



## The Canadians in Folkestone during the Great War

In England the trains from London to the south coast seaside towns had been busy with day-trippers; it was the Bank Holiday weekend of August 1914 and the weather was so nice that many families took a train to Brighton, Hastings and Folkestone. Across the English Channel, however, there were serious problems. Before the weekend was over the holiday mood had would be dampened because of the announcement that Britain had declared war on Germany. Even so, those early days of the Great War created a spirit of excitement as young men, worried that the war would 'be over by Christmas', flocked to join the army. The professional British army was sent to France and Belgium, proud and confident that it would send the Germans packing. However, within a few months of the start of the war at the end of August 1914 the Army (British Expeditionary Force) had been shattered; its place over the next five years would be taken by a generation of young men from all walks of life, and from all corners of the world, who answered the call to arms.



**A famous poster calling for Volunteers  
to fight. The man pointing is  
Lord Kitchener**

Among those who answered the call were the Canadians. The Great War is just beyond living memory, but so many men were killed that most families throughout Britain, Canada and the

Commonwealth will have a relative who took part in the war. That war is so often remembered because of the horrors, the mud and blood, the fields of men cut down like corn by the storm of machine gun bullets and the slaughter in the trenches from the artillery bombardments. In France and Belgium there are very large cemeteries with rows and rows of graves of all the men and women who were killed.

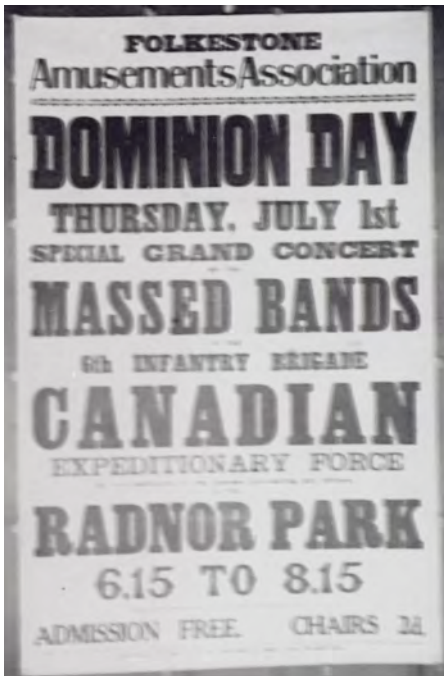
In Canada, as in Britain, young men volunteered to help fight the war. Some had arrived in 1914 and more followed. The second group of men (the Second Contingent or Division) set sail for England in February 1915 and came to Folkestone, where large camps of huts and tents had been set up for them in and around Shorncliffe Army Camp. Just before the Great War, Shorncliffe Camp could only hold about 8,000 men so a lot of other land had to be found for all the men who arrived. As well as the huts and tents, some of the soldiers were given homes with local families (billeting).



**Soldiers who were living with (billeted) a Folkestone family**

Forty thousand Canadians came to the area in 1915 and, in the towns of Folkestone and Hythe many local people even started to talk like Canadians, saying 'sure' instead of 'yes'. The local people welcomed and liked the Canadians. The Maple Leaf Club was started by a small group of English women to provide home comforts, such as a bed, bath and a meal at reasonable rates.

The Canadian soldiers did lots of things which helped to make them popular with the people of Folkestone. Their bands played music in the bandstands on the Leas and at local churches, and they also marched through the town. They arranged sports days at Radnor Park and showed how good they were at horse riding.



Poster from 1917

The huts and tents where most of the men lived were very basic. After they had spent a hard day training there was not much for the men to do to relax. To help them, the people of Folkestone and elsewhere raised money to put up a special hut, the YMCA Hut, where the men could enjoy their free time. The hut on St Martin's Plain was officially opened in April 1915. The event was reported in the local Folkestone and Hythe Herald,

*The patriots from Canada greatly appreciate the comfort and advantages of the YMCA's admirable building which is tastefully fitted up. On week-days concerts and cinematographic performances are given to the men, while on Sundays services are held. At one end there is a counter where the men can procure refreshments of all kinds. Writing paper and envelopes are provided and there is a gramophone and bagatelle table.*

The soldiers could also come into Folkestone in their spare time. One soldier, Private Broome, wrote home to his family in Canada, telling them:

*"29th September 1915: We have had nice weather here till today and it's raining cats and dogs. We are fixed up alright though. We are in huts. About 30 men live in each hut and have their beds and tables and chairs and crockery. The food is brought from the cookhouse and we eat right in our huts. They are pretty big although the name makes one think they are small. I believe I told you we are near Folkestone. We go there nearly every night. I am learning to roller skate. It is great fun although kind of rough for a learner."*

Sadly, Private Broome was killed in France in 1917, so he never went back to Canada to show his family and friends how he could roller skate.



