the war involved visiting individual shops – the butcher, greengrocer or baker – separately.

Other items such as tinned goods, dried fruit, cereals and biscuits were rationed using a points system. The number of points allocated changed according to availability and consumer demand.

Priority allowances of milk and eggs were given to those most in need, including children and expectant mothers.

As shortages increased, long queues became a regular sight. It was common for someone to reach the front of a long queue, only to find that the item they had been waiting for had just run out.

Not all foods were rationed. Fruit and vegetables were never rationed but were often in short supply, especially tomatoes, onions and fruit shipped from overseas.

The government encouraged people to grow vegetables in their own gardens and allotments. Many public parks were also used for this purpose. The scheme became better known as 'Dig For Victory'.

Posters such as the one on the right, produced in 1942, encouraged people to grow their own vegetables.

Certain key commodities were also rationed – petrol in 1939, clothes in June 1941 and soap in February 1942. The end of the war did not mark the end of rationing. Bread, which was never rationed during wartime, was put on the ration in July 1946.

It was not until the early 1950s that most commodities came 'off the ration'. Meat was the last item to be de-rationed and food rationing ended completely in 1954.

One way to get rationed items without coupons, usually at greatly inflated prices, was on the black market. Shopkeepers sometimes kept special supplies 'behind the counter', and 'spivs' – petty criminals – traded in goods often obtained by dubious means. By March 1941, 2,300 people had been prosecuted and severely penalised for fraud and dishonesty.

See <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-rationing-in-the-second-world-war> for more.



© IWM Art.PST 2893

Food rationing in occupied Belgium during WWII

Author: Michael Whitburn

As a result of the German invasion on 10 May 1940 and the British naval blockade, the situation rapidly became difficult for Belgium. Importing goods from overseas was now impossible. Forced to survive on its own food production, Belgium introduced rationing.

The context was extremely chaotic: the Belgian army was on the march to face the German offensive; a huge flow of refugees was crossing the country; and a number of wealthy people were buying up stocks of food. The government, along with many administrative services, retreated to France. Ration stamps were required to purchase most essential and even many non-essential products such as shoes and bicycle tyres.

The first rationing table did not create too many problems: every 30 days, each person was entitled to purchase 600 g of coffee, 600 g of salt, 900 g of sugar, 15 kg of potatoes, 2,250 kg of edible fats (cheese, milk, meat), and 450 g of bread per day.

Stocks were still fairly high and many food products could be purchased without stamps. After a few months, however, the situation changed: the population had to make do with 225 g of bread, between 20 and 35 g of meat per day (1 kg per month) and 300 to 500 g of potatoes per day (9-15 kg per month).

Alternative channels of food supply

There were several alternative channels: one option was to seek charitable assistance, such as offered by *Secours d'hiver*, but this solution was reserved for the most needy.

Those who were not eligible for this assistance could always turn to the black market.

The black market created social tensions between rich and poor. Prices were very high and only the rich could maintain their pre-war eating habits. The wealthiest also had their own traffickers, who would buy the food and deliver it to their homes. The winners were of course the sellers and traders who profited from the black market and formed a group of *nouveaux riches*. The police confiscated illegal goods and sometimes re-sold them to third parties on the black market. German soldiers and authorities were also regular buyers.

The Rue des Radis in Brussels has long since disappeared. During the German occupation, it was situated in the popular Marolles district and became the focal point of the black market.

Black market prices fluctuated depending on the levels of rationing, the season, police raids and unforeseen events. In 1942, for example, as a result of a massive catch, the price of herring fell so sharply that it became cheaper to buy the fish at the official rate.

The Rue des Radis was always very busy. Narrow streets and passageways between houses allowed the *smokkeleirs* (Brussels dialect for smugglers) to make a quick getaway and disappear at the slightest whiff of danger.

As in Britain, green spaces, including public parks, were transformed into allotments.

Below, the lawn of the Parc du 50-naire being turned into a vegetable patch by local residents.



©CEGESOMA

Photo published in La Libre Belgique, 01-09-2014 to illustrate an article entitled Bruxelles se nourrit comme elle peut. <https://www.lalibre.be/planete/2014/09/01/en-1940-bruxelles-se-nourrit-comme-elle-peut-N2MR6ZYTJA6PBSH2MVBDI37PA/>

Farmers were required to deliver a certain amount of their production to the state. What they did not have to hand over would easily end up on the black market. Furthermore, official purchasing prices were often low, so farmers preferred to sell their produce directly to the population.

