The village memorial in Mells, Somerset was raised ‘in the home of our delight,’ as described by Poet Laureate Robert Bridge’s inscription on the memorial.

It remembers twenty one men from Mells and the neighbouring village of Vobster lost in the First World War. Three of these men, Raymond Asquith, Edward Vranch and Tom King, died one terrible September weekend in 1916 at the Somme.

A hundred years on, this exhibition explores the stories behind the memorial and the impact of war at home in rural Somerset. Alongside the gamekeepers, gardeners and colliery workers, the men remembered on the memorial also include Edward, last son and heir of the Horner family and Mells estate, and his brother-in-law Raymond Asquith, son of Herbert Asquith, prime minister until December 1916.

On the memorial in the centre of the village, all are remembered in the same way, regardless of rank, or position in society. As it was with their war graves in France and further afield.

The village memorial was one of many, at home and abroad, designed by the eminent and highly in demand architect, Edwin Lutyens. But as a friend of the Horner and Asquith families, the commission for Mells, was a personal and heartfelt one. Lutyens was one of the many artists, writers, politicians and diarists of the time well known to the Horner family, and Frances Horner in particular, and it is thanks to these artistic and cultural connections that some of the finest First World War memorials in Somerset were commissioned for the village.

Through a selection of letters unearthed in local, national and family archives, this exhibition lets us hear some of those voices from a hundred year ago. The authors are of all ages and come from diverse backgrounds but all relate to Mells and the surrounding area. We hope they give an impression of just what it was like to be living during the ‘Great War’ in one village in the English countryside, the impact of which is still felt one hundred years on.

Jo Plimmer, Project Coordinator and Sue Bucklow, Curator on behalf of Rook Lane Arts Trust
RAYMOND ASQUITH.
FRANCIS BABER.
GEOFFREY BATES.
OLIVER BURGE.
STANLEY BURGE.
EDGAR CHAMBERLAIN.
EDWIN FRICKER.
ALFRED GRACE.
WYNDHAM HAMES.
EDWARD HORNER.
EDGAR JAMES.
GILBERT JAMES.
CHARLES KING.
THOMAS KING.
ARTHUR LONG.
HERBERT OLDING.
FRANK PHILLIPS.
LEONARD SILK.
EDWARD VRANCH.
HERBERT VRANCH.
THOMAS WITCOMBE.
Dear Madam

I now take the pleasure of writing to let you know how pleased I was to receive the parcel you and Mrs Asquith sent. I received it this morning safely. I am at present in winter quarters wooden huts just for a few days we are on the move to the firing line and back pretty frequently. The weather is very wet and the roads are very muddy but I am in the best of health at present getting quite used to the life now it has its humour as well as its hardships and there is not the least doubt that we shall win in the end. We are in dug outs when we are in the firing line, they are fairly warm. My brother in law Pte. T. Mounty is near me, not in the same bay but quite close so I have a village chum to talk to over old times and we quite cheer one another up. We are quite cheerful nothing like down hearted, we know without boasting the Germans will have to go back. Time and men and money to the good on our side. My regiment has been very lucky lately not so very many casualties, the enemy very often gives us a warm ½ hours shelling but…

(The remainder of the letter is missing)
4TH DECEMBER 1915

From Pte Edgar Chamberlain to Lady Frances Horner

This letter from Edgar Chamberlain to Lady Frances Horner is a rare voice of one of the village men named on the memorial. There is no other correspondence that we know of from the others, except from Edward Horner and Raymond Asquith.

Although the last page is missing, we have enough here to bring Edgar to life. It is a warm, humorous letter, thanking her for his parcel, with the kind of 'banter' one often finds in soldiers' letters:

"My regiment has been very lucky lately, not so very many casualties, the enemy only often gives us a warm ½ hours shelling."

He could well have been writing to any one of his family at home on Rashwood Lane, Mells.
“MY BROTHER-IN-LAW PTE. T. MOUNTY IS NEAR ME, NOT IN THE SAME BAY BUT QUITE CLOSE SO I HAVE A VILLAGE CHUM TO TALK TO OVER OLD TIMES AND WE QUITE CHEER ONE ANOTHER UP.”

Edgar Chamberlain and his brother-in-law Thomas Mounty, believed to be taken in Ypres

Written in December 1915, Edgar had only joined up in March of that year. He was serving with the Somerset Light Infantry in the Lewis Gun section, alongside some familiar faces from home.

Embroidered card sent home to Mells c. 1915

Sent home by Edgar for his sister Winnie’s birthday, this is typical of many embroidered French cards purchased behind the lines by serving soldiers, and sent with a brief note in pencil to reassure their family back at home.

