

## Article by Sam Peters – Journalist and Resident of Fovant.

It is a little under 30 years since long-term local resident Margaret McKenzie began researching the fascinating history behind the Fovant Camp and Badges.

Last Wednesday Aug 4th, which proved a glorious warm summer's day, world-leading television historian Dan Snow descended on our village after being alerted to Margaret's failing health by a mutual friend and fellow journalist, Sam Peters, who also lives in Fovant. Dan had no hesitation interrupting his busy filming schedule to meet New Zealand born Ms McKenzie, 83, in order pick her brains and hear her extraordinary tales of the First World War Camp, which was used as a training ground for 20,000 Allied soldiers at any one time.

The young men from across the world, many of whom would never return, were put through a gruelling training regime around the Camp, which also housed a field hospital, railway line, cinema and YMCA building, before being deployed to the trenches in northern France. Dan, who recorded a series of interviews with Ms McKenzie for his acclaimed "History Hit" podcast was clearly engrossed by her deep understanding of the important human stories which can often be overlooked in the recounting of military history. "When I heard Margaret was poorly I jumped at the opportunity to come and speak with her," Dan said. "The whole area around Fovant is of extraordinary historical importance and listening to Margaret's detailed knowledge of the area was truly humbling. I'm grateful to my old friend Sam for setting up this meeting and I very much hope to see Margaret again on Anzac Memorial Day next April 25."

The unlikely trio, led by the eternally intrepid Ms McKenzie, began their wonderful three-hour tour by orientating themselves at the top of the Fovant Badges before travelling by car down to Fovant High Street – which once housed no fewer than 42 shops to service the huge military camp. "It's incredible to think this village was actually a sprawling metropolis serving the camp," Dan said. "It's thanks to people like Margaret and others in the area who have worked tirelessly researching that so many precious stories have been kept alive. I'd encourage everyone with an interest in history who lives in the area around Fovant and the Nadder Valley to assist in the effort to save the memories of these amazing people and this extraordinary camp."

After viewing the High Street, the trio drove to the foot of the cinema steps on Green Drove and then east on the A30 to Naish's Farm, where local legend has it a very large number of unwanted mules were buried when the war drew to a close. The field is known locally as "mule pit" and the group were very grateful to landowner Anthony Newman for granting them permission to access the fields.

"I have spent many precious days trying to keep the stories held in this camp alive and it is very reassuring that so many people have promised me they will continue the work people like myself, Liz and Mike Harden and many others have done over the years," said Ms McKenzie. "It was a really special day and I'm grateful to Dan and Sam for organising it all."

**Sam Peters**