Adults (women especially) and children travelled to the countryside every day, often by tram, and returned loaded with food.

Theft of fruit and vegetables rose, as did armed robberies. Criminals operated mainly in Wallonia, targeting farms, dairy farms, bakeries, town halls (for ration stamps) and cash transports, causing unrest and fear among the rural population.

Adapted from: <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/belgique-en-guerre/articles/ravitaillement-et-penuries-alimentaires.html> (translated from French with the help of DeepL.com and checked by Michael Whitburn) and <https://www.history.co.uk/article/how-brits-utilised-allotments-during-two-world-wars-the-era-of-growing-your-own>

Wartime memories of a child, part 1

Author: Colin Puplett

My father was a member of the Territorial Army before WW2 and was immediately called up for full-time service. He was initially stationed near a village in Wiltshire. For a short time, my mother rented a room in the house of an elderly couple in a nearby village. My brother Alan and I both went to the village nursery school. Our teacher was Miss Gates. I remember she had very protruding front teeth. She treated us very well, but our 'funny' London accents made other children laugh.



Colin Puplett, aged 5

I remember things got rather heated at the house we were staying at, when I repeated to the elderly couple what my mother had said about the lady's cooking. Fortunately, my father's unit was sent to North-East Africa where the British Army was fighting the Italians. So, we returned to our home in Eltham in South-East London.

The house in Eltham, where we spent the war years, was the second we had lived in. Our first house, together with my father's car, had been destroyed by a large bomb. Luckily, we were not at home when it happened. I was very young at the time and have no recollection of the event, though I do remember a photo of my brother and me standing outside the house.

Some months after our return to London a telegram was delivered to my mother informing her that my father was 'missing in action' and believed to have been taken prisoner by the Italians. The sight of my mother weeping at the news has always stuck in my memory. We would not see my father until the end of the war. We would however hear of his experiences via the Red Cross. My mother kept all his letters, and I still have them.

As the war progressed, the bombing increased, and the effects of rationing became more severe. Mum had an elderly relative who lived in Abingdon, Oxfordshire. She was a kind-hearted soul and had sent us a parcel of food including a few bread rolls. It had taken many days for the parcel to arrive and, as one can imagine, the rolls were as hard as rocks, though once they had been soaked in water, they were added to the chicken feed.

To supplement daily rations, we kept chickens, rabbits, ducks and geese in our back garden. This was quite common at the time, and it encouraged trading and swapping between neighbours.

To make sure we had a constant supply of eggs, my mother would buy day-old chicks which we had to keep indoors out of the cold until they were old enough to join the chickens in the garden.

The food parcel we had received had encouraged my mother to keep in close touch with our relative in Abingdon and so, at some point, my mother arranged for us, together with Big

Nan, my mother's mother, to travel to Abingdon and stay there. The difference in character between Little Nan (Dad's mother) and Big Nan was as big as their difference in size.

Big Nan was (very) large and mostly wore black clothes. She had dark sunken eyes and had hairy warts on her face. Her character matched her appearance – and that was enough to scare the wits out of any child.

The trip to Abingdon was a real adventure. We started our journey in Eltham where the Southern Railway had electric trains for passengers only. When we got to London, we took the amazing underground train and then, best of all, we changed to steam-engine passenger trains. The last train we took was a very special steam engine, with just two carriages with a single door in the middle. It ran into Abingdon on a three-kilometre branch line from the main line to Oxford. I have vivid memories of that journey. To me it was like something out of a children's adventure story.

Though the house we stayed at in Abingdon was in the countryside, it was not far from an American bomber airfield, and the noise of the massive multi-engine bombers could be clearly heard. Also, the cafes in Abingdon were often crowded with American airmen in their very stylish uniforms; many of them drank something they called "milk and dash" (hot milk with a little coffee).

There was also an animal market in the centre of the town. For a city child to see cows, bulls, horses, sheep and pigs close-up, and to hear the animated voice of the auctioneer, was simply thrilling.