List of serving men of Mells, kept by Frances Horner

The villagers and their welfare meant a great deal to Frances Horner, which is evident from this bound list of all those serving from Mells and the surrounding villages. She has typed or written next to each name noting acknowledgement of parcels that had been sent and, as news was received in Mells, what happened to each soldier. In Edgar’s case it is clearly noted he received his parcel and also that he was “wounded” and on “sick leave.”
Angel

Thank you very much for your long letter of the 5th. I am terribly sorry to hear about Ego. Diana has also written to me saying that there can be no doubt any longer that he was killed. He was unique and irreplaceable. And I suppose anyone would have picked out Egypt as by far the safest of all parts of the battlefield. I agree with you about the utter senseless ness of war but I do not think about it even so often as one day in seven; one of it’s effects being to make one more callous, short sighted & unimaginative than one is by nature. It extends the circle of one’s acquaintance, but beyond that I cannot see that it has a single redeeming feature. The suggestion that it elevates the character is ludicrous. Burglary, assassination and picking oakum would do as much for anyone.

I’m glad that Frances pitched into Margot about the heartless ness stunt. As a result got quite a sensible letter from her (Margot) - the 2nd I have received from Downing Street since the war began. I answered it promptly and at length, but I don’t flatter myself that that anyone but Margot’s maid will read what I wrote. I also got last night a parcel of socks from Frances with your note inside & the frozen eau de cologne which is very refreshing. Another parcel of socks had come previously. I suppose those were of your sending. So I am well provided now. The foodstuffs you speak of have not yet turned up. Will you send a couple of indelible pencils – if such things are to be had. The ones I have always break off and chip away when one tries to sharpen them.

We are in the frontline now and have two more days there, then 2 days support, & then I think 8 days rest further back. One gets terribly tired of one’s clothes after 16 days without a change. One does off in the day time with a pleasant humming in one’s ears which makes one dream of woods & hayfields in England & when one wakes one finds that it is a covey of bluebottles quarrelling over a bit of bully beef that some blasé private has flung into the trench. Yesterday I saw a very handsome fly with a bottle green bodice & magenta skirt. This is the nearest I get to a beautiful woman.

My sweetest fawn, how happy I should be to see you again. Perhaps leave will open again soon. Perhaps leave will open again soon.

Your loving Raymond

P.s When I get back to my cheque book I will send you more money. My July allowance must be in by now I should think
Raymond was a brilliant letter writer, whether to his beloved wife Katharine and daughters Helen and Perdita, or to any other of the many family and friends he kept in touch with. The gruesomeness of the war he generally kept from Katharine, but he was always very forthright in his political opinion, and never shied away from saying what he truly felt about the whole pointlessness of the situation. It comes across clearly in the letter written to Katharine in July 1916, after hearing of the death of his friend Hugo (“Ego”) Charteris.
“THE SUGGESTION THAT IT (WAR) ELEVATES THE CHARACTER IS LUDICROUS. BURGLARY, ASSASSINATION AND PICKING OAKUM WOULD DO AS MUCH FOR ANYONE.”

Raymond and his daughter Helen c. 1913

My sweet Helen,
I am writing you my first letter from France to wish you many happy returns of the day. I have asked your mother to get you a penknife and give it to you as a present from me. You must be very careful how you use it. I don’t want you to poke your eyes out or Perdita’s. I wasn’t allowed to have a penknife till I was older than you. And remember that even if you have “true beauty” that it is better to have two eyes than only one. I often think of Nathan.

Your loving Father

Raymond Asquith c. 1912

When he was killed on 15th September 1916, Raymond’s death was mourned as the loss of one of the most brilliant young men of his time; a barrister and prize winning scholar of Balliol College, Oxford, and a Fellow of All Souls, with a glittering political career ahead of him.

Raymond and his daughter Helen c. 1913

Thank you letter from Helen to her father written 26th October 1915

Helen and Perdita Asquith and a friend playing on the wall at Mells Manor

Raymond’s life with Katharine very much revolved around her family home in Mells, it was where they had met and fallen in love on his first visit in 1900. Although they set up home in London after their marriage in 1907, summers were always spent in Mells. During the war years it was where Katharine chose to bring up their children, Helen, Perdita and their youngest Julian (known to all as “Trim”) who was born five months before his father’s death.
Dear Tom

