



HEROES OF HAYLE

Poetry to mark the
centenary of the end of
World War One

Introduction

This poetry was written in autumn 2018 in Hayle, Cornwall, a century after the guns finally fell silent on the Western Front.

Keen writers – some experienced, some trying their hand for the first time - gathered at three workshops led by respected local author Jenny Alexander.

They created poems to mark the centenary of the end of World War One, looking at Hayle's extraordinary social and industrial history during 1914-18.

The result is a moving and powerful anthology - poems reflecting the courage, stoicism and heartbreak of those terrible years.

The War Graves

The graveyard of Phillack Church lies on the edge of Hayle Towans.

Beyond the long grasses and wild flowers that grow between the graves are the dunes, stretching for five miles along the beach. This is a peaceful resting place.

Our poets looked at the stories of those who are buried there – stories of sudden death, loss and loneliness as well as the comforting continuity of life in the ancient town of Hayle.

St. Felicitas and St. Piala's Church, Phillack

The interior walls of Phillack Parish Church have recently been stripped of their plaster leaving a rough granite surface.

Rachel Woolf

I stand here in my nakedness
rough to touch, just as I was hewn

no affectation of plastering
to be a petticoat, nor yet a greatcoat

But when the greatcoats of war
came to lay a bluebell on an ancestral tomb,
a filial farewell duty of the sons of Phillack

and knelt to pray

But when the petticoats of Saint Piala
threaded tapestry needles for the stitching of kneelers
and forged fortitude for the bearing of absences

then I still had plastered walls,
a smooth disguise

My walls are now laid bare
as the squaddies were
in trench and squelching mud

My walls now show their strength
as did stoic womenfolk
minus father, husband, son

My walls, as they were hewn,
extend a granite hand
to touch them

May

Jane Goldsworthy

My feet crunch the gravel path,
Skitter stones as I advance.
The sun warms my scalp
As I remove my cap and
Press the rough cloth to my chest.

Your stone is new, black,
Fresh carved – the words stand out.

Flowers on your grave
Tremble in the stiff breeze,
Which brings whispers
From the hedgerow.

I look away to sea,
To the lost days on the dunes.

Overheard in the churchyard

Mary Bryon-Edmond

They're somewhere here!
Yes, family, but only distant
long time ago, First World War of course.
watch your step! It's slippery here
in this incessant rain.
No-one said the path would be so difficult.
Oh! here we are, and two of them together
just granite, plain and stark for such young people.
Can you imagine them arriving day by day?
Young women chattering and laughing
as they walked to work
to face the constant threat of danger?
Only a spark away from death.
No jewelry allowed. No frippery.
No place for youth was it?
Front-line service tucked away in the Cornish dunes.
and there they died.
And here they lie together
forever young.
But--not forgotten.
Here are flowers for you both
instead of medals.

The National Explosives Factory

The sand dunes of Upton Towans, Hayle, are covered with banks and bunkers. Ruined walls and mysterious remains of buildings are all that is left of the huge explosives factory that was in full swing there during World War One.

The National Explosives Factory was founded in 1888 to produce dynamite for the mining industry.

After war broke out in 1914, it started to supply explosives for military use. At its peak, the Factory was one of the largest in the country and employed 1,800 people. Because so many men were away fighting in the war, a large proportion of the workforce was made up of women.

There were several accidents and large explosions at the factory over the years. In 1904 the explosion was so huge that it shattered windows across the bay and even further afield in Penzance.

Two young women, aged 20 and 21, Cissie Rogers and May Stoneman of Hayle, were among those who died in another explosion in December 1916. Their graves are in Phillack Church graveyard.

One for Sorrow

Pru Banks Price

They link arms in friendship
gossip on their morning walk
white caps pulled close
not quite concealing
 wisps of orange curl

comfort of close companionship
recollection of earlier promises
sworn soulmates since other times
 of summer evening larks
 daring dips in the mill pond

now new-built blast wall looms
steps slow towards
unwelcome exchange, morning's sunshine
 for hut's gloom damp stink
 job's risky *money's good*

a single magpie startles noisy
from brambles beside the track
so close they duck and shriek
 arms pull tighter
 wide eyes lock in terror

One for sorrow

East Wind at the National Explosives Factory

Vicki Morley

Red streaks in a cold sky
angry sea crashing over rocks
cream spume blowing inland
I pull mother's blue knitted shawl
tight over my cotton bodice.

I dip down among the dunes
held firm by marram grass
my wooden clogs
rat ta tat scares the rabbits
as I trot over the duck boards.

East wind shrill and sharp
but can just catch Mary
and Rose singing sweetly
“O sole mio”
in their hut.

Wind in the East blows
the stench of chemical tanks
“Fat Boys” Betty calls them.
Metal pipes spiral snake off
dark drips leak into silent sand.

Another dull day ahead
me and Betty
packing cordite—
wonder how the boys
are coping out to the east

Rat ta tat
I unlatch the wooden door
of our hut
inhale damp air
wait for the end of the long shift.

Brick from the Blast Wall

Frances Nelson

Here I lie, almost covered by sand,
A sea pink nods its head above me.
My face is pockmarked, full of holes.
The sun shines upon my face
And I can see a lark in the sky.
Its melodious song reminds me of a time gone by.

Then, I was whole, complete and strong.
Companions above and below,
And at each side.
We were important, All for One
One for All.
Protecting those who worked from the last
Should things go wrong.

Never dreaming that one day
We would be forgotten
Left to stand or fall, our work all done.
So now I lie in peaceful times,
Remembering a past long ago
When we helped to win a dreadful war.

We did our job, but few people know.
No poppies red mark our graves,
But I am content to lie in the sun,
A sea pink at my head.

