

Ralph Gordon Ellis: an Arundel Artist at War



W.S.R.O. Lib 13733

By Jonathan Unitt

Introduction:

In August 1914 Ralph Gordon Ellis became one of thousands of men who enlisted in the New Armies being created to fight the First World War. Whilst he went to war as an amateur soldier, he also went as an experienced artist. Throughout his training in England and his service in France and Belgium, Ralph recorded his experiences whenever he could through sketches and paintings. After being wounded in June 1917 Ralph spent eighteen months convalescing in hospitals. It was at this stage that he wrote up his memories of the war to accompany the drawings he had made. He eventually compiled five marvellous tomes of text and drawings, all of which can be found in the West Sussex Record Office (WSRO) along with a typed version of the next that he named 'A March with the Infantry'.¹ These are supplemented by surviving letters that he wrote home to his family whilst on service, which can be found in a biography published by his daughter Margaret.² We are lucky enough to have access to an abundance of memoirs, diaries and letters from the First World War but it is a rare find to come across one that contains accompanying artwork from the author. This rare combination of pictures and text provides an enlightening account of one Sussex man's experience of the Western Front during the First World War. This case study offers an insight into Ralph's experiences and the rich documents that he produced from them.

Background:

Ralph Gordon Ellis was born to William Blackman Ellis and Jane Wilson Ellis on 31 January 1885, and was the youngest of seven children. The family lived in Arundel where his father worked as a taxidermist. After leaving school at the age of 14, Ralph went to London where he took to painting, decorating and sign writing. On 2 March 1910 he married Gertrude Ada Seymour and they soon moved to Bognor where Ralph ran a



The Crab and Lobster, Siddlesham
(W.S.R.O. MP 5511)

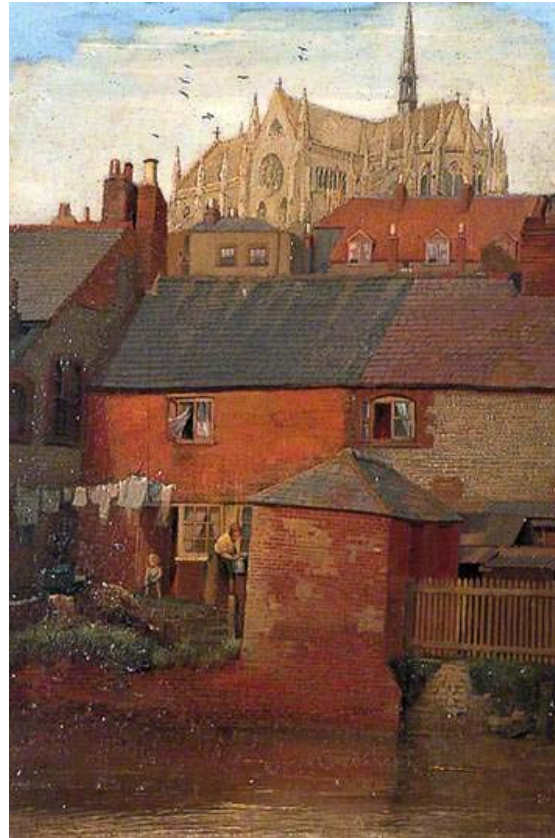
little shop selling art supplies alongside some of his own artwork. After his service in the war Ralph studied at the Slade Academy of Art in London, before he and Gertrude settled in Arundel. It was from here that Ralph began to make a living as a painter of inn signs. He would eventually complete over 250 of these signs for the brewers Henty & Constable, at inns across Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. He also completed a number of signs for other brewers, with his work reaching as far as Yorkshire, Devon, Shropshire and East Anglia. Many of these were for pubs no longer running but some do still stand, such as the Crab and Lobster at Siddlesham (see picture), albeit with a modern sign. He also loved

painting landscapes and in 1951 he retired from inn signs to focus on this instead (see picture). Whilst he completed many accomplished landscape and portrait paintings, it is for his inn signs that Ralph Ellis is mainly remembered as an artist.³