Am writing these few lines in answer to your letter and PC. Pleased to see by then you were alright as I am glad to say we are all in the pink of condition here at home. Beattie is gone to Bristol for a holiday to Aunt Rose’s sister. Her little girl has been out to Uncle Toppers for a week or two and they wanted Beattie to go back with her for a week or so. I expect she is enjoying herself. Well Dear Bro we have had a lovely summer here so far and there have been good crops of everything but I daresay we shall soon be getting some colder and wetter weather so if you could do with anything to keep you warm later on just write and let me know. They have brought some of the German wounded to Warminster and by what I can hear about them they are a toughish lot. Two of them got shot the other week, one trying to escape and the other assaulting the nurse who was attending him. I suppose if the war was over we’d be thinking about football now, but I don’t think there will be anything in that line about here this season. We had a letter from Bill last week and he told us he had the photo’s you sent. Dear Tom I don’t think I have any more to say at present. Things seem to go on here the same as ever and nothing seems to alter very much so now I will close with best love and wishes from all of us at home from your affec Bro. Edgar
28TH AUGUST 1916

From Edgar King to his brother Tom (pictured), serving in France

This poignant letter was written by Edgar King, eldest brother of Thomas (Tom) and Charles King. It was written on August 28th 1916, less than three weeks before Tom died of wounds sustained in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette.

Edgar’s is a very typical letter, filled in Tom with news from home. He writes of their youngest sibling Beatrice (Beatrice), then 8 years old going to Bristol for a holiday. This is the same Beatrice you can hear speaking eighty years later in the BBC documentary ‘The Day the Guns Fell Silent’ (1998) which is showing on the screen in the Café Gallery.
“I SUPPOSE IF THE WAR WAS OVER WE SHOULD BE THINKING ABOUT FOOTBALL NOW, BUT I DON’T THINK THERE WILL BE ANYTHING IN THAT LINE ABOUT HERE THIS SEASON.”

Beatrice King, Mells School 1916

Beatrice scarcely recognised her brother Tom when she saw a young man coming over the brow of the hill towards her. Having got last minute leave Tom was ashamed to come home in the “lousy” state he was in. Beatrice remembers him being very restless, his mind not at ease, and he told her brothers that he wouldn’t be back again.

Thomas and Charles King, c. 1913

Before the war, Tom and Charles King had plans to join the Metropolitan Police but were told they were below standard height. With this rejection they made the decision to enlist in the Coldstream Guards instead. This they did in 1913, hoping to try again for the police at a later date. Sadly this was never to happen as neither brother survived the First World War.

Mells Pit Rescue Team 1915

According to the 1911 census, both Tom and his father Henry were employed at Vobster Quarry, while the letter writer, Edgar, worked at Mells Pit. As a miner and therefore involved in an essential industry, Edgar was exempt from fighting. He is pictured here (front row left) as one of the Mells Colliery Rescue Brigade during the war.

Photo of Tom King’s grave sent to his family

In September 1916, after three months of the Somme offensive and for the sake of a ten mile advance, Tom King along with Edward Vranch and Raymond Asquith became some of the 600,000 killed in what many came to feel was a pointless sacrifice.
My Darling

I wrote you a message on a funny little card last night as I didn't know what time I might have, but now we've gone back again to the same place I wrote to Daddy from last. The very day of that letter we were hurried off up to the line and road over unspeakable roads most of the night. Riding with the regiment in the dark is at best difficult as people in front of you disappear and you don't know where you're going, and yet can't gallop after them or the tail of your own troop would be left behind, and over broken ground it's doubly hard, eg. One of my packs fell into a shell hole, (you have 2 or 3 pack horses containing machine gun ammunition etc. at the end of your troop and mountain of tools, very unwieldy) We went through the big gun area of course always a trying experience in acoustics and finally got to the German lines taken that day by the infantry. The rest of the night was spent in building a bridge over trenches to get our horses off the road and then in persisting cold and snow storms tried to sleep by improvised fires - not a drop to drink and I found I'd made a mistake in putting port into my water bottle! One lives and learns – and by the way what a capital water bottle you sent me. Well then in the morning they said we should go through if the infantry attack succeeded and after the cold night I for one felt frightened to death. All day we stood about, horses saddles up, looking at maps, arranging respective jobs, etc. Again cold, wet and almost foodless. However, the infantry attack didn’t succeed and tho’ one saw other cavalry fighting (through one’s glasses) and I fear getting it pretty hot, esp. the 10th, our Brigade didn’t fight and that night ie. last night we stayed in the same place finding a dug out to sleep in and very welcome, tho’ the wretched men and the horses were out in the snow all the time. This morning weather considered to bar the job altogether so we’ve ridden back some miles out of shelling distance. What seemed hardship two days ago is Paradise. I’ve bathed in my usual wash tub at the signal cottage, changed clothes out of saddle bags and am writing this in the tin hut before dinner in the most comfortable frame of body. No one knows what happens tomorrow, but I’ll write if anything momenti – expect further back, myself, to wait for another chance.

