

The story of Cheltenham's Official WW1 Memorial Painting



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Cheltenham
Remembers.



Cheltenham
Local History Society



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For further information on Cheltenham in WW1
or to contribute to the *Cheltenham Remembers* project
go to www.cheltenhamremembers.org.uk

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The story of the painting

It was in 2014, whilst writing the book
Cheltenham in the Great War, that Dr. Steven
Blake gave me a copy of an article by James
Brazier, Editor of The Western Front Association's
Bulletin. Written in 1997, the article was entitled
Cheltenham's Forgotten War Memorial Painting.
The painting, by Fred Roe RI, has a self
explanatory long title – *A relieved platoon of the
1/5th Gloucesters marching in from the trenches
past headquarters at Hébuterne 1916*.

This painting had been commissioned to
remember the 1,700 or so people of Cheltenham
who gave their lives in WW1. Five of the soldiers
of the seven in this picture were Cheltenham
men and one died on the Somme. The story
behind and within the painting intrigued me
so that it became the postscript of the book.

I was determined the picture should be brought
back to Cheltenham. The opportunity to realise
this objective arose in 2016 through the

Cheltenham Borough Council's *Cheltenham
Remembers* project, funded by the Heritage
Lottery Fund and Cheltenham Borough Council,
to commemorate the end of the First World War.

In a collaborative venture between Cheltenham
Local History Society and The Wilson Art Gallery
and Museum, the painting was returned to
Cheltenham to be displayed, with an explanatory
exhibition, from June 2018 – March 2019. It is
uncertain when the picture was last exhibited
in the town but is known to have been away
for at least 50 years, looked after by the
Gloucestershire Regiment, latterly in the
Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum, where
it will return after the exhibition.

Now the story of the painting can be told here
and as part of a larger exhibition under the title
At Last Fighting is Over in The Open Archive.

The commissioning of the Commemorative War Painting



Clara Winterbotham, 1921

In July 1919, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum Committee, chaired by Councillor Clara Winterbotham, agreed to commission a war memorial painting, the fee being £200.

During the war, Clara Winterbotham had been a VAD nurse in Cheltenham. She became Cheltenham's first lady councillor in 1918 and the first lady Mayor of Cheltenham in 1921. Two of her brothers are portrayed in the painting.

An appeal was made for photos or sketches, as they were needed by the artist, from any soldiers who had been in Hébuterne. By December 1919 the artist, Mr Fred Roe RI, had submitted a sketch of the picture. Incidentally, Queen Alexandra purchased this preliminary sketch of the painting after it had been exhibited at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours in March 1920.

By September 1920 the painting, 56" x 40" in size, was on view in Cheltenham Art Gallery. At that time the *Echo* hoped the picture would set an example which would encourage donations from "all who desire to see in Cheltenham a war memorial on a scale appropriate to the sacrifices of the town." The town's war memorial was unveiled on 1st October 1921.

One hundred prints of the painting were sold to raise money, realising 14 guineas in 1921. It was the purchase of one of these prints in a Kent antique shop in 1997 which prompted James Brazier's article. He too was intrigued by the picture. Another print is now in Brown's University, Rhode Island in the USA having been purchased by the university's curator whilst holidaying in London. Had he purchased it from the same print dealer in London to whom James Brazier had sold the print?



Cheltenham Territorials 1/5th Battalion Gloucesters, Clarence Street, 5th August 1914

The painting

The scene is of a platoon of the 1/5th battalion Gloucestershire Regiment returning from front line duty in the trenches to their headquarters in Hébuterne.

Placed next to the battalion's chaplain Rev George Helm is a young officer in a helmet, leading the platoon. He stands out in the foreground of the painting and is Lt Cyril Winterbotham – the only one of the soldiers in the picture to be killed in action.

Four other officers have come out of the battalion's building (H51) to greet the men – 2nd Lt JP “Percy” Winterbotham, brother of Cyril, Lt Col JH Collett, Major JF Tarrant and Major NH Waller.

The soldier at the head of the men returning from the trenches is Company Sgt Major William Tibbles. In the background can be seen the shattered buildings which is all that remained of the heavily shelled village of Hébuterne.



