

Villagers recall poet's hell not to be forgotten

From a Staff Reporter
Mells, Somerset

The people of the tiny Somerset village of Mells, in the shadow of the Mendip Hills, could not boast the pomp and ceremony of the Cenotaph in London yesterday, but like the rest of the nation they came out in their own way to remember the dead of two world wars.

Wreaths were laid on the stone memorial, Last Post was sounded, and the congregation in the village church of St Andrew paused to recall relatives long gone, whose memories survive as names engraved on a memorial tablet.

The Rev Peter Lamb, Rector of Mells, and two war veterans stepped between the headstones to the simple grave of Siegfried Sassoon, the First World War poet, whose profound revulsion at the indignity of war was rooted in his own heroic experiences in the front line.

That, and Sassoon's lasting regret at the war's destruction of the rural simplicities of the pre-1914 era, make Mells's small token of remembrance especially apt. He died, aged 80, in 1967, at his home at Heytesbury, a few miles away in Wiltshire.

His bravery was not only expressed as "Mad Jack", the foxhunting lieutenant who won the Military Cross in 1916, but as the angry young pacifist who, a year later, threw his medal ribbon into the Mersey and declared against "the political insincerities for which the

fighting men are being sacrificed".

The military authorities sent him to a sanatorium, saying he was suffering from shell-shock, but he was not silenced and his poems have done much to ensure that later generations do not forget.

They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy
on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and
grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make
it stop!

There were only three veterans of the war in the congregation of 60 at Mells, but the local pack of Brownies, fidgeting in the polished pews, was there to lay a wreath.

There would have been more at the church if there had not been an accident at the local quarry, which is the village's biggest employer. A train carrying stone through a tunnel jumped the rails and cut the sleepers in two. It meant that many missed the ceremony and service because they had to relay the track.

Mr Samuel James, aged 76, secretary of the local branch of the Royal British Legion, said: "With work as it is today there was nothing we could do. But I still think it has been a good turnout." He remembers spending his sixteenth birthday with water up to his waist in a trench at Ypres after running away from his parents to join the Army.

"We can all say now that we

were fools, I suppose. But we are obliged to our comrades to remember them, and to keep reminding people what happened so that they know what a horrid mess war is", he said.

"A lot of people these days do not know what it was about, and I try to impress on them that through these annual Remembrance Day ceremonies we are trying to help to avert future wars. I know interest is declining, but as long as Britain has armed forces there will be a need for the Royal British Legion to look after ex-Servicemen, not only of the two world wars but of all the conflicts since.

"Siegfried Sassoon was right, it was hell. But we must never forget it."

Queen lays wreath: The Queen laid the traditional wreath at the Cenotaph in London yesterday in remembrance of the men and women who died in two world wars (a Staff Reporter writes).

She walked from the Home Office accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Kent, all in military uniform, to observe two minutes' silence.

The royal party's wreaths were followed by others laid by Mr Callaghan, Mrs Thatcher, Leader of the Opposition, and Mr Steel, leader of the Liberal Party.

Others were laid by the Service chiefs of staff and the high commissioners of Common-

wealth countries. Hundreds of ex-Servicemen, diplomats and officials attended the ceremony and its short service.

King Olaf of Norway and members of the Royal Family, including Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips, watched the ceremony from a balcony. Yesterday was Prince Charles's twenty-eighth birthday and the third wedding anniversary of Princess Anne and Captain Phillips.

For the first time since 1920 the start and finish of the two minutes' silence was not marked by the firing of maroons from police stations in London because of the expense.

Throughout the day there were other ceremonies at the Cenotaph, including one by the National Party and another by the National Front. In the latter more than three thousand people marched from Victoria to Whitehall behind several dozen Union Jacks.

Hundreds of police were on duty to prevent any trouble and the march and ceremony finished with no incidents. At the Cenotaph the ceremony included a prayer by the Rev Brian Green, in which he said: "Save us from unfaithful politicians who would destroy our nation . . . raise up mighty men who will lead us in righteousness."

The National Front's colour parties were applauded by supporters in front of the Cenotaph.

Times 15/11/76