I’ve discovered three further wants by this experience: a case for carrying maps so that you can look at them all the time (Asprey again) and a really good electric with refills, also a larger single saddle bag, to fasten on one side of one’s horse, than I’ve got now. Cicely got me the original one at souzer’s, too small, but Whippy where I have an account would have the thing all right - one of the larger sizes (Dist from the double saddle bags on pack horse).

I’m very sleepy, Good night, Angel
From Edward Horner to his mother, Lady Frances Horner

Edward Horner’s character comes across in the daily letters he wrote home to his family in Mells. In this letter, despite having spent the night moving troops and horses in terrible conditions and building a bridge over trenches for the horses before attempting to sleep, Edward writes that “not a drop to drink and I found I’d made the mistake of putting port into my water bottle! One lives and learns – and by the way what a capital water bottle you sent me”.

This is a typical Edward comment, even though he has spent the night out in the piercing cold.
“WHAT SEEMED HARDSHIP TWO DAYS AGO IS PARADISE. I’VE BATHED IN MY USUAL WASH TUB AT THE SIGNAL COTTAGE, CHANGED CLOTHES OUT OF SADDLE BAGS AND AM WRITING THIS IN THE TIN HUT BEFORE DINNER.”

Edward Horner, drawn by Violet, Duchess of Rutland

Born in 1888, Edward was the only surviving son of Sir John and Lady Frances Horner, of Melus (their younger son Mark had died from scarlet fever in 1908). Initially Edward joined the North Somerset Yeomanry in 1914 but by the time of this letter he was in France with the 18th Hussars; a cavalry regiment of the British army.

In May 1915 Edward was seriously injured when a bullet passed through his kidney, necessitating an operation to remove it. This was such a high risk procedure, his parents travelled to France to be with him. Remarkably Edward recovered, and after a frustrating time spent in Egypt on a staff job, in February 1917, at his own insistence, he returned to the cavalry in France.

Edward Horner seated on his horse

Edward Horner in the 11th Reserve Cavalry at Tidworth Barracks

I discovered that my room mate, one Horner, had joined the regiment complete with his own valet, groom and chargers. In those days officers’ servants were enlisted directly to the service of their masters, and as often as not remained with them throughout their military career.

Reginald Hancock in ‘Memoirs of a Veterinary Surgeon’ published 1954
My darling

You haven’t written lately about yourself. I feel terribly disquieted about you & Daddie. How is he & how is your foot & what’s this about a motor smash – of which I heard a rumour. Life goes on peacefully to the sound of very distant guns. The optimists here say the worst is over but others shake their heads & talk about vast German reserves. My ward remains fairly full so I’ve regular work but there is no rush & the hospital is emptyish & Milly rather unhappy about it. We had more cases last night – but only one bad one & I am writing this in the ward.

Our great excitement last week was dinner with a highland division close by but I am not supposed to say this as Milly doesn’t like it. I thought that we ever go out of hospital and indeed we hardly ever do. As a matter of fact I minded it dreadfully. It was a great effort. We dined with the General – they were just leaving this neighbourhood after a short rest to fight again. It was their last night. They had a concert for us. Terribly vulgar songs composed by the staff a female impersonator supposed to be the best in the army! They were frightfully keen about this show – & dressed up as Pierrots & watched to see how we liked it. I may say Milly and Rose enjoyed it heartily. I did my best to laugh and applaud but it seemed like a nightmare.

We drove back quite late we weren’t very far from the front lines – say eight miles – & the sky was lit by the guns – just like summer lightning & I felt that I saw just what Raymond & E must have seen every night. Milly & Rose went to sleep & I’m sorry to say I quite broke down but no-one knew. It was the reaction after the effort to be cheerful and the strange incongruity of our evening. Never again – yet I wasn’t really sorry that I had been as it was the nearest I had been to the front.

Darling

A lovely red wrap has just arrived its too pretty. Thank you so much I shall wear it a lot as it is so chilly here as of an evening.

Don’t flag about letters – & tell Diana she has been neglecting me but two white dresses have arrived.

We had a lovely day yesterday – an outing. I didn’t go to the hospital at all. We motored to Dunkirk – but though our objective turned out to be a dismal one enough – the drive there was too lovely, through medieval looking towns with moats and gates. One on top of a very high hill fairly close to the line is the most attractive place I’ve ever been in. We dined there on the way home. I thought of how perfect it might have been as a setting for the people we loved & I wondered if E or Raymond had ever been there. It was a marvelous inn with a courtyard and a long low room from which you could see thousands & thousands of miles all the battlefields of the world.
When Raymond Asquith was killed in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on the 15th September 1916, it was more than his wife Katharine Asquith could bear. She felt compelled to be in Northern France to be near to the place where he died. In 'Time Remembered', her mother Frances Horner writes, "Katharine and Raymond Asquith fell fathom-deep in love," and the hundreds of letters that exist between husband and wife bear testament to this.

