

# NOVEMBER 1916

## MUD, BLOOD AND FUTILITY

Two of the bloodiest battles in history dragged on. The first, Verdun, was not to end until 15 December 1916 with a loss of a million casualties to each side - after 10 months of bitter fighting. The fourth phase of the second, the battle of the Somme began on 13th November 1916 with an Allied attack on the Ancre resulting in the capture of Beaumont Hamel. This last major operation ended on the 18th November 1916 and with the first heavy snowfalls the struggle ended. There were perhaps 600,000 casualties on each side with the British and French gaining about 6 miles on a 16 mile front over the 5 months since July 1916. Both sides now concentrated on enduring the weather - rain, sleet, mud, waterlogged trenches and shell holes.

There were significant political developments this month. In the USA Woodrow Wilson became the first Democrat to be elected for two consecutive terms since Andrew Jackson. His campaign slogan had been "he kept us out of the war", but in the months ahead increased German submarine attacks on US shipping make it difficult for him to maintain neutrality. Aged 86, Emperor Franz Joseph died on the 21st November 1916 after 68 years on the throne of Austria-Hungary. His successor, grand nephew Archduke Charles had already indicated he might want to take his Empire out of the conflict.

Wilmslow lost one man on the 11th of the month - **Private Thomas Massey**. Serving with the **16th Battalion the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (36756)** in Flanders, he had seen action earlier at Mametz Wood made famous by Robert Graves in "Goodbye to all that". Thomas was born in 1884, the eldest son of William and Elizabeth. Living at 3 Wallworth Terrace, Altrincham Road (now a machine hire company) with 2 brothers and a sister, he was employed as a domestic gardener. His brothers also joined up - Alfred as a gunner with the Royal Garrison Artillery and Fred with the 7th Cheshire's. Mercifully they both survived.



Thomas is commemorated on the Town's memorial, in St Bartholomew's and on Morley Green. His grave can be found at Essex Farm, near Pilckem Ridge, Boezinge along with 1,203 others. This cemetery is an attraction to visitors to the battlefields for two reasons. Firstly, it contains the grave of one of the youngest British soldiers - Private Valentine Joe Strudwick who died on 14th January 1916 aged 15 serving with the 8th Battalion Rifle Brigade (5750). Secondly, it contains the concrete Advanced Dressing Station where in May 1915 Canadian physician Major (later Lt Col) John McCrae wrote "In Flanders Fields" whilst looking at the trenches and noticing the poppies surviving amid the carnage after presiding over the funeral of his friend Alexis Helmer.



Essex Farm Advanced Dressing Station

The grave of John McCrae, writer of the poem 'In Flanders Fields'



He sent the poem to London where it was rejected by *The Spectator*, but published by *Punch* in December 1915. The poem and poppy are now staple Remembrance Day symbols around the world. McCrae was to die of pneumonia at Wimereux on 13th January 1918.

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## *In Flanders' Fields*

*In Flanders' fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders' fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch, be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders' fields.*

*John McCrae*