To me, Little Nan was a major figure during my wartime days. It seemed there was nothing she could not do, particularly around the house and especially in the kitchen. Pulling a goose or a turkey (removing their intestines) was one of her skills, and I can still remember how she did it. She was very kind to both my elder brother and me and gave us three pence a week pocket money, which in those days was enough to buy quite a few goodies.

One day, when walking to Nan's house we noticed a train had stopped just before a bridge, about 50 metres from Nan's house. We then heard that a landmine had fallen on a house a short distance away from the bridge and that all trains would remain at a standstill until the bomb was defused. Landmines were very large and came down attached to small parachutes.

Talking about mines, I clearly remember that we were all called into the main hall of our school to watch a film to warn us about small anti-personnel mines called 'butterfly bombs'. They were about the size of small oranges and were dropped from planes in large numbers. They had curved side plates which spread out butterfly-like as they fell to reduce the speed of impact. We were warned never ever to touch them, but I never actually saw any.

Something I do remember about wartime nights was the effect of blackout regulations that prohibited all visible light from outside a building. This was enforced locally by the Air Raid Warden, who would knock loudly on your door if you did not comply. Blackout meant there were no street lights, and I remember walking home one night with my mother during a real "pea-souper" (dense fog).

My mother had poor eyesight and was completely lost. It was thanks to my own eyesight and the fact that I was of course much closer to the ground than my mother and could see the pavement that we finally got home safely. Pea-soupers were caused by the great many coal and coke fires that burnt in homes for heating and cooking purposes, and the damp autumn weather conditions.

Even as age eats away at our memories, some things will always stay with us.

There will be more of Colin's memories of a child in upcoming issues of the Wipers Times.



Colin with his wife, Brenda

Commemoration at Evere Cemetery, 21 June

Author: Dennis Abbott; Photos: Viviane Pede



The branch paid a special tribute at its summer commemoration in Evere to one of its most distinguished members, [Count Henri d'Oultremont](#), who served in the famous Piron Brigade during World War II.

President Zoe White presented Count Henri with a richly deserved certificate of appreciation at the close of the ceremony held at Brussels Town Cemetery.

Despite blazing temperatures on the day, the 100-year-old veteran was on his feet for more than an hour and laid a wreath on behalf of the branch.

What an inspiration for us all!



Colin Puplett (*left*), former chair of the welfare committee, gave a fascinating talk on his childhood memories of VE Day in 1945 (see separate article above) and the Military Wives Choir sang beautifully.

In the absence of our regular Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux, deputies Charlie Wilson and Faith Wittevrongel (*right*), looking very smart in their scout uniforms, stepped up to make their debut and did a wonderful job.

A sizeable group from the Sonian Explorer Scouts and 1st Brussels British Scouts also took part in the Act of Remembrance, with the Explorers laying a wreath and reading "A Soldier's Elegy", written by the group's 2023 Duke of Edinburgh International Award Silver Team.



Group Captain John Dickson, UK Defence Attaché for Belgium and Luxembourg, represented the British Embassy.

Branch Vice-Chair Jean-Pierre Pede (*below*) gave the traditional reading of the Names of the Fallen.



Following the service, conducted by the Branch Chaplain, the Revd John Wilkinson, Phil Hyde led a tribute at the grave of Major Bob Mélot MC, a remarkable Belgian who served with the British Special Air Service during World War II.

Commemoration of the Battle of Mons on 22 August

Author Michael Whitburn

Background

Within days of disembarking in France in 1914, the hurriedly organised British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 70,000 men engaged the Germans near the Mons Canal in an attempt to protect the left flank of the retreating French army.

On 23 August 1914, outnumbered two to one and described by a German general as “a contemptible little army”, the British fought their first battle on European soil since Waterloo.

For 48 hours the ‘Contemptibles’ held the line, losing 1,600 men but inflicting even heavier casualties on the enemy. Defeat however was inevitable and the BEF was forced to fall back after the Germans crossed the canal. The BEF then proceeded to march from near Mons to near Paris in just two weeks.

Annual tribute

On 22 August, the city commemorated the 111th anniversary of the Battle of Mons and paid its annual tribute to the British soldiers who died in the fighting of August 1914.



The commemorations began to the sound of the bagpipes.



Some thirty or forty people representing the city, SHAPE, various embassies, patriotic associations and of course the RBL Brussels branch – this year represented by Jean-François Husson and Michael Whitburn – assembled at the Grand Place, under the porch of the City Hall.