She left her three young children in the care of her mother, and in April 1918 went out to be a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse - affectionately known as VAD's - at the Duchess of Sutherland's Hospital at St Omer, from where she wrote frequently to her parents.
“WE DROVE BACK QUITE LATE WE WEREN’T VERY FAR FROM THE FRONT LINES – SAY EIGHT MILES - & THE SKY WAS LIT BY THE GUNS – JUST LIKE SUMMER LIGHTNING & I FELT THAT I SAW JUST WHAT RAYMOND & E MUST HAVE SEEN EVERY NIGHT.”

There had long been talk of Katharine going to nurse in France; she had even discussed it with Raymond whilst he was still alive. Up until this point she had been helping her mother Frances do night-time canteen work at munition factories, mostly in the East End of London, but her close friend Lady Diana Manners had been trying to persuade Katharine to join her as a VAD. Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, a family friend and an activist for social reform, had managed to overcome strict Royal Army Medical Corps rules to establish the No.9 Red Cross Hospital (otherwise known as Millicent Duchess of Sutherland’s Ambulance) at Namur. This hospital changed location many times and had only just moved to St Omer in April 1918, when Katharine went to work there.

Raymond visited Amiens Cathedral on 24-hour leave only days before he was killed, of which he wrote in a letter to Katharine. Whilst in France, Katharine made a point of also visiting Amiens Cathedral. Raymond would have a memorial there too, designed and carved by Eric Gill, the notable sculptor who also undertook the lettering on the village war memorial, and Raymond’s memorial inscription beneath the tower of the Church of St Andrew, Mells.

This was one of several press cuttings relating to her children, then on holiday in Norfolk, sent to Katharine whilst she was nursing. Helen Asquith recollected being able to clearly hear the guns pounding from France from where they were staying.
In a train
Left my stylo at the office
My own darling
Many happy returns of the day. I wish I was with you and ours but...

Just coming back from Mells. there were present Jack, lady H, Katharine Asquith, Mrs Aubrey Herbert & Harold Baker.

I took down with me Edward Horner’s memorial tablet. The train was very late & I arrived and found Lady H alone. Had tea & then unpacked the memorial. we carried it into the church – so there was no fuss and it was an excellent excuse for not going to see a Shakespearean play in the vicarage garden, Cymbeline. Where Mr Lear the Vicar & Mrs Lear played the King & Queen & he had to invoke Jove at an altar. Such a thing that would have burst me suppressing giggles. villagers took the other parts.

Lady H very kind & pleased & touched by the tablet.

Sunday we went to the Cairns, Lord & Lady, where there was small & young family & a delightful little boy of 12 full of fun & life & intelligence & takes trouble to keep at the bottom of his form as it gives him he said a much better time!

I drew pictures for them which proved a success.

Monday. Jack, Lady H, Kathleen met the villagers & walked round all morning inspecting sites for the war memorial at Mells. a funny procession. I walked miles Sunday morning with Katharine A to have preliminary survey.

Found a perfect site in the centre of the village – which no one else had found! or thought of & with a little tact & patience it was carried by the villagers with acclamation.

Yesterday afternoon went on to a house restored by E. Lister a bachelor household- full of virginals and rather precious furniture & a lot of whitewash that was forever coming off & whitening us and the inhabitants.

It was very funny with some success!

The evening I spent in the church repainted the inscription to Raymond Asquith – for which they were grateful – so my weekend was as a spring day. Fun & tears – all their young men are killed
AUGUST 4TH 1919
From Sir Edwin Lutyens to his wife Emily

This one letter brings together many strands of our exhibition. Written by Sir Edwin Lutyens to his wife Emily in 1919, after his visit to the Horner family in Mells, it paints a vivid picture of the village in the period just after the end of the war, when for some life had returned to normal, but for others coping with the loss of loved ones – and for some in Mells this was the loss of two sons – life could never be the same again.

The pathos of the situation was not lost on Lutyens when he wrote: “My weekend was a Spring day. Fun and tears – all of their young men are killed.”
“MONDAY... MET THE VILLAGERS & WALKED ROUND ALL MORNING INSPECTING SITES FOR THE WAR MEMORIAL AT MELLS. A FUNNY PROCESSION. I WALKED MILES SUNDAY MORNING WITH KATHARINE A TO HAVE PRELIMINARY SURVEY.”

Cymbeline: Mells village theatricals 1919

In his letter, Lutyens tells his wife that arriving late and finding Frances Horner alone meant that they could visit the church together without any fuss, “an excellent excuse therefore to escape the village theatricals, in this case a production of Shakespeare’s Cymbeline. The thought of Mr Lear, the king, and his wife playing the King and Queen and having to invoke Jove at an altar, such a thing would have burst me from suppressing giggles.”

