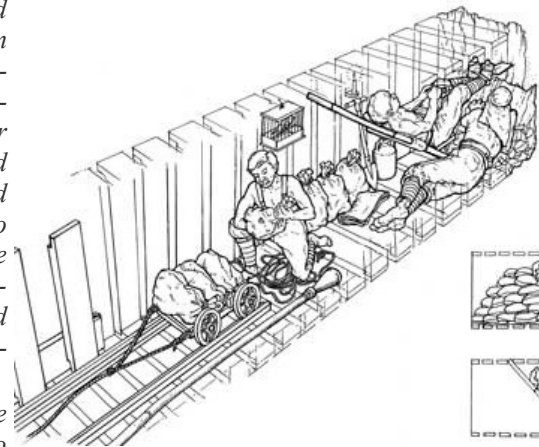


rubber-tyred trolley on rails, returning with pre-cut timber which could be slotted together to support the tunnel without the need for hammering nails.

The ultimate aim was to cause an underground explosion that would destroy a surface target, and in the softer ground of the Ypres Salient, specially prefabricated self-contained explosive charges housed in tubes or 'torpedoes' were used. These were kept in a store at the rear of tunnel systems, with at least one torpedo fully charged, primed and ready for instant use.

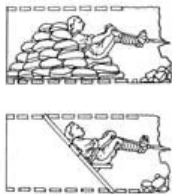
The 250th Tunnelling Company was formed in Rouen in October 1915 and was then moved to the Ypres Salient. It is likely that Arthur Morris was with them from the start and in November 1915 they began work on a deep mine and tunnel which eventually took out a small German salient that protruded into the British lines. In January 1916, they were responsible for digging the deep-level mines under the Messines ridge, joining thousands of men tunnelling out of the Ypres Salient towards the German lines. The plan was to plant 25 enormous mines under the enemy trenches, and explode them just before the major offensive, planned for that summer. The offensive was eventually postponed until the summer of 1917 but when it took place, it rocked the foundations of buildings 30 miles away. The Messines



Ridge was then quickly taken and the battle was regarded as the most successful local operation of the war.

However, Arthur Morris did not live to see the results of his company's tunnelling. Neither was he able to return to his wife and three young children, as he was killed in action on 15th October 1916 at the age of 30. In view of the secrecy surrounding the tunnellers work, it is doubtful if his family were told how he died and his service record has been lost. He is buried in the Ridge Wood Cemetery near Ypres.

Clay-kicking



His widow re-married in 1919 and had another daughter in February 1921, but Arthur's three children lost their mother, too, when she died in March 1921.



For further copies of this leaflet or if you have any information to add, please contact Di Landon on 01452 760531

Westbury Remembers—Part 11

Hubert Backhouse and Arthur Morris

Written by Di Landon
and sponsored by

Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



Captain Hubert Backhouse was one of only two officers commemorated on our war memorial. His parents lived at Westbury Court, as tenants of Maynard Colchester Wemyss, (MCW) and it is clear that they were a wealthy family. One of Hubert's ancestors, a Quaker flax dresser and linen manufacturer, had founded Backhouse's Bank of Darlington, which later merged with Barclays of London to form what is now Barclays Bank. Hubert's grandfather had been the Liberal MP for Darlington, and this is where Hubert was born on 4th Jan 1883. His father, Charles Backhouse, was the local director of Barclays Bank and had grown up in Middleton Lodge in Yorkshire, a beautiful house with a 200 acre estate. His mother, Maude (née Ritchie), also came from a wealthy family, her father having been a coffee merchant in Sri Lanka, and they had also lived in Paris and Pisa. It appears that the family paid a heavy price for what might sound like an exotic lifestyle as five of their ten children died very young.



Mrs Maude Backhouse

Charles and Maude married in 1880 and by the time of the 1891 census they were living in Darlington and had four children, Julia 9, Hubert 8, Charles 7 and Indiana aged

4. Hubert was sent off to Aysgarth Prep School, before going on to Wellington College and Trinity College, Cambridge. Predictably enough, he then became a chartered accountant and joined Barclays Bank. When war was declared in 1914, he was the Assistant Local Director in Leicester and, in one of his wartime letters, MCW wrote that his tenant's son was "very high up in a bank" and had volunteered directly war broke out. The records confirm that on 3rd August 1914 he became a Second Lieutenant in the 4th Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment) and it appears that he was initially stationed in Sunderland for training.

In June 1915, he was promoted to Lieutenant and on 16th August 1915, he sailed for France. It is not clear where he was fighting during the following year as at some point he was transferred to the 2nd Battalion, but by August 1916 he was on the Somme as part of the 6th Division. His battalion was in the front line at Beaumont-Hamel and in September they were in the area of Ginchy and Lesbœufs. All three of these villages were fiercely fought over during the battle of the Somme.

