

World War 1 Centenary

The centenary of the 1914-18 war is approaching, and it will generate a lot of public attention. The government has committed £50 million to make this a major event. The Culture Secretary is chairing an expert advisory panel to oversee a 4-year programme, building a commemoration ‘fitting of this significant milestone in world history’.

Other key organisations have begun to plan their response. The Royal British Legion is ‘determined that the tone will be one of commemoration, not celebration; and that Centenary activities will be available to all and kept free of partisan or sectarian bias’. Churches Together in England recognises that there will be much debate about the nature of the commemoration and intends to help churches and local communities to work together. Other stakeholders include the Imperial War Museum, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the National Archives.

A four year centenary will last a long time. The Government has already listed what it considers six key dates: the declaration of war in 1914, the start of the battle of Gallipoli in 1915, the first day of the battle of the Somme and the battle of Jutland both in 1916, the battle of Passchendaele in 1917 and the 100 days from the start of the Battle of Amiens to the Armistice in 1918.

While the nation will wish to remember the heroism and sacrifice of so many during the war, there will undoubtedly be many who are uncomfortable with the focus on so many horrific events. Some will undoubtedly think that the only event worth marking is the Armistice in 1918 (though cynics call that the start of a 20 year cease-fire until the next war). What will almost certainly generate significant interest, though not on the Government’s agenda, is when the carnage briefly paused at Christmas 1914 and the opposing troops played football together.

As ringers we will all hold personal views about the war and what should and should not be commemorated, but as the custodians of the nation’s bells we have collective responsibility to use them in ways that enhance public sentiment at such times, whether to enhance rejoicing, to dignify mourning or to support sober reflection.

The Central Council is working with the other bodies involved in planning WW1 centenary events, to ensure that bell ringing can make a full and appropriate contribution, and we will keep ringers informed of progress, especially where there are requests for widespread national ringing.

In representing the ringing community it would help us to know the thoughts of ringers at large about the emphasis and type of ringing that you would like to contribute to this centenary.

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