A commemorative plaque pays tribute to the soldiers of the 5th Irish Lancers who fell during the two battles of Mons in August 1914 and November 1918. Jean-François Husson laid a poppy wreath on behalf of Brussels branch (*left*).

From the Grand Place, the participants were taken in two coaches chartered by the city of Mons to different commemorative sites.

The first of these sites was the Place des Martyrs, where a commemorative plaque perpetuates the memory of the five civilians who lost their lives on 23 August 1914 when they were used as human shields by the advancing German troops.

Damien Pirmez, head of protocol of the city of Mons, read out the names of the victims (*below, left*).



From the Place des Martyrs we were taken to the railway bridge at Nimy, on the outskirts of Mons.

The men of the British Expeditionary Force were dug in along the Mons-Condé canal and the 4th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, a regular army battalion largely recruited in and around London, were defending two bridges over the canal.

There were not sufficient explosives to blow the bridges, so their right flank was on a swing bridge and their left on a railway bridge.



Memorial To 4th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, Nimy

Some of the fiercest fighting of the Battle of Mons took place at the Nimy railway bridge, where the first Victoria Crosses were awarded to two British machine-gunners of the 4th Royal Fusiliers, who covered the retreat until they were too badly wounded to continue.

One was Irish-born Lieutenant Maurice Dease who, although already wounded, took over one of the battalion's two machine guns to halt the German offensive. He was wounded again and died the next day. The second award was to Private Sidney Godley. Despite being wounded in the head and back, he took over the other gun and tenaciously fought off the enemy attack, and by doing so gained vital time to allow the withdrawal of the 4th Royal Fusiliers.



The commemorative plaque along the towpath to the railway bridge at Nimy bears the following inscription:

To the glorious memory of the Officers, NCO and men of the 4th BN Royal Fusiliers who held this sector of the British Front in the defence of the town of Mons. August 23/8/14. This memorial marks the M.G. position where the first V.C.'s awarded during the war 14-18 were gained by Lt M.J. DEASE and Pte S.F. GODLEY.

Our next stop was further along the canal, at Obourg, where the first shots in the Battle of Mons were fired.



On 21 August 1914, a bicycle reconnaissance team from the 4th Battalion Middlesex Regiment encountered a German unit near Obourg, just north of the Mons-Condé Canal. One of the cyclists, Private John Parr, was shot by German sniper and killed, becoming the first British fatality of the war.

Participants gathered to pay their respects where a plaque on the wall of the station in Obourg bears the following inscription:

On 23 August 1914, at eight o'clock in the morning, near this spot, the 4th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment fired the first shots in the Battle of Mons.

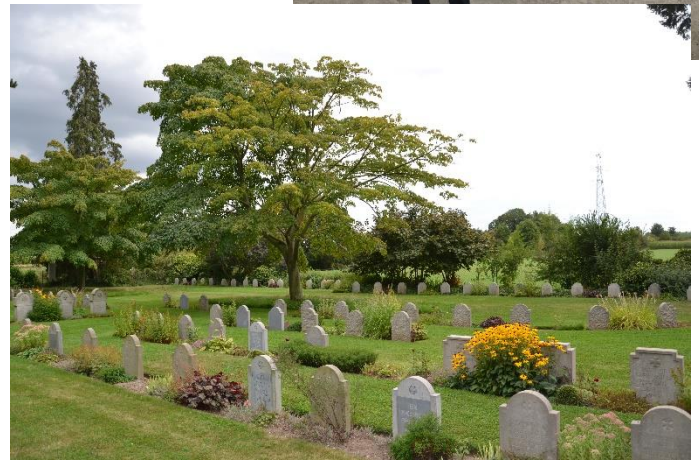
During the course of the morning of 23 August, the Middlesex Regiment was heavily engaged before withdrawing in the early afternoon, by which time 15 officers and 353 other ranks had either been killed, wounded or were missing in action.



All aboard and arrival at St Symphorien cemetery



St Symphorien cemetery is unusual in as much as it is divided into British and German sections symbolising peace and reconciliation after the horrors of WWI.



