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COMMEMORATING THE GREAT WAR ON FILM: VETERANS, PILGRIMAGES AND AMATEUR FILMMAKING

Mark Connelly and Tim Jones

This article explores the work of four amateur filmmakers from the Canterbury area, between the late 1920s and early 1970s focusing on the films relating to the battlefield visits of First World War veterans and their families. It argues that film provides a fascinating insight into veteran behaviour and culture. Of particular interest is the manner in which the films reveal the continuities and developments in the behaviour of ex-servicemen. The films of the late 1920s and 1930s reveal a highly masculine culture which remained closely aligned with military ceremonial and codes of conduct, whereas the later, post-1945, films show the veterans with wives and family members engaging in a wider range of activities. The article also sets the films within the culture of amateur filmmaking of the time discussing equipment, techniques and exhibition, thus engaging with an element of film history which remains under-explored compared with the degree of research commercial cinema has attracted. The article is supplemented by a short film providing excerpts from all films discussed.

Academic works focusing on the memory of the Great War have proliferated over the last thirty years with memorials and public commemorative practices and rituals receiving much attention. Despite this outpouring, the role of veterans in commemorative culture has remained surprisingly low. When veterans are the focus, the main issues explored are often the campaigns for pensions and benefits,

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To both illustrate and provide a visual commentary on the themes examined in this article, the authors have produced an accompanying film which can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/canterburyamateurfilm/veterans>.

their struggles with physical and mental disabilities inflicted by military service, or their profile in politics. Among the most significant exceptions to this concentration of work are the studies by Alison Fell, Adrian Gregory, Jessica Meyer, Eleanor O’Keeffe and Dan Todman.¹ Taking a cultural history approach, they have explored the complex nature of veteran culture, the extent to which it integrated into or diverted from the wider social and cultural norms, the role of veterans in local civic culture, and how their behaviour and attitude could confront contemporary hegemonic definitions of gender. Dan Todman’s work introduced the variable of time. Most studies of Great War veterans have concentrated on the 1920s and 1930s, whereas Todman explored the impacts of the Second World War and the effects of retirement and old age on outlooks and opinions. Todman’s approach allowed for the identification of continuities and innovations in veteran culture. Importantly, he was able to show that veteran conceptions of the war were always shot through with ambiguities: it was the best of times, it was the worst of times; one moment seemingly disillusioned and embittered, or a convinced pacifist, and the next minute revelling in the glories of medals, regimental traditions and ceremonies.

The filmmakers, their style, equipment and film culture

The complexity of veteran culture, and the visibility of veterans in British society, which has been doubted by some, can be seen in vivid detail through the films made by four Canterbury veterans between the late 1920s and the early 1970s.² Film, and particularly amateur film, takes the argument beyond written sources, published and private, and provides a fascinating way, a literal lens, through which to gain insights into veteran behaviour, their interactions with each other, and their interactions with those outside their circle. To explore these aspects of veteran behaviour, this study will concentrate on films relating to activities crucial to veteran identity: pilgrimages to Western Front battlefields and visits to war cemeteries. Wartime reportage and rhetoric began the process of transforming the battlefields into sacred sites – ‘High Altars of Sacrifice’, as they were labelled by the poet John Oxenham in 1917 – and this was maintained in the post-war period as the bereaved visited the grave or place of commemoration of lost loved ones, while veterans returned to remember comrades and engage with a landscape that had become an essential part of their identity. As a result of this high diction pilgrimage became the common term used for battlefield visiting with its implications of a journey undertaken for reasons of high purpose and the intention of gaining a spiritual reward.³ In recording these pilgrimages the filmmakers made many decisions which throw up questions of agency: who decided which topics should be captured on film, who were the intended audiences, were certain aspects ignored or downplayed deliberately, and did interests and foci change over time? As will be seen, the overall approach and milieu of each of these filmmakers varies. As Justin Wolff observed when analysing the amateur approach and aesthetic:

Every familiar moment in a historical home movie is suspended in emulsion deteriorated by time imprinted with its maker’s spontaneous choices, quirky

aesthetics, and degree of technical skill; recording equipment (cameras, lenses, and films), and techniques of mechanical operation (crank speeds and frame rates), film editing (cuts and splices), and projection machines (again crank speeds) render the familiar deeply strange.⁴

Through their techniques and vision, the four amateur filmmakers examined in this study made records of veteran activities creating a new way of progressing along the well-trodden historiographical path of First World War commemoration and remembrance.

Of the four amateur filmmakers, three were veterans of the Great War: George Page served with the East Kent Regiment (the Buffs), Leslie Goulden as an ambulance driver and despatch rider on the Western Front, and George 'Jumbo' Gisby in the merchant navy, while the last, Grahame Wright, served as a gunner with the Royal Artillery in the Second World War. The four came from differing social and economic backgrounds. Page was in paid employment as a clerk, while the other three ran their own businesses. Gisby had a taxi-service in Whitstable, Wright was the owner of a stamp and jokes shop in Canterbury, and Goulden took on his family's music and piano business on Canterbury High Street. The films that form the focus of this analysis were recorded during two distinct eras. The majority of the Goulden and Page films were made during the 1930s, while Gisby and Wright's films date from 1961 to 1971.