Enlistment and Training:

Ralph enlisted in August 1914 soon after war was declared, becoming one of the 'First Hundred Thousand' volunteers. He signed-up at Chichester Barracks, becoming part of the 7th [Service] Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment that was formed there. A total of three service battalions were formed at Chichester Barracks in August and September 1914, as well as three South Downs 'pals' battalions at Bexhill.⁴ Ralph describes the chaotic scene of the influx of volunteers at the barracks as "overflowing the wooden huts and spilling the men from every conceivable shelter, out on to the parade ground and wherever else they might find a place to sleep." Such was the volume of volunteers that the uniform stores soon ran out and men were left in their civilian outfits or, even worse according to Ralph, in part civilian and part khaki clothing.⁵ This strain on resources described by Ralph suggests that support for the war was very strong amongst the men of West Sussex.

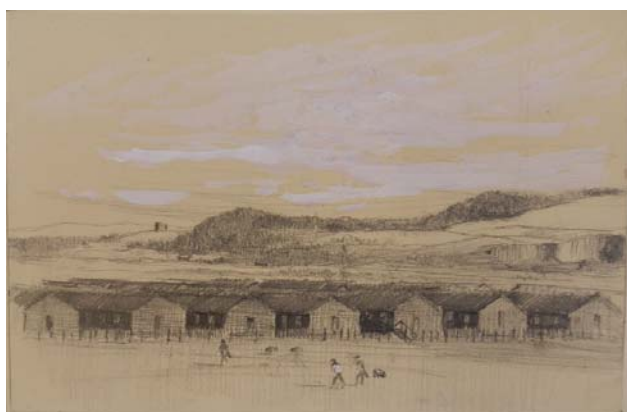
Ralph and his new comrades experienced strong war enthusiasm as they passed through London on their way to their first training base at Colchester, where they were met by crowds "cheering our way from one station to another." What followed for the 7th was eight months of tough, physically demanding training in order to turn them from raw recruits into efficient soldiers. Despite this though, Ralph remembers the "good fellowship which existed in every tent" and the "willingness and keenness shown by every man." As well as this enthusiasm and developing camaraderie it seems that pride in the battalion was also already present; "It was a great day for all when the whole battalion first formed up and wheeled out of the barrack square in 'column of route'."⁶ Ralph poignantly sums up his training days in the first months of the war as "Hard days, great days, fit training for greater, harder days to follow."⁷



'Washing Day' 1926
(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/arundel-cathedral-west-sussex-from-the-river-68524>)

Ralph's Service in WWI:

On 31 May 1915 Ralph departed with the 7th for France, where he would spend the next two years fighting trench warfare. In 1915 the battalion spent much time in the area around Bethune in northern France, fighting in the Battle of Loos and on the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The battalion went on to be involved in the Battle of the Somme, fighting at La Boisselle and Pozieres throughout July 1916.⁸ At the end of 1916 Ralph was sent home to undertake officer training. Unfortunately, although this occupied him for six months Ralph did not write anything about this experience. He did however make a few drawings of the training camp and surrounding area



'9th Officers Cadet Battalion, Camp at Gailles, Ayrshire' (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25006)

in Ayrshire (see picture). He returned to the front in June 1917 but his service as an officer would be short lived as he was wounded within a matter of weeks. His left arm was hit with shrapnel that would affect him for the rest of his life. At the end of his memoir Ralph expresses the genuine feeling of regret that he felt upon discovering he could no longer serve with his fellow men.

