

# The Day Sussex Died



This helpsheet outlines key information for primary school teachers about the Battle of Boar's Head. This is a largely unknown battle of World War I which took place on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1916 the day before the main battle of the Somme began. Locally the Battle is known as The Day Sussex Died due to the large numbers of Sussex men who were killed while fighting on this day. This helpsheet discusses how the Battalions who fought were formed, the battle and its impact on Sussex and some of the most notable soldiers involved. This helpsheet also includes some suggested activities to do with pupils in Key Stage 2 that will help them understand and commemorate this event of World War I which had such an impact on Sussex. This information may be useful for general studies of World War I or as part of a local history topic.

## Colonel Lowther

Colonel Claude Lowther was the MP for Eskdale in Cumberland and a Boer War Veteran who owned Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex. He bought and carefully restored the 15<sup>th</sup> century castle from ruins in 1911. When the Great War began in 1914 Colonel Lowther was too old to fight and so instead sought permission from the war office to raise a battalion of local men. He formed, trained and funded the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment, also known as the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Southdown Battalions, to support the war effort. The battalions were known colloquially as Lowther's Lambs. They were so called after Peter the sheep who was allowed to roam freely at Herstmonceux Castle and was also the Battalions' mascot.

## The Southdown Battalions

At the beginning of September 1914 recruitment offices were set up all over Sussex but principally in the seaside towns of Hastings, Bexhill, Eastbourne, Brighton, Worthing and Bognor. Farm workers, railway men and sports teams all joined up together in answer to Colonel Lowther's recruitment drive with the promise they would serve alongside friends, neighbours and colleagues. More than 1,000 men volunteered in the first two days to form the 1<sup>st</sup> Southdown Battalion (11<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment). By the end of 1914 a further 2,000 men had volunteered which was enough to create another 2 battalions. The soldiers from the Southdown Battalions began their training at Cooden Camp near Bexhill. After more training at Detling, Kent and Witley Camp, Surrey they sailed for France and proceeded to Fleurbaix for instruction and further training.

## The Battle of Boar's Head

The Battle of Boar's Head took place at Ferme du Bois near Richebourg, France on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1916. It was primarily planned as a diversionary tactic to draw German troops away from the Somme battlefields the day before the main battle began. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Southdown Battalions went over the top at 3.05am. The 1<sup>st</sup> Southdown Battalion had more of a supporting role following the dismissal of their commander Colonel Grisewood just before the battle. Although the men were able to make some gains into German trenches, the attack was a disaster. In less than five hours most of the men were either dead, injured, captured or forced to retreat.

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## **The impact on Sussex**

The 30<sup>th</sup> June 1916, the day of the Battle of Boar's Head, is commonly referred to as the Day Sussex Died. The recruitment drive by Colonel Lowther resulted in large numbers of men from Sussex volunteering and then fighting alongside each other as part of the Southdown Battalions. When such battalions suffered a high casualty rate in action it had a devastating effect on the towns and villages they came from.

Casualty rates at the Battle of Boar's Head were extremely high. In less than five hours 366 men including 17 officers died and over 1,000 were injured or reported missing in action. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Southdown Battalion suffered the worst impact and was almost completely destroyed with over 800 men being killed, wounded or captured. Of the 366 who died around 70% of these men came from Sussex including 12 sets of brothers.

During the World War I centenary several new memorials have been unveiled linked to this awful day in Sussex's history including one at Beach House Park, Worthing which pupils from Chatsmore Catholic High School helped to create. This was unveiled on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2016 100 years on from the Battle of Boar's Head. There is also a memorial in Brighton which was unveiled on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

## **Company Sergeant Major Nelson Victor Carter VC**

Nelson Victor Carter was born at 3 Hydrige Terrace, Latimer Road, Eastbourne on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1887. He was one of nine children born to Richard and Harriet Carter. The family moved near to Hailsham when he was 6 years old and this is where he attended school. After leaving school Nelson worked in range of industries and also spent some time in the army although was discharged twice on medical grounds.

