

Report on the October meeting of Sandbach History Society

The October meeting of the Sandbach History Society was held at Sandbach Library on Tuesday 6th October. John Higgins, a member of the society gave an interesting talk entitled “Men and Memorials”.

Mr. Higgins said that recently he had carried out considerable research on the men listed on local War Memorials including those in St John’s Church in Sandbach Heath. His motivation to do this work was to discover more about the people behind the names. Mr Higgins’ father’s name is on a war memorial at St John’s Roman Catholic Church in Kidsgrove. His father was killed during a German V2 rocket raid on a cinema in Antwerp in 1944.

Mr Higgins first gave the example of Ernest Cooper who is named on the war memorial in St John’s Church, Sandbach Heath. His family lived in Arclid, and he worked as a county roadman. Ernest Cooper married in 1914 and in 1915 enlisted in the Royal Lancashire Regiment. However, there was a problem as he was only 4 foot 11 inches tall and the army regulations were that soldiers should be at least 5 foot 3 inches. In order not to lose men like him the Army created Bantam battalions for those under the standard regulation height. These battalions soon developed a reputation for fierce fighting and bravery. The 11th Battalion of the regiment was sent to France in June 1916 and took part in trench warfare. In August 1916 Ernest was killed at the age of thirty.

Mr Higgins said that he had found out from research carried out by the local British Legion that there had been a brass memorial installed in Arclid Primitive Methodist Church in 1924 in memory of Ernest Cooper. There was also a roll of honour at the church of those from Arclid who had died. Over time the Church became a private dwelling, and the memorial was passed to a Mrs Peake of Sandbach Heath for safe keeping. Despite his best-efforts Mr Higgins had not been able to locate this lady or her family until recently. One day when at St John’s Church, Mr Higgins was chatting to a person who turned out to be Mrs Peake’s son. Mr Higgins was thus able to locate the memorial, and it is now installed in the entrance to St John’s Church.

It is now clear that there were no fixed rules as to who should be listed on local war memorials. Whilst it used to be assumed that every person listed on them was local, Mr. Higgins gave examples of men who did not live in Sandbach but were included on a memorial because their family or spouse were from the area. In one case a person was included because his brother was from Sandbach although he was not.

Mr Higgins then discussed another ornate brass memorial which used to hang on the wall in the Nat West Bank in Sandbach which is now closed. He wondered what had happened to the memorial and recently learnt that it had been taken to the Crewe branch of the Nat West. On a visit to the bank, Mr Higgins discovered it displayed along with another memorial which had come from the recently closed Nantwich branch.

The Sandbach memorial was to Philip Pendlebury, and the Nantwich memorial was to Frank Cooke. A short biography of both is given on the website "Nat West Remembers". As the biographies were quite brief, Mr Higgins decided to research them further and they have subsequently been updated as a result of his work.

Mr Higgins found out that Philip Pendlebury joined the Westminster Bank in Sandbach in 1938 and then in August 1940 he left to go on war service and became a leading aircraftsman in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Philip Pendlebury was a trainee pilot and was killed in April 1941 at the age of twenty, when his aircraft crashed on his first training flight at night.

Mr Higgins then researched Frank Cooke who worked at the Nantwich branch following in the footsteps of his father who became manager of the Sandbach branch of the bank. In the summer of 1939, Frank Cooke joined the Territorial Army and then was called up for service in France. He was evacuated from Dunkirk and like Philip Pendlebury transferred to the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve in March 1941. Frank Cooke gained his pilot's wings in October 1941 but died in June 1942 when his plane crashed immediately after take-off. He was twenty-five years old and is buried in Sandbach cemetery.

Mr Higgins concluded the talk by reminding everyone that it is important to realise that behind every name on a war memorial is a real person. He certainly brought several of them back to life in his talk.