Goulden clearly had a deep interest in film being a founder member of the Canterbury Cine Society in May 1934, and soon after Page was recruited as a member.⁵ By February 1935, the Canterbury Cine Society had 50 members (44 men and 6 women) and a month later the society acquired premises which it fitted up with a studio in which members with more advanced skills helped those with less experience.⁶ In addition to producing drama films, it was agreed at the inaugural meeting that the Society would 'produce news and interest films of direct interest to inhabitants of Canterbury and district'.⁷ Reports in the local press reveal that both Goulden and Page screened films. One of the first was a newsreel of the British Legion Rally in Canterbury in July 1934 made by Goulden and the Chairman of the Society, Dr Brett.⁸ It is, therefore, quite possible that their films about battlefield pilgrimages were also shown at society meetings, although there is no specific record of this. The Society also invited guest speakers to the meetings, including well-known people from the amateur cine movement such as Percy Harris and George Sewell, as well as professional filmmakers including the director, John Grierson.⁹

The members of the Canterbury Cine Society were part of a wider film culture. By 1934 there were two monthly cine magazines for amateurs, *Home Movies and Home Talkies* and *Amateur Cine World*. There was also a national organisation, the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC), inaugurated in 1932, to promote and support amateur film making across the country.¹⁰ By the late 1950s the popularity of amateur filmmaking was increasing with thousands of newcomers flooding into the movement. Since the war *Amateur Cine World* had been the only magazine available to the amateur, but the increasing interest saw the market expand to include the new titles *Amateur Movie Maker* and *Cine Camera*.¹¹ The scale of interest can be shown by *Amateur Movie Maker's* shift from a monthly magazine

to a weekly edition in January 1961 and a claim to reach over 50,000 readers.¹² This weekly magazine, the only one of its type in the world, was to last for six years until an unforeseen trade recession saw it revert back to a monthly format under the simplified title, *Movie Maker*.

During the early 1960s there was a vibrant amateur filmmaking culture in the Canterbury area as was demonstrated by the existence of three separate filmmaking clubs. The Playcraft Film Unit produced a number of award-winning drama films between 1956 and 1961, under the direction of Peter Watkins who went onto work for the BBC, winning an Academy Award for his film, *The War Game* (1966).¹³ Canterbury Amateur Cine Society Film Unit was inaugurated in 1951, and dedicated itself to documentary filmmaking. By the 1960s the society had built its own mini-cinema and studio in the basement of a large Victorian house in Canterbury.¹⁴ The Canterbury Archers diversified into filmmaking, and between 1962 and 1968 used the quiet winter months to make ambitious period drama films featuring archery.¹⁵ All of these clubs were focussed on the production of films made as a group. By the end of the decade all three of these filmmaking clubs had folded and been replaced by the new Canterbury Cine Club which had more of a focus on the home movie maker, making family and holiday films. Grahame Wright had acted in the films made by Canterbury Archers and later joined Canterbury Cine Club, taking the role of Vice Chairman. By contrast, Jumbo Gisby, was not a member of any of these clubs, choosing to make his films as a lone cinematographer.¹⁶

In terms of the equipment used, both Page and Goulden had 9.5 mm cine cameras and Wright and Gisby Std 8 cameras. Arguably the most interesting piece of kit was that favoured by Jumbo Gisby. His films were shot on a Zeiss Ikon Movikon or Movinette camera.¹⁷ It had an unusual design closely resembling a camera for stills photography. In turn, this links to his filming style as people were posed as if for a photograph.

Unlike the other filmmakers studied here, Gisby physically got far closer to people and so the subjects are fully aware that they are being filmed. Most of the party members captured on his films seem comfortable with his close-up work, which implies that he had an official (or semi-official) commission to provide a cinematic record of each pilgrimage and was on close terms with his subjects.¹⁸ Significantly, the only time George Page deliberately opted for proximity was in his shots of a Menin Gate ceremony. Here he filmed from between the ranks of his fellow veterans thus immersing himself among them while acting as chronicler. His identities as filmmaker and veteran were brought together as he provided the 'veteran gaze'.

One stylistic approach common to all four filmmakers was the use of camera movement, particularly panning shots. This approach was most likely in order to show the whole subject, as the field of view of the cameras would have been quite narrow.¹⁹ George Page had a particular habit of regularly moving the camera, most often panning but sometimes also tilting. The camera movements seem quite unplanned and can go from left-to-right and then back again, a habit known as 'hosepiping' among amateur filmmakers.²⁰ Static shots were also often quite wobbly, but his films were usually correctly exposed and sharp. Technical proficiency

was also shown in the inter-titles with the occasional use of scrolling credits, a particularly ambitious approach given the crude technology available to him. Another sign of his ambition was the use of white lettering on a black background, which was more technically difficult to achieve than black lettering on a white background.²¹ Page used his intertitles to perform several functions. First, was the provision of geographical information about where scenes were shot. Second was the addition of historical context and the names of people involved. He also often added a drawn image alongside or behind the text which is usually subject related. Such care revealed someone committed to the creation of an accurate chronicle which could be understood by a wide-range of viewers.

All but one of the films, that made in 1968 by Grahame Wright for the Friends of St. George's Memorial Church, Ypres, are silent. However, it should not be assumed that the other films were screened silently. Both Leslie Goulden and George Page had seen films at the Cine Society accompanied by gramophone records, and so may have done something similar, and they had even seen examples of a film screened together with a synchronised commentary recording by one of the members.²² By the time Jumbo Gisby made his films, technology for playing sound, either from a sound stripe down the edge of the film, or from a separate tape recorder was now possible, although there is no evidence that he did this.²³ In all cases, the filmmakers may have given a live commentary when showing the films to an audience.

