

THE FRIENDS OF EXETER CATHEDRAL

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‘1917 AND ALL THAT’

by Jonathan Walker

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It is not often that Hollywood has a link with Exeter Cathedral, but Sir Sam Mendes’ new blockbuster film ‘1917’ has created one. The film, which features cameo roles by Colin Firth and Dominic Cumberbatch, is set on the Western Front during The Great War and tells the story of two messengers who have to cross a surreal landscape, recently abandoned by the Germans, in order to deliver a message to a British battalion. That message aims to halt the unit’s intended suicidal attack, for the Germans have laid a trap. To say more, would be a ‘spoiler’ but the unit portrayed in the film is the 2nd Battalion The Devonshire Regiment – and Exeter Cathedral remains the spiritual home of the ‘Devons’, encompassing their regimental chapel of St Edmund.

Before looking at the close association between the Devons and the Cathedral, what was the story of the county regiment’s contribution to The Great War? As with most regiments before the outbreak of the conflict, the Devons maintained two regular battalions of professional soldiers, a reserve battalion and three battalions of territorial (part-time) soldiers. There was a gulf between these units, with Lord Kitchener complaining, somewhat unjustly, that the Territorials were a collection of ‘middle-aged professional men who were allowed to put on uniform and play at soldiers’. Professional jealousy apart, it was clear that the British Army would have to be rapidly expanded, as the first weeks of the war decimated the ranks of the ‘old contemptibles’. So, with the recruitment of new volunteer ‘Service Battalions’ and later with conscription in 1916, the Devonshire Regiment eventually expanded to some twenty-four battalions. The Regiment fought with great distinction during the Battle of The Somme in 1916, but it was their military operations in early 1917 that were to prove the inspiration for the recent feature film.

As 1917 began both sides found themselves exhausted, but it was the Germans who first changed their strategy. They attempted to starve Britain into submission by launching a campaign of unrestricted U-Boat attacks. But they needed to buy time for this plan to work and with the threat of the United States entering the war, German tacticians needed a quick, radical plan. They estimated that by removing the bulging salient in their front line around Arras on the Western Front and falling back to a heavily defended and straighter ‘Hindenburg Line’, they could save themselves ten divisions (approx. 200,000 men). So, during February and March 1917, the Germans retreated some twenty miles, leaving their sappers to raze all buildings, destroy roads, and fell trees (to prevent the British using them as observation points). They also laid mine traps and poisoned water wells to hinder the inevitable British advance.

British units, including the 8th and 9th Battalions of the Devons (20th Brigade) swiftly moved forward to occupy the vacated territory, but they were still unsure of the enemy’s motives. Because of German air superiority in the sector, British aircraft could not get close enough to report on the scale of the enemy withdrawal. Nevertheless, the two battalions continued to attack rearguard German positions in the sector and were then withdrawn on 5 April. Meanwhile the 2nd Devons¹ (23rd Brigade) were also involved in probing operations. In late March they assisted in the capture of Heudicourt suffering only light casualties and were then put into reserve until 11 April. While the actual dates of the Devons’ deployments do not exactly tally with the action in the film, we have to remember that ‘1917’ is a feature film and not a documentary. Some critics have taken issue with other minor errors of detail in the film, yet it remains an important and popular movie, which has been widely viewed and promises to reach a youthful, worldwide audience. Furthermore, many of those young will hear of The Devonshire Regiment for the first time, and some may even be encouraged to visit the regimental chapel in Exeter Cathedral.



27 July 1921 (Photograph reproduced by kind permission of The Keep Museum, Dorchester.)

The connection between The Devonshire Regiment and the Cathedral goes back a long way. On 27 July 1921, nearly three years after the Armistice, the Cathedral began its long formal association with the regiment. For on that day a large crowd, including many veterans and families of the fallen, gathered outside the West Front, as parties from the regimental battalions paraded with their colours into the Cathedral. The clergy and choir processed around the Nave to a rendition of 'Fight the Good Fight' followed by a moving Russian anthem. At that point, the procession joined the representatives of the regiment, who gathered around a new large covered memorial on the north wall of the Nave (where the reception desk is currently sited – see image). Two soldiers of the Devons stood with heads bowed and arms reversed, flanking the memorial as the Dean gave special words of thanksgiving, followed by the Blessing.

Major-General Sir Louis Bols, Colonel of the Regiment, then unveiled the splendid bronze, sculpted by JA Stevenson and dedicated 'To the glory of God and in memory of the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the Devonshire Regiment, who lost their lives during the war 1914-1918'. Bols emphasised that the striking memorial of the crouching soldier represented the 'spirit of determination, doggedness and self-sacrifice' that the Regiment had shown during the war. After his address, the regimental bugler played 'The Last Post' and then the 'Reveill e', when the two sentries beside the memorial snapped to attention, as if depicting the transition from death into new life.

