

I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me this Adjournment debate, whose theme is the forthcoming centenary of the outbreak of the first world war, which will fall in August 2014. It may feel as if that centenary is a little way off, but this debate is timely because today the Imperial War museum has hosted a national conference bringing together representatives of voluntary and community groups from across the country to discuss the work they can do in preparing for that centenary.

In 1964, on the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the first world war, similar co-ordination of activity and events around the country took place. In my constituency, there was an exhibition of war paintings at the Metropole art gallery, which was hosted in conjunction with the Imperial War museum. Co-ordination also took place for the Last Night of the Proms, with music by Vaughan Williams and Britten acting as a musical commemoration of the war. Many organisations would seek a similar level of co-ordination for this forthcoming centenary between groups involved in heritage and the arts, community groups across the country and the Government.

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David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate, Conservative)

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate and on mentioning the work that the Imperial War museum does. Will he also pay tribute to the work that it does to build up a national inventory of war memorials? Does he share the concern about the fact that many a war memorial is, sadly, the victim of either neglect or vandalism? Will he join me in the campaign by the War Memorials Trust to have all war memorials registered by the time of the commemoration?

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Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe, Conservative)

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I am happy to support that very worthwhile project. The television series produced by Ian Hislop, "Not Forgotten", was a good demonstration of the power of memorials, some of which had fallen into abeyance and loss. In two local projects in the villages of Lyminge and Sandgate, in my constituency, local people have decoded the war memorials, using new online materials to look up the stories of the servicemen who served in their own communities, for example, Walter Tull. He is named on the Folkestone war memorial and was the first person who was not a European white male to be commissioned into the British Army—he was commissioned in the field as a second lieutenant during the first world war. He also had the distinction of being the first black man to play in an outfield position in the English football leagues, and his story was really uncovered by a project run by the Dover War Memorial Project. It would be a wonderful way to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the war if similar projects could be launched across the country, perhaps supported by the Imperial War museum and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to give people toolkits to understand where their memorials are and the stories of the men that lie beyond them. We are all familiar with the fact that although the men who served in that war have passed—indeed, many of their children are probably no longer be with us—their stories remain. Part of the Chamber in which we sit today is, in some ways, a memorial to the 20 Members of this House who lost their lives on active service during that war and the many others who saw active

service. One of my predecessors as the Member of Parliament for the Folkestone and Hythe area, Sir Philip Sassoon, was on active service as an officer of the East Kent Regiment, which was known as "the Buffs" during the war, and he also led a lot of the local recruitment. Many other distinguished Members of this House served in that war too. As Members of Parliament, we too can think of a fitting commemoration for that centenary.

Today's conference at the Imperial War museum is also being attended by Ann Berry, a former mayor of Folkestone, who has worked closely with me on our own project in Folkestone, Step Short. It seeks to mark the recognition of Folkestone's role during the war. I wish to talk a little about that, because it is important to think of the centenary in terms not only of the sacrifices made by allied servicemen in the trenches on the western front and around the world, but of sites of significance in this country. Such sites were well understood in the years after the first world war, but, of course, memory has been lost.

My friend, Professor Nick Bosanquet, who has kindly joined us in the Public Gallery this evening, has, aside from his duties at Imperial college and with the Reform think-tank, also done work on the significance of UK sites-particularly Folkestone, which was the major port of embarkation and disembarkation of about 9 million men during the war, as well as sites in Gretna and Liverpool and of major munitions production as well as other sites around the country. It is important that those stories are not forgotten.

The anniversary of 1914 is in many ways the start of an important series of anniversaries: the outbreak of the first world war in 1914; for many in the Commonwealth and the UK, Gallipoli in 1915; the battle of the Somme in 1916; Passchendaele in 1917; and, of course, the Armistice in 1918. That theme was picked up by the Irish Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, in a recent speech he made to the institute for British-Irish studies. He said that in 2016 in particular-a significant date for Ireland-

"the centenary of the Somme will be commemorated here in Dublin, as in Belfast, to honour the heroism of those who fought and died there, Protestant and Catholic, side by side."

