



The boys who never came back

On Remembrance Sunday, **Sebastian Faulks**, author of *Birdsong*, pays tribute to a lost generation

Plus: The Great War in never-before-seen images



We will remember them

The writer *Sebastian Faulks* introduces forgotten heroes from the First World War, discovered among a trove of unseen images taken by the Sussex-based photographer *Benjamin Reeves* between 1914 and 1918



Sebastian Faulks

This Sunday we strive to remember — though “imagine” is an apter word — what the people in these photographs lived through. What strikes you about the faces is how blank they are. The eyes of the gunners (page 27) in the makeshift stables at the Ironworks are as expressionless as those of their horses. The 10 men in a bed (above) could be

patients in a Victorian asylum. It’s not difficult to imagine that every man shown on parade has a family and a life of normal, happy connections; but even those men photographed alone show little sense of agency. They are neither smiling nor fearful; they have become part of a process they can’t escape.

War found a use for everyone. The so-called National Reserves depicted on the previous pages are attached to the volunteer Territorial Force, so these men are reserve reserves. If this is 1915, as the photographer records, they are almost certainly about to undergo a fitness test: a 10-mile march with rifle and pack. The best will join service battalions, the second tier may go to Egypt or India to replace territorial units fighting in Mesopotamia (Iraq) or Gallipoli. The less fit will be asked to guard

railway stations and fuel depots in Britain.

The colonel looks like a regular, who as such could have seen service in South Africa or under Kitchener in the Sudan. It seems he is Lieutenant-Colonel William Horsley Dewe, who died in 1918, aged 65; so, despite his stiff knee and white moustache, he is only 62 here. A Sussex history website lists Lt-Col Dewe as having been in the Royal Defence Corps, but that was not formed until 1916, so it is not clear if he was always a territorial or had been a regular before. He certainly has a proper military bearing.

Every part of British society, male and female, was involved in the war. It was a minority who went over the top, a majority who supported and enabled. Many of these photographs date from 1915, an optimistic year notable at home for the raising of Kitchener’s volunteer army of half a million

men. In the big cities this number included many unemployed or underpaid workers desperate for a chance to escape the drudgery of factory or coalmine.

In a town such as Lewes, however, the men are more likely to have been motivated by patriotism and the example of their friends. The 10 pals in a bed were so quick off the mark in 1914 that there was no uniform available for them (though the breakfast table looks promising). This was the case in much of 1915 as well, when men drilled in civvies under the instruction of whatever retired regulars could be found. Many did not see khaki until they were leaving for France in 1916.

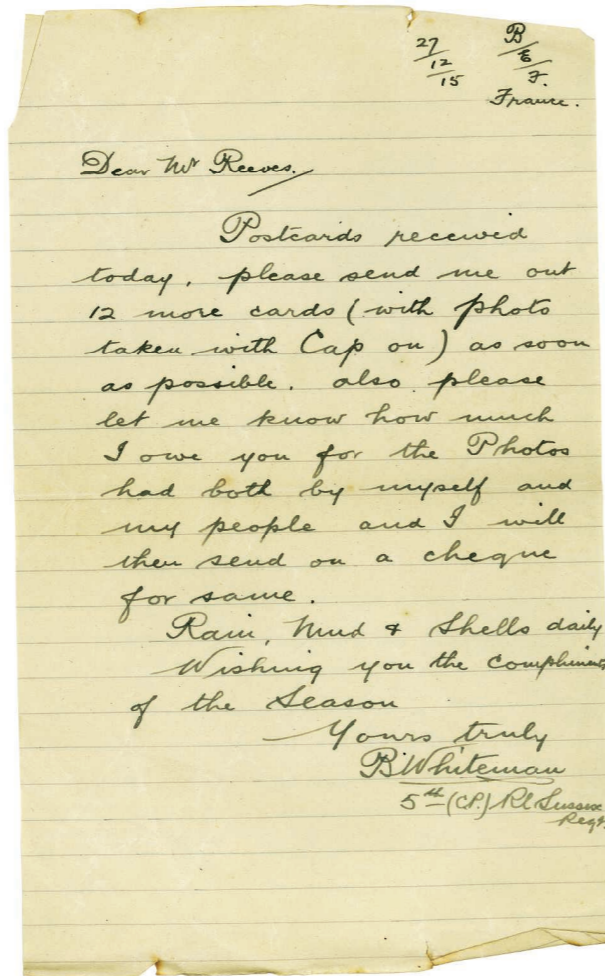
Kitchener’s deputy, Lord Derby, had the inspired idea that men who joined together could serve together, in the so-called Pals Battalions. This greatly increased »»→

PREVIOUS PAGES
National Reservists in Lewes, 1915, led by Lt-Col Dewe. They were trained by the regular army and could be called up to fight in an emergency

TOP LEFT
Royal Field Artillery soldiers billeted at the Phoenix Ironworks, Lewes, at drill in 1915. Harveys Brewery is visible across the river in the background

ABOVE
The Cyclists’ Battalion outside the church of St Michael, Lewes, in 1915. The cyclists were for reconnaissance and carrying messages

BOTTOM LEFT
October 1914. Ten recruits billeted at the home of Cecil Fawsett, 83 High Street, Lewes



ABOVE LEFT
Lieutenant Bernard Whiteman of the 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment won the Military Cross at the Somme

ABOVE CENTRE
Whiteman's letter from a trench in northern France in December 1915 to the photographer Benjamin Reeves, ordering 12 copies of his portrait

TOP RIGHT
The YMCA tent, photographed in 1915, provided letter-writing facilities, newspapers, books and other comforts

BOTTOM RIGHT
Royal Field Artillery horses stabled at the Phoenix Ironworks, 1915. Working horses across Britain were taken to the front line as war horses

camaraderie and speed of recruiting; the drawback was that a community could lose almost all its young men in a single day. The youngsters in the YMCA tent (top right) are made to look older by moustaches and uniforms, but almost all are in their early twenties and physically fit. It was only when most of these were dead or wounded that conscription (introduced in January 1916) began to sweep the slums for young men with weak chests and rickety legs to make up the numbers. The Somme in 1916 was the killing field of the volunteers, the nation's finest; Passchendaele in 1917 took its toll on the conscripted as well.

