

Festubert - a briefing document

In 1908, the British Army was reformed. The old Militia and Yeomanry were swept away and the Territorial Force (nowadays the TA) was formed, for home defence. Men were encouraged to join by being paid, and also by the two weeks of annual training. The latter was often their only holiday from their tedious jobs. The 7th battalion, King's Liverpool Regiment (KLR) recruited in Bootle, Crosby, Formby and Southport. When the Great War broke out, they were at their annual camp.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) went to France 120,000 strong - to meet an advancing German force numbering over a million men. First contact came at Mons, in Belgium, a town which twinned with Bootle (and hence with Sefton MBC) in 1964 on the 50th anniversary of the battle. A retreat followed, with a further holding action at Le Cateau, down to the River Marne, where the British and French turned and forced the Germans to retreat. They went back to the River Aisne and dug in. The following up BEF and the French were forced to dig in too. The following six weeks saw both sides trying to outflank the other - the Race to the Sea - until 475 miles of parallel trenches stretched from Nieuport on the North Sea coast down to the Swiss border.

During the winter of 1914-15, plans were made to drive the Germans out of France and Belgium. The French planned an attack on Vimy Ridge. In a war of trenches, possession of high ground was paramount. They called upon the British, the junior partner in the coalition until 1917, to mount an attack further north to tie down German troops and draw off their reserves.

British plans were drawn up to attack at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge and at Festubert. The trench lines were within half a mile of the latter - a very ordinary French village. The houses and barns were used to billet British troops when out of the line and the Church tower used as an observation post. This was known to the Germans, who regularly shelled the village, taking off roofs, smashing down walls and destroying the Church.

The French attack at Vimy failed. Evidence can be seen at the cemetery at Notre Dame de Lorette where there are 44,000 French headstones, and a further 23,000 unknown French dead in seven ossuaries. The British attack fared little better, although the remains of Neuve Chapelle were captured and from May 15th to 25th 1915 the lines were pushed nearly half a mile away from what remained of Festubert. The latter cost nearly 16,000 casualties.

The 7th KLR arrived in France in February 1915 and first saw action at Festubert. A number of them are still there - in the three cemeteries in and around the village.

The Roll of Honour at the entrance to Bootle Town Hall is different from most in that it is in three pieces - top centre, bottom centre, and the two side panels. A glance at the top central section, dedicated by the then Mayor in 1916, includes those men who fell in 1914 and 1916. That glance would reveal over 70 men of the 7th KLR. A similar study of the Southport War memorial shows roughly similar numbers. If one adds on those who subsequently died of their wounds, then over 150 men of Sefton died at Festubert.

The village remained behind Allied lines until 1918. In the spring of that year the Germans gambled that by using those freed from the Eastern Front following Russia's withdrawal from the war, they could win the war before the Americans arrived in sufficient numbers to tip the balance. They attacked towards Festubert, smashing walls and buildings with artillery and swept west. The British line bent, but never broke. The Germans ran out of steam and on August 8th 1918 the British, French and Belgians attacked all along the lines, pushing the Germans back everywhere. This time it was British shells that fell on Festubert.

By the time of the Armistice on November 11th, 1918 most of the homes in Festubert were just smears of brick dust. Where the Church had stood was grey stone dust. It was to such a scene of total devastation that the people of Festubert returned in the next few months after the cessation of hostilities.

In 1920, the British League for Help summoned representatives of local authorities to a meeting at the Mansion House in London. Subsequently, a large number of British towns and cities "adopted" (such was the word then used) a place in France. Birmingham adopted Albert on the Somme. Liverpool adopted Givenchy - the village not the perfume - where many of its men fought so gallantly in 1918.

Southport adopted Festubert.

Money was raised in Southport - sufficient for the building of a sports hall in the village. The original has been replaced by a more modern structure, but the foyer of the salle des fetes bears the original plaque naming it the Southport Memorial Hall.

Between 1922 and 1939 (when German visitors returned) parties of Southport schoolchildren went on an annual cultural visit to Festubert. These visits were not restarted after World War Two. Veterans of the battle of Festubert in 1915 met up every year in Southport on its anniversary until the 1990's, when there were but five elderly men remaining. The last official visit of any kind (which this author can trace) was in 2000 when the Southport Branch of the Dunkirk Veterans Association diverted to the village to lay a wreath at the village war memorial. The latter is a rarity, for it not only lists the men, and women, of the village killed in the Great War, but also "Les heros Britannique mort pour la France."

Festubert is thus part of the heritage of Sefton. Over 150 men from what is now Sefton fought and died there. Twice as many must have been wounded in body or in spirit. The people of Southport cared enough to raise money to assist the village in its rebuilding, and links continued for 20 years.

2015 marks the centenary of the Battle of Festubert, a small French village "adopted" by Southport. To ignore the links is to ignore part of our borough's heritage. How nice it would be to re-establish those links in advance of the centenary!

Bruce Hubbard

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Et al.

