

A chance discovery in a bundle of papers sent Richard Corfield and his family off on a journey of remembrance

As I stand at the edge of the square in the cool night air discarded newspapers skitter along the deserted street frontages of the French town of Arras. All the bars are closed now and the only sign of life is the solitary kebab van on the opposite corner of the square under the soft rays of a sodium light.

The buildings of Arras have one thing in common – none of them are more than 96 years old. There is a good reason for this and it is the same one that affects every other habitation in northern France. By November 11, 1918, every town in Picardy had been reduced to rubble.

But tonight, August 4, 2014, exactly 100 years ago to the day, the town would have been full of gaiety and relief, because the inhabitants had just heard the news that Britain had joined the war and that the British Expeditionary Force was on their way to expel the Hun.

Tonight, my family and I are staying in Arras because tomorrow we intend to visit a member of the family who, five years ago, we did not even know existed.

Now the Great War has become real to us. These are no longer headstones around me. Instead they are men, hundreds of them, standing still and silent

Some years after my mother died, in January 2001, I encountered a bundle of her papers lying in a forgotten file. One document in particular stood out. It was a letter that was all too common among the households of Britain during the First World War, explaining the death of a much-loved member of the family.

What must it have been like to receive such a letter? Even allowing for a loyalty to King and Country that is as alien to modern sensibilities as the idea of the band playing as *Titanic* sank, there is no real way of knowing. But that did not stop myself, my wife Julie and our daughters Jess, 20, and Susie, 14, setting out to find his last resting place and, more importantly, to pay our respects to a man that we never knew but who shares at least some of our family's genes.

So began our quest for Great Uncle Albert.

It turned out that he had died at the final battle of the Somme on August 23, 1918 – just three months before the Great War ended.

He had turned 18 in March that year and joined the Norfolk Regiment, despite being a Londoner from the East End.

According to the comprehensive Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, Great Uncle Albert was buried at the cemetery at Ribemont-sur-Ancre in the 'cemetery extension', a euphemism for the



In search of Great Uncle Albert

Continued on page 26

No. 42019 M Ga

ARMY FORM B. 104-82

Record Office,

3.9.18

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Madam

It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office notifying the death of:-

(No.) 42019 (Rank) Plt

(Name) A. Shipley

(Regiment) 4th Norfolk

which occurred on 26 Field Ambulance France

on the 23. 8. 18

The report is to the effect that he Died from Wounds received in Action

By His Majesty's command I am to forward the enclosed message of sympathy from Their Gracious Majesties the King and Queen. I am at the same time to express the regret of the Army Council at the soldier's death in his Country's service.

I am to add that any information that may be received as to the soldier's burial will be communicated to you in due course. A separate leaflet dealing more fully with this subject is enclosed.

I am,

Madam

Your obedient Servant,

Chas. Cameron, Lieut.

Officer in charge of Records.

Mr. E. Shipley

16 Brotherton St

Bethnal Green

E.

FORM B. 104-82 (1918) 11th Ed. H. B. L. 100

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The document which began the Corfield family's quest for Great Uncle Albert. Below, High Wood, part of the Somme battlefield, as it is today



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rather large annex that had been added in the aftermath of the final Battle of the Somme.

Heading out of town on the Baupame road, a town that, like Arras, was left as nothing more than a pile of rubble by the summer of 1918, we drive along roads that are still as straight as the Romans left them.

The early morning sunlight casts lambent gold across fields of ripening corn and the rolled bales of straw.

"A hundred years ago," I observe to my family, "these would have been stooks rather than rolls, collected by hand."

I am reminded of the words of Cyril Helm, the medical officer with the Second Battalion of the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry which had fought some way to the north-east: "One of the saddest sights I ever saw," he wrote in 1914, "was the sight of the horses leaning against the stooks of corn trying to support themselves after they had been wounded."

It was a lamentation from a man whose generation had grown up with horses, for, as everyone knows, once a warhorse lies down, it never gets up again.

And then we turn left down into a little valley. A river, the Ancre, a tributary of the Somme, runs along the bottom between fields and glades which are interspersed with clusters of woodland.

We enter the village and turn left again and there, slumbering in the sun is the cemetery of Ribemont-sur-Ancre. We park and walk along a grassy path that still glistens with dew.

The cemetery is like all CWGC cemeteries – tended to perfection. The flowerbeds that front the headstones are without a weed and the grass is cut to a military precision short-back-and-sides.

We walk among them as in a dream. Then my eldest daughter calls softly and we turn to see one more grave among the regimented ranks. But this one says 'A Shipley'. We stand beside it with heads bowed. Now the Great War has become real to us. These are no longer headstones around me. Instead they are men, hundreds of them, standing still and silent with the wind of history scudding silently behind their sightless eyes. Each face bears an expression of terrible sadness – for pain and suffering, for ruined lives, for wasted dreams.

I look up and now these shades of history stand in serried ranks among the fields and coppices as far as I can see. A million shades whose light was doused for a few square miles of territory.

Back in Ribemont-Sur-Ancre safe in the 21st century with my family around me, I look around and I can see that all of us have been affected, each in their own way.

After an hour we leave and Jess writes in the book at the gatepost: "Came to see A. Shipley: Great Grandfather and Brother. Not Forgotten."



Ribemont cemetery.
Below, Jess and Susie
Corfield pay their
respects



**Nature has
reclaimed these
trenches at the
Somme**



■ For those wanting to trace their own Great War relatives, the first port of call should be the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website. <http://www.cwgc.org/>

■ Also, [ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) is invaluable for in-depth research, revealing war medals records as well as births, deaths and marriages and much more. <http://www.ancestry.co.uk>

■ A great resource for general information about the Great War is The Long, Long Trail at <http://www.1914-1918.net/>