In the early thirties the cost of 9.5 mm equipment ranged in price, but a camera and projector suitable for a beginner could be obtained for £9 1s (181s).²⁴ To place this in context, in 1931 the mean male weekly earnings for manual work was 55.7 shillings per week.²⁵ A direct comparison with the cost of equipment in the sixties is difficult as the equipment on offer had changed. However, as an example, the cost of entry level equipment such as the 8 mm Kodak Brownie camera and projector cost £42 8 9 (848s 9d).²⁶ At this time the mean male weekly earnings for manual work was 290.67 shillings per week.²⁷ Thus, by looking at these two specific examples the relative cost is fairly similar, coming in at approximately three weeks wages (1932 – 3.25 and 1961 – 2.92). However, a more noticeable difference can be seen in the price of film between 8 mm and 9.5 mm. By 1960 Std 8 was less than half the price of 9.5 mm for the same duration costing £1 5s 5d for 25 ft which gave 4 min 10 s as compared with £1 15s 8d for 2 min 5 s for 9.5 mm film.²⁸ So, as can be seen both in the 1930s and 1960s, if filmmaking was not particularly expensive, neither was it within reach of all. In turn, this reveals a deep and genuine interest and commitment to the hobby on behalf of the filmmakers examined here, and the number of films concentrating on battlefield pilgrimages and war graves visits underlines the centrality of this activity to veterans and their families.²⁹

Sites of memory: the sacred places of pilgrimage

Although all the filmmakers captured a range of sites in their film records, of all the destinations and sights recorded on the films, Ypres stands out as the common denominator. This reflects the profile of this West Flanders city in British and

Commonwealth war memory and commemoration. Ypres was a legend long before the Armistice ended hostilities on the Western Front. Around it five great battles were fought, drawing in troops from every corner of the Empire. These battlefields formed the Ypres salient. Salient is used in military terminology to describe a marked bulge in the frontline. Throughout the First World War the allied lines around Ypres created a narrow bulb-like shape jutting into the enemy lines in which fighting was almost ceaseless. Ypres then came to symbolise indomitable British endurance, determination and grit against an enemy that held all the ace cards. The city was deemed the British Empire's equivalent of that iconic site of French memory, Verdun, with the same aura of sacrifice and martyrdom for a sacred place in a sacred cause. Renowned as the gateway to the Channel, Ypres was declared the outpost of Britain's security, and therefore the entire Britannic world. And it was precisely this strategic status that placed the city at the heart of British battlefield visiting in the twenties and thirties.³⁰

At the same time, it also represents something of the logistical realities of visiting the battlefields. Close to the coast and a plethora of ports, from Calais in the south-west through Dunkirk and Zeebrugge to Ostend in the north-east, and connected to those ports through good road and rail communications, Ypres was the easiest of the major battlefield sites to visit. This connectivity was apparent from the earliest days of post-Great War travel and as visitors, whether tourists, veterans or the bereaved, flocked to see the battlefields, cemeteries and memorials, Ypres rapidly established a hospitality industry. Hotels and hostels, cafes, bars and restaurants proliferated. Therefore, Ypres was not only a site of major wartime importance, and thus a place of interest and emotional power, it was also a very good place to stay and find entertainment.³¹ With Ypres established as a hub, visitor itineraries developed which came to dominate the circuits of visitors. The films reflect and underline this fact in their concentration on certain key sites and progression across what might be termed an essential schedule and tick-box list of 'must see' places.

The Cloth Hall is captured in nearly all films. Situated on the main square of Ypres, which was also a hub of bus and coach services, it was natural that the Cloth Hall should be recorded as part of arrival scenes. The enormous building was also a visual shorthand for Ypres that had been established early in the war. As all newspaper readers were told in the autumn of 1914, Ypres' medieval textile trading halls were one of the architectural gems of Europe and constituted its largest, secular Gothic building. Much was then made of Germany's wanton vandalism and brutality in shelling this amazing piece of cultural heritage into dust.³²

One of George Page's films, his record of the Surrey British Legion's 1935 tour, titled 'Epic Pilgrimage', reminded his viewers of this narrative, for he created a chronology utilising pre-war photographs and postcards juxtaposed with images of the wartime destruction. His intertitles used a mixed register being part guidebook and part homage to the high-rhetorical flourishes of wartime propaganda and reportage, which was also fitting for a pilgrimage. A pre-1914 postcard of the Cloth Hall is captioned: 'From October 1914 the fair city of Ypres with its Cloth Hall, once the finest Gothic building in Belgium, built 1200–1304, became the target of German guns'. Moving on to the war he used a famous photograph of the

Cloth Hall in the background, while the foreground is dominated by a local woman fleeing the city with her possessions in a handcart, which he captioned, '1915. The Cloth Hall after twelve months of wanton shelling'. This is succeeded by images cataloguing the gradual destruction of the building accompanied by the intertitles, '1916. The destruction of historic buildings continues', and '1917. German long range guns complete the destruction' before ending with an early post-war shot depicting the ghostly ruins of the Cloth Hall and buildings surrounding the square. The use of such images and captioning underlined the essential moral of the war: Britain had been right to fight because it had fought on the side of right; the Germans were a beastly enemy contemptuous of European civilisation. Such sentiments reveal the complexity of war memory in the 1920s and 1930s because they could sit alongside calls for reconciliation and respect for the former foe without being perceived as contradictory or inimical.

As Gisby's films for the Salient Circle, a remembrance group based in Whitstable, a seaside town close to Canterbury, reveal, there was a slight shift of emphasis in the post-1945 films. In these records, the Cloth Hall is the backdrop to the point of arrival, a looming and unmissable presence, but not the focus; it is the scenery behind the descent of the party from its tour bus. Gisby was far more concerned with capturing the faces of individuals as they stretch their legs in the square and wait for all to assemble before commencing the next element of the tour. Some of this detachment from what had been an iconic touchstone may have been down to reconstruction. By the late 1950s Ypres' long-process of restoration was finally complete. The Cloth Hall was no longer a ruin and thus, perhaps, was slightly less of a curiosity. In addition, Gisby was recording a society with a very different relationship with ruins and reconstruction. Throughout the Great War and into the 1920s and 1930s, ruins and redevelopment was almost entirely a phenomenon confined to the devastated battlefields of the continent. By 1961, the British people had been sucked into an intimate knowledge of ruins through the experience of bombing in the Second World War. Craters, piles of rubble, regret at the loss of beautiful and historic buildings were no longer the preserve of continental neighbours. What was once considered as something akin to a novelty or wonder to be gaped at had become a quotidian reality for Britons, too. This was very much true of Whitstable's community, all of whom would have witnessed the effects of bombing on Canterbury, especially the effect of the so-called 'Baedeker blitz' of June 1942.³³

