

It began at the Craven Arms Mayfair. A local man had bought a plane at auction for £22 10s. It went on display. Hotchkiss was inspired, he signed on at the Bristol and Colonial Aeroplane Company's flying school. On May 16th 1911 he became just the 87th person in the land to obtain the Royal Aero Club's Aviator's Certificate.

He became Bristol's chief test pilot and the manager of the British School of Aviation at Brooklands. He was on Cloud Nine. In the 1912 manoeuvres Hotchkiss took off in his Coanda Military Monoplane and arrived over his destination at 2,000ft. He put the plane into a glide. A catch failed, a flying wire tore a hole in the wing stripping off the fabric. The plane became uncontrollable and crashed. It hit the ground and smashed into a tree simultaneously. The plane was concertinaed – only the tail unit was recognisable. His body was recovered from the wreckage

The train drew into Craven Arms & Stokesay Station. Two thousand people were waiting. The coffin, on a gun carriage drawn by 8 horses of the Royal Horse Artillery, was escorted by a troop of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. A firing party discharged three volleys over the open grave and the bugler sounded the Last Post.

Inside the church Shropshire's first aviator is commemorated by two stained glass windows of St Michael and the Archangel Gabriel.

We cannot know what sort of war Hotchkiss might have had. We can be sure the officers he taught to fly whilst at Brooklands made their mark in the skies over the Western Front.

Gunner Joseph Alexander Morris

On the other side of the same path leading to the castle beyond a chest tomb are two graves close to the churchyard wall. One has a headstone to members of the Morris family. The other is a simple grave with surround but no headstone. "Uncle Alex", as his descendants refer to him, was the local postman.

In 1914 the GPO with 250,000 staff was the largest single employer of labour in the world. By 1918 30% had been released for war services. Morris became a "big gun".

In June 1916 he left his rural round for the Western Front. He was posted to 366 Siege Battery, equipped with two 9.2inch naval guns mounted on railway waggons. The 28ton guns could fire a mighty shell 15 miles at a muzzle velocity of 1,800mph. Gunner Morris had become part of the team that serviced these monster guns which could fire on the enemy from well behind our lines.

He survived the War but appears on two war memorials. Men and women still in military service at the time of their death qualified for commemoration if they died between 4th August 1914 and 31st August 1921. He died on February 5th 1919 of the Spanish 'flu. Now turn to the adjacent headstone where the family lost two more members to the 'flu; his mother Emma died six days later [aged 74] and his niece Hilda Emma Hotchkiss [aged 12] a day after that.

By the hedge is 'Old Bill' the Craven Arms war memorial. The work of a sculptor from Leominster, Storr-Barber, he is the spitting image of Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoon figure. Bill was posted here when traffic in town became too intrusive. The memorial records the fallen on the front and all who served on the sides and the back. On either side is a chilling mistake – the word 'fallen' has been added to two names. They had not returned.

10 Retrace your steps almost to the A49. Turn left and walk along path, then cross with care the A49 following the Shropshire Way signs. Go through gate and take path to left through the trees. Continue along the path to the Discovery Centre.

Walk route by Helen d'Albert. Texts © 2014 Keith Pybus Research: Craven Arms and District History Group and Alan Brisbane and Vanda Dawson.

You won't have to visit the battlefields to experience Shropshire's part in the First World War. 20 walks cover the war years and the aftermath throughout the county. The printed guides will form a complete set by the end of 2019.



LED BY IWM

War Walks on the Home Front



Walk 3 Preparing for War A Riverside Walk along the Onny



www.shropshirewalking.co.uk

Walk 3– Preparing for War – In the Air and on the Rails

Distance: 3.5 miles, approximately 2½ hours

Grade: Easy

Terrain: Meadow paths, lanes, crossing busy road at couple of points. Walk is relatively flat apart from several stiles, 2 sets of steps and one very short section steep incline.

A circular riverside walk with a weir and salmon ladder along paths and across meadows. Learn how the men and women of Craven Arms played their part before and during the First World War.



1 Leave the Discovery Centre via the Car Park entrance. Turn right and follow the road to the right past the school. Turn right into Newton.

Before the railway created Craven Arms, this medieval hamlet grew up on the banks of the Onny. The variety of timber-frame and stone cottages are picturesque. The Victorian terrace was built by John Derby-Alcroft, wealthy glove manufacturer, who owned Stokesay Castle and built Stokesay Court.

2 At the end bear left and cross over the 'White Bridge'

The River Onny rises in the Shropshire Hills. It flows from Craven Arms through Onibury to meet the River Teme at Bromfield.

Go straight ahead across the field to the corner of wood. Bear left. Pass wood with the river on your left. Go through the kissing gate to the main road.