Life on the Western Front:

Through his notes and sketches Ralph paints a vivid picture of what the men did on a daily basis, both in the front line trenches and behind the lines whilst on rest. Life in the trenches was mainly about daily routines, such as improving trenches, distributing rations, checking equipment, and carrying out repairs to barbed wire in no man's land at night. Ralph's regular duties included range finding, observation, and mapping. Whilst he never goes into any detail about his own specific role, it does seem that his ability as an artist led to him being used for observation purposes as he was able to make quick and accurate sketches of the enemy lines. He visited a range of observation posts in order to achieve this, seeing much more of the Western Front than many other soldiers would have done. Many of the sketches and paintings included in his memoirs come from the time he spent in these observation posts, as well as from time spent in billets and towns behind the lines. The drawings he made would often be of a desolate landscape scarred by warfare, either barren countryside or buildings that had become crumbling ruins (see pictures). This is probably one of the most enduring images of



'Remains of a Church, Agny' (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25005)

the Western Front, conveyed to us through numerous photos as well as paintings from more well known artists like Paul Nash. Such images symbolize the horror and destruction that industrial trench warfare inflicted upon Europe.

However, it wasn't always about the desolate landscape. Ralph took the opportunity to paint as much of the unscarred landscape that existed behind the lines as he could. He also writes about the landscape regularly, often linking it back to the South Downs of his home. It seems that whenever he came across French countryside that reminded him of home he received a little boost, helping to raise his (and other's) spirits and perhaps take his mind off of the regular horror of trench warfare, if only temporarily. For example:

"So we came to Lillers and rested again beyond on a spur of high ground that was dressed in a gay little frock the fashion of our Sussex Downs, of fine grasses and little flowers and untired men – boys – pack free, unable to rest awhile quietly, gambolled, throwing clods of clean earth and grass at each other and laughed again."⁹



'Remains of a small wood near Vermelles' (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25004)

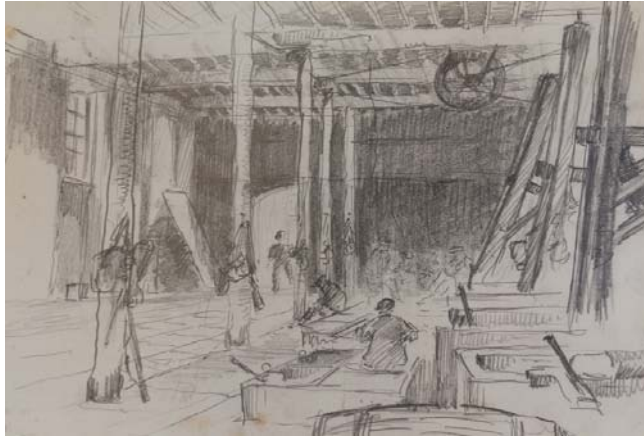


'Near Allouagne' (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25005)

Unspoilt countryside was not the only thing to bring Ralph comfort in a hostile environment; small pleasures had a big impact on his morale. Simple things such as finding a warm, dry place to sleep, being issued fresh clothes, or receiving letters and parcels from home, could help bring relief from the trials of trench warfare. The moments when Ralph and his comrades were relieved by another battalion and allowed back behind the lines for a few days rest was particularly uplifting, especially in the winter months when the trenches were particularly cold and squalid. Awaiting men behind the lines would be billets, often schools, factories or farms (see pictures). Whilst they never knew what they were going to get and

these were often very cramped, the men always appreciated them after a stay in the trenches. On one occasion Ralph recounts the comfort the men found in a coal mine:

“We are to be billeted in a coal-mine, it does not look inviting, but anywhere for rest and sleep. Our Company is in luck, we are in the large



‘Billets in the Cotton Factory’ (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25003)

engine room, a clean place smelling of oil, but warm, so warm. Others will sleep where the cold wet wind sweeps through, or the dust of coal is always in the air, and settles thickly on everything...Back to our warm, snug billet, and the loud buzz and hum of the machinery, which we thought might disturb us. Nothing could keep us awake, the noise becomes a drone, we are intoxicated with sleep for one more night.”¹⁰