Sir Edwin Lutyens at Mells

Lutyens was a long term friend and frequent house guest of the Horners, and his design influence is very apparent both within the church and churchyard and around the village. In her book ‘A Time Remembered’, written in 1935, Lady Horner comments: “Both in London and in the country he has beautified every house that anything to do with, and the village of Mells owes a great debt to his skill.”

Design by Lutyens for the Edward Horner memorial

While Lutyens designed the plinth, A.J. Munnings was responsible for the striking bronze of horse and rider. The design also factored in the inclusion of Edward’s wooden grave marker in the plinth, a poignant reminder brought back from France.

Design for Edward Horner memorial tablet

The reason for Lutyens’ visit to Mells was to choose the site of the village war memorial, and also to deliver the wooden tablet (design left) which is sited on the wall in the Church of St Andrew, Mells, adjacent to the magnificent memorial statue of Edward Horner. Lutyens designed the plinth, which is reminiscent of his Cenotaph recently designed for Whitehall.
Dear Lady Horner

Re. Memorial at Mells

May I thank you for your appreciative note. I have seen many village memorials in Somerset and elsewhere, and I have always been disappointed. But the Mells Memorial – well, I frankly admit I found it impossible to describe adequately the effect it produced on me. I should think it would be impossible for anybody ever to pass it without being compelled to stop & look & think. If I had anything of the artist in me, I might be able to tell you really what I feel about it. I wonder if you could prevail upon Sir Edwin Lutyens to write a description of it for me. I could incorporate it in my report for the unveiling ceremony, which Mr Lear tells me has been fixed for the evening of Sunday 26th June.

Yours faithfully,

Reginald F. Dix
In 1914 Mells was a village with just fewer than 1,500 inhabitants, well served with a shop and post office, public house, reading room, two schools, baker, blacksmith and a policeman. The local doctor, George Crawford Helps, held a daily surgery in his home, Bilboa House, which even included Sundays. It was certainly rural, with many villagers involved in agricultural labour or employed by the Mells estate, but a good number also employed as miners at the Mells Colliery on the outskirts of the village, or in the nearby Vobster Quarry. It was a small world where everyone knew each other and soon heard of the loss of those men named on the village memorial. No one was immune to this, regardless of status, as this heartfelt letter from the editor of the Somerset Standard, Reginald Dix, to Lady Horner, pictured here, bears testament.
“BUT THE MELLS MEMORIAL - WELL I FRANKLY ADMIT I FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE ADEQUATELY THE EFFECT IT PRODUCED ON ME. I SHOULD THINK IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANYBODY EVER TO PASS IT WITHOUT BEING COMPelled TO STOP & LOOK & THINK.”

Lutyens’ design for the village war memorial in Mells

Frances Horner had commissioned the village war memorial to be designed by the most eminent architect of the day, Sir Edwin Lutyens, and the names inscribed on it included not only her son Edward Horner, but also her son-in-law Raymond Asquith. Many of the villagers had met Lutyens in 1919 and given their approval to the site he chose for “the” memorial.

Unveiling Mells War Memorial
26th June 1921

A crowd of 1,500 – as many people as populated the village at the time – turned out for the unveiling of the memorial by Brigadier General Arthur Asquith on the evening of Sunday 26th June 1921. “Oc” Asquith, as his family and friends knew him, was Raymond’s younger brother who had fought throughout the war, seeing service in Gallipoli and France.

The Hames family, Mells Park c.1900

The majority of the crowd at the unveiling would have known the names on the memorial. Families in the village were often interwoven, either through marriage or work or both. For example John Horner’s much respected gamekeeper, Richard Hames, lost his son-in-law Arthur Long in May 1915, and his own son Wyndham was declared dead in April 1918, after many months missing in Palestine.
Dear Lady Horner.

Your letter was sent on to me at the arts club in town where I got it yesterday. I am very glad the bronze pleases you and I would very much like to see it now Sir Edwin has set it on its base. I am sure it has been beautifully done and if it pleases you then it must be right for your taste is never anything but the most artistic. I am sorry we shall not be able to come to Frome before the 28th October: I am painting at Lord Bathurst’s at Cirencester later on. About the 14th and if I could get there to see the church before I return I would do so.

Both shall look forward to seeing it someday. Thank you for your kind invitation.

Yours sincerely

A.J Munnings
It is not clear whether Alfred Munnings ever did get to Mells to see in situ the beautiful memorial bronze he sculpted of Edward Horner. It is an extremely fine piece of work, the more so if you consider that this was his very first commission for a statue. Up until this point his reputation as an artist was based on his equestrian paintings only. But the union of Lutyens’ plinth and Munnings’ bronze is a great success, and the Church of St Andrew in Mells has one of the finest and most moving of First World War memorials because of it.