In September 1914 Nelson was one of the first to sign up to the Southdown Battalions receiving the service number SD4. He was quickly promoted through the ranks due to his previous army experience becoming Company Sergeant Major in January 1915. During the Battle of Boar's Head Nelson was in command of the fourth and final wave of assault. He and a small group of men were able to penetrate the German second line and inflict heavy casualties. When forced to retreat Nelson captured a German machine gun post, shot the gunner with his revolver and used the machine gun to cover the retreat of his fellow soldiers before fleeing German trenches himself. He then repeatedly re-entered No Man's Land to rescue wounded men and carry them to safety. On his final trip he was shot through the chest and died within a few minutes.

Nelson was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions and immense bravery at the Battle of Boar's Head. The London Gazette on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1916 reported "His conduct throughout the day was magnificent." The medal was passed to his widow Kathleen "Kitty" by the King at a special ceremony at Buckingham Palace on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1917.

Company Sergeant Major Nelson Victor Carter VC is commemorated on both the Eastbourne and Hailsham war memorials. His name also appears on a number of plaques in the local area including Hailsham Community College. The home that he shared with his wife and their daughter Jessie, 33 Greys Road, is marked by a Blue Plaque and the barracks on Seaside, Eastbourne have been renamed Carter Barracks in his honour. The towns of Eastbourne and Hailsham continue to remember and both unveiled Memorial Stones on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1916 to mark the centenary of Nelson's death.

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## **Edmund Blunden**

War poet Edmund Blunden spent his early life in Yalding, Kent before gaining a scholarship to Christ's Hospital School near Horsham, West Sussex. He gained a place at Queen's College, Oxford to read Classics which he did not take up until 1919 after the end of World War I. In 1915 aged 18, Edmund Blunden arrived at the headquarters of the Royal Sussex Regiment in Chichester with two letters of recommendation and volunteered to join the army. After time at numerous training camps, in spring 1916 he joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Southdown Battalion as a Junior Officer.

He witnessed The Battle of Boar's Head as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion took on a supporting role. He remained on the Western Front until the end of the war seeing action at the Somme and the Battle of Passchendaele. Edmund Blunden received the Military Cross for his actions during the war. His experience of life on the front line including the Battle of Boar's Head is recorded in his war poems some of which form the collection entitled 'Overtones of War'. Some of these poems were written during the war, others were written immediately after and some many years later.

## **Suggested activities**

### **Activity objectives:**

- Know what Pals Battalions were and why people joined them
- Develop an understanding of how The Battle of Boar's Head affected local communities
- Know how these people and events are remembered
- Explore and respond to World War I poetry

1. Look at posters which encouraged men to join Pals Battalions. An internet search for Pals Battalion Recruitment posters will bring up a range of results including East Sussex and Southdown Battalion posters. Posters may also be found in military or local history museums and local archives. Ask children to consider what was being offered and why men from Sussex might be keen to volunteer. This could be extended by pupils creating their own posters
2. Based on the information that has been shared with pupils about The Battle of Boar's Head pose a question which allows them to explore and discuss whether the battle was worthwhile. This could be extended through a class debate with different groups taking on different roles such as men who returned home, members of the local community, representatives from the war office
3. Look at photographs of memorials in places where recruitment offices were set up (principally Hastings, Bexhill, Eastbourne, Brighton, Worthing and Bognor). Look at and describe the type of memorial. Use the Commonwealth War Grave Commission website or local websites to find out more about the people who are named on these memorials and if they were part of the Southdown Battalions. The Researching names on war memorials resources at [www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/primary/pri-lessons](http://www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/primary/pri-lessons) provides more detailed information about how to do this. If you are within walking distance of one of these memorials you may wish to visit it
4. Explore poems by Edmund Blunden and discuss what the poet is trying to portray about life on the front line in World War I. Use the poems to consider what conditions for those involved in the Battle Boar's Head may have been like

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