

## Remembrance Day Address 2025

A starter for ten: who won the FA Cup in 1914 and retained it for four years?

Even if you are not a fan of football, and my broken body betrays a preference for rugby, for the historian, football is a mirror reflecting the nation's development. From its beginnings in factory towns, such as Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield, to its current status as a global industry, football faithfully charts the evolution of English society, revealing its class structure, imperial legacy, cultural struggles, and ongoing search for identity. Many of the older generation here will recall what they were doing in 1966 when England's men claimed the Jules Rimet trophy and, in time, the same, I am sure, will be true of the Lionesses' recent victories.

Football is a recurring motif in World War I. During this year's Senior production of "Oh What a Lovely War!" a particularly poignant scene focussed on the famous Christmas Truce of 1914. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1914, along parts of the Western Front, German and British soldiers emerged from their trenches and fraternised.

They exchanged gifts such as brandy, chocolate, cigarettes and uniform buttons. And then, in one of the most extraordinary moments of the entire war, impromptu football matches were played. Reports vary: some suggest an informal kickabout in the frozen mud, while at Ploegsteert, near Ypres in Belgium, where pupils from Year 8 have made an annual pilgrim, the affair was a bit more organised with jackets laid down to mark out goals, so that something approaching a proper match took place. The 134<sup>th</sup> Royal Saxon Regiment took on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (so, strictly speaking Germany v Scotland, rather than Germany v England, as it's often been reported) with the Saxons apparently winning 3-2 and, it seems, without recourse to penalties.

"The British brought a ball from the trenches, and soon a lively game ensued", wrote schoolteacher Lieutenant Kurt Zehmisch, of the 134<sup>th</sup> Saxons, in his diary. "How marvellous, how wonderful, yet how strange it was. The British officers felt the same way about it. And so Christmas, that celebration of love, managed to bring together mortal enemies as friends, for a time".

For a few brief hours, the words sung by angels over Bethlehem, as recorded in Luke's Gospel, - "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill to all" - became reality. Men who had been sworn enemies recognised one another's shared

humanity and, in that moment, we glimpse something of the heart of the Christian message: that even in darkness, the light of Christ's peace can shine.

In Britain, football was initially criticised during wartime for distracting men from enlistment. Under pressure, at end of the 1914-15 season, the decision was made to suspend the normal league and cup competitions in England and Wales in favour of a regional programme of matches. But even then, government pressure had been a less significant factor than players joining the armed forces or taking up war work, the difficulties of travel restrictions or the financial strain on the professional clubs

However, football was also seen as a useful recruiting tool with recruiters urging spectators at professional matches to join the army. For example, Stamford Bridge and Old Trafford were used for recruitment rallies, and grounds were sometimes repurposed for military training, storage, or even hospitals.

In 1914, the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion Middlesex Regiment, nicknamed the "Footballers' Battalion", was formed. It included many professional and amateur players. Indeed, it has been calculated that 2 000 professional footballers served in the forces. The 296 killed in action included former Tottenham Hotspur player Walter Tull, the first black officer in the British army, and Bradford Park Avenue's Donald Bell, the only professional footballer to be awarded the Victoria Cross, as well seven members from the Heart of Midlothian, one of the leading teams in Scotland at the time. 16 Hearts players and 500 supporters volunteered en-masse in October 1914, the same month as Lieutenant A.E.C.T. Dooner, one of the first Old Roffensians to give of his life, fell at Hoge Crater, barely 22 years of age.

In preparation for "Oh What a Lovely War!" the cast visited the Somme battlefields in France and, as the sunlight faded, we gathered at the grave of Captain Wilfred "Billy" Nevill in Carnoy Military Cemetery, close to the frontline on 1st July 1916. Nevill, between 1905 and 1911, a pupil of Mr Fisher's former school, Dover College, famously provided the men in his company with a number of footballs marked with the inscription "The First European Final: East Surreys v Bavarians" intended as a distraction for nervous young soldiers as they went over the top, but widely reported as a demonstration of British courage and misguidedly suggesting that war was a game.