Wreaths were laid at the foot of the Monument (*right*) that pays tribute to the Fallen of both sides, British and German. The monument bears the following inscription in German:

IN DEN KÄMPFEN BEI MONS GEFALLENEN DEUTSCHEN UND ENGLISCHEN SOLDATEN

(To the German and English soldiers who died on the battlefield near Mons)



At St Symphorien, lie the remains of the first and last British casualties of the war.

The first was 20-year-old Private John Parr of the Middlesex Regiment (*below left*).

The last was Private George Ellison of the Royal Irish Lancers (*below right*). He was killed by a German machine-gun one hour and a half before the Armistice was signalled.

From St Symphorien cemetery to our final destination: the crossroads of La Bascule.



At this crossroads, a monumental Celtic cross (*right*) was inaugurated on 11 November 1923 to commemorate the participation of the Irish unit that defended this location.

Jean-François (*below*) laid a wreath on behalf of the branch.



Opposite the Cross, on the other side of the crossroads, is the British Empire Memorial (*below*) dedicated to the two battles of Mons, in 1914 and 1918. It was originally inaugurated in 1952 by King Baudouin and Field Marshal the Earl Alexander of Tunis at the parc du Beffroi, before being moved to its present location at La Bascule and re-dedicated in August 1986.

It bears the inscription:

Here the forces of the British Empire fought their first and last battle in the 14-18 war. On 23rd and 24th August 1914, the British Expeditionary Force commanded by Sir John FRENCH with supreme courage held the advance of overwhelmingly superior German Forces. On Armistice Day 1918, after 60 hours of heavy fighting, Canadian divisions entered Mons. British and Canadian Regiments have erected this tablet to the Glory of God and Commemorate these events.





For more information see: https://musees-expos.mons.be/fr/nos-lieux/mons-memorial-museum/parcours-de-memoire/lieux-de-memoire/guide-des-champs-de-bataille-14-18/985_guide_champs_bataille_web_final.pdf and <https://www.tracesofwar.com/sights/102965/Irish-Memorial-Mons.htm>

At the end of a long but rewarding day of commemorations, participants were invited to attend a reception organised by the city of Mons at the Mons Memorial Museum. There were speeches followed by drinks and sandwiches.



Corentin Rousman, Curator of the Mons Memorial Museum, and Jean-François Husson holding the Poppy Appeal collection tin with donations from museum visitors.

Belgian graves in the UK

Author: Jean-François Husson

I recently went to Westerham in Kent to pay my respects to the Belgian soldiers that are buried there and to thank retired [Major General Ewan Carmichael](#) for his commitment in preserving the memory of those who gave their lives for their country. While in England, I also visited the military cemetery at Shorncliffe, near Folkestone.

During the First World War, many wounded Belgian soldiers were evacuated to Britain for treatment. Some recovered, but many did not.

Shorncliffe Monument

The Monument at Shorncliffe Military Cemetery and others like it were paid for by grateful Belgian families to thank the British people for taking care of their loved ones.



Shorncliffe Military Cemetery
<https://www.nzwargraves.org.nz/cemeteries/shorncliffe-military-cemetery>

Two Belgian soldiers, Vital Sterckx and René Thioux, are buried at Westerham cemetery in the churchyard of St Mary's Church, a few hundred yards from General James Wolfe's Quebec House.

Vital Sterckx of the 13th Régiment de Ligne died on 16 October 1914. He was buried alongside other WW1 casualties.

René Thioux of the Chasseurs à pied died on 1 November 1918. His gravestone had disappeared over the years and his exact resting place was unknown.

Thanks to the intensive research of Ewan Carmichael, the former Director of the Army Medical Services, the grave's location was pinpointed.

A new military headstone was shipped to Westerham and placed with the help of the CWGC colleagues. The new gravestone was officially inaugurated earlier this year with the participation of the local branch of the Royal British Legion.

I regularly highlight Gen Carmichael's work in my speeches at Remembrance Sunday events in Namur.



*Jean-François Husson and Ewan Carmichael at the graves of
Vital Sterckx and René Thioux*

Welsh Guards return for anniversary of the Liberation of Brussels, 3 September

Author: Dennis Abbott

The Welsh Guards were back in Brussels on 3 September, 81 years after they liberated the city in World War II, and they came with a special gift – a miniature, hand-made version of their ceremonial uniform, complete with scarlet jacket embroidered with gold lace, white belt and bearskin cap for the Manneken Pis.

