

HISTORY SOCIETY: THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

MASTER CHARLES WELCHMAN



Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget

The scene was set by Master Timothy Shuttleworth's introduction of His Honour Anthony (Tony) Bradbury as the speaker earlier this year for the third in the present series of lectures organised by the Gray's Inn Historical Society. Tony Bradbury is a retired and much admired Circuit and Deputy High Court Judge. His riveting talk was entitled 'The Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey' and covered the events leading to the burial of the unknown warrior on 11 November 1920. They were brilliantly described, and Tony Bradbury delivered a master class in advocacy as well as history. There is not the slightest chance that any of those who were prescient and fortunate enough to be there will forget this extremely moving talk delivered as it was with consummate understatement and without any apparent reference to notes. It confirmed the gold standard that has been set by these lectures. While the causes and the conduct of The Great War are again being debated there is no escaping the scale of the human sacrifice and consequential distress and anguish for wives, children and friends and relatives of those who lost their lives. Made worse for many because there were some 500,000 for whom there was no known grave. It was an Army Padre, the Rev David Railton MC, who had served on the battlefield, performed his ministry there and tended the graves of unknown British soldiers, who recognised the need for those who had lost a loved one to have a focal point for their grief. It was his suggestion to the Dean of Westminster Abbey that an unknown warrior should be buried there that set in train the events covered in the talk. King George V initially did not favour the idea of the burial of an unknown warrior in the Abbey and neither did the Cabinet. The King and Cabinet were won round by the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, ably assisted by Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the General Staff. It was by now 15 October 1920 and the unveiling of the Cenotaph was just over three weeks away. Time was very short. On 7 November field ambulances went to the four cemeteries on the Western Front to exhume and collect an unidentified body save for some remnant of a British uniform. The four bodies selected were then taken to a chapel not far from Arras. At midnight Brigadier General L J Wyatt selected one of the bodies not knowing from which battlefield it had come. The next morning the pine coffin was conveyed to Boulogne with French troops lining the



The King laying the final wreath on the gun carriage containing the Unknown Warrior.

route to the Castle that had served as the French HQ and where it remained overnight guarded by a company of French soldiers all of whom had been awarded the Legion d'Honneur.

On 10 November the pine coffin was placed inside one of English oak with a Crusader's sword donated by the King bolted to the lid. Then with due ceremony the coffin was placed on deck of HMS Verdun. On arrival at Dover the Verdun was greeted from Dover Castle by a Field Marshall's 19 gun salute. With meticulous planning and precision the coffin was then conveyed to London by train. There were large crowds at Dover and at every station en route to Victoria Station where a huge crowd awaited its arrival. The next morning, 11 November, the casket was covered with the Union flag that had been used as an altar cloth by David Railton on the Western Front. The coffin was then placed on the waiting gun carriage and the funeral procession moved off. From Horse Guards a measured 19 gun salute rang out with the echoes of each salvo dying away before the next was fired. Tony Bradbury described the scene in moving detail including a description of a slightly misty still November day with a chill in the air. The entire route to the Cenotaph was lined by troops and vast silent crowds – the cortege took over 10 minutes to pass. At the Cenotaph the King placed a wreath on the coffin and then he unveiled the Cenotaph itself just as Big Ben started to ring out the Eleventh Hour on the Eleventh Day. Two minutes of complete and motionless silence followed not just in Whitehall but throughout the land. After the sounding of the Last Post and the laying of wreaths, the

funeral procession moved off to the Abbey with the King as chief mourner walking behind the coffin.

The congregation waiting in the Abbey comprised in the main women who had lost sons and husbands (in some cases their husband and all their sons) and veterans from the armed forces including a Guard of Honour comprising two lines of 38 holders of the Victoria Cross.

When the King and the other dignitaries had left the Abbey the 76 holders of the Victoria Cross filed past the open grave along with other members of the congregation. Shortly thereafter David Railton's battleworn Union Flag that flies motionless in the Abbey to this day was spread over the grave itself and the public was admitted to Westminster Abbey. More than half a million people filed past the grave before it was closed on 18 November.

Floral tributes overwhelmed the Cenotaph and Whitehall in November 1920. In our own times we have witnessed out pouring of public grief but this as described by Tony Bradbury was on a different and truly extraordinary scale. It was understandable given the enormity of the human sacrifice and in so very many cases the lack of a grave to be tended. In conclusion Tony Bradbury reminded his audience

of Kipling's Recessional Hymn that ends with the words 'Lest we forget – lest we forget'. We will not forget nor will we forget this moving and uplifting reminder of the Army Padre who provided the nation with a focal point for its grief in an hour of need.

Postscript

Since writing the above I have discovered that the Inn's Head Porter from 1930 until 1951, Mr Harry Ivey, was in charge of the army escort at the interment of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Mr Ivey's military service was between 1910 and 1930 and in World War II he organised the Gray's Inn fire watches and fought fires during air raids. Like our present Head Porter, Nigel Hoadley, Harry Ivey was late of the Coldstream Guards, which they both served with distinction.

I am grateful to the Inn's Librarian, Theresa Thom, for the help she has given me in providing this footnote and to Arthur Pease, the Inn's long-serving commissionaire, for telling me of Mr Ivey's involvement with the interment of the Unknown Warrior. ■