A further consistent element in all films relating to Ypres is shots of the Menin Gate memorial. Completed and unveiled in 1927, the Menin Gate commemorated nearly 55,000 missing of the British Empire who fell in the fighting around the city. It was the first of the major memorials to be completed by the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, and was revered as a sacred site for the empire. Soon after its unveiling local people began sounding the Last Post at the memorial. At first this was a largely improvised affair, but it rapidly became more formalised and ceremonial. Visitors were (and still are) greatly moved by this simple daily ritual which has served to buttress the memorial's status as the key focal point for remembrance activity.³⁴

Another site regularly visited on battlefield tours captured in many of the films is Tyne Cot cemetery. Tyne Cot evolved into the largest Imperial War Graves Commission cemetery in the world and was dedicated on 20 June 1927.³⁵ Containing some 12,000 graves, the majority unidentified, and a memorial to 35,000 missing, the drama and power of the cemetery was enhanced further by the integration of two concrete pillboxes (German machine-gun positions) and a towering Cross of Sacrifice built over a pillbox. The Cross was specially designed to provide a viewing platform across the battlefield, and its lower steps were soon used as a convenient place to sit down and take a rest. All of the films show this feature, and use it as the point from which to take panning shots of the cemetery. Interestingly, none of the cameramen moved far from this spot when shooting. As such, only a small section of the cemetery is captured which usually consists of the north-eastern quadrant of the cemetery taking in the memorial pavilion and the start of the screen wall containing the name panels of the missing. The only other shot used is one through the main cemetery entrance which then serves to frame the central avenue up to the Cross of Sacrifice. Two of the Salient Circle films show members of the group sitting on the steps of the Cross, which perhaps also underlines the age of the veterans and their fellow travellers. Similarly, the record of the 1962 visit contains shots of veterans inside the north pavilion and it appears that many have gathered there to sit on the stone benches and escape the direct sunlight. These films also show small groups of veterans and wives wandering among the rows of headstones close to the Cross. Again, this may expose a common phenomenon in visitor behaviour at Tyne Cot in which its sheer scale can often overwhelm and, in turn, often leads to visitors progressing up the main avenue from the entrance and then confining their engagement to the area immediately around the Cross.

Public and private faces: veteran behaviour

The regularity of Tyne Cot shots and Menin Gate ceremonies in the films, during which wreaths are laid, orations delivered and flags dipped in salute, underlines the significance and magnetic appeal of these great memorial sites to visitors. However, the elapse of time also reveals subtle changes and developments. The footage from the thirties places veterans at the forefront of the remembrance ceremonies; they are the fulcrum of the activity and their military identity is the vital unifying element. Medals, and more particularly flags and standards form the heart of the spectacle and ritual. This is a world in which military routines and identities are still very close to the surface of the veteran's character, outlook and behaviour. The footage also reveals the hierarchies and disciplines of the military in which formal presentation, the posture of being at attention with back straight and chest out, and ritualistic, regimented movement forms the behavioural core. By contrast, Gisby's and Wright's films mix formal and informal remembrance acts. It is clear that there is still the same desire to engage in commemorative observation at the Menin Gate, but the military demeanour and masculine atmosphere has dissipated. The veterans are accompanied by their wives, there is little in the way of regimented line-ups and parades, which become the preserve of accompanying bands

or serving military only. By this point in their lives, the veterans had experienced many years of working life, most were clearly close to, at, or beyond retirement age, most seem to have had wives, and it is likely most had children and even grandchildren. They had also experienced, or even directly participated in, a second great war. By the early 1960s, these men were veterans of the First World War plus a great deal more, and crucially, they also had a good deal more spare-time in which to undertake active remembrance, commemorative activities and leisurely tourism.³⁶

But respectful, and often personal, remembrance was important to these visitors no matter when they were undertaken. As a private record, Goulden's film juxtaposes the spectacle of the new memorial at Villers Bretonneux (the pristine quality of the memorial and the worn grass near the main wall, which probably marked where guests and VIPs gathered for the ceremony, implies that the visit was made in 1938 soon after the unveiling), with the highly personal in footage of Bucquoy Road Cemetery. Although a very fine cemetery, Bucquoy Road Cemetery, unlike the Villers Bretonneux memorial and cemetery, is not on any major route which any casual tourist might stumble upon, but a site that needed finding. As such, Goulden's decision to visit and film implied a particular reason for the excursion. The answer is supplied by his lingering shot on the grave of Private J. Fergusson. Jesse Fergusson served with the 3 Motor Ambulance Convoy and died on 29 May 1917. Goulden had served with the same unit, so it is safe to assume that he had made a personal pilgrimage to see the grave of an old comrade.³⁷ Moreover, not only did he wish to visit, but he also wanted to make a film record of this moment. At a group level, cemeteries were visited to see graves of particular interest to their organisation. Grahame Wright captured the moment when the Friends of St. George's Memorial Church went to Gilbert Talbot's grave in Sanctuary Wood Cemetery. Gilbert Talbot was a friend of the Reverend Philip 'Tubby' Clayton who founded the Toc H Christian movement in 1915 in Poperinghe. He named the centre Talbot House in his memory, and it came to be known by its name in army signal's parlance, Toc H. From this humble beginning, Clayton devised a new Christian movement which soon spread across the British Empire and proved particularly attractive to young men and veterans.³⁸ As friends of an Anglican Church in Ypres the group obviously felt it important to see a site of importance to a closely-related Anglican organisation. For Page, it was men of the local regiment that were of importance, as he focused on the graves of three East Kent Regiment soldiers in Poperinghe New British Cemetery (*Figure 1*).