Nevill fell in No Man's Land, one of the 49 000 men who gave of their lives on the first morning of a battle that was to last until the winter called a halt to the offensive

in November. These men lived out the words of Jesus, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

Their love was not an abstract idea. It was lived out in muddy fields amidst shellfire and bullets, in acts of courage and comradeship, in the giving up of comfort and safety for others.

And even as men left for the Front, the spirit of the game - and of service - lived on at home. Remarkably it is estimated that there were around 150 teams of women playing football during the First World War. And these games attracted large crowds. Indeed, it was a matter for remark when only 1 500 spectators turned out for a visit of the Portsmouth Ladies for their game with the Army Ordnance Depot.

The most famous team was the Dick Kerr Ladies, which played to a crowd of 10 000 at Deepdale in Preston on Christmas Day 1917, raising hundreds of pounds for local hospitals. Their star player, Lily Parr, scored over 900 goals in a career spanning 32 years. She trained as a nurse and continued to play while caring for others in a mental health hospital. Her example reminds us that service takes many forms. Some go to the battlefield; others bring healing at home. Each, in their own way, lives out Christ’s command to love and serve one another.

Earlier this summer my wife and I visited a Commonwealth War near Mons where the first British casualties of war are buried, alongside those who had been killed in the final hours even as the guns finally fell silent. And when the silence fell, life had been changed forever. Memorials, like the one in the Lady Chapel opposite or on a patch of grass on the way to the Alps, were built and names were carved into stone and wood to commemorate the innocent youth who had gone to war, often grinning with the “empty joy” of which the poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote.

King's School in 1914 was a much smaller school with only 52 pupils, all boys, rising to 97 pupils by 1918. At the beginning of the so-called Great War the activities of the Officer Training Corps were enhanced and boys went straight from school into the services. 164 ORs are listed in the school magazine as having served during the War. Considering the size of the School, the number of those who gave their lives in the World War I - 70 - shows the extent of the sacrifice made. Nor should we forget all those who fought valiantly for their country and survived the conflict, often scarred physically and psychologically.

When you get a chance, go to the Paddock Pavilion and, in the Colours Room, look at the sepia image of the 19011-1912 1<sup>st</sup> XI football team. Stare at the slightly serious,

callow faces of the young men dressed in their worsted blazers and shod in heavy-leather, studded boots, assembled in Main School Yard in front of the steps leading to what today is the Design Technology Department. Separated by a little more than a hundred years, these innocent sportsmen look not dissimilar from those Fifth and Sixth pupils sitting in the congregation today. Nine of these eleven did not return.

Look along your row and image nine empty seats, nine lives unlived, nine lives yet to love, nine sets of loving, grieving parents. This void was repeated in every church, every village hall and every workplace across the land, during a war which saw a soldier dying every 15 seconds.

Football did return. Crowds cheered again. Communities healed. In that return, we see something deeply Christian - the rhythm of death and resurrection, of despair giving way to hope.

As Paul wrote in Romans, “Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus”.

In the silence which follows, we remember the fallen, recognising that the freedoms we enjoy today were not cheaply won. Remembrance is a time to move beyond old enmities, as did the footballers in that first Christmas Truce, and celebrate not the victory, but the peace, which, to echo President Roosevelt’s phrase, must be won afresh in each generation.

As we have seen, service comes in many forms, from soldiers such as Dooner, Nevill and Tull, all of whom made the ultimate sacrifice, to the prodigious goal-scorer Lily Parr, who sought to mend the minds of those broken by conflict. In their honour, it is timely to reaffirm our commitment to participate in civil society and uphold democratic values, values underpinned by the Christian call to love our neighbour founded in this place and lived out daily in this school. As war continues to bring death, violence and despoilation in Gaza, Sudan, and the Ukraine, whether you are a person of faith or no faith, this message remains as important today as it was in August 1914 when the lights went out over Europe.

Oh, and by the way, it was Burnley that won the FA Cup in 1914.

Paul Medhurst