The centenary gives us a chance to remember and reflect. The significance of the first world war is great, not only because of the enormous loss of life on all sides but because that war shaped, in many ways, the politics of the 20th century and so much of the world in which we live today.

The centenary is a good way of uncovering the human story. I was very moved last week to attend a service at Shorncliffe military cemetery in my constituency on 1 July, which is Canada day. The Canadians had many thousands of men stationed in Folkestone during the war, 296 of whom are buried in the cemetery. After the war, the people of the town promised Canada that they would look after and maintain those graves. Every year, 296 schoolchildren from the constituency sit by individual graves with individual presentations of flowers that they make to the graves as part of a service of memorial. That links the town not only to the story of the first world war but to the lives of individual servicemen, too. That is a fitting act of memorial. On the harbour arm of Folkestone harbour, there was a canteen maintained by Florence and Margaret Jeffrey. They ran the harbour canteen, dispensing free cups of tea and refreshments to men before the troops boarded. In the case of most people who have an ancestor who served in the first world war, that person would probably have passed through Folkestone in one way or another during that time. There is a record of 40,000 names collected in the visitors' books from those of general servicemen to those of people such as Field Marshall Haig, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill who passed through the town. With the support of Kent county council, we have started a project to create a digital record of those names and to scan each of the pages of those books. We are looking to raise funds to have that as a resource that can be accessed online by people around the world who want to search for stories of their ancestors. It will record them as being in Folkestone on a particular time, place and day during that war.

Most of the men who were in Folkestone during the war would have assembled on the Leas, outside the Grand, which was a great society hotel in the period before the war. It was also the place where Wilfred Owen, the war poet, spent his last night in England. They would have been assembled and marched along the Leas, down a road that during the war was known as the Slope road, to the harbour before they embarked for the trenches of Belgium and France. For many of them, that would have been their last journey in England before they went to the trenches, not to return.

That is the significance of the UK sites. Hundreds and thousands of people every year make that pilgrimage themselves to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors in the battlefields. As a schoolboy doing my GCSE studies, I made that same journey, as many people studying history as part of the national curriculum and their GCSE courses will do today. To continue shamelessly to plug my constituency's heritage links, people can start those journeys and see part of them in this country, too, without making the trip to France. They can walk, as many men did, down the Leas in Folkestone and down the road that, after the war, was renamed the Road of Remembrance as a national memorial to the sacrifices made by those men—a walk down which many people could go, retracing their steps. There are elements of our heritage, particularly as regards the first world war, that have been lost and forgotten and anything that we can do to use the centenary to reconnect people with those stories and the sacrifices that so many millions of people made during that war would be excellent.

Will the Minister consider what support the Government could give? It need not necessarily be financial support, but could be support in co-ordinating a national day of remembrance to mark the centenary, perhaps with a national programme of events. They could work with the major galleries and museums and the regimental museums, particularly at sites with a strong interest, and, as my hon. Friend Mr Burrowes has said, and work in support of the memorials themselves. That would be a particularly fitting memorial.

I should also like to know whether the Government will consider marking a national day of remembrance, potentially in the form of a bank holiday or a part-bank holiday on the day of the centenary of the outbreak of the war. Might they consider having a permanent national bank holiday of remembrance, perhaps on Armistice day or a day of the week near to it, as other countries do? Australia and New Zealand have Anzac day as a national memorial day, and there are national memorial days in other countries, such as the United States. Perhaps it is time for us to consider making such a move, and the centenary of the first world war would be a fitting time to introduce such a national holiday or day of remembrance. If it could not be an additional holiday, perhaps there could be discussions about it replacing another bank holiday, as it might be a more fitting to have a bank holiday on that day.

So, although Adjournment debates involve closing the proceedings of the House, my intention was to start a debate among our colleagues and people around the country who have a great interest in the historical and community significance of the first world war about how we in the country and in the House should lead the country in marking that centenary.

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Julian Lewis (New Forest East, Conservative)

I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this matter. He is absolutely right that there is huge interest in it, despite the long lapse of time. One reason for that is the availability of so much more information, including the online record of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission of every serviceman who lost his life in that disastrous war. Given that we spend so much time commemorating the events and triumphs of the second world war, is it not right that we should

remember that twice as many were killed in the first world war as in the second, and in a smaller geographical area? So many of the political mistakes of the first world war paved the way for the second world war. Surely, therefore, we have to give it serious attention when the anniversary comes.