In September 1916, having broken through the lines of German defence, the British were fighting on flat, open ground as they approached the gentle slopes of the Transloy ridges. The fighting was still severe but they were gradually pushing

forward. Then autumn came, and the rain made the conditions increasingly difficult, stretching the men to the limits of their physical endurance. The heavy, clinging, chalky Somme mud and the freezing, flooded battlefield became as formidable an enemy as the Germans. The British gradually pressed forward, in spite of numerous counter-attacks, in an effort to bring the front line on to higher ground from which the offensive could be renewed in the following spring.

By October 1916, Hubert was acting as a temporary Captain and on 15th October was in action at Gueudecourt. A fellow officer reported that Hubert had had orders to take over the command of a company whose commander had been mortally wounded, and was to report back on the situation. He was not satisfied with the reports that he received from an advanced post

and decided to go and see for himself what was happening. Shortly afterwards he was shot in the head and died. The officer went on to explain that "He was buried where he fell under cover of darkness, as it was impossible to get his body back, except at the greatest risk of losing other lives." He added that "His loss is a great blow to the battalion." Hubert's Colonel and Major were mortally wounded in the same action, and very few of the officers serving with him were left alive by the end of it. Those who were spared wrote of the high esteem and affection he was held in by the officers and men of his regi-

ment. He is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.

In one of MCWs letters, we learn that Hubert's father "was in the middle of a game of bridge between tea and dinner" when he was rung up and told that his son had been killed the previous Sunday. "Death had been instantaneous as he was shot in the head by an explosive bullet . . . the poor Backhouses were most terribly upset." De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour (a



Captain Hubert Backhouse

privately-produced roll, mainly of officers who served) pays tribute to Captain Backhouse and adds that he was "fond of golf and all sports, a good rider and was well known with the Zetland hounds." The Zetland hounds hunted in the area of the Tees valley and this suggests that Hubert may well have spent more time in the north of the country than in Westbury.

Arthur Morris.

Identifying which of the fifty nine Arthur Morris who died in the First World War is the one commemorated on our war memorial has been well nigh impossible, but only two seem to have any sort of local connection. One was born in Coleford but he and his family had moved to Monmouth by 1911 and none of them seem to have had any connection with this parish. I initially ruled out another Arthur Morris who, according to his military record, was born in Blakemere in Herefordshire but on cross-checking with other records, I

found he was actually born in Blakeney in 1887 and is therefore the most likely candidate. His father, Thomas, was an agricultural labourer but I have been unable to find out exactly where the family was living. A younger brother, William, was also born in Blakeney before the family moved to Brecon.

Arthur married Mary Jane Kendrick in 1908 and by 1911, they were living in Merthyr Tydfil and had two children Hilda May aged 2 and William Thomas, aged 1. Another daughter, Gladys, was born in 1914.

Arthur was working as a haulier underground and when war broke out, he enlisted in the Army Service Corps. His previous experience meant that he was soon a Sapper in the Royal Engineers 250th Tunnelling Company. He joined a group of men whose job was not to charge over the top of the trenches into No Man's Land, but to sink explosive-packed tunnels deep beneath it. Working in total silence up to 100ft underground they faced the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, tunnel collapse or being blown up or buried alive by the enemy's tunnellers, as they set out to detonate mines beneath the enemy's trenches. At each step of the way they had to search out and destroy German tunnellers digging the other way, whilst operating in complete secrecy.

Tunnelling had for centuries been a prime siege-breaking technique and, by the end of May 1915, the continuous trench line which stretched from the North Sea coast to the Swiss frontier had produced the greatest siege the world had ever seen. The Western Front was therefore ripe for underground warfare.

By 21 December 1914, the Germans had secretly dug shallow tunnels across No Man's Land and exploded some small but deadly mines beneath the primitive trenches. The British had no military mining corps to counter this threat and alarm increased as the news spread. Further similar attacks in early 1915 spurred the British to react speedily and by March 1915 the first Tunnelling Companies were at work in Flanders and mine warfare came into use wherever opposing trench lines lay within striking distance.

By mid-1916 the British had around 25,000 trained tunnellers with many more fetching and carrying, pumping air and water and removing spoil. They also had specially-selected men employed as listeners to detect underground activity by the enemy. Tunnelling plans were kept secret as leaked information could cause the loss of many lives in the most hideous of circumstances.

The tunnels were dug using a technique called 'clay kicking', (see overleaf) whereby a specially shaped and finely sharpened spade was pushed into the working 'face' using the power of the legs, each 'spit' then being levered out. Progress was faster than digging by hand and the technique was almost silent, unlike digging with a pick. The Germans never used clay-kicking and the contrast in digging techniques was a key factor in the ultimate British dominance of the subterranean battleground.

A team consisted of a 'kicker', a 'bagger', who filled sandbags with the 'spoil' and a 'trammer', who trammed the bags away on a small,