When the bronze memorial is viewed today, those qualities of the Devons still shine through. The figure of the soldier, bloodied but unbowed, peers out into No Man's Land, surrounded by the debris of the battlefield. To his left, a field crucifix still stands, symbolising the resilience of Christianity, while he cradles his Lee Enfield rifle with fixed bayonet. He wears the British Army woollen puttees (manufactured by the Devon company of Fox Brothers, at their mills in Uffculme and Culmstock), which are wound around his khaki woollen trousers. While his Brodie helmet gives him some protection from shrapnel and his box respirator might save him from an enemy gas attack, he is essentially exposed and vulnerable. His situation becomes more apparent when viewed at a distance and this fine memorial was actually more accessible in its original position. But it was eventually moved to become the centrepiece of a nearby dedicated chapel for the Devonshire Regiment.

This new home was the 14th-century Chapel of St Edmund, sited behind the cathedral's earliest oak screen, in the north-west of the Nave. It was originally dedicated as a regimental chapel on 25 July 1936, being the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Regiment. The dedication ceremony must have been quite a spectacle, as trumpeters appeared in both the minstrels' gallery in the Nave as well as the Lady Chapel. This chapel had been newly refurbished by the fashionable architect Sir Guy Dawber, who supervised the remounting of the existing Cathedral's monuments and tablets relating to the Devons, including the splendid Stevenson bronze. In 1948, a twin lancet window in the chapel's west wall was adapted to take a memorial stained-glass design by Reginald Bell, commemorating some of the Regiment's later campaigns.

As Britain's worldwide commitments were reduced post-war, a series of regimental amalgamations were inevitable and in 1958 the Devons were merged with The Dorset Regiment. St Edmund's Chapel was then re-consecrated in 1974 in the name of the new Devon and Dorset Regiment. In a further round of regimental amalgamations in 2007, the Devon and Dorsets paraded through Exeter for the last time and laid up their colours in the Cathedral prior to disbanding and merging into the latest incarnation – The Rifles. Most recently, the chapel was rededicated in 2014 as the spiritual home of both the original Devonshire Regiment and its successor, the Devonshire and Dorset Regiment.



*Laying up of the Colours 27 January 2007
(Photograph: The Devon and Dorset Regimental Association)*



*Regimental Association Reunion 17 May 2014
(Photograph: The Devon and Dorset Regimental Association)*

While the colours of the old Dorset Regiment were laid in the ambulatory of Sherborne Abbey, some of the Devonshire regimental colours still hang from the west wall and north corner of St. Edmund's Chapel. Every battalion had two flags (collectively known as a 'stand'). The King/Queen's Colour was a union flag with a gold trim, overlaid with the motif of the battalion and some of its battle honours, and its object was to remind serving soldiers that their ultimate allegiance was to the monarch. The other flag was the Regimental Colour, which bore the battalion insignia in the centre, surrounded by more of its battle honours on a background colour which was the same as the facings on the regimental uniform – which was green in the case of the Devons.

Beyond the Cathedral's west front stands the Devon County War Memorial, designed by Edwin Lutyens and carved out of Dartmoor granite. However, it was not the initial choice for a county memorial, as it was only proposed after the idea of a commemorative Cathedral cloister had failed due to lack of funds. The Lutyens county memorial commemorates over 11,000 Devonians who were killed in the Great War and who served across all the regiments and services, including those who fought with The Devonshire Regiment. This highlights the issue of communities 'owning' the memory of the fallen, for although the Regiment suffered nearly 6,000 deaths during the war, many of those fallen had no territorial or familial connection with the county. For, by the time of the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line – as portrayed in the film '1917' – The Devonshire Regiment had lost thousands of its original Devon recruits. Their places were taken by men from the Midlands and from London, which is why the viewer will have to work hard to find traces of a Devon burr from amongst the cast of the film. In the end, it matters little whether a serviceman who made the ultimate sacrifice, came from Devon or from any other county. What matters most is that his loss is not forgotten, and the quiet Chapel of St Edmund remains a fitting site to nurture that remembrance.

Jonathan Walker

NOTE

¹ The 2nd Battalion The Devonshire Regiment would later distinguish themselves during their 'last stand' at the Bois des Buttes during the Battle of The Aisne in May 1918. The battalion lost 552 killed, wounded and captured during the engagement, and also suffered the loss of their commanding officer, Lt.-Colonel Rupert Anderson-Morshead. His bravery, together with those of his men, has been remembered by a service each year on the anniversary of the battle, at the church of St Mary and St Peter, Salcombe Regis, Devon (Anderson-Morshead's parish). A memorial in the churchyard commemorates their sacrifice. Another memorial to the 2nd Devons was erected near the site of the battle, in the Aisne village of La Ville-aux-Bois-lès-Pontavert. It was partly funded by the Devon County War Memorial Committee with the residue of funds after the completion of the county memorial cross outside Exeter Cathedral.

Jonathan is a Cathedral Roof Guide and a member of the Council of The Friends of Exeter Cathedral. He is an author, member of the British Commission for Military History and an Honorary Fellow in War Studies at the University of Birmingham. He lectures widely on land and at sea about aspects of 20th Century conflict. His fascination for history, and the personal testimonies of those caught up in wars, has extended to individuals commemorated in Exeter Cathedral. Several years ago he gave a talk at the Cathedral on the Holocaust and more recently he combined with Diane Walker on tours illustrating the human stories behind some of the Great War memorials in the Cathedral.



*Detail from the screen of
St Edmund's Chapel*