To modern eyes the strangest of the films is George Page's record of the German War Prisoners Association visit to the UK in June 1935. The party was hosted by the Brighton branch of the British Legion and invited to participate in a joint parade to the British and German war graves in the city cemetery.³⁹ Page's film shows British and German veterans, the Germans in their association's uniform, as well as civic dignitaries and considerable numbers of women, marching into the cemetery, the placing of wreaths, and the German contingent using the Nazi salute. Following the formalities, Page captured a very different tone as bonhomie, good-humour and friendly wishes are clearly evident in the broad smiles and relaxed body-language. To see such obvious public displays of fascist



Figure 1. East Kent Regiment graves, Poperinghe New British Cemetery (Page).

ceremonial in Britain reveals the complexity of Anglo-German relations in the mid-thirties and the status invested in veterans as ambassadors for peace and reconciliation who could temper the sharp edges of political extremism.⁴⁰

For the post-Second World War veterans depicted by Gisby evidence of the old military 'spit and polish' was much dissipated. The veterans of Gisby's films are far more relaxed about showing aspects of their character excluded from the films of the 1930s. Throughout the war and into the twenties and thirties British soldiers were admired and celebrated for their sense of humour. Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoons made heroes of his stereotypical soldiers, Old Bill and Bert, soldiers marching songs were recorded by the gramophone companies (which often meant cleaning up the lyrics), Charlie Chaplin donned khaki in *Shoulder Arms* in 1918, and most significantly, the trench journal the *Wipers Times* was collected and published for home front consumption.⁴¹ Through such coverage, the British public was assured that the typical Tommy was a chirpy, cheeky chappie with an irrepressible spirit. Ex-servicemen took this aspect of their behaviour into their post-war lives and it was often expressed in the meetings of regimental old comrades associations and British Legion branches, as the magazines of these organisations often record. Although this behaviour and spirit continued to be celebrated in British culture, it sat less easily with formal and respectful remembrance, as was shown in public discussions on the nature of Armistice Day.

In the early twenties Armistice Day had a dual function serving as a moment in which to reflect on the empire's immense sacrifice and celebrate its victory. Veterans were largely comfortable with this duality. Military life and the war had taught them to celebrate and mourn dead comrades in equal measure. By contrast, the civilian bereaved could not comprehend this culture. For the civilian, the degree of pain at the loss could only be dealt with through sombre and sober acts of remembrance. Having had no say in the form of burial or service, remembrance and Armistice Day services were the proxy funeral and as such demanded a certain code of behaviour. It was a sentiment supported by the mass circulation newspapers, the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, and resulted in Armistice Day being stripped of any element of public celebration. In turn, veterans tended to confine the more

raucous and bibulous side of commemoration to their own private spheres of the British Legion club or old drill hall.⁴²

This cultural fault-line was neatly defined by the veteran, Charles Carrington, in his 1965 memoir, *Soldier From the Wars Returning*:

For some years I was one of a group of friends who met, every Armistice Day, at the Café Royal for no end of a party, until we began to find ourselves out of key with the new age. Imperceptibly, the Feast-Day became a Fast-Day and one could hardly go brawling on the Sabbath. The do-gooders captured the Armistice, and the British Legion seemed to make its principal outing a mourning. To march to the Cenotaph was too much like attending one's own funeral, and I know many old soldiers who found it increasingly discomfoting, year by year. We preferred our reunions in private with no pacifist propaganda.⁴³

George Page's films reveal veteran groups conforming to the codes of behaviour the public expected. They are seen expressing their remembrance of fallen comrades through the formal and traditional military format of ceremonial parades, usually at the Menin Gate. Only one film contains a glimpse of their more jocular veteran personas. Shots of the party exiting the wartime tunnel system excavated under Vimy Ridge by British and Canadian troops shows a group drinking from glass tumblers, and therefore perhaps something alcoholic, while one of the number mimics conducting as they sing. A little later another group is shown and one of the number has just uncorked a bottle of sparkling wine. Another short snippet captures the veterans grinning at the camera and smoking cigarettes in a carefree and light-hearted manner. Such a scene is in sharp contrast to the footage at the Menin Gate which shows the veterans placing wreaths with decorous formality before stepping back and maintaining the 'eyes front' according to military custom (Figure 2).

By contrast, Gisby's records of the Salient Circle rejoice in much longer depictions of comedy, japes and relaxed drinking. The group was founded in Whitstable in 1959 at just the moment when veterans were beginning to retire and find



Figure 2. A rare moment of levity. Veterans drinking at Vimy Ridge (Page).

themselves with a bit more leisure time, and was also happy to include veterans of the women's uniformed services.⁴⁴ Adopting the title Salient Circle also implies a spatial awareness to the commemoration. These veterans were deliberately linking themselves with the British Empire's most famous battlefield of the Western Front. A more practical reason was probably also at play. As residents of the Kent coast with easy access to the ports of Dover, Folkestone and Ramsgate, the Ypres battlefields could be reached quickly and simply. This facility was reflected in the fact that many members of the Friends of St. George's Memorial Church in Ypres were also resident in Kent. Sentiment and utility therefore combined to shape this act of real and 'fictive kinship'.⁴⁵