*Gloucestershire Echo, 26th August 1915.
Image © Joe Devereux*

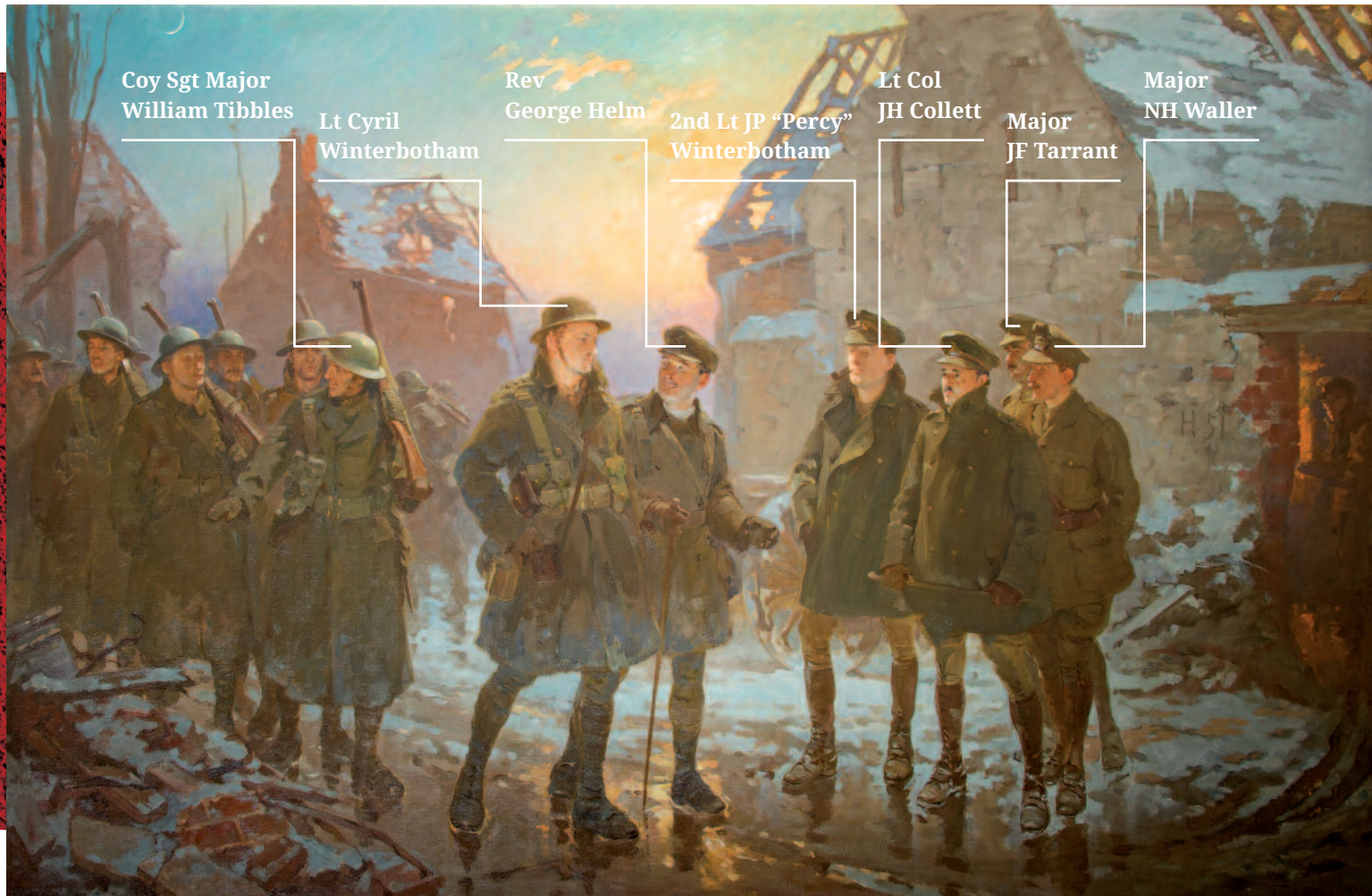
The setting of the painting

Hébuterne was a farming village in the far north east corner of the Hauts-de-France region of France, 15 miles south west of Arras.

