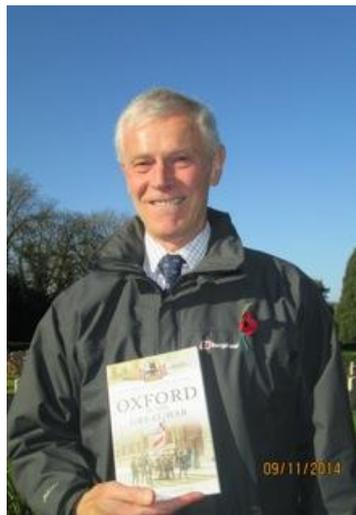# Botley Cemetery and the Great War

Address given by Malcolm Graham on 9th November 2014

Malcolm Graham
(with permission)

Just over 100 years ago, on October 15th 1914, Thomas Eggleton, a 28 year old private from the Wiltshire Regiment, became the first military casualty to be buried in Botley Cemetery. He had been shot in the arm during the battle of the Aisne on September 20th, and was treated initially at a field hospital. He was admitted to hospital in Oxford on October 1st, but complications set in and he died of tetanus on the 10th. Large crowds lined the route of his funeral procession all the way from central Oxford to Botley. The procession was headed by 12 privates from the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry under Corporal Carter who marched at slow step with their rifles reversed. More than 40 men from the Oxford unit of the Royal Army Medical Corps followed the hearse and mourners to the cemetery. After the burial service, three volleys were fired over the grave, and buglers sounded the Last Post.

In the years leading up to the First World War, County Territorial Associations across the country made preparations for mobilization in the event of war. In each area, they had to identify a suitable building that could be swiftly converted into a military hospital. In Oxford, the Examination Schools in High Street were chosen, and confidential plans – apparently unknown to the Vice-Chancellor – envisaged turning the building into a 520-bed hospital if and when the need arose. Arrangements were also made to staff the hospital, and to obtain quotas of beds and bedding from nearby colleges.

Mobilization on 4 August 1914 triggered the implementation of these plans. The Clerk of the Exam Schools was bundled out of his office, and down came the portrait of the Kaiser in the

robes of an honorary Oxford graduate. Preparations went ahead so quickly that what became known as the 3rd Southern General Hospital was ready for use by August 16th.

The first trainload of around 150 wounded soldiers arrived in Oxford from Southampton during the afternoon of Sunday September 13th. Large numbers of people gathered to welcome them both at the railway station and outside the Exam Schools. Ambulance trains were soon arriving regularly, and, by the end of the war, members of the St John's Ambulance Brigade had transported more than 105,000 wounded soldiers from the station to Oxford hospitals.

Colonel George Ranking of the Royal Army Medical Corps, Administrator of the 3rd Southern General Hospital, was under constant pressure to provide more beds, and the Base Hospital at the Exam Schools and its many subsidiary hospitals had getting on for 3,000 beds by the end of 1918.

From the first, it was clear there would be deaths among the patients at the 3rd Southern General Hospital, and Colonel Ranking soon approached the City Council for burial space. The Cemeteries Committee decided in September 1914 that soldiers should be buried in Botley Cemetery, free of charge if they were British or Allied soldiers, but for a fee of 12/6 (62½p) per burial 'in the case of alien enemies.' Botley Cemetery was presumably chosen because it was nearest to the city centre.

Military funerals in the months after Private Eggleton's burial included those of five young Belgian soldiers who died at the 3rd Southern General Hospital in November and December 1914. They were among the 200 or so wounded Belgians who had been admitted to the hospital in late October following the heroic defence of Antwerp. Speaking at the funeral of Private Jules Noyelle on December 21st, the Belgian priest, Father Calbrecht said: 'His life was not destroyed; he had not appeared and disappeared without leaving a mark; he had helped to write one of the most noble pages of their history.'

The First World War memorials in Botley cemetery illustrate how men from across the British Empire supported, and died for, the Allied war effort. Thirteen Canadians, 8 Australians, 9 New Zealanders, 2 South Africans, and at least one Irishman, Private James Conway – aged just 19 - are among those buried here. Private James Cunningham was a 35 year old Scottish Canadian who had returned to Europe with the 4th Canadian Infantry. He was wounded and gassed in May 1915, and died on the 28th after only a few days at the 3rd Southern General Hospital. The 27 year old New Zealander, Private John Hampton, was severely wounded on September 16th 1916 during the battle of the Somme, and died in Oxford on October 5th.

Most wounded soldiers brought to Oxford came from the Western Front, but at least one batch of nearly 200 officers and men wounded at Gallipoli arrived in late August 1915. There were probably others because Private Cattle of the 2nd South Staffordshire Regiment, buried here on March 31st 1916, had been invalided home from the Mediterranean expeditionary force before dying of pneumonia at the Town Hall hospital.

When wounded British soldiers were brought back to England, the overriding priority was to find beds for them and treat their injuries. They were distributed to military hospitals around the country, and the bodies of many soldiers who died in Oxford were therefore taken by train for burial in cemeteries near their homes. Local men who died elsewhere might similarly be brought back to Oxford. Trooper Bob North, an Osney man with a wife and 4

young children who had enlisted in the Oxfordshire Yeomanry, was buried here on May 29th 1915 after dying of his wounds in Northampton General hospital.

Some of those buried here died as a result of accidents and illness. Cadet Arthur Kaye was killed during a training flight in October 1918, one of a number of Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force casualties from the wartime airfield on Port Meadow. Others, such as Sergeant Richard Claridge of the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, fell victim to pneumonia following flu in January 1917.

The Spanish flu epidemic in 1918 claimed the life of Staff Nurse Mabel Murray. She was a Londoner who joined the Territorial Force Nursing Service in January 1915, and spent three and a half years working at the 3rd Southern General Hospital. Matron's annual confidential report in January 1918 praised her work: 'she keeps her ward well, is very kind to the patients but maintains good discipline – she is good-tempered, tactful and reliable...' Like many other staff at the hospital, Mabel Murray went down with flu in the autumn of 1918, but she died of pneumonia following influenza on November 2nd at the age of 35. Her mother and sister were unable to get her buried in London within seven days, and so she was buried here.

When the first batch of wounded soldiers reached Oxford on September 13th 1914, they included about 40 German prisoners of war. They were the last group to enter the Examination Schools, and the crowd's rising cheer for another group of brave Tommies was suddenly choked off as they spotted the Germans' field grey uniforms. Instead, they watched in silence as the men were taken into the hospital. All these wounded prisoners seem to have recovered, and they were later transferred to PoW camps. No more wounded prisoners were brought to Oxford until the very end of the war, but four German PoWs died at the 3rd Southern General Hospital between November 1918 and April 1919. They are buried here in a line, still separated in death from the Allied war dead. Three were soldiers, one of whom, Bernhard Dodenhof, was a stretcher-bearer; the fourth, Hans Sack, was a civilian.

The lasting effects of injuries meant that military burials continued here throughout 1919, and the last one was in October 1920. The First World War section of Botley Cemetery contains 156 British and Commonwealth War Graves and nine graves for the dead of other nations. It is a microcosm of the vast conflict that led to around 16 million military and civilian deaths in all the combatant nations, and especially poignant in this the centenary of the outbreak of the war.