The new uniform replaces the one presented to the city by Regimental Sergeant Major Ivor Roberts in 1945.

Branch members Jean-Pierre Pede, Ethel Pede-Moffat, Eleanor Vaughan, Rob Vaughan, Alain Brogniez, Mika-John Southworth and the Chair attended the presentation at the City Hall.

VIPs present included the UK Ambassador Anne Sherriff (*right*), with Defence Attaché Gp Capt John Dickson and Welsh Guards Regimental Adjutant Lt Col Guy Bartle-Jones. Geoffroy Coomans de Brachène, Member of the Brussels Parliament, is pictured with RSM Christopher Greaves (*below*).



A Guards band led a procession from the city hall to the Manneken Pis statue for the grand unveiling which attracted a large crowd of onlookers. The band played the British, Welsh and Belgian national anthems.



The replica Welsh Guards uniform, complete with a miniature sword provided by Pooley Sword, was made by a team led by 1st Battalion Master Tailor Sgt Chris Watson. The tunic buttons are in rows of five (denoting that the Welsh Guards are the fifth regiment of Foot Guards), the bearskin curb-chain created from the links of an officer's spur, and the cap has a green and white plume – the colours of the leek, the Welsh national symbol which is also the emblem of the Regiment.



RSM Greaves commented: "To be able to present this new Welsh Guards uniform to the city of Brussels is a great honour, particularly following my predecessor 80 years on."

Manneken Pis 80 years ago, being presented with his Welsh Guards uniform by Ivor Roberts.

Manneken Pis in his brand-new Welsh Guards uniform.



Lt Col Bartle-Jones, who attended Brussels Branch's 80th anniversary Liberation dinner last year, added: "We are proud of our special connection with Brussels. It's part of our legacy and we want to preserve this."

Earlier, a commemoration took place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Colonne du Congrès.



The Chair laid a wreath on behalf of the branch and Eleanor Vaughan represented the Welsh government. The Ambassador, Defence Attaché, as well as dignitaries from the US, Canada, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and city of Brussels, also left tributes. Our Standard Bearer, immaculate as ever, was Freddy Roiseux.

The British Second Army Guards Armoured Division advanced 140km in one day to liberate Brussels in 1944. Lieutenant (later Captain) John Dent of the 2nd Battalion Welsh Guards commanded the first tank to enter the city on 3 September 1944.



The Welsh Guards were followed the next day by the Brigade Piron, named after its commander, Colonel Jean-Baptiste Piron.

Branch member Kathleen Johnson sent us a photograph taken during the liberation celebrations in Brussels in September 1944. She found it in an album belonging to her father, the branch's long-serving Standard Bearer [Eric Johnson BEM](#). The second lady from the right is her maternal grandma and the second from the left is her auntie, who was dressed in the colours of the Belgian flag (black skirt, yellow blouse and red hat).



Liberation of Brussels and Brigade Piron commemoration

Author: Jean-Pierre Pedé; Photos: Viviane Pedé

On 4 September 2025, Molenbeek St Jean, patron of the Brigade Piron, held its annual commemoration to celebrate the Liberation of Brussels.

The ceremony took place at the Parc of the Muses in the presence of Acting Burgomaster Amet Gjanaj, Colonel BEM Chris Maseure, H.E. Anne Sherriff (UK Ambassador), H.E. Xavier Lapeyre (French Ambassador), and H.E. Jean Louis Till (Ambassador of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg).

The Brigade Piron was represented by Jean-Louis Marichal, Count Henri d'Oultremont, André Liegeois and Colonel BEM Jacques Luyckx.

Andrée Ferrant, Ethel Moffatt, Alain Brogniez, Jack Van Sprang, Rodolphe Lancksweert and Jean-Pierre Pedé represented the RBL Brussels branch. The Standard Bearer was Freddy Roiseux.

The pupils of three schools were also present, including the great-grandson of a veteran of the Piron Brigade.

Below, Count Henri d'Oultremont and on his right, Brigade Piron veteran André Liégeois.



Speeches were delivered by Mr Amet Gjanaj and Col BEM Jacques Luyckx.



Jean-Pierre Pede pronounced the Exhortation.

Flowers and wreathes were laid. Andrée Ferrant laid a wreath on behalf of the RBL Brussels Branch.