Munnings’ voice comes across loud and clear; always out and about, busying himself with prestigious commissions. He was gaining a reputation as one of England’s finest painters of horses, and no doubt if both men had lived, their paths may well have crossed.

For Edward Horner and Alfred Munnings enjoyed their place at the centre of society life, and both were passionate about their horses.
“I AM VERY GLAD THE BRONZE PLEASES YOU AND I WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE TO SEE IT NOW SIR EDWIN HAS SET IT ON ITS BASE. I AM SURE IT HAS BEEN BEAUTIFULLY DONE AND IF IT PLEASES YOU THEN IT MUST BE RIGHT FOR YOUR TASTE IS NEVER ANYTHING BUT THE MOST ARTISTIC.”

Patrick

Munnings volunteered himself, and his horses, soon after the outbreak of war, but was rejected. However his favourite horses including Patrick, above, were still commandeered. Munnings managed to get them back, thanks to being on friendly terms with the recruiting officer in Penzance, close to where they had been stabled. They spent the rest of the war safely grazing in Cornwall. When the artist was offered the Edward Horner memorial commission, Patrick became the model for Edward’s horse in his new studio at Castle House, Dedham; now the Munnings Art Museum.

Photograph of clay maquette from Edward Horner memorial album, Mells c.1920

‘The very first job I did in that newly-moved studio was a model, in clay, of Edward Horner on his charger... The model of the horse and rider was a good size, the horse being roughly the height of a deer... My young sculptor friend, Waters, came and stayed as assistant in setting up the armature, and finally with the casting of the plaster-moulds.’

Sir Alfred Munnings in ‘The Second Burst’ 1951

Sketch for watering horses 1918

It seems ironic that in 1917 when Munnings finally got an army job caring for thousands of horses that would be transported to the battlefields, the war effort was preparing to use mass tanks - as part of a combined arms offensive - for the first time. This was the Battle of Cambrai in which Edward Horner was killed on 21st November, one of 44,000 allied dead.

Sketch for Flowerdew’s Charge 1918

Despite the increase in mechanised warfare, when Munnings made it to France in 1918 as a war artist, first with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and later with the Canadian Forestry Corps, horses were still being used. In his painting ‘Flowerdew’s Squadron’, Munnings depicted what became known as “the last great cavalry charge.”

Despite the increase in mechanised warfare, when Munnings made it to France in 1918 as a war artist, first with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and later with the Canadian Forestry Corps, horses were still being used. In his painting ‘Flowerdew’s Squadron’, Munnings depicted what became known as “the last great cavalry charge.”

Despite the increase in mechanised warfare, when Munnings made it to France in 1918 as a war artist, first with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and later with the Canadian Forestry Corps, horses were still being used. In his painting ‘Flowerdew’s Squadron’, Munnings depicted what became known as “the last great cavalry charge.”

Despite the increase in mechanised warfare, when Munnings made it to France in 1918 as a war artist, first with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and later with the Canadian Forestry Corps, horses were still being used. In his painting ‘Flowerdew’s Squadron’, Munnings depicted what became known as “the last great cavalry charge.”

Despite the increase in mechanised warfare, when Munnings made it to France in 1918 as a war artist, first with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and later with the Canadian Forestry Corps, horses were still being used. In his painting ‘Flowerdew’s Squadron’, Munnings depicted what became known as “the last great cavalry charge.”
Two generations of the "Souls" pictured pre-war

Both Ego and Raymond (front row) feature on the Rothenstein panels; 'Beb' Asquith (first left, front row), poet, writer and brother of Raymond, does not, as he survived. However he was profoundly affected by his experience of active service with initially undiagnosed shellshock.

Ettie Grenfell, Lady Desborough, knew more than most about the tragedy of the war and how it changed families forever. This letter written in 1916 to Katharine Asquith refers to the death of her two sons Julian and Billy Grenfell. Both had been family friends and contemporaries of Katharine and her husband Raymond – whose letter Ettie is referring to – and their tragic deaths two months apart from each other in 1915 rocked the upper echelons of society and the close circle of friends known as the "Souls".

The "Souls" was the nickname given to a group of wealthy families who regularly hosted weekend parties at their respective homes. Ettie, and the family home of Taplow Court, was at the very centre of this group, along with the likes of George Curzon, Arthur Balfour, Mary Elcho, Margot Asquith and Frances Horner, who all played their part. Their name apparently came from a remark made by Charles Beresford: "You all sit and talk about each other's souls."

Several of the "sons of Souls" are immortalised in a set of mural panels (two of which can be seen above) painted by the artist William Rothenstein in 1916. First exhibited at the Royal Academy in the autumn of that year, they were intended as a study for a larger commission that never happened.