Givers not Takers

Mary Charnley

Mist over the sea
Like the smoke from smouldering guns
But clean, salt smell fresh wind on my skin
But always
Just beyond the sighing of the sea
Something acid-sharp capturing my breath
I cut the cordite
Feeding the guns
Strips coiling like deadly snakes
I pause, rub my back
Long to feel the sun on weary bones,
And I remind myself of who I am
I am a woman
A life giver not a life taker

We're all doing our bit
Packing shells with death
Coughing, like the giant guns
Always coughing
Acid fumes corrupt the air
And in the trenches
Boys are drowning in blood-soaked mud
Our work will kill
Not our boys but others
From some foreign land
Still drunk on patriotism
Or drained with disillusion
Voice scarcely broken, skin soft on boyish cheeks
And I remind myself
I am a woman
A life giver not a life taker

Machines vile vats of acid

And pipes and drowning tanks
The sound of trucks on wooden rails
And somewhere far away
Shells explode, deadly fireworks in the sky
And young men die
And as laborious trucks burdened with death roll out
I remind myself
I am a woman.
A life giver not a life taker

The 251st Tunnelling Company

The British Army's 251st Tunnelling Company was formed at Hayle in 1915.

It was one of many specialist companies engaged in the difficult and often deadly work of tunnelling on the Western Front. Cornish miners were particularly expert at this. To encourage them to join up, a per diem of six shillings a day was offered – around double the rate in the mines back home.

The units burrowed out under enemy lines to plant explosives to blow up the unsuspecting enemy above.

“Tunnelling was like a game of chess, one had to anticipate the opponents’ move. You didn’t always know that you were going to get away with it. All the tension, all the time – the strain underground and the darkness. It was terrible. It was not war, it was murder.”

Lt WJ McBride, 1st Australian Tunnelling Company

Jack in a tunnel near Givenchy France

Vicki Morley

I wonder if my dog Pip misses me
I would love to walk the cliffs again
with my crowst warm under my arm
feel the air chill around Botallack
hear gulls crying in the zawn.

I wonder if my old Dad
is selling candles at Geevor
he can't go underground any more
but he can greet fellow miners
still wave his withered arm.

I wonder if trains are rattling over the viaduct
boats sheltering in Hayle harbour
west wind blowing a hooley
and weather-beaten John in The Bucket of Blood
spinning a sailor's yarn.

Men Washing In The Field

(for the men of 251 Tunnelling Company)

Abigail Elizabeth Rowland

Here our world is dirt and mud.
Mud is what we see - and what we eat.

Young Harry is the man ahead of me.
His scrawny back is scarred.

And here is the water I will wash in,
already thick as soup.

There are my boots and my stinking socks -
stripped off my rotted feet.

Black mud seeps through my naked toes.
My towel's a scrap of rag.

*

Once there was water from the pump
and supper on the stove.

Scraped clean, our faces shone like
lilies lifting evening's gloom.

We smoked our pipes by our granite hearths,
the women stitched their seams.

Our thoughts turned on tomorrow's work.
Sometimes a *flegbik* cried.

*

Young Harry's scrubbed himself half raw.
He's pulling on his boots.

I never thought afore this war
I'd ever miss the *dry*.

Now I've filled my jack and fetched
my pick I'm kitted for this day.

Come Candlemas will I be still
a *moldwarp* underground?

fleghek - infant -in the Cornish language

moldwarp - European mole, early 14th C literally 'earth-thrower'/'

France, 1915

Fran Nelson

Here I am, standing by the factory
That's now our base, our home.
All is dusty where the mud has dried.
At night, the silence is not pure.
Rumbles from guns, a shout from one who cried
"Mother, come and get me, I am lost"
"Shut up" calls another, sighs and groans fill the night.

Once, not so long ago, as I lay on the Towans at night
I heard the hoot of an owl on the prowl,
The hiss of the sea on the shore.
The stars, like diamonds, filled the sky
So large, so immense, who was I
This person given such a wonderful life to live.

Now, as I slowly sink into a troubled sleep,
I wonder what tomorrow will bring.
Will I live, or will I die?
Not mine to know, or reason why.

What you can see

Judith Cook

Laughing

With a fag in one hand, a drink in the other
Utterly unafraid, not fazed by the severity of war.

Brave face to send home to the family
To feed their pride, their own stories.

The stretching of truths because we are going to survive
We look untouchable.

But the eyes have it,

Dark in fear, dead to the horrors seen.

Not able to project for *one* moment the fear

The nights of crying silently.

Unable to show a true self to others

In case a small chink should progress to

Breakdown.

Hayle and Home

Jean Curnow

Dear brother, I wonder if father's boots would fit me now,
Cleaned and dried overnight in the Cornish range,
Please see to that well-worn pair,
I may have need of them.

Here in this dank dark tunnel I am frozen, a silent
spectre with sweat and fear dripping down in squelching
mud that waits to steal my foot, my leg, my life.

Rats scrape and scurry by, causing candlelight
to flicker, to grow monstrous shadows. Here the
rank smell of decay wraps me in its shroud.

I wonder if dear mother is still breathing
breathing good clean Atlantic air,
in sepia there a fair 'andsome woman,
I see her smile and am warmed.

I Wonder

Mary Charnley

I wonder if they birds still sing so sweet
And the wind still whispers on the wintry moor
I wonder if they tides still ebb and flow
If they miners' boots still clatter past my door.

I wonder if it's noisy down below
If the men sing rousing songs to pass the time
It's so quiet in these tunnels far away
Where a whisper is enough to blow a mine.

Now the air is dead they've turned off all the pumps
The bright canary's gasping at my feet
The guns and shells are silent for a while
And I think I hear they birds who sing so sweet.

Heroes of Hayle, a series of talks and workshops looking at the town's World War One history, took place between spring and autumn 2018.

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