

East Ilsley's hidden memorials

The third bell

The marble tablet in St Mary's Church is the most visible memorial to the men lost in the Great War, but it is not East Ilsley's only memorial to them. The principal war memorial is seen by few, but heard by many. It is the third bell in the church tower, and it bears the initials of the 21 men named on the tablet.



As the Newbury Weekly News reported on 8 May 1919:

A meeting was held at the Old School on Monday evening for the purpose of affording discussion as to the form the village war memorial should take. About 50 parishioners attended, and the Rector presided. Five proposals were put to the meeting, and a show of hands taken on each. They were (1) a village hall, (2) a recreation ground, (3) a stained glass window, (4) a new bell in the church tower, (5) a memorial cross. Each proposal was discussed separately. The show of hands resulted in a majority in favour of the new bell. A committee composed of the Rector, Messrs. Field, Hibbert and Goddard, Mesdames Eagles and H. Pearce, and Miss E. Lowe were appointed to consider ways and means of raising the necessary money. It is understood that a marble tablet is to be placed in the church with the names and regiments of the 20 (sic) men, natives of the parish, who have rendered the supreme sacrifice. There is also a proposal to erect a tablet in the village chapel.

The money for the new bell seems to have been raised without much difficulty, but - as the NWN told its readers in April 1920 - there was an unforeseen problem:

The parishioners of East Ilsley decided some months ago at a public meeting that part of their War Memorial should be a sixth bell to complete the present ancient ring of five. The money required for this, about £70, has already been subscribed within the parish. But both firms who were asked for a report and an estimate have pronounced the existing bells unsafe. Before they can be rung again, and certainly before a new bell can be added, the whole peal must be re-hung in a new metal frame. It would be waste of money to attempt to patch the old material. The estimate for this is £330. The War Memorial Committee feel that this work ought to be undertaken. The bells carry one back through

several centuries of national history. The treble was cast in 1589, the year after the defeat of the great Armada, and bears the appropriate inscription "Praise ye the Lord". Another bears apparently the date 1619, while the great Tenor, weighing nine cwt, was cast in the year 1625 (the accession year of Charles I) and was the gift of the Rector of the Parish, the famous Dr Richard Wightwick, the co-founder of Pembroke College, Oxford. An appeal is being issued by the Rector, Rev. Canon Whitham, and the Memorial Committee. Out of a population of 470, East Ilsley contributed 122 men for service in the Navy and Army, of whom 22 (sic) were killed.



But undaunted, the village rose to the occasion. After a series of fund-raising events there was enough money not only to meet the costs of the new bell-frame, but for two smaller bells to complete a full octave. The first peal on the new ring of eight bells was rung on 23rd December 1922, and hundreds more peals have been rung since.

The Roll of Honour - Refurbished



The East Ilsley War Memorial is in St Mary's Church, but those who served in the Great War and came home to the village were not forgotten. Their names were handwritten on a decorated "Roll of Honour" which was displayed in the Baptist Church until its recent closure. Over the years the writing had faded so much that it was barely legible, so in 2014 the Parish Council commissioned a calligrapher to restore the names.

It's not known who compiled the list, but one thing was obvious – it wasn't complete. Only 18 of the 21 men on the War Memorial appeared on the Roll of Honour. There were 89 names, but the Newbury Weekly

News in one report gives a figure of 122 men who served, and the Active Service Rolls that were published regularly in the paper include some names that do not appear on the Roll of Honour. Some of these turned out to have only tenuous links with the village, and at least one was a mistake. Others were untraceable with the sources currently available. Some of these men may have worked in East Ilsley's racing stables, but didn't come back here after the war.



Drawing up a complete list is far from simple. The main problem is that there's no definitive list of people who served during the First World War. Most of the Army service records were destroyed in an air raid in 1940, and other sources such as medal records don't provide enough detail. We did find service records for a few more Ilsley men. Most of them didn't serve abroad and that's probably why they weren't included on the Roll of Honour. Many of these were older men and teenagers who were too old, or too young, to go. They "did their bit" at home, for example looking after horses at Army depots, or working with the ASC Forage Department sourcing feedstuffs from farms. There's also one lady known to have served as a nurse, and probably there were others. Vital work, but it seems that only those who went away to war were included, and that is understandable.

Since we can't be sure that we found everybody, it was decided to preserve the spirit of the original list, adding the three extra names from the War Memorial. But we now have a record of other people who served, and this can be added to or revised if more information becomes available.

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Thanks to the intrepid Dave Morris for the photos of the bell! The other pictures are by Kay Sanderson.