

Sandbach History Society
Report on November 2021 meeting
Visit to St John the Evangelist, Sandbach Heath

The November meeting of Sandbach History Society took the form of a visit to St John the Evangelist Parish Church in Sandbach Heath. John Higgins gave a talk about the men from Sandbach Heath who died in World War 1 who are remembered on the memorial in the lychgate of the church.

24 Society members and 8 visitors were welcomed to the church by lay reader Alan Warburton, followed by John who spoke about the research he has done into the men who are commemorated on the memorial. He began his research when a friend commented to him in 2018 that it was a pity that so little was known about these people who had sacrificed their lives in the World War 1. John decided to rectify the situation and researched the lives of the twenty-three men and published his findings in a booklet, "Never to Return," a copy of which can be found in the local history section of Sandbach Library. As a person whose father died in World War II, he reminded members that for every name on the memorial there was a person who had grown up and lived as part of a family and community in the area. Hence the aim of his research was to bring them to life.

In 1911 Sandbach Heath had a population of 1,258 and most people were employed in agriculture, horticulture or at the Brunner Mond chemical works at Malkins Bank. The Church was built in 1861 with a vicarage nearby, later to be converted to the Chimney House Hotel. The St John's School opened in 1866 and the vicar during the First World War was the Rev. Charles Muckleston. The Church lychgate was built as a memorial to the men of the parish who died in the war and dedicated in 1920. At the time there was no standard criteria for war memorials and John has identified some errors in rank for several people. There are two men who are also commemorated on the Sandbach War Memorial and another who is also remembered in a plaque in St Mary's Church Sandbach and at Sandbach School.

Due to limited time for his talk, John focussed on just some of the people on the memorial and explained that his research used several sources. Two thirds of the WW1 service records were destroyed by fire in World War II but other sources such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission web site which records all those who died, census returns, regimental diaries, genealogy sites Ancestry and Find My Past, as well as contemporary newspapers, were used. For example, he was able to discover that Cpl Ernest Wood from Mow Cop left school at the age of fourteen and worked as a hall boy at Rode Hall and then as a chauffeur to Mrs Kennedy of Brookside in Arclid. He enlisted at the age of 19 in 1916 in the Gordon Highlanders and his battalion was sent to the Somme. On August 18th he was reported missing, presumed dead, though his body was never found. He is remembered in the Thiepval Monument in Picardy and a memorial service was held for him in St John's Church.

Not all those remembered died on the battlefield. For example, John identified that Norman Thornhill was born at the Oddfellows public house in Sandbach Heath where his father was

the publican. He was baptised at St John the Evangelist Church and attended the local school. When he enlisted as a private in the Cheshire regiment in 1915, he was working as a painter. In 1916 he was admitted to hospital with rheumatic fever and later sent home. He was subsequently discharged from the Army as being unfit for active service. He died of pneumonia in November 1918 and was buried in the family grave at St John's Church.

The only officer on the memorial plaque was 2nd Lieutenant William Upton whose family lived in Betchton; his father was a land surveyor and William was educated at Sandbach School from 5 to 18 where he was a member of the Rifle Club. It is said he took part in debates about conscription and referred to his fellow pupils as comrades. He joined the army in 1916 and then transferred to the Royal Flying Corps which merged with the Royal Navy Air Service in 1918 to become the Royal Air Force. He was flying a Sopwith Camel when he was shot down on 18 October 1918 over enemy lines in Flanders. He is buried in Dadizeele Cemetery in West Vlaanderen in Belgium.

After the talk and a vote of thanks, Aileen Thompson encouraged members to explore the Church. It is a Grade II listed building designed by George Gilbert Scott and funded by a bequest from Sarah Sibson whose father was curate of St Mary's Church for many years. Prominent features include wooden carvings on the reredos behind the altar by Mrs Kennedy, the stained-glass windows by Clayton and Bell, and the various plaques. Tea and biscuits were then served by Janet Warburton, whilst John Higgins displayed another of his talents by entertaining the members by playing the Church organ.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will take place in the evening of Tuesday 4 December at 8pm. This will be an online Zoom meeting. Dr Chris Horner from Manchester Metropolitan University will talk about "Early Edwardian Motoring" drawing on his recent research into the Cheshire vehicle registration records and on motoring salesmen of the time. Visitors are welcome to attend virtually; please e-mail Richard Vickery on info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk or view the Society website www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk for further details.