There is something ethereal about their unfinished state, particularly when you realise that Raymond Asquith and Ego Desborough had died only weeks before. They depict an academic procession and the conferring of a degree in a chivalric style on an undergraduate. The young men are shown wearing their academic dress over their uniforms and advancing to receive the honours that would have been theirs.

Rothenstein, who was an Official Artist with the British and Canadian armies, was inspired to paint it after attending a degree ceremony at Oxford. He wrote in his book Men and Memories that it "put me in mind of the age of chivalry".

In the end all of those depicted by Rothenstein were gone. The only missing "son of Souls" was Edward Horner – Julian Grenfell's close friend – who died after the painting was made, in November 1917.
ROOK LANE ARTS TRUST THANKS THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR HELP AND SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE TWO YEARS OF THIS PROJECT:

Raymond and Clare, Earl and Countess of Oxford and Asquith and John d’Arcy, archivist for the Horner/Asquith Archive for not only allowing access to such a special family archive but also for their generosity in time and knowledge.

Sam Astill and the team at the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton, Bill Teatheredge and the team at the Munnings Art Museum, Dedham, Tim Skelton and the Lutyens Trust, Nick Turner, Radstock Museum, Charles Rocher, University of Exeter, Keith Meldup and Centerparcs holding images by William King, Cole Her and the CameronJwt Marsh Grant Commission, Mel’s Village Shop and Carla Helen Thomas, Christopher Aylar, Director of The Days that Passed East Sussex 2008, Caroline Dakin, author of The Country Side at War, Sandra Martin and Old Bill, Tamara Grant, Toby Maple, RBK Collections, somerset University, University of Warwick, Matthew Ashdown, National Art Library Images, Broadway and Roger Ellis, Louise Memon, Andrew Bewley, France Foam, in aid of raising the money, Bob Gillett, author of Mells, and another loan of materials, John Duckworth, Mel’s School, Church of St Aldhelm, Mel’s, Lillie Buckeridge, the invaluable research on Mells and Willy Memon, and another loan on 1914 research by the Heritage Management Management, Bath Spa University.

Families of the men listed on the memorial who helped with information and loaned personal material (and joy and laughter), Andrew of Thomas and chinese; Angela of Jason and Christ, Valerie of Edgar and Horner, Val of Raymond Reverie, Neil and the family of Edward and Thomas Mynatt, Raymond Horner, and John Jiffy, nhờ of Edward Reverie and Raymond Alphonso.

Fantasy, help from our volunteers particularly Marisa Baas and Kevenson Char, for photography and strong growing, Gail Lozmore, great reading, Piers and emma, CARA, Isabelle Borges, Sue Smith; also responsible for the beautiful illustrations in the centre (her destination: weird and wilder under the Tuscan Roof) and Stephen Thomas for invaluable research and Sullivan’s help on the Mells, more of our Delight team.

Finally, to everyone who helps on all aspects of the project from transcribing to walking: the France Foam History Company, Emily Bennett, Emma Smart, Robin Smith, Imogen Somers, Amy Nicholls, Evie Bennett, plus Liz Jo Hargraves; and the volunteers, Marta Bax and Mervyn Clingan for photography and digitising, Sally Somers, proof-reading; Pam Lea, research; Carol Minchington, Sarah Godsill (also responsible for the beautiful illustrations in the Delight project booklet and all the Under the Tuscan Roof) and Stephen Thomas for invaluable research and Sullivan’s help on the Mells, more of our Delight team.

For image use we would like to thank the following organisations;

The Estate of Sir Alfred Munnings, Midsomer Norton, Radstock & District Museum @ Radstock Museum, Keith Meldup @ Jason Collection, Centre for Information, University of Exeter, University of Southampton, University of Warwick, and the Talbot Inn, Mells, for allowing our speakers.

Without the above Home of our Delight would not have been possible.
If you have found this exhibition interesting you may also like to explore the new Home of our Delight history walk around Mells village.

You can get a flavour of the walk, and the places and stories it explores here in the Café Gallery, where you will also find our book and film corner.

Pick up a leaflet, and you can walk the trail on site in Mells too.

Thanks to our partnership with Storywalks, if you have a smartphone you will be able to uncover archive photos and hidden histories geo-located along the way with help from local schools and volunteers.

You can download our history walk app from the website: www.homeofourdelight.org.uk

Particular thanks to Caroline Dakers for allowing us to quote from her book ‘The Countryside at War 1914-18’.

Box artist: Lucia Harley
Digital storywalks: Chris Jelley
Storyteller: Lisa Kenwright
Coordinator: Jo Plimmer

Below: North Somerset Yeomanry encampment, Mells Green c.1900