On another occasion Ralph highlights the initiative that was often needed in order to find a comfortable place to sleep, and how unexpectedly rewarding this could be:

“A special job lasting about five weeks gave me the opportunity of seeing almost all the forward observation posts in the divisional area, tramping many miles of trenches during the day, but always returning at night to the large farmhouse at Noyelles. All the rooms were fully occupied, but to my surprise I discovered that a large cupboard, a fixture on the landing was empty. On the bottom shelf of this, with doors almost closed, I slept undisturbed and comfortable. At the end of my stay it was eagerly sought after by another tenant of the farmhouse.”¹¹



‘Entrance to farm, Noyelles’ (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25004)

Time spent in these billets behind the lines was a major part of Ralph’s experience, as it was for all soldiers of the Western Front. This time was crucial to men’s ability to endure trench warfare, allowing them to escape the danger and drudgery of the trenches for a short while. As well as being more comfortable there was also more time to relax and enjoy themselves, helping them to recharge before heading back to the trenches. Ralph distinguishes this first night spent in billets as central to the recovery of the men’s energy, allowing them to go on and enjoy their few days at rest, ready to return to the front and continue the fight:

“Men arrive back in reserve billets, looking thoroughly fatigued, and used up. They revive speedily; you may see them slowly marching back to billets, back bent over with weight of pack, looking as though they needed a month’s rest. Yet the next day are on parade, after having a good long sleep, and a thorough clean up, looking as fresh and fit as men could possibly be, ready to enjoy a game of football and the little social gatherings in the estaminet, and the occasional visit of the Divisional concert party.”¹²

Similarly, on the following page is an extract of the text as it appears in the original document. In it, Ralph describes the scene on a typical evening in billets where men relaxed cheerily with one another before slipping off into a well earned sleep.



‘After the Trenches. A rest.’ (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25003)

As well as these regular chances to recuperate there was also the occasional big event to celebrate. Ralph writes about two of these in particular – Bonfire Night and Christmas 1915. Both acted as a welcome morale boost, starting with fireworks:

“It was going to be a big fifth of November affair, with lots of banging, and bombs that burst, and threw little jets of blue flame about. From a spectacular point of view, it was a huge success, the straw was lit and pushed over as one, the grey and white smoke drifted away to the wondering Hun, then the fun began merrily, running from point to point, along my section of the trench, lighting and placing the candles on the parapet, for a moment or two watching the smoke gush forth and form great volumes of gorgeous colouring, ranging from pale yellow to deep salmon, hiding everything from view.”¹³

Just a month later they enjoyed a lavish Christmas feast:

“The dining-hall was an old cart-shed, which we hung about with tarpaulins and sacking borrowed from the transport. It kept out most of the cold-rain-laden wind, a dimly lighted place, filled with the faces of men, all else seems to melt away into the shadow and the faces talked, talked freely without restraint, fed and drank sumptuously of the good fare provided, for the cooks had excelled themselves, and when you have tasted nothing but stew and bully beef day after day, roast pork and a liberal supply of fresh vegetables is vastly appreciated. Of course the feast did not end with that; there was fruit, nuts, drinks and smokes to be disposed of, which seems rather to put the soloists off song, but the choruses sung en masse almost raised the roof, and brought the little kiddies of the farm running, wide and wonder-eyed to the door. It was a cheery evening.”¹⁴

By the light of the candle.

It is the close of a day back in support, some sleep already with waterproof sheet between them and the bricked floor of the building, greatcoat flung over and pack for a pillow, a few read, having something to read, many write to those at home, several groups are playing at cards, from them come an occasional tinkle of coins and many excited exclamations, while on their faces dwells a look which is oblivious to everything but the game, one lively crowd are joking and singing, a mixed bunch of men but birds of high spirit and light heart, thus they flock together.

Everywhere are the little flickering candles that pick out with high warm lights the features of the men and wrap them in dark mysterious shadows.