The Circle was given much coverage in the *Whitstable Times* and its many activities and events seem to have made the members local celebrities. Dinners and social events were major parts of the calendar and all carefully preserved the idea of the cheery British soldier able to laugh and joke through adversity. Titled 'Shell-Hole Suppers', the dinners were the moment 'when the 1914–19 lads of the Ypres Salient get together, put the clock back forty-odd years and set out to recapture something of that comradeship of those days'. The tables were set with candles in old beer bottles, and the food was the estaminet classic so-beloved by British soldiers, fried eggs, chips and sausages. Another dinner menu boasted 'Sandbag pudding a la bayonneted', which implied that fun and good fellowship were the heart of the event. Clearly, 'sandbag pudding' was not considered to be poor taste, merely a reflection of the old soldier's roguish humour. W.V. Dawkings, the honorary secretary, admitted that while the evenings had sad moments, the overriding spirit was jollity and nostalgic recollection.⁴⁶

In his many letters to the *Whitstable Times*, Dawkings's tone was the typical old soldier blend of high diction and ideals combined with self-deprecating and knock-about humour. Although it is highly likely that Dawkings and his fellows were also members of the British Legion, by creating an entirely separate, and highly localised, body, there was the potential for a much more idiosyncratic approach and one which paid slightly less attention to military ceremonial. In his report of the first trip to Ypres in 1960, he stated that the group had 'set out to accept the honour of representing their 200,000 comrades who shared the burden of the defence of Ypres forty odd years ago. We hope and we believe we have done that job worthily'. However, that worthy commemoration of comrades included a wide spectrum of behaviours with serious drinking and partying a fully-acceptable element. As Dawkings admitted of the first night, 'It was the early hours of another day before we finally hit the hay'. In fact, the whole thing was a 'great adventure of five wonderful days' with Dawkings light-heartedly describing himself as 'General Officer Commanding operations "Once More" and "Happy Comradeship"'.⁴⁷ But at the heart of the jollity were the bonds of comradeship made sacred by the fact that they were forged in adversity and the face of death: 'We learned in the Salient forty-odd years ago, the meaning of true comradeship, appreciation of the other man, of sacrifice, of pulling together, of fighting with a will, with determination for what is worthwhile ... They were the days when we learned to make the best of days that were ours, for the chances were that we would not have many more. That's the experience we want to enjoy and to show

others'.⁴⁸ Once again, this provides a glimpse into the sheer complexity of veteran war memory; the dichotomies and dialects of disillusioned and idealistic provide a framework for interpreting veteran understandings of their experiences and their relationship with the conflict.

As a lively bunch led by an engaging chairman with a keen appreciation of a good public image, it was unsurprising that the *Whitstable Times* honoured the first trip to Belgium with front-page coverage. Sixty-four veterans and fourteen wives accompanied the party; sixteen veterans who had made an initial booking were forced to withdraw through various reasons.⁴⁹ No film record of this initial visit appears to have been made, but inspired by the immense success of the trip Dawkings decided to organise a repeat in 1961 and this time Gisby acted as visual chronicler. During the course of planning he was contacted by a West German veterans group which wished to join them. Dawkings embraced the offer with enthusiasm. He told the *Whitstable Times* of the approach: 'My opposite number, who is making up a party of German veterans to join us at Ypres, tells me of his difficulty in convincing his German comrades that a cordial invitation has actually arrived from old soldiers of... [in original] England. They are afraid of a catch somewhere and at Ypres of all places... [in original] what will the Belgians say? They can't realise that we and our Ypres friends are holding out both hands to them to join us in full-blooded, soldierly comradeship'. For Dawkings, the decision to meet the German veterans placed an onus on him and his fellow members of the Salient Circle to show a spirit of reconciliation and comradeship: 'When they return to Germany they will know us as we are. That's one of our jobs: to represent real Britishers as they really are'.⁵⁰

Perhaps significantly, this moment of reconciliation was not captured by Gisby. However, a visual record was made by the BBC's current affairs programme, *Tonight*. Accompanied by the rapidly-rising star of documentary making, Alan Whicker, who was himself a veteran of the Second World War, it was possibly the knowledge of this meeting that inspired the interest of the *Tonight* production team. Whicker broached the subject of the German contingent with the British veterans at the emotive location of Tyne Cot Cemetery.⁵¹ He asked them whether they welcomed the opportunity and received a decidedly mixed response. One said he was not looking forward to it with any great enthusiasm as many of his comrades had been poorly treated by the Germans following capture. Regardless of this wariness, the actual moment of meeting, as captured by the BBC team, was warm and friendly. The German veterans handed over souvenir badges, all were soon drinking beer together which encouraged each group into renditions of wartime songs. For Dawkings this was a powerful moment: 'It was a wonderful occasion when old foes of nearly half a century ago met for that long overdue handshake'.⁵² Further, such moments allowed Dawkings to distance himself from an accusation of trivialising or glamorising war: 'We old boys don't glory in war – there's no glory in it. We hope rather that these fine boys who are making up the new regiment [East Kent] while preparing to meet any demands that may be made on them, will enjoy a really full and happy life as soldiers'.⁵³

Although Gisby avoided recording these interactions, or possibly edited them out, it does not necessarily follow that he deliberately excluded them. He might

have been so busy engaging with the Germans that he had no opportunity to film, which may have been encouraged by the fact that there was a BBC crew present whose specific task was to cover the event.⁵⁴ Whatever the reason, there was no such exclusion of the interactions with local people. Gisby filmed the many moments when local dignitaries met them for formal and informal receptions. Among the characters seen, but not identified, is Roland Annoot, the head of the tourist office in Ypres. He welcomed the Circle to his family home, and his daughter was declared the 'Queen of the Salient Circle', and even visited Whitstable for its festival in August 1960.⁵⁵ With the fiftieth anniversary of the war's outbreak looming, the charming and hospitable Annoot probably also saw such visits as a great way of raising the profile of Ypres as a destination for any with an interest in the conflict. Dawkings and the Circle were not only self-declared ambassadors for Britain, but were viewed that way by all they met. When planning the follow-up tour, Dawkings found that they had received so many official invitations for receptions that they could not fit them all into their planned itinerary. He then used a very interesting term: 'Our Ypres friends have urged us to invade them once more'.⁵⁶ Dawkings clearly believed that he could use the term 'invade' in a jocular and comic manner, but given the fact that the British went as (self-declared) liberators and defenders in 1914 and that Belgium's Second World War history included the deep trauma of invasion and occupation, this was a strange term. It seems to reveal his unwitting insensitivity, a belief that soldier/veteran humour was understood and appreciated by all, and the deeply multi-faceted and seemingly contradictory understandings of war that could be expressed by veterans.

