

# Remembrance Sunday Address

*Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, November 2023*



Despite their ever-present memory, especially in these days of Remembrance, the scale of destruction that the First and Second World Wars wreaked are, in many ways, too huge for us to truly comprehend. I personally am always dumbstruck every time I visit one of the British and Commonwealth war cemeteries in France, Belgium or elsewhere around the world. I never sense the level of destruction and waste wrought more than when I visit some of the larger cemeteries, places like Tynn Cot in Belgium, the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world, where nearly 12,000 servicemen from the battles of the First World War's Western Front are commemorated. And the German war cemeteries are frequently even larger. Last summer, when travelling through Italy, I visited the Futa-Pass war cemetery which is the last resting place of over 30,500 German soldiers killed in the Italian battles of the Second World War. And then there are the monuments to those killed on both sides but who have no known grave, or whose bodies were never found. The Thiepval Memorial in the Somme records the names of over 72,000 such British and Commonwealth soldiers. If you've ever had the opportunity to visit such places, or

considered just how many are listed on the smaller war memorials found in pretty much every town or village in this country and elsewhere in Europe, then I'm sure you will have found it hard to get your head around the seemingly endless lists of names of the dead etched for perpetuity into stone. The vastness of destruction brought about by the two world wars and indeed subsequent conflicts is like the vastness of space - too much for our limited human capacity to fully grasp.

But let's just try and limit that vastness this evening; to try and focus on something more relatable and more akin to our own experience. I want to take a moment to consider the effect that the world wars, and especially the First or so-called Great War had on our own School and how we here at Wells now might respond.

Consider for a moment the lives of those pupils from this School who demonstrated the ultimate form of duty and who gave their lives in the service of others. Their names are inscribed on boards in the School's Main Reception. I wonder if you've ever taken time to pause and review them? Eight members of our School died in the First World War. That doesn't sound like a huge number when compared to the 17 or so million people who are estimated to have died in that war overall. But if, as is pointed out in the introduction printed at the start of your order of service this evening, you consider that the School in those days only had about 50 pupils, that's roughly the equivalent to the entire Lower or Upper Sixth being killed now.

These eight men, since they were all men, lived and worked here just like you and I do now. They sat in your places in the Cathedral on a regular basis, they walked up and down Vicars Close and through Market Square; they played sport here, made music, and learned their lessons. They were people with the same interests and passions and aspirations as you. Take by way of example one of those young men: Private Cyril Parsons.

As a boy here, Cyril was a cathedral chorister, and developed into an accomplished musician, qualifying at the age of 16 as an Associate of the Royal College of Organists. Having left School he became one of this Cathedral's organists, a position he held until he was enlisted and left for the Western Front. While at school here he was also a noted sportsman, winning many sports day prizes; in particular he was a celebrated rugby player, often playing for both the School and Wells Rugby Club. I'm sure that many of you here would have a very similar biography; have times really changed that much? But then Cyril, or "Tidler" as he was known to his many friends, was just 24 years old when he was killed instantaneously on September 3rd 1916 during the Battle of Guillemont. His is one of the names recorded on the Thiepval Monument I mentioned earlier, one of the many thousands of soldiers who died but for whom we have no known grave.

Or perhaps we might consider Henry Bussell. He was a day pupil here at WCS; he lived at No 4 New Street, next door to where some of you now live in Brock House. By all accounts, he was a star scholar. In the 5th Form, what we now call Year 11, we know that he was awarded the Dean's Prize for English Composition, the Plumtre Memorial Prize for Greek Testament and The Collins Prize for Drawing. In the previous year he had won four other prizes. On leaving Wells, he joined the civil service, where he worked for ten years before

enlisting voluntarily as a soldier at the outbreak of war in 1914. Three years later, on 17 August 1917, 2nd Lt. Henry Bussell died in battle in Belgium aged 38. Like Cyril, his body was never found and his name is commemorated on the Tyne Cot memorial.

Cyril and Henry were both young Wellensians who enjoyed the same things you enjoy at school, shared many of the same experiences you are having here, and who had the same hopes, aspirations and plans for life that you all have. It's just that they happened to live a century earlier than you. And their lifetimes required them, and their fellow classmates, to do their duty and serve others in the most extraordinary way - and they said yes. They were called upon to show such extreme levels of duty and service that they gave their lives for it. I hope and pray that none of us will ever be called upon to show such extreme duty and service - but equally, while none of us know with certainty what life will throw at us, we do know that we have a duty every single day to do what is right and we know that we are called upon every single day to improve the lives of both ourselves and those around us, by our own acts of service. That's the very least we can do to honour the memory of Wellensians such as Cyril and Henry.

But for me Remembrance Sunday is not just about recalling to mind the memory of those who have died, important though that is. It is also about re - membering our communities - rejoining or reconnecting the members - past and present - of a community, giving us the opportunity to invite those who have literally sat in days gone by where we are sitting now and to, metaphorically speaking, sit alongside us once again and speak to us afresh.

One of my favourite films is *Dead Poets' Society*. In it, the late, great actor Robin Williams plays the role of an English teacher in a fictional elite American boarding school called Welton Academy. Robin Williams plays the part of Mr Keating, a fresh-faced teacher straight out of university, who inspires his pupils through his teaching of poetry. In one of the film's scenes, he takes his class out of the classroom and to the main hall of the School where photos of previous generations of pupils arranged by Houses and sports teams are displayed - just like the photos you have all been in at School yourselves. Mr Keating asks his class to look at the faces of their predecessors; he asks them to lean in and to listen to what they are saying to them. And while the class attentively and silently look upon the photographs, as if to make those photos come alive, Mr Keating himself leans in and whispers - 'Carpe Diem; seize the day'.

The photos themselves were never going to literally speak, of course, but Mr Keating wanted to challenge his pupils to imagine what those in years gone by who had been in the shoes of his current class what would they want to say to the present generation about how they should behave and act.

As we re - member our School community this evening, and as we hear in just a moment the names of those Wellensians killed in the First and Second World Wars, I invite you to consider what they might want to say to you directly about how you can make the most of being a Wellensian, how you should live and how you can help make society more generally a better place for everyone.

And so, as I conclude, I wonder whether I, like Mr Keating, might invite you to look now at the back cover of your Order of Service. There you will see printed the names of the Old Wellensians killed in the First World War, along with photos of those for whom we have images. Look at the faces of Arthur Laver, William Croom, George Abram and Ronald Knight. What do you imagine they saying to you this evening? Given their experience as Wellensians and as soldiers, what do you hear them say to you now about honouring their sacrifice and their memory? Can you allow them to speak again into our still- broken world, a world still sadly torn apart by wars and division; what can they teach us about being good citizens? Look at their faces. How can you enable their voices from the past, to speak to you today, and every day, in the present?

We will remember them.