Section commanders call the roll of their sections all are reported present to the Orderly sergeant who reads out the orders for the morrow, one by one the lights go out the prone sleeping figures bunched together for warmth increase in numbers the card players are the last to give way to the pleasure of rest and sleep.

The lights have gone, one hears the cough of the sentry outside the dull thud of foot and clank of rifle and bayonet, it increases the feeling of smugness as one pulls the coat more closely around and finds a hollow spot for the hip bone, the night is ours to spend in luxurious sleep, the softest bed in the world cannot give you more than that.

W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25003

Tanks:

It is worth mentioning one more thing of interest from Ralph's memoirs – Tanks. The British first deployed tanks as part of the Battle of the Somme in September 1916 and they went on to play a significant role in the allied victory. Whilst we might expect the Germans to be scared and confused the first time they saw these machines coming towards their lines, it seems that British troops could be just as astounded by them. In a letter home to his sister in September 1916, Ralph does not seem to know very much about them at all:

“What do you think of the war news now? We have heard many and various rumours lately, but know less than you do since what newspapers we can obtain, are usually two days old before we receive them. The ‘armoured cars’ are one up on us and not a copy of a German idea. The Germans are having a terribly rough time of it on the Somme, and not exactly a picnic for us!!”¹⁵

Ralph finally glimpses them in action in October 1916:

“We had seen the tanks stationary, a stolid looking mass of metal, but as they went up or came out of action seeing them slowly thrusting forward through the mud, nosing and feeling their way into and over deep shell hole and portions of deep trenches, there was no sense of ordinary mechanical

movement. A thin whiff of blue fumes arise as breath on cold air and the thing slithers forward, like some pre-historic animal having slept through the ages and aroused by this thunder of war had thrust its way up through the crust of the earth to roam once more over the land.”¹⁶



‘Tanks coming out of action’ (W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25006)

The invention of the tank clearly made a huge impression on the men of the Western Front. This uniquely strange place was made even stranger by the introduction of these mechanical beasts.

Conclusion:

Not long after glimpsing his first tank, Ralph would be ordered to return to England for officer training. Once back in France he would soon suffer the wound that kept him out of the rest of the war. Ralph went on to live a full life back in Arundel, making a living through the art that he clearly loved. When the Second World War came around he once again did his bit for the country, this time on the home front. He played an active role with the Home Guard, the Air Raid Precautions and as a Fuel Officer issuing permits for coal and coke. He lived in Arundel until his death in May 1963 at the age of 78.¹⁷ He left behind a fascinating artistic account of his time on the Western Front. This case study has been but a glimpse of the rich stories and vibrant drawings that it contains. For anyone interested in the First World War and the contribution that West Sussex made to it they really are worth a look in person.

References:

- ¹ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001-25006, *A record of service with The Royal Sussex Regiment during the First World War*.
- ² W.S.R.O. Lib 13733, *Ralph Ellis: Inn Sign Painter and Designer*.
- ³ For more on Ralph's life and work see W.S.R.O. Lib 13733, and W.S.R.O. MP 5511, *Ralph Ellis Inn Signs*.
- ⁴ <http://www.1914-1918.net/sussex.htm>, accessed 11:11am 16 June 2014.
- ⁵ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, *A March with the Infantry*, p. 3.
- ⁶ Above quotes all taken from W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, pp. 3-4.
- ⁷ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 8.
- ⁸ <http://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/unit-info/2022/>, accessed 12:44pm 16 June 2014.
- ⁹ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 90.
- ¹⁰ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 31-32.
- ¹¹ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 70.
- ¹² W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 115.
- ¹³ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 30.
- ¹⁴ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 52.
- ¹⁵ W.S.R.O. Lib 13733, p. 35.
- ¹⁶ W.S.R.O. Add Mss 25001, p. 141-142.
- ¹⁷ W.S.R.O. MP 5511.

Acknowledgements:

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