The official receptions, welcomes from local marching bands, and joint parades with local groups, including ex-servicemen, which are given so much attention in Grahame Wright's and 'Jumbo' Gisby's records for the Friends of St. George's Memorial Church and The Salient Circle stand in marked contrast to the films made by George Page. His records from the late 1920s and 1930s are largely focused on British parades making the British seem like outsiders operating in their own bubble rather than visitors enjoying interactions with local people. Occasionally, local people do provide subjects of interest for Page's camera, especially if it is a shared moment with French and Belgian veterans or military personnel, but beyond that there are odd moments when local culture becomes a topic of interest, particularly when it is the novelty of Catholic festal day parades, but it is very much the view of an observer. The films of the 1960s show integration. It was the period in which town-twinning schemes flourished and the Salient Circle trips played a major role in encouraging Whitstable council to propose twinning with Ypres. (In the event, it was beaten to the honour by another Kent town just up the coast, Sittingbourne. But the two communities came together in sending joint delegations of veterans to Ypres in the later sixties.)⁵⁷

What also separates the films of Page from those of Gisby and Wright is the focus on the social and familial circles of the veterans. Unlike Page's largely male-veteran focused films, Gisby provides plenty of shots of veterans and their wives sitting on the street terraces of cafes and bars in Ypres and other towns and cities. In these shots beer and spirit glasses can be seen on the tables and in the hands

and all smile at the camera. The film of the 1962 trip, in particular, is characterised by the sense of carefree holiday. Many of the shots show the veterans and their wives milling around, strolling along streets in groups, often arm-in-arm. It also contains flashes of broad humour. A shot captioned, 'Our dear major having a little difficulty' shows him with his back to the camera. What he was doing was perhaps mysterious to some unaware of Belgian and French customs, but was all too obvious to those that did. The major is standing in front of an open-air urinal, or pissoir, and is having trouble with his fly buttons! Later on in the film there are more shots of a different pissoir with the veterans piling out at the pavement end. Significantly, the comrade identified was of a senior officer rank and this desire to use former officers for comic effect was maintained in the 1963 film. Here a piece of 'Chaplinism' was very carefully and deliberately created. It commences with the intertitle, 'Kerbside Virginia' followed by a close-up of a cigarette-butt on the road. This cuts to the next intertitle, 'The only brand he can afford'. We then see a staged shot of one veteran wandering along before casually discarding his cigarette. Following closely behind him is another veteran, but this one is very clearly of the officer class. This is indicated by the typical former officer civilian garb of bowler hat and rolled umbrella (the clothing recommended by the British Legion and regimental associations as appropriate for ex-officers attending remembrance or commemorative events) and a carefully folded copy of the *Daily Telegraph*. He looks around, bends down smoothly and elegantly, as if it is a natural action, and snatches up the cigarette. It is followed by a few more comedy scenes in which the veteran is caught in the act and berated. The scene is then repeated, but later in the day, under the caption 'He's at it again', only this time with an even more ostentatious pantomime of looking around and making sure he is not being watched before the surreptitious and well-rehearsed swoop (Figures 3 and 4).

A number of cultural threads come together in these carefully created comic scenes. First, they give full expression to a military culture in which the other ranks mock officers. The army, recognising the need for a safety valve, arranged entertainments for troops throughout the First World War, and a mainstay of the comedy was jokes about officers and the high command. Trench journals often fulfilled a similar function publishing much knockabout humour at the expense of senior officers.⁵⁸ Such humour continued to be expressed after the war in



Figure 3. The changing culture: veterans joined by their wives.



Figure 4. Humour and fun more apparent by the 1960s.

regimental and ex-service associations, but it was an aspect of veteran behaviour that George Page did not want to record as part of a battlefield tour when public expressions of formal military masculinity dominated. Clearly, there were no such inhibitions by the 1960s. Again, age and experience may also have played a role by making everyone far more relaxed. By this point almost fifty years had passed since their army service and any divisions between ranks that might still have been palpable in veteran groups in the immediate aftermath of the war had faded away. As the humour makes clear, former officers were here willing participants in the joke and not simply the butt or target of humour. In the films, the veterans are of an age when they did not need to worry about wider social conventions, especially as they might have sensed their own 'funeral season' was rapidly approaching, and could recapture the early days of Armistice Day celebration.⁵⁹ Finally, it might also reflect the slowly eroding culture of deference that had so marked British society. The 1960s was the decade in which assumptions about seemingly solid and natural social structures came under increasing scrutiny and doubt.⁶⁰ However, although they were all advancing in years, had not been in uniform for a long time, and were happy to lark about and seem highly irreverent, they remained respectful of military trappings. Medals and banners are proudly displayed in the *Salient Circle* films and the amount of footage dedicated to the band of the 4 battalion East Kent Regiment goes beyond the spectacle of a marching band and instead implies something about it as a unifying badge of identity, experience and pride.⁶¹