**Soldiers marching along the Leas to the harbour  
and the ships to take them to the War in France**

Other soldiers wrote home from Folkestone to tell their families about the War. Folkestone was very important because most of the men who had to fight in France (the Western Front) had to travel by ships from Folkestone harbour. Private Louis Duff wrote to his parents,

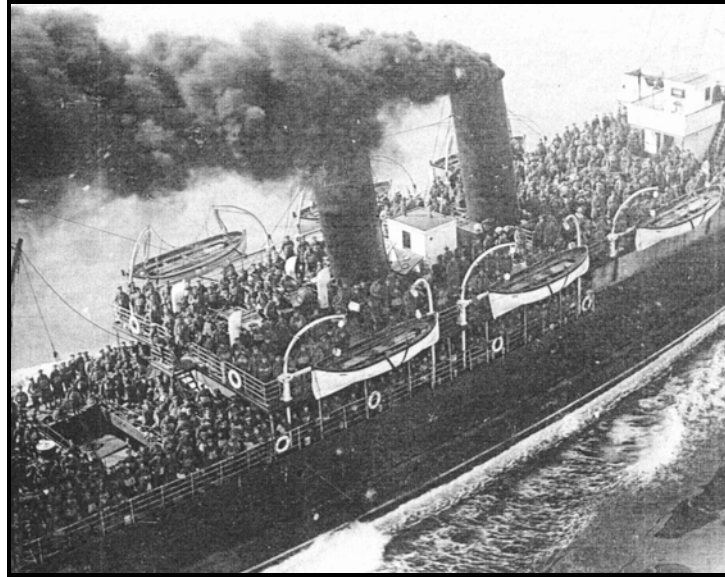
*“29<sup>th</sup> June 1915, Dibgate Camp, Shorncliffe: Just a line to let you know we arrived OK and am well...We have two pretty coast towns close by, Hythe west of us an hours walk and Folkestone, a popular seaside resort, east of us...On a clear day France shows up plainly. Submarines and Torpedo Boat Destroyers are patrolling the sea all the time. Aeroplanes and dirigibles are a common sight.”*

The soldiers had to work hard to learn how to use their rifles and to march and how to dig trenches. In France there were thousands of miles of trenches and the soldiers spent most of their time in them. They were dirty, muddy places but they helped to protect the men from the guns of the enemy. Once the training was finished the men were ready to go to war. They must have felt excited, but also nervous and frightened. Even though Folkestone was not where the real fighting was, the town was close enough to France and Belgium to hear the sounds of the battles. Lieutenant Kirkland, wrote home from Folkestone to say,

*“When there is a heavy bombardment on around Zeebruge or at the west of the battle line at Dunkirk, or in the direction of Ypres, we can distinctly hear the rumble of the big guns...I thought at first the noise I heard was thunder but as I was hearing it every morning I made enquiries and was told it was the noise of battle.”*

When the day came to go off to war, the men soldiers marched to Folkestone Harbour to board a Troop Ship for the crossing to Boulogne in France. One of the many thousands of men who crossed was Harry Patch. Harry died in 2009 and was the last surviving British soldier (Tommy) who had fought in the Great War. He described what it was like to leave England to face the unknown horrors of the war,

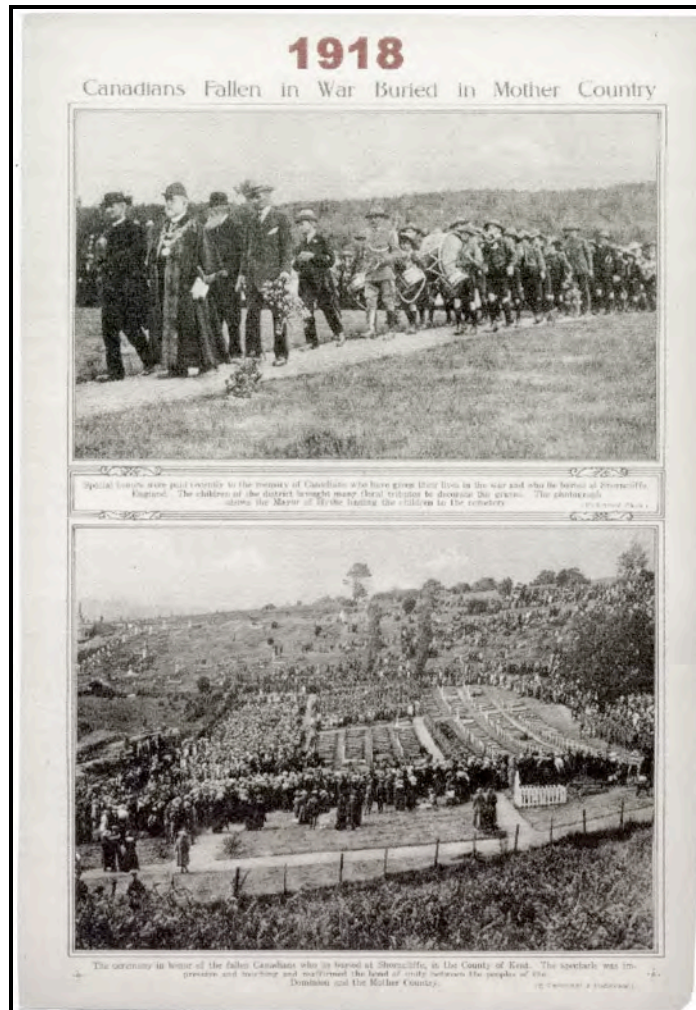
*“Our small group walked up a narrow gangway and was packed together in an old paddle steamer. As we pulled out of Folkestone harbour, we watched England and the white cliffs gradually recede into the darkness. I wasn’t the only one who wondered whether we would ever set foot on her soil again. Would I come home and, if I did, would I be in one piece?”*