3 Turn left. At the end of the bridge cross road, go over stile on opposite side and down steps. Follow the permissive footpath through the fields with the river on your right. Continue past Halford Weir with its salmon ladder.

4 Leave through the kissing gate and cross river on the foot bridge. The Bishop's Castle to London turnpike followed this way via Halford and Whettleton before joining the line of today's A49.

Follow the causeway across the meadow. Turn right along the 'turnpike' until you reach the Church.

Is the lych-gate of St Thomas Shropshire's least-known war memorial? Craven Arms & District History Group uncovered a touching love story; one which overcame family and class prejudice.

"To the Glory of God and in loving memory of my husband William George Biggs and of the other dear lads who together with him were members of this choir and congregation." The reference to "in loving memory of my husband" suggests something very personal. It is the sole clue to Hilda Mary Biggs who was responsible for the memorial.

Hilda Mary Baxter, born in 1876, was the daughter of the Rev Henry Fleming Baxter and

his wife Anna Maria. He was the curate (later vicar) of Halford and Sibdon Carwood. The family was wealthy and gentry.

This young woman, from the world of Jane Austen, married a railway stoker. There was talk that 'Her family were not too keen on the match but love won the day.' In 1901 Hilda was 25. She helped her father with his duties. The railways were the major employer in Craven Arms. A terrace – built by the railway company for 28 families – was the main source of Halford parishioners. In No 21 Newington Terrace lived a guard, Richard Biggs, and his family.

So Hilda Baxter met William Biggs, who had followed his father, and was a stoker. The couple married in 1908 at All Saints, Ealing; her father having retired there. If they felt she was marrying beneath her, they were clearly reconciled to the match. Then came the First World War. Hilda's faith was vindicated. The army too, thought highly of William. He was made a Regimental Sergeant Major with a railway operating company of the Royal Engineers and awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (a silver medal for distinguished service or gallantry). Hilda died aged 85 in 1962, leaving £1m in today's terms. The war memorial at Halford is an enduring monument not just to 18 men of the parish, 8 of them, like her husband, with railway connections, but to this generous and inspiring woman.

By the end of 1917, 180,000 railway men had enlisted. 40,000 served in Royal Engineers railway units. Craven Arms, created by the railway, played its part. There were construction and light railway operating companies. RSM Biggs served with 32nd railway operating company in Salonika. Their job was to serve the front line against the Bulgarians and Austrians. The chief enemy however was the malarial mosquito. Our troops were in Europe's most malarial region. In 1917 over 63,000 men were admitted to hospital. RSM Biggs died of malaria October 31st 1918 a few days before the Armistice. L/Cpl John Evans of Railway Terrace served with 262 Railway Construction Company: 200 platelayers, 20 carpenters, 10 blacksmiths, 7 masons and bricklayers, a draughtsman, 2 clerks, and 2 cooks. The company landed at Le Havre in February 1917. They were assigned to one of the construction trains. It took them, their tools and equipment to and from wherever

work was required. The tracks were constantly cut by shellfire. John Evans died in hospital days after arriving in France.

5 Leave the Church, turn right and follow the lane to the main road.

6 Turn right. At the bridge cross the main road and through kissing gate you used before. Retrace steps. Cross the field (keeping to the left of the telegraph poles), till you reach a footbridge. Go up steep slope and follow fence line on your right. Through two kissing gates, fence line and river below on your right. Continue. Cross a stile and field to another stile.

The river is bordered by our 'linear forest'. The tiny alder seeds are equipped with a pair of water wings. The Clun Valley alders provided charcoal and clog soles. The charcoal was prized for its use in gunpowder.

7 Climb steep steps holding the hand rail. Turn left along abandoned road towards the 'new' A49.

8 Busy road, cross with care. Turn right along the pavement over the road bridge towards the lane to Stokesay Castle. There is another weir and salmon ladder below.

9 Turn left up the lane and take the lych gate entrance to Stokesay churchyard. On the right is a mounting block from the days when you rode to church on horseback

Edward Hotchkiss Lt Royal Flying Corps

To the right of the path which leads from the church to the castle entrance is a family plot marked by a plain cross mounted on a series of low pedestals. It is next to a tomb enclosed by railings. On the side next to the moat is a dedication "Also of Edward Hotchkiss Lieutenant Royal Flying Corps Killed at Wolvercote during The military manoeuvres September 10th 1912"

Hotchkiss was the first man in the county to learn to fly. The manoeuvres were the first in which the army coordinated its new air arm with troops on the ground. He had been the first man to take his pilot's test in a biplane. Now he was amongst the first aviators to be killed in the line of duty.