By the end of 1914, Britain had suffered more than 90,000 casualties; most of the regular army (the "Old Contemptibles") were gone. It is unlikely that these Lewes men were aware of that figure; and in any case they would have expected professional soldiers to die. There is probably still some optimism and excitement in the YMCA tent, though not many will have followed Kitchener's urge to sign the pledge to abstain from alcohol. Cheap wine and frites

in French cafes behind the line was a staple for the infantry; rum before an attack was vital. The "no cigarettes sold on Sundays" notice in the background shows the last effort of church and chapel to influence departing men. In France, orders were more likely to concern which brothels to visit.

The wide-eyed Lieutenant Whiteman

A century in the dark

These rare images were taken by a high-street photographer, Benjamin Reeves, and lay hidden for a century among 150,000 glass-plate (pre-film) negatives, recently unearthed at his studio in Lewes, Sussex, by Brigitte Lardinois of the London College of Communication. Founded by Benjamin's father in 1855, the Edward Reeves studio is believed to be the oldest continuously operated studio in the world. Benjamin is thought to have been commissioned by the army, but portraits would have been paid for by the sitters themselves.

(top left) writes home to the photographer Benjamin Reeves in December 1915, requesting copies of his portrait, shortly before the war changed for good. The next year, 1916, was the year of the great slaughters of Verdun and the Somme, the second of which he survived. Such events changed not only the war itself but our understanding of what men could be. I wonder whether Whiteman ever spoke of his experiences when he resumed his Captain Mainwaring-like existence at the high-street bank. The fact that he had become the battalion CO shows he found something worthwhile in soldiering.

The open-faced Clement Frank (page 29), snapped in June 1916, had the misfortune to survive the worst of the offensive on the Somme, only to be killed in October. It is quite possible that, had he lived, he would have been commissioned. By 1918 almost all the young public-school officers were dead; at company level and below the men were commanded — very well in most cases — by former private soldiers. The age and dates of the smiling Lieutenant >>>



Compton (below right) suggest that he was one such.

The vital role played by women at home in factories and mills and as nurses at the front advanced the case for female emancipation after the war. It's interesting that the women making slippers (right) are in what looks like Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) uniform, as worn by nurses at the front. It may be that they are nurses in their spare time; but by 1917 most women wanted to be involved and a uniform would have helped show commitment. The suffragist cause had its pacifist wing, but most women made a material contribution to the war effort.

There is usually some comedy in war, even in the darkest hours. The members of the Cyclist Battalion (page 25, without their bikes) don't look as though they will frighten the enemy too much. The short man nearest the camera may be swallowed by his greatcoat at any moment; and has he brought his pregnant sister with him? Or is that a brave boy who has lied about his age and has something to hide beneath his cape? One thing we know is that they are all volunteers, perhaps not up to full infantry service, but fit enough to ride a bicycle and look warlike.

The lone cyclist in the orchard, Sergeant Turner (on the cover of the Magazine), looks a bit more like it. His well-tied puttees, neatly rolled cape and stuffed kitbag show him ready to do business, especially with the Lee-Enfield attached to the frame of his bike. Most of his errands must have stopped at the support lines, however, as even in the chalk soil of Picardy the battlefield was too muddy for a bicycle. If he survived to the middle of 1916, he will at least have had the protection of a steel helmet as he made his way among the falling shells between brigade headquarters and the transport area.

For Sgt Turner, it was a long way from the South Downs, though even at Lewes, if the wind was in the wrong direction, you could hear the artillery on the Western Front. There are many Turners registered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but I could find no cyclist sergeant. Perhaps he survived.

Britain and its empire lost nearly a million men in the Great War. There was no family in these islands left untouched: if not a husband, father, son or brother, then a cousin, lover or irreplaceable friend. A generation of women found themselves without companions or offspring. What was lost to us as a country in the children they were not to bear remains, 100 years later, almost too sad to contemplate ■

Stories Seen Through a Glass Plate, 1916: Lewes Remembers, an exhibition of 80 light boxes, can be seen in various locations around Lewes until November 20; reevesarchive.co.uk. Sebastian Faulks's books Where My Heart Used to Beat (Vintage £9) and Pistache Returns (Hutchinson £11) are both out now



TOP

The War Hospital Supply Depot at 199 High Street, Lewes, in 1917. It relied on gifts of material for making nightshirts and pyjamas out of old sheets and tablecloths. These women in uniform appear to be making slippers

ABOVE RIGHT

2nd Lieutenant William Walker Compton of the Royal Field Artillery Special Reserve, 1917. He was killed in action near Ypres on April 25, 1918, aged 26

ABOVE LEFT

Clement John Frank, June 1916. Born in 1891, Frank was a private in the Royal Fusiliers 41st Division and was killed in action at the Somme on October 7, 1916

ONLINE EXTRA

To see more First World War photos, go to Magazine at [thesundaytimes.co.uk](https://www.thetimes.co.uk)