

Remembrance Sunday 2011
St Bride St Columba
Remembrance Day 2006, S. P&P Commercial Drive

‘They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old, age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn: at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we shall remember them, we shall remember them’.

I grew up in the north of England. When I was about 10 or 11 years old, in around 1953 or 1954, we went the extra step, and put the car on the ferry to France: something which was not yet commonplace, the war being over but some 10 years. When you went to Europe at that time, you didn’t just have your sticker proclaiming your nationality on the back of the car, you mounted little flag posts on the front of the car, and there were raised two Union Jack flags in proclamation of our identity to all around.

The surprising thing was that those two Union Jacks attracted responses in all those little villages and towns across the north of France: across the valley of the Somme, across Picardy, Flanders, the valley of the Marne, and Champagne people stopped as they were doing their errands, their shopping, stood and waved as we went by. For a small boy, it was really a lot of fun, and I remember happily waving back.

But the meaning behind those waves was lost on me.

Yes, when we stopped for a lunchtime picnic by the side of the road, you could find, still recent, traces of the reason for the waves: as you went off exploring, as small boys are wont to do, there would be odd things in the undergrowth: from gun emplacements: massive fortified concrete shelters, to rusting rolls of barbed wire, overgrown with wildflowers, and yes, with those all-too-well-known poppies. But although they were old, although I could relate them to the war, trenches, guns and so on, there was no human impact of what had happened here: just the sight of a farmer, going up and down, cultivating his fields as he had always done – except when armies of men were fighting across the same land, turning it into a muddy waste, where men might drown in the water-filled holes made by impact of shells fired far away.

The impact of what had happened, and what we commemorate this day, came when we stopped at a small city or large town: possibly Abbeville, possibly St. Quentin, and after looking around the main square, went off into what seemed to be a park: and it was a beautiful park, a garden of remembrance, with row upon row of white headstones, each engraved with name, rank and number, and many with the regimental crest, and many with the inscription ‘name unknown’, or ‘known only to His Maker’. This park might be found today, usually in a quiet corner of many of the towns and cities of Northern France: they are worth a visit, to understand what happened, and to reflect on how this incredible fact had

an impact on the future for us all: how many dads lie there who never had the chance to become dads? How many dreams, how many hopes, how much ability, were never to be realized? Never to be realized, because these men knowingly enlisted in the forces, to protect what we now enjoy.

There were two sections: the first for the First, the Great War, and the second, for the 1939-1945 war. These men had gone off and left families and loved ones for you and for me: they had left peace and safety, so that we might be safe and sure of a good life. They had been prepared, as those who returned had also been prepared, to give their lives so that others may live a free and good life, free from oppression and injustice. And they had died in this cause.

They brought all their good, and all their bad, into the battle with them, and perhaps we might think that in this fury, in this terror of death and damnation, this was their purging by fire, so that they, giving their lives for the sake of all of us, might be granted entry to heaven, any sin being wiped clean by the fear and desperate pain suffered at the last, so that they are now safe in the arms of Jesus.

But despite any weaknesses and thanks to their strengths, we are here now, in this free and pleasant land, enjoying the fruits of their labours, and so, at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we shall remember them, we shall remember them'.