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Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe, Conservative)

I thank my hon. Friend for his meaningful contribution to the debate. He is absolutely right about the enormous significance of the war and that the far greater loss of life in that war is sometimes forgotten.

In some ways, the burden of memorial falls on new generations, which is why this is a particularly important challenge for the House. There are still alive today many service veterans from the second world war and many people who have vivid memories of that war, as was seen at the 70th anniversary of Dunkirk, which was marked last month. For the first world war, those memories are not there, so there is a greater challenge for this generation and new generations to continue celebrations when those events are so much further away. I want to mark that challenge with a nod to the huge canon of literature about the first world war. Let me adapt slightly Kipling's words in his lament for his son:

"Then hold your head up all the more,

This tide,

And every tide;

Because they were the sons Britain bore,

And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!"

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6:13 pm

Andrew Robathan (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans), Defence; South Leicestershire, Conservative)

May I say how nice it is to see you in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker? This is the first occasion on which I have been in the Chamber when you have been in your place.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend Damian Collins for drawing attention to the fact that in four short years we will be commemorating an important milestone in our nation's history-100 years since fighting broke out all over Europe that would rapidly plunge the world into its first world war.

I welcome my hon. Friend's arrival in Parliament. He succeeds the former leader of the Conservative party and a very great parliamentarian, Michael Howard-a man for whom I have huge respect and affection. I suspect that all Conservatives will echo that sentiment. I hope that my hon. Friend will emulate Michael Howard in many ways in the course of his career, especially after dark. Perhaps he, too, will become the leader of the party and the Home Secretary, and perhaps he, too, will hold many other of the great offices that Michael Howard held.

I was interested to see what my hon. Friend made of his victory on 6 May. Soon after the general election he wrote an article in *The Romney Marsh Times*, which I assure him is weekly reading for me. He described a mixture of gratitude-something we all feel-weight of

responsibility for the trust placed in him and a keen sense of anticipation for the work ahead. He related a memorable encounter on election day when a woman outside the New Romney scout hall told him:

"We voted for you, now go and change the world for us".

My hon. Friend wrote:

"Changing the world is the responsibility of all new MPs, to use our position not only to champion the interests of our community in Parliament, but also to support policies that can change our society, and ultimately our world."

I am delighted to hear a new MP elucidating such noble principles; they are the principles that should drive all of us to enter Parliament, and certainly drove my hon. Friend's predecessor, Michael Howard.

The first world war certainly changed our world, so it is fitting that we are discussing those historic events and plans to mark them so early in the new Parliament. As an historian, I shall touch briefly on some of the chronology of the calamitous events during the apparently glorious summer of 1914 that were to lead irrevocably to war.

On 28 June, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, was assassinated in Sarajevo by Serbian nationalists. He was on his way to a hospital to visit attendants who had been injured by an anarchist bomb-something we see often in not always terribly funny sketches-thrown at his car earlier that day in a failed attempt to kill him. On the way to the hospital, the driver took a wrong turn. When he realised his mistake he began to reverse, but another Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, stepped forward and fired two shots. The first killed the archduke's pregnant wife, Sophie, almost instantly, and the second hit the archduke in the neck, and he died a short while later. So much trouble after taking a wrong turn and then making a U-turn; it is not a joking matter, but it could be a lesson to us all.

Exactly a month later, on 28 July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and events moved quickly. On 1 August, the French and Germans mobilised and Germany declared war against Russia. On 3 August, Germany declared war on France and broke the 1839 treaty of London by invading Belgium on 4 August. As a result, later that day the British Cabinet voted almost unanimously to declare war.

The Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, memorably said as he stood at the window of the Foreign Office, across the road from his house, watching the lamps being lit as dusk approached:

"The lamps are going out all over Europe: we shall not see them lit again in our time."

In fact, he and the nation would see the lamps lit again, but the intervening slaughter was unimaginable.