For most of WW1 Hébuterne was in the front line of the Western Front. On the eastern side of the village the allied forces were entrenched. Facing them, 800 yards away, was the Imperial German Army, occupying the village of Gommecourt. In mid-summer 1916, the British army carried out attacks from Hébuterne in an attempt to capture Gommecourt as a part of the battle of the Somme, which failed with severe losses. In the month of August 1916 the 1/5th battalion Gloucesters alone suffered over 500 killed, wounded and missing out of 1,000 men. By the war's end, the village was a complete wreck as a result of its front line position and had to be completely re-built.

After the war, under the scheme organised by The British League of Help to aid war-devastated towns and villages in France, Hébuterne was adopted by the town of Evesham – both being fruit-growing areas. Gloucester adopted the village of Ovillers-la-Boiselle, where the Gloucestershire Regiment had been in action in the summer of 1916.

Cheltenham adopted Engelfontaine which had also been razed to the ground due to shelling. The unveiling of Cheltenham's war memorial in the Promenade on 1st October 1921 was attended by the Mayor of Engelfontaine, M. Continneau, and a sale of metal lapel flags raised money for the adopted town. Major General Sir Robert Fanshawe who had been Commanding Officer of the 48th (South Midland) Division, of which the 1/5th battalion Gloucestershire Regiment was part, unveiled the memorial.



The soldiers in the painting

Lt Col JH Collett of Gloucester was the Commanding Officer of the 1/5th Gloucesters. He launched the trench magazine *The Fifth Glo'sters Gazette* to raise the morale of his troops. This is thought to be the first trench publication, predating *The Wipers Times*.

Major Noel Huxley Waller led the Cheltenham territorial soldiers of 'E' and 'F' companies of the 1/5th battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment out of Cheltenham from the Drill Hall in North Street the day after war was declared. For some time he served as officer commanding the Grenade School at Sailly, inventing ways of improving weaponry and for this he was the first soldier of the battalion to be awarded the Military Cross.

In civilian life Waller was an architect in the family practice which designed Cheltenham's Town Hall in 1903.

*Major NH Waller at Houtbeck, 1917
(Courtesy of the Waller family)*



Major J Frederick Tarrant was second in command of the 1/5th Gloucesters when the battalion went to France. Born in Cheltenham in 1870, Tarrant was Bursar at Cheltenham Ladies' College for over 50 years.

Major JF Tarrant, 1919



Rev George Helm was the battalion's Chaplain. He was also the first Editor of the trench newspaper *The Fifth Glo'sters Gazette*. In September 1917 he returned to England to be Curate of St. Anne's in Lambeth. Helm became Honorary Canon of Gloucester

Cathedral in 1937. From 1938 to 1942 he was Honorary Chaplain to King George V.

Company Sgt Major William Tibbles was a Motor Mechanic from Cheltenham. On the outbreak of war he became Company Sgt Major under Major NH Waller.



Coy Sgt Major William Tibbles leading men of 1/5 Gloucesters, August 1919

At the attack at Ovillers-la-Boiselle on the Somme on 27th August 1916, in which Lt Cyril Winterbotham and others died, Tibbles took over command when all the officers were killed or injured and two thirds of the company killed. For this he was awarded the Military Cross. After the war he ran his own motor repair business at 28 St. George's Place, Cheltenham.

2nd Lt JP "Percy" Winterbotham was born in Cheltenham, the second son of Alderman Winterbotham and the brother of Lt Cyril and Clara Winterbotham.

When Percy Winterbotham enlisted in 1914 he was the Cheltenham Borough councillor for East Ward and a solicitor with the family firm of Winterbotham Gurney & Co. After the war he became Chairman of Directors of the Queen's Hotel and Director of Cheltenham Gas Company. He was a well-known county

and local cricketer and golfer.

Lt Cyril Winterbotham was born and educated in Cheltenham, the third son of Alderman Winterbotham. Although a barrister in London, Cyril Winterbotham had been selected



Lt Cyril Winterbotham (courtesy of SOGM)

in 1913 as the Liberal party's parliamentary candidate for the Cirencester division and had a promising political future. From the time he enlisted in the 1/5th battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, Cyril wrote letters home to his widowed mother who was living at Cranley Lodge, Wellington Square, Cheltenham.

Of over 120 letters written to his mother, which are in a collection at the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum, the true nature of this sensitive man shines through. He was a man who loved the English countryside and wrote poetry from a young age – his most famous being the poignant *Cross of Wood* which appeared in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* the day before he died. Cyril's last letter to his mother dated 24th August 1916 read:

"Just to let you know Percy and myself are still alive and kicking. Life is a bit strenuous but to everything there is an end... I hope this is our final appearance in this very unpleasant form of scrapping."

