

Willie Langdon

Remembered by his daughter Elise Langdon- Neuner

My father, William Langdon, known to all as Willie, took over the tenancy of Naishes Farm at Compton Chamberlayne in 1943. Britain was at war and food rationing was in force. One of the items he brought with him was a suitcase full of packets of sugar; winter feeding for his bees. It sorely puzzled the removal team to know what the cases contained, but he did not divulge the contents to them, although the sugar had been obtained perfectly legally, even under war regulations.



Willie, & with his baby sister Kathleen

The land he inherited had been used as a military camp during the First World War, but during the Second World War, in response to the government's call for farmers to grow corn to feed the nation threatened with shortages, he ploughed the field in front of the farmhouse where the Nissen huts had stood. Although the corrugated steel had been sold off, their concrete foundations remained. Removing them was laborious work. By the time I came along, the field was a hunting ground for intriguing treasures. My father and I spent many an hour walking across it, collecting spent bullets, military uniform buttons, bottles with marbles used to hold in the carbonation, earthenware ink pots, and many other discards, even hand grenades, that had been turned up by the plough. My sisters were amazed by a denture they found. At least six dentists worked at the camps, so it's plausible that the hospital block, immediately before the farmhouse, included a dentist's surgery.



Earthenware ink pots found at Naishes Farm

For Willie, who was 2½ years old when the First World War was declared, the military camps had been an intrinsic part of his childhood. His grandfather, another William, farmed Manor Farm in the village between 1886 and 1921. He supplied milk to the camps, which his eldest son Joe delivered in a churn loaded onto a horse-drawn cart. On one occasion, my father joined his uncle Joe on the milk round. Although only around 5 years old, the outing stuck in his mind because of his pure delight when a nurse at the Military Hospital in Fovant gave him a soft fluffy kitten to hold.



Joe Langdon

Three of Willie's uncles at Compton, Reg, Will and Rupert, went to fight in the War, leaving Joe to help their father, while my grandfather John farmed at Ashmore. In a letter to me written on 4 August 1974, my father wrote: "I reminded uncle [Rupert] that it was 60 years ago today that the First World War began, and he told me that he remembered the day well. Your grandfather had been to Salisbury and was returning to Shaftesbury on that very new-fangled mode of transport, the country omnibus. And as he passed Compton Chamberlayne he looked over the hedge and saw uncle Rupert cutting wheat with a self-binder." Picture the brothers gayly waving at each other as the bus rattled by on the tranquil A30. In only a matter of months, a deafening constant flow of monster traction engines would clank along this road carrying heavy loads of building material that would morph the village into a military megalopolis. As it would for many young men, the War was about to bring about a seismic change in Rupert's parochial life.



Our horse-drawn mechanical binder.

Willie is sitting on the horse, and his father on the binder. The photograph was taken at Manor Farm, Ashmore. My father wrote: "I cannot imagine when it was taken but memory recalls a vague Saturday in the early thirties when our 1918 tractor broke down and we continued cutting the corn with horses. I can imagine both the horses and myself were conscripted for this job under some protest." The boy's disgruntled expression speaks for itself.

Rupert enlisted in February 1916. Farmers were encouraged to provide horses for the War Effort. Officers from the Army Remount Service visited farms and offered good money for them, but their owners were reluctant to let go of those they were particularly fond of. To avoid appearing unpatriotic, they often concealed them in haystacks. Rupert, though, rode his horse to Tidworth to report for duty, leading two that belonged to his father. They both died during the rough voyage across the Bay of Biscay on their way to Egypt. The young man was broken-hearted, and must have deeply regretted taking them to war. Ten months later, he learnt that his brother Will was among the thousands of British soldiers slain at the Battle of the Somme. The empty space he left was a sadness the family always carried with it.