Fatalities in the British imperial forces alone totalled more than 1 million, with more than 2 million wounded. Overall, it is reckoned that by the time the first world war ended in November 1918 it had caused 37 million casualties, military and civilian, of whom about 16 million were fatalities. As my hon. Friends the Members for Folkestone and Hythe and for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) have pointed out, it was not the war to end all wars, but its scale robbed this country of a generation of young men.

Each year since, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, those who served in the great war and the generations who followed have stood in silent respect for the sacrifice. On the 50th anniversary of the start of the great war, in 1964, the BBC produced a majestic documentary series, "The Great War", which was a small-screen alternative to tributes in stone and bronze. Some of us, including I suspect my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, watched those programmes. It was a brilliant series, made in black and white, and I suspect that the BBC will sensibly re-release it in four years' time.

Many of those who served in the first world war were able to return to northern France and Belgium to pay their respects to their fallen comrades. Alas, as we know, the last active UK

combatants in the great war passed away last year so there will be no further trips for those who fought in the first world war.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe talked about plans to mark the centenary. The Government have no specific plans to do so. However, my hon. Friend will understand that I speak as a Defence Minister and now, because everybody who served is dead, we view the first world war as a historic, heritage event, so we shall talk to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the museums my hon. Friend mentioned to see what plans they may have.

It remains, in my opinion, hugely important to remember the sacrifices that were made in the great war. It affected the whole country—every family, almost without exception. Certainly I suspect that hon. Members present will have family members who died in the first world war. My mother's uncle was killed on the Somme, my father's uncle was killed at Gallipoli, and many other members of my family, as was the case with every family, served in the first world war. As we did with the 90th anniversary of the Armistice in 2008 when our last three serving personnel, Henry Allingham, Harry Patch and Bill Stone, laid wreaths in a poignant ceremony at the Cenotaph, we will certainly remember in 2014 with great poignancy the 100th anniversary. Twelve months after that commemoration of the 90th anniversary, we remembered the passing of the entire world war one generation in a service in Westminster abbey attended by the Queen—that was last year. Our children, and their children, who have grown up without the threat or shadow of world war, need to be taught how the freedoms they take for granted were won, and at such heavy cost. I would say to my hon. Friend that I think more than anything else this centenary should be one of education—education in schools, and with everybody taking part, so that nobody forgets.

We will be discussing with colleagues across Whitehall, particularly in DCMS, how the centenary may be commemorated, and we will work with other interested parties, such as the Imperial War museum, to develop a co-ordinated approach to ensure that the centenary is given the highest possible profile. My hon. Friend mentioned the meeting today at the Imperial War museum, and I understand it is prepared to lead the national commemoration of the centenary of 1914 and has already appointed a programme manager. It will create digital resources for education and ensure that all events, activities and exhibitions relating to the centenary achieve the highest possible profile. Forty-five organisations attended the conference today, and more are now expected to join.

There is also a need to recognise the significance of the first world war globally, because it was, obviously, a world war. The Imperial War museum is establishing a series of international collaborations with organisations such as the Smithsonian and Les Invalides. We will of course do likewise with our international partners. The UK Government and our partners are well used to marking such important occasions. Traditionally in Britain, we mark the end of a conflict, but we understand the historic significance of this centenary and the additional poignancy and we expect that to be reflected in widespread media and public interest.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for the suggestions that he has made. I say to my hon. Friend Mr Burrowes that I am a great believer in keeping up war memorials, so that we do remember and do not forget. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East made some very sensible points about the second and first world wars.

I am quite a believer in bank holidays—frankly, the more the merrier—but I do not think it would be appropriate to press for an additional bank holiday to commemorate the first world war, given that the day in 1914 ultimately resulted in millions being sent to their deaths and millions more injured. We will look at the other suggestions that my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe made closely, and plans are emerging to commemorate this important and sombre event in a fitting way, although precisely what form it will take we cannot yet say.

I can say this, however, and I say it from the heart. We will not forget the duty we have as a nation to commemorate properly all those who fought in the great war, and to reflect on the

sacrifice that they were prepared to make. If for no other reason, younger generations and generations to follow must never forget what their forefathers did on their behalf, in the hope that younger generations are spared the horrors that our fathers' and grandfathers' generations endured.

Question put and agreed to.