**Soldiers on board a ship (Victoria)  
leaving Folkestone for Boulogne**

With so many thousands of soldiers in Folkestone training for the war, and many more who came back from the fighting in France and Belgium with injuries, it was necessary to provide hospitals and medical staff, nurses and doctors, to treat the ill and wounded men. Many places which, before the war had been schools, hotels and ordinary homes, were turned into hospitals. Most of the ill and wounded soldiers recovered, but not all. Some died. It was decided that the Canadian soldiers who died in Folkestone should be buried at the Military Cemetery at Shorncliffe Army Camp.

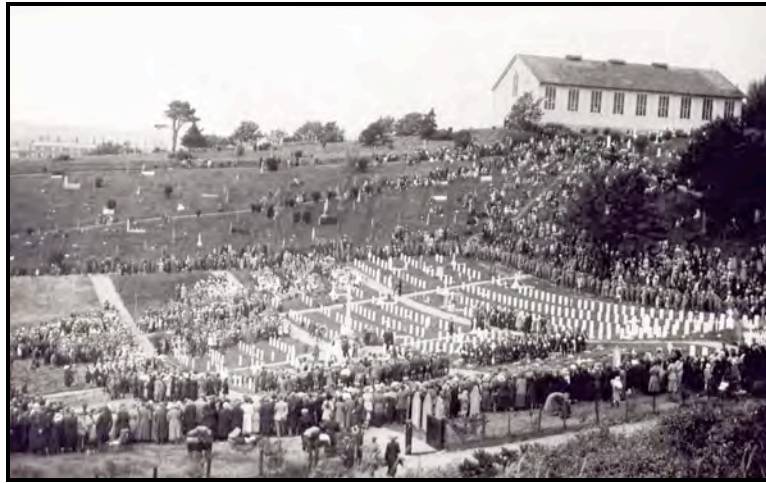
As so many of the Canadians were buried so far from their homes and families, the people of Folkestone and Hythe decided to help remember them and this led to the idea for Canadian Flower Day. Children from local schools would go to Shorncliffe Cemetery each year to say prayers and place flowers on the grave of a Canadian soldier. The first time this happened was in 1917 and, apart from a short break during the Second World War (when local school children had been evacuated to safer parts of the country) the ceremony has happened every single year since. Some of the children who, today, attend the ceremony have parents or grandparents who did the same when they were children.



**A page from a Canadian magazine in 1918 showing soldiers being buried at Shorncliffe Cemetery**



**Nurses and soldiers at Shorncliffe Cemetery during WWI.  
 Note the new graves of the men who have been Buried, marked with just wooden crosses**



**Another view of Shorncliffe Cemetery from about 1925,  
now with the white headstones**



**Children attending a very early Canadian Flower Day in about 1930**



**This is a more recent picture, probably from the early 1960s**

There are nearly 300 Canadian soldiers buried at the Cemetery. It is possible to find out details about many of them, and teachers will show how this can be done. Here, we will mention just one of the them. His name was William Meehan. William was 36 years old when he volunteered in 1915. He had served in his local militia in New Brunswick for the past ten years and he answered his country's call to arms despite the pleas of his wife, Alice, and their three young children. Private Meehan sailed for England with the rest of the Canadian Second Contingent in spring 1915. Sadly, William caught meningitis soon after his arrival at the barracks outside Folkestone and, although treated in hospital, he died from the disease on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1915, and was buried at the Military Cemetery (Plot N.288).



**William Meehan with his wife Alice taken in 1901 in Canada.  
William is buried at Shorncliffe Cemetery**

When remembering the Canadian soldiers at Shorncliffe Cemetery, it is also right to remember the many other soldiers buried there. Some died over 200 years ago, and some very recently, including soldiers killed in Afghanistan.