My father remembered chilly journeys to visit his grandparents in Compton; the horse slowly pulling their trap over the steep hill by Win Green, having to wait while the little narrow-gauge train that served the camps at Fovant rumbled across the road, and "seeing Australian soldiers sweeping the road with mules and one side of their hats pinned up (the Australian's not the mule's)."

Either on the 11th or 12th of November 1918, as Willie writes in his memoirs, he hurried home from school to tell his father what he probably already knew, that the War had ended, little realising himself what war really was. This was 3 months short of his eighth birthday.

Fovant Camp became a demobilisation centre. Between two and three thousand soldiers travelled every day to the Camp, Rupert among them. As he was leaving the hut after receiving his papers, he was called back by the sergeant, who reminded him that he had not taken his rail pass. Oh, he didn't need a pass, he just had to walk a mile to his home in Compton.

The Australian soldiers stationed at Naishes Farm at the end of the War lifted turf on the hill above the camp to reveal the shape of their homeland in the white underlying chalk. Their Map of Australia did not meet with universal approval. The owner of the land, Charles Penruddocke, sued the Commonwealth for damages. He refused an offer of £1,500, went to court, lost the case, and had to pay his own costs.



View of the military camp at Naishes Farm as seen from the farmhouse

Grass has grown over the map twice. It was allowed to reclaim the ground during the Second World War, for fear enemy aircraft would use its beacon as a location point. Afterwards, the Fovant Home Guard Association reinstated the map, together with regimental emblems carved on the hills in Fovant and Sutton Mandeville. A flagpole was erected on it. My father first hoisted the Australian flag, donated by Australia House in London, at its dedication on 26 January 1951. Every year after, until he retired and left the farm in 1978, the flag was flown four times a year: on the Queen's official birthday, Australia Day, Anzac Day, and Remembrance Day. He trudged up the hill in all weathers to raise it at sunrise, and take it down again at sunset. If it had rained, we returned home from school to find the massive flag laid out to dry in our kitchen. Nobody flew it after our family left, and regular maintenance of the map was also abandoned as too costly. Grass began to take over once more. Watching the emblem gradually fade was saddening, but I was not alone in this sentiment. In 2017, a group of volunteers set up the Australia Map Trust to restore it to its former glory. On Anzac Day 2019, the flag was finally raised again at a service on the hill. I was invited to attend, which I did with great pleasure as a homage to my father, who for 27 years had unfailingly carried it up and down the hill on the four designated days.



Willie is the person in the light-coloured overcoat.



The flag being raised again on 25 April 2019.

The map brought him pleasure too, with the many Australians who visited or contacted him to thank his association for maintaining their memorial. The last words should come from him. In a letter to

me written in September 1976, he told me he was going to write to the Primate of Australia and the archbishop of New South Wales to ask for a contribution towards the restoration of the church bells, adding:

“We could get the bells to play Waltzing Mathilda every time the hour strikes.”

His efforts met with success. He wrote to the Archbishop of Sydney too, “putting in a plea that Australian soldiers carved their map on our downs as some of them were left behind in the graveyard.” The Archbishop regretted not being able to help, but continuing his letter to me, my father reported that he heard from him again after almost a year: “Guess my surprise when I received a letter from him this week enclosing a cheque for nearly £200 (not Australian dollars). It had been collected by the chaplains of three RAAF stations and three army depots.”



A group from the village of Compton Chamberlayne and their friends undertook the restoration again. Here they are hard at work, looking north over Naishes Farm.



Willie standing on the right of the group. © Salisbury Museum.

Buttons & Badges found by Elise and her father, Willie, on their strolls around the fields.



1. Australian Military Forces
2. A Servant's Livery button. Possibly a hunt livery button of the Cove family of Herefordshire: "A Dexter Arm In Armour Embowed Holding In The Gauntlet A Battle-Axe Ppr." [See here.](#)
3. Royal Army Ordnance Corps
4. [General Service tunic button](#)
5. WWI RAF cap badge, perhaps dropped by someone being demobbed in 1919. (The RAF came into being on April 1, 1918.)