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Village's war dead honoured at last after 27 names missed on memorial

A new memorial to the war dead of Deddington in Oxfordshire will be dedicated by the Bishop of Dorchester on Sunday after local historians discovered dozens of names were missing from the village's existing monument for those killed in conflict.



Robert Forsyth, left, and Michael Allbrook with Deddington's new war memorial. Photo: JOHN LAWRENCE FOR THE TELEGRAPH

By **Sam Marsden**

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For decades the war memorial in the small Cotswold village of Deddington has honoured 58 local men who gave their lives serving their country.

However, when two amateur historians started looking into the stories of those from the parish killed in the World Wars, they discovered another 27 "lost" names that were missing from the roll.

After five years of painstaking research, a new memorial for all the villagers who made the ultimate sacrifice during their military service will be dedicated on Sunday by the Bishop of Dorchester in a ceremony to be attended by many of their descendants. Some of the families have finally discovered where their loved ones are buried and even made contact with long-lost relatives as a result of the historians' efforts.

Robert Forsyth, a retired Royal Navy submarine commander who has lived in Deddington, Oxfordshire, for over 35 years, believes that the names were simply missed off the village's original monument to its dead because of administrative oversight.

"The war memorial didn't go up until four or five years after the First World War," he said.

"By that time some families had moved and it was probably a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'.

"There was nothing suspicious about it, it was just life. There were no specific reasons we could find for the names being left off."

The previously missing names on the new memorial, which takes the form of a plaque inside the Church of St Peter and St Paul in the heart of the village, include two men killed in the Boer War and 21 who died in the First World War, among them two who lost their lives in Iraq.

Two of those who died in the Second World War are remembered in inscriptions in Deddington but not on the original war memorial.

However, the village had no record at all of another two men who were killed in the 1939 to 1945 conflict.

Tom Van Oss was a successful artist before the war and had one of his works, a morale-boosting painting of a new anti-aircraft gun ironically entitled 'Salute to Invader', published by the Daily Telegraph in 1938.

He moved to Deddington with his wife Favell and their sons in 1936, and he enlisted in the Army as a specialist camouflage officer when war broke out.

Having been posted to France, he spent a fortnight working on the Maginot line before joining the retreat to Dunkirk, and was one of the final British troops to be rescued from the beach.

Mr Van Oss was then promoted to Major and given responsibility for camouflage along a lengthy stretch of England's eastern coast.

On November 3 1941 he was inspecting coastal defences off Boston, Lincolnshire, in a patrol boat when it hit a magnetic mine, killing him and everybody else on board.

Also missing from Deddington's war memorial was Ken Harris, a decorated RAF wireless operator and gunner.

He served in the merchant navy before joining the RAF on the outbreak of war. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal and promoted to Sergeant after a reconnaissance mission over France in 1940 during which his aircraft was badly damaged by enemy fire but managed to limp back to base in Norfolk.

On June 13 1940 his aircraft was on a mission to attack Panzer tank columns advancing on Paris when it was attacked by two Messerschmitt Bf 109s and crash-landed near Esternay in north-eastern France, killing him, although his crewmates survived.

He is the only British Second World War serviceman buried in the local French military cemetery, but until now had no known grave or memorial in the UK.

Mr Harris came from a large Deddington family – his Boer War veteran grandfather had 12 children - but his descendants moved away and lost contact with the other branches of their family until the research rediscovered his links to the village.

Sandra McQueen, 69, from Aylesbury, Bucks, is Mr Harris's cousin, but was born four years after he was killed and had no idea that he had a grave in France.

She said: "As a child, entertainment for my sister and I in the late 1940s would be to go through the family photographs. We had this photograph of Ken, who I knew had been shot down.

"Rob Forsyth's research means that his story is going to be told now, and I am very moved and so thrilled that I will be going to a memorial for Ken."

The local history project began about five years ago when Deddington resident Michael Allbrook, 69, who previously ran his own recruitment business, began investigating the names on the village war memorial.

Mr Forsyth, 73, joined him and expanded the scope of the research to include everyone from the parish who had served in the military from Waterloo onwards, interviewing hundreds of people across the country, many of them now in their 80s and 90s, to fill in the many gaps.

The pair published the fruits of their labour in a 200-page book called *A Parish At War* in 2011, and used the proceeds for the new memorial.

There are no official rules for who should be listed on a local war memorial, but Mr Forsyth decided to include people who had a strong relationship with the village, either through birth, marriage or having moved there.

Tomorrow's dedication ceremony will be led by the Right Reverend Colin Fletcher, the Bishop of Dorchester, and attended by guests including Sir Tony Baldry, the local Conservative MP.

Mr Forsyth said: "I would put the experience of putting this book together up there with my submarine career in the Cold War.

"It grew on me. At the beginning I had no idea how big it was going to be. I feel I have done something which the village really appreciated and joined in.

"It has brought the village together, and people are enormously grateful, particularly the younger generation."