

REMEMBERING THE SOMME

The search continues to find the fate of loved ones

Many people would like to find out more about family who served or died during the war but don't know where to start. **LESLEY WALSH** looks at a project in Ballymena which has helped scores uncover the past

THE interest shown in an offer to help people find relatives involved in World War One far exceeded the expectations of one researcher who had expected just the odd bit of interest from his fellow townsfolk. But after renting out a room in the local library to share his burgeoning expertise identifying old soldiers, Des Blackadder found out his tidbits of info were in fact precious property to others. Now he reveals just how easy it is to find out information about those who fought in the Great War. Sparked by an interest in his own family's involvement in the war, Des, editor of the Ballymena Times, said his initial perusal of local newspapers' archives left him stunned by the copious amount of information available.

Found in his paper's predecessor, the Ballymena Observer, on file in his local studies' library, Des said what was first confined to a personal interest, filtered out into a general interest in the whole area. Des said "it soon became a labour of love for me" so he began to build up a database of local people who participated in the war.

When he "decided to take it out into the community in October 2004" through a Great War family history day at the library, he had already enlisted a partner and fellow devotee John Hoy, a Larne Grammar School teacher.

They simply couldn't believe the crowds that turned up: "We expected maybe 20 people through the door but we started at 10am on the Saturday and the queue to get in was still going strong at 4pm. The level of interest was fantastic," he said.

So it seemed others were just as captivated by the whole subject as Des. He said it was the personal stories of individual men thrown together by war, how they managed to cope with the conditions they found themselves living in and how they answered the patriotic call to war often from backgrounds of great hardship that so fascinated him. Des was riveted by the many stories and memorabilia of local people's ancestors who had fought, died or survived the war.

"One man asked about a man called Hugh Stewart who had won a medal during the war. We showed him the photo and the cutting about him in the paper and he produced the medal."



Des Blackadder and John Hoy

BY LESLEY WALSH

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Another interesting tale concerns a man called Adam Craig, a native of Ballymena who died at war in August 1917.

"I received information from Canada from someone I met on our website and they sent me a picture of Adam Craig with a little dog and he's holding a picture of his daughter. He's posing with the picture to show he received it to those at home."

Before he died, Mr Craig had sent home a cutting of a tree from the location he'd been based in Langemarck, which was duly planted by the family at home.

The tree is there to this day, as a poignant tribute to the man who died on the war front so many years ago.

Des continued: "Many come to us with the odd idea that they may have had someone in the war and come to see what we have and it really makes them start to think about their own history."

"They go away and start to do their own reading. Many will take themselves off to France or Belgium to see the battlefields for themselves and they really get into it."

It is such interest that

Des is helping to nurture through his website 'ballymenagreatwar' which steers people in the area in the right direction when searching for ancestors who fought in the 1914-18 war.

"We've done all the legwork and about 99 per cent of what they need to know is there," he said.

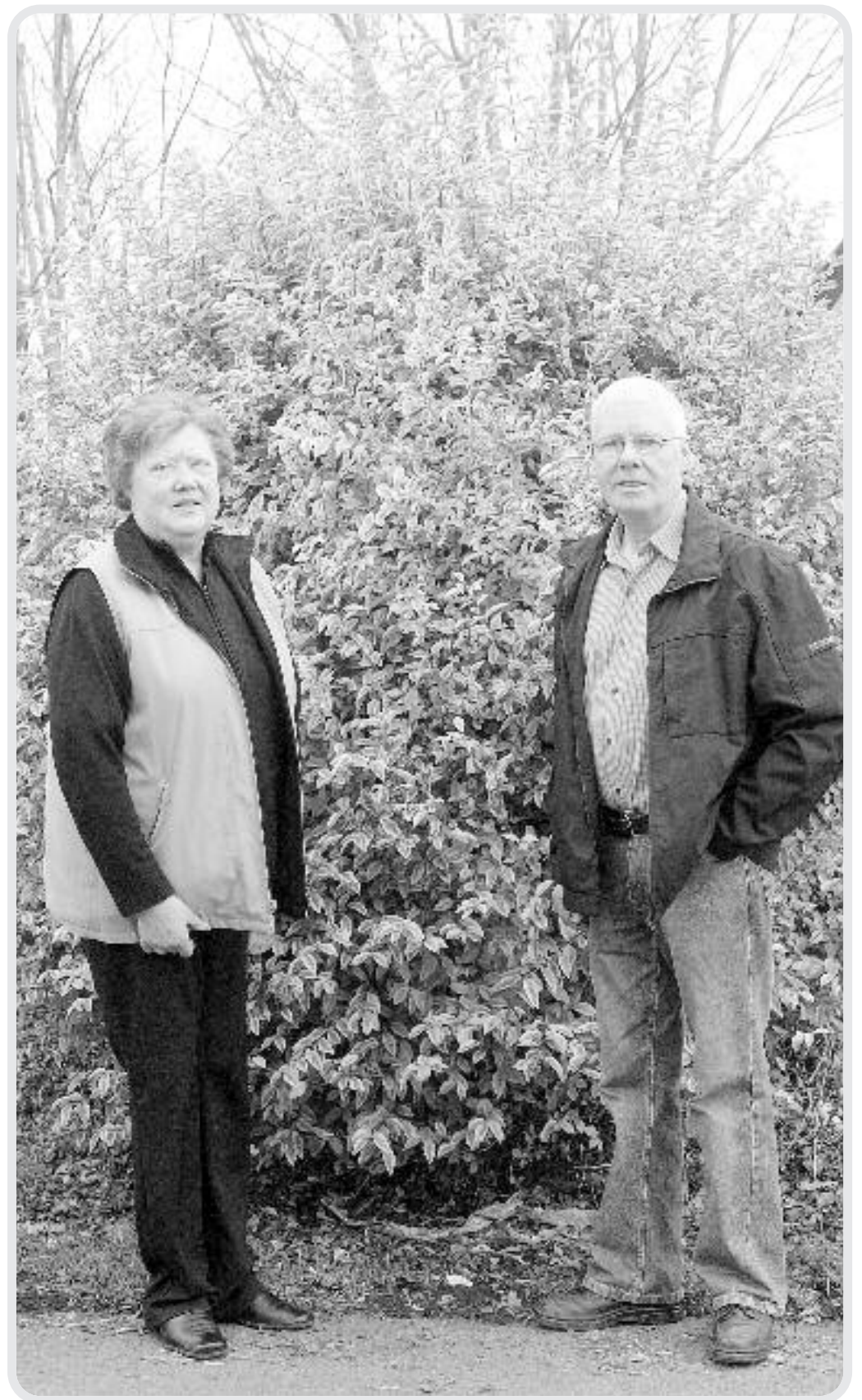
But his assistance isn't merely restricted to those from the Ballymena area. For everyone else, Des reveals there are a number of avenues down which people can turn for news of family from other areas.

"Everyone received a campaign medal. Around the rim was the name, the registration and serial number. From that you can get an awful lot of information."

"The next step is to go to the National Archives website and look up medal index cards which gives information on when they arrived in France etc.," he continued.

Old war diaries written daily by Army commanders are another vital link to the past.

They provide details of the true nature of someone's demise, warts and all, more brutally than the telegram home which usually told grieving relatives their loved one "died instantly".



CAPTION: Jean Scott and Ted Dickey