Swapping personas: from pilgrim to tourist

As the films show, most pilgrimages also contained elements of 'pure' tourism concentrating on sights of general interest, but this element generally became stronger from 1945 onwards. George Page took shots of Belgian dog carts, a wedding procession in a village near Notre Dame de Lorette, and a cruise on the canals of Amsterdam. However, these components of the visits became more and

more significant with the passing of time. 'Jumbo' Gisby captured the Salient Circle parties enjoying a boat excursion at Bruges. Grahame Wright's film of the Friends of St. George's visit has the strongest sense of a holiday with some pilgrimage elements, which is reflected in the audio commentary spoken by Len Dawson, the Honorary Secretary of the organisation and resident of Herne Bay (another seaside town close to Canterbury). The bulk of the film refers to the 1968 annual pilgrimage, but has a second part relating to the 1971 tour. The commentary appears to have been unscripted and comes across more as a running annotation with Dawson responding to what he could see on the screen. In places he stutters a little and the commentary does not sound polished or heavily rehearsed. It is also a little out of sync with the image and starts late and probably reflected some of the technical difficulties of recording the commentary onto the sound stripe, which runs down the edge of the film, in precise synchronisation with the picture. Dawson's tour-guide-like commentary provides basic information as he identifies each location, which opens up the issue of the intended viewers. If primarily a record for fellow Friends, it might be reasonable to expect that the sites would be well-known to such a group with such a specialist interest, and so perhaps the film was actually constructed for a more general audience.

The list of places reveals that the Inter-war 'whistle-stop' tour approach was still very much the standard. The first full day starts with footage of the Ploegsteert memorial near the French border, the border is crossed at Le Bizet, there is a brief glimpse of the Neuve Chapelle Indian memorial, the signpost for La Bassée then provides a topographical fix for anyone wishing to look up the precise location, before footage of the Vimy Ridge memorial and the nearby Fauborg D'Amiens British cemetery in Arras. The record then picks up with sites a few miles further south on the Somme front at Albert, and its basilica, which was made so famous through numerous wartime photographs, and the Newfoundland Memorial Park. Seemingly the last stop of the day was the French memorial and cemetery at Notre Dame de Lorette, which is a short way north-west of Arras. Presumably, this was the one location visited on the way back to Ypres. Such a profusion of different locations very much implies a whirl of brief stops, which is underlined by the commentary. 'Time was limited so one had to move on. And it is always a pity on those trips that one has so little time', Dawson remarks over footage of the group at Sanctuary Wood Cemetery.

In contrast, other days seem far more leisurely and relaxed. There is a day visiting Poperinghe before doubling back to Ypres to attend a ceremony at the Menin Gate. The following day the trappings of a pilgrimage disappear completely and the tour becomes sheer tourist excursion with a trip to Bruges. Shots of the canals, horse-drawn carriages, and belfries work with the commentary— 'Bruges has an ancient history', 'the well-known belfry'— to create a travelogue effect. The film then moves on to scenes of the party in Amsterdam. The mixed nature of the 'pilgrimage' is shown in both the itinerary and the film's running time: the eight day trip (including the travel to and from the UK) had one full-day of battlefield touring, one day in Ypres and one in Poperinghe, which provided a mix of commemorative and tourist sites, and three days of 'pure' tourism; the film reflects this balance containing just short of seven minutes' footage of the battlefields and

memorials and nearly ten minutes on the other elements. Thus, the ‘tourist gaze’ often comes through in the films revealing the dual nature of the trips; although ostensibly pilgrimages and acts of solemn remembrance, they were also the moment to enjoy sites of general interest and amusement. Pilgrimages were, clearly, far from purely spiritual journeys of reflection and far more a mixture of different experiences and sensations. However, it is equally clear that all members of such tours valued the idea that they were engaging in something deeper than simply tourism and appreciated the terminology and perceived trappings of pilgrimage.

The films of ‘Jumbo’ Gisby, Leslie Goulden, George Page and Grahame Wright provide a new way of examining the rich culture of veterans, their behaviours and attitudes from the late 1920s through to the early 1970s. Although there are some marked differences over time, there are also many consistent elements, particularly the essential pride of all veterans at having done their duty. The films show the veterans balanced between their outward, public-facing personas and their everyday characteristics and manner, but the early films have a much stronger emphasis on formal behaviour of ceremonies and parades, as well as individual graves which reveals the lingering effects of grief and loss. Although these activities are still present in the later films, they are balanced by more elements of fun, relaxation, engagement with local communities and outright tourism. Collectively, the films reveal the high profile of the Great War and the special status of the veteran in British popular culture and society. Veterans and the battlefields over which they fought were regarded as the star turns by these local filmmakers in their chronicling of community life in Canterbury and South-East Kent.

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Appendix

Details of the amateur films examined in this study are as follows:

Leslie Goulden – His collection of films are stored at Screen Archive South East.

Subject	Code	Link
Wedding, Car Rally, School Sports Day, War Graves	11672	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11672/

George Page – His collection of films are stored at Screen Archive South East.

Subject	Code	Link
Nijmegen Pilgrimage 1951	11811	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11811/
War Graves	11818	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11818/
War Graves; Buffs	11819	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11819/
An Epic Pilgrimage	11820	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11820/
War Graves	11821	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11821/
War Graves; Various Races	11824	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11824/
Lands Across The Sea	11853	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/11853/

Grahame Wright - His collection of films are stored at Screen Archive South East.

Subject	Code	Link
Pilgrimage to Belgium and France by The Friends of St George's Church Ypres 1968 & 1971	15318	https://screenarchive.brighton.ac.uk/detail/15318/

George 'Jumbo' Gisby – His collection of films are currently held by author (Tim Jones).

Subject	Code	Link
The Salient Circle Pilgrimage to Flanders 1961	N/A	vimeo.com/canterburyamateurfilm/salient1961
The Salient Circle Pilgrimage to Flanders 1962	N/A	vimeo.com/canterburyamateurfilm/salient1962
The Salient Circle Pilgrimage to Flanders 1963	N/A	vimeo.com/canterburyamateurfilm/salient1963