



# *In The News*

## *Compton Chamberlayne*

### **DOWNLAND BADGES**

#### **WILTSHIRE RELICS OF TWO WORLD WARS**

*From a Correspondent*

Ten miles out of Salisbury on the road to Exeter you pass through the village of Fovant and there can see, on the Downs rising steeply to the south (that is, to your left), a white rank of Army regimental badges cut in the chalk. They are not very ancient features (two are in fact only a few years old and the rest date from the middle of the First Great War) but in the eyes of at least the Fovant Home Guard Old Comrades, who have for some years tended them, they are much more than a local curiosity; they are a national possession.

During the 1914-1918 War there were many camps around Fovant where thousands of men of the Territorial and the New Armies, with troops also from Australia, did their training before going to the fronts overseas. The reserve battalion of the London Rifle Brigade in 1916 first had the idea of cutting their regimental badge in outline on the hillside. Volunteers in plenty came forward to do the work in their off-duty time and they were so successful that other units soon followed their example. Among them were battalions of The Royal Warwickshires, The Devonshires, the 6<sup>th</sup> City of London Rifles, the 7<sup>th</sup> London, and the 8<sup>th</sup> London (Post Office Rifles) and also certain "Aussies" and the Y.M.C.A. unit serving in the camp area.

#### **HARD WORK AND EARLY**

Arduous work it was on the steep slope. Moreover, the hillside was in the danger zone of the rifle ranges, which were in constant use from daybreak to dusk, so that in the summer the volunteer labourers had to rise betimes and work from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m., before the firing parties arrived. The first job was to mark out the badges to scale; the next, to remove the turf, after which the depressions had to be filled with chalk dug from neighbouring pits (for the natural chalk within the outlines lay too deep to be exposed simply by taking out the turf). A former sergeant of the 6<sup>th</sup> City of London Rifles who was in charge of the party of working on that regiment's badge has recalled that it took them three months to finish the job and that the height of the badge was 150 feet. He has related also how at the end of each morning's toil the lads would toboggan down the slope on their shovels.

After the war and the departure of the troops the badges began to be overgrown by turf and weeds, but some regiments paid local workers to keep their emblems clear. The Australian Government also showed great interest and sent an annual sum for the maintenance of the so-called "rising sun" badge and a large figure of a kangaroo. But when war came again in 1939 the maintenance work had to be stopped and the hillside features were soon almost obscured by overgrowth and the tracks of grazing animals.

## RESTORING THE CRESTS

With peace once more some of the regimental associations concerned thought about the restoration of their badges on the Downs and in 1949 members of the Fovant Home Guard Old Comrades' Association began work on the crests of the L.R.B., 6<sup>th</sup> City Rifles and the Post Office Rifles. In the next year the Fovant men cut out a new badge, that of The Wiltshire Regiment, which they had worn during the war in the Home Guard, and in 1951 the badge of the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry was added. During the same period, as a gesture of appreciation to the Australian people for their kindness in sending food parcels during and after the war, a fund was raised locally for the restoration of the Australian badge and also of the great map of Australia cut into the downs at Compton Chamberlayne, near Fovant.

Last year it was found that, although most regiments had been able to pay for restoration, they could not find funds for regular maintenance of their badges and it is largely with the object of raising some of the necessary money that a booklet has been written about the whole subject, including histories of the regiments commemorated, by Mr Laurence Combes, obtainable for 1s. 6d. from the Fovant Home Guard Old Comrades.

(*The Times* (London, England) Wednesday, April 21, 1954)

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A military badge carved into the chalk of rolling English downland lacks the obvious charm of a white horse or a long man, and its bellicose overtones might seem out of place in such a setting. But, with their First World War connections, five of the badges etched into the hillside along the A30 near Fovant in Wiltshire have become part of the national heritage and are scheduled as ancient monuments.

Hand-dug into a back-achingly steep slope of between 20 and 40 degrees and measuring up to 150 ft across, they represent hundreds of hours of gruelling work by soldiers in 1916-1918 who were based at a training and transit camp around the villages of Fovant, Compton Chamberlayne and Sutton Mandeville. Ostensibly, the badges were done in the men's "spare time", which, at least occasionally, meant the 4am to 7am shift, but, as they were bound for the Western Front, they were probably only too happy for hard physical labour to distract their thoughts.

The cluster of carvings is said to be the largest in Europe. Unfortunately many of the badges represent military units that no longer exist or have been incorporated into other units.

The badges (which were added to in the 1950s and again in 1970) were maintained until recently by the muscle power of local volunteers, organized by the Fovant Badges Society.

Now, professional help has had to be called in, and, with the benefit of newspaper-in-industry sponsorship, a £70,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant and other donations, a major renovation is under way, due for completion this summer. Thereafter, the Fovant Badges Society faces an ongoing campaign to raise the £15,000 a year needed for maintenance.

(*The Times* (London, England) Saturday, February 22, 2003)

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