The ceremony closed with the national anthems of France, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, the European Hymn and the Belgian national anthem.

81st Tank ceremony – Antwerp

Author: Dennis Abbott; Photos: Eddy Bertels, Dennis Abbott

The 81st Tank ceremony was held on 6 September at the Cromwell Tank Memorial in Jan van Rijswijklaan, Antwerp.

The annual event is hosted by the Antwerp branch of the RBL to commemorate the city's liberation by British forces on 4 September 1944.



top left: Prime Minister Bart De Wever and Mayor of Antwerp Els van Doesburg

top right: RBL National President Vice Admiral Paul Bennett CB OBE (second right) and branch Chairs

left: Baroness Regina Slusznny during her address



bottom: Wreaths in front of the Cromwell Tank

The Battle Dress of RSM Pike, MBE

Author: Alain Brogniez



A few months ago I acquired from a British militaria dealer the battle dress (BD) blouse of the Regimental Sergeant Major of an unidentified regiment of the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC), as is apparent from the yellow/red Arm of Service strips worn on both sleeves (*pictured below*).



It was obvious that putting a name on the RSM of an unidentified RAC regiment was going to require detective skills on my part.

The only clue I had was a red felt disc (a badge backing) worn below the rank badge on the right sleeve (*pictured left*). Unfortunately, the medal ribbons were missing, but with a little help from British fellow collectors, I discovered that the felt disc was in fact the backing of the regimental badge worn by the Warrant Officers of The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (*collar badge pictured right*).



So, all I then had to do was go through the Regimental History, of which I am lucky to own a copy, to find that the RSM I was looking for was a Reginald Edric 'Jack' Pike, and that he was appointed on 14 October 1943 to the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) as a Member of

the Military Division, in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find many more details about Jack's life and military career.

All I knew was that he came from Salisbury and was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Africa Star with the 8th Army Clasp, the Italy Star, and the Defence Medal and War Medal 1939-45.

The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry was still horsed when they were mobilised in August 1939. In January 1940, they sailed to Palestine with the 1st Cavalry Division. They served in Palestine, Syria, North Africa and Iraq.

In January 1941, the horses were replaced by motor vehicles and the RWY were converted to Motorised Infantry. In July 1941, they were transferred to the RAC and received their first tanks.

The Regiment fought gallantly at the Battle of El Alamein with Montgomery's Eighth Army in October and November 1942. They were later sent to Syria for internal security duties and finally, in May 1944, the RWY were transferred to Italy, where they fought until the unconditional surrender of Germany.

We will remember RSM 'Jack' Pike (MBE).



Reginald Edric 'Jack' Pike

Obituary

Hon. Lt Col J.P. Schellekens

Brussels Branch Secretary Andrée Ferrant informed us of the death on 1 September of Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Pierre Schellekens, President of the Belgian National Remembrance Committee for the victims and veterans of the two World Wars.

In the words of Andrée, "Jean-Pierre Schellekens was a kind and brave man who dedicated many years to honour and remember the Heroes who gave their lives for our freedom."

Jean-Pierre's funeral, held at the Swedish Church in Brussels on 15 September, attracted a large congregation who heard moving eulogies from his family and friends. The multilingual service was jointly conducted by Parish Pastor Tina Haettner Blomquist and RBL Chaplain the Revd John Wilkinson. Chair Dennis Abbott represented the branch.

"I got to know Jean-Pierre a little in the past few years," writes Dennis (see also the start of this newsletter). "He was a lovely man. He invited me to his apartment and spoke of his vivid memories of the Liberation of Antwerp, when he was eight years old and living in the Jan Van Rijswijcklaan."

Recalling the moment when the first tanks of the 11th Armoured Division began to roll into the city, Jean-Pierre recorded the following for our branch history:

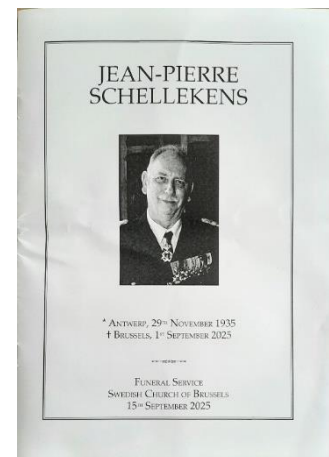
A few hours before, there had been a panzer outside, and my father told us to get in the cellar. We waited but nothing happened. Then suddenly the panzer was gone and we heard the clanging of the British tanks. We stormed out. It was absolute delirium. What you felt was unbelievable – it's nothing like you see in the films. The tanks stopped and I climbed on the first one. I was on the small flat side next to the turret. Someone was holding on to me so I wouldn't fall. It was fantastic. One of the things I remember most is the smell of sweat and gasoline the tanks used as well as the clink, clank, cronk of the tracks turning. Suddenly, Flemish SS started firing and somebody got me back inside, very quickly. I didn't see any blood but I saw falling and I knew there were casualties. Captured Germans were held in cages at the zoo and collaborators faced reprisals.

I remember a café on the corner of Isabellastraat. When I came past it a few days after the liberation, I saw people throwing all the furniture – everything they could – into the street.

A former member of the Brussels branch, Jean-Pierre Schellekens had strong links with the Normandy Veterans' Association and Belgian patriotic groups through his role as the founder and President of the Belgian National Remembrance Committee.

Our condolences to Pierre and Elisabeth and Jean-Pierre's grandchildren.

We will remember him.



Digest

The British Charitable Fund (BCF)

Author: Ron Aston of The British Charitable Fund

The British Charitable Fund (BCF) was created in 1815 to provide help for British soldiers and for their dependants who were left behind in Belgium after the Battle of Waterloo.

In the 21st century, providing help remains its core mission but the remit has been broadened to include anyone and everyone in Belgium with a British connection.

On the 18 June 2015 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, the honourable Duke of Wellington planted a sapling oak tree in the grounds of Mont St Jean.

Ten years on, look how the tree has grown!

Live thy life,
Young and old,
Like yon oak,
Bright in spring,
Living gold.

Alfred Lord Tennyson in Poems (1842)



Making poppies

Author: Irina Nock Krishnan



Sonian Explorer Scouts will be making some poppies to help RBL fundraise this year.

The young people made their poppies a couple of years ago (*left*) and wore them at Remembrance. The aim is to make 100 poppies for this purpose.



Your Brussels Branch committee

Branch President		
President	Zoe White	zoezoew@hotmail.com
Branch Officers		
Chair	Dennis Abbott	Brussels.Chair@rbl.community
Vice-Chair	Jean-Pierre Pedé	brussels.treasurer@rbl.community
Joint Secretary	Andrée Ferrant	andree.ferrant@hotmail.com
Joint Secretary	Mireille Picron	mireillepicron-lad@hotmail.com
Treasurer	Jean-Pierre Pedé	brussels.treasurer@rbl.community
Branch Committee members		
Branch Community Support Representative	Mika-John Southworth	mj@southworth.me
Membership Secretary	Rhoda D Grant-McArthur	rhoda@argrant.net
Poppy Appeal Organiser	David Bizley	rblbrusselspoppyappeal@gmail.com
Events Coordinator (commemorations)	Mika-John Southworth	mj@southworth.me
Events Coordinator (battlefield tours)	Steve Grant	Brussels.Publicity@rbl.community
Facebook Coordinator	Alain Brogniez	broal.redcoats@skynet.be
Web Coordinator	Scott Wilson	scofranwil@hotmail.com
Newsletter Coordinators	Michael Whitburn Scott Wilson	michael.whitburn@vub.be scofranwil@hotmail.com
Committee Member (Namur)	Jean-François Husson	jfr.husson@gmail.com
Youth Officer	Irina Nock Krishnan	irina.krishnan@outlook.com
Branch Chaplain	Rev. Canon John Wilkinson	john.wilkinson@holytrinity.be
Standard Bearer	Freddy Roiseux	calimeroofreddy@hotmail.com

About The Royal British Legion

Patron: His Majesty King Charles III

National President: Vice Admiral (Rtd) Paul Bennett CB OBE.

The Royal British Legion formed on 15 May 1921 bringing together four organisations of the Armed Forces that had established themselves after the First World War.

By 1921, the tradition of a Two Minute Silence had been established. The first Poppy Appeal was held that year, raising over £106,000 to help WW1 veterans with employment and housing.

The Legion was established to care for those who suffered as a result of service during the First World War. It has been helping the Armed Forces community and their families ever since.