On the evening of 27th August 1916 Lt Winterbotham was killed leading 'C' company when his battalion, without support, attacked German positions near Mouquet Farm, Ovillers-la-Boiselle on the Somme. He was 29 years old.

Lt Cyril Winterbotham is commemorated on Pier 5B Thiepval Memorial – just one of 73,335 whose remains were never identified.



*2017 Position of trench where Lt. Winterbotham fell at Ovillers-la-Boiselle. Thiepval Memorial on hill.
© Joe Devereux*

The war diary report of the attack, including the death of his brother, was written by 2nd Lt Percy Winterbotham, who was the battalion's Adjutant.

In a letter to his mother two days after Winterbotham's death, the battalion's Chaplain, Rev George Helm (standing next to Cyril Winterbotham in the painting) wrote:

"It may be some consolation to know that I buried him early this morning in the German trench he did so much to win, both by his example beforehand and of his actual leadership on the day... he was the British Officer at his best."

A wooden cross was erected on the trench naming the nine who fell there and six missing. The top name is that of Lt Cyril Winterbotham. Two other Cheltonians are also named who died that day, Private Edward Keen and Private Ernest King.

In March 1918, Mrs Winterbotham received a letter from a Corporal Thomas HK Woolhouse of 4 Windsor Street, Cheltenham, serving with the Army Service Corps. It read:

"Yesterday I went again to the spot where your son lies. His comrades and I shall have to try and get something to grow other than roses as the soil is very chalky... but I believe that I shall be moving on in a day or so. The cross is firm and stands about 4ft 6in out of the ground, by itself, close to the trench."

In 1922 Thomas Woolhouse was appointed Superintendent of the Cheltenham cemetery where, by 1927 there were around 230 wooden trench crosses from Flanders' fields. They had been gathered by Mr Tom Packer who had been one of the official recruiting officers during the war. It is thought that this was the largest number of wooden crosses in any public cemetery in the country.

Return of the *Cross of Wood*



The *Winterbotham* wooden cross was returned to Cheltenham in 1925 and placed in Cheltenham cemetery. Its replacement is now at the centre of 22 original WW1 trench crosses in Cheltenham cemetery, which it is hoped will be renovated through a Cheltenham Civic Society Project.

See www.cheltenhamremembers.org.uk for information on this project.

“*Lest We Forget*”

The Cross of Wood

God be with you and us who go our way
And leave you dead upon the ground you won.
For you at last the long fatigue is done,
The hard march ended. You have rest today.

You were our friends. With you we watched the dawn
Gleam through the rain of the long winter night,
With you we laboured till the morning light
Broke on the village, shell-destroyed and torn.

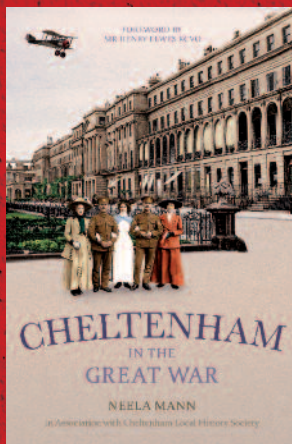
Not now for you the glorious return
To steep Stroud valleys, to the Severn leas,
By Tewkesbury and Gloucester, or the trees
Of Cheltenham under Cotswold stern.

For you no medals such as others wear
A cross of bronze for those approved brave.
To you is given, above a shallow grave,
The wooden cross that marks you resting there.

Rest you content. More honourable by far
Than all the Orders is the Cross of Wood,
The symbol of self-sacrifice that stood
Bearing the God whose brethren you are.

Cyril Winterbotham 1887-1916

Cyril Winterbotham's poem *Cross of Wood*, which first appeared in *The Fifth Glo'sters Gazette* July 1916 secured his reputation as a minor war poet, having been published posthumously in several anthologies of First World War poetry. This moving poem also appeared in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* the day before Cyril Winterbotham died.



The book *Cheltenham in the Great War* by Neela Mann (2016, The History Press) can be purchased from The Wilson and book stores including Suffolk Anthology or from Cheltenham Local History Society to whom all proceeds are donated.

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