

In The Shade of a Willow by Chris Todhunter

Our September book choice was 'In The Shade of a Willow' by Chris Todhunter. Chris is a local author, living in Combs. So we seized the opportunity to invite Chris to our meeting to talk to us about his book. In particular, why he decided to write it and how he went about researching his subject.

In 1914 Philip Oakley is a young solicitor in Needham Market. The son of the local Rector, Philip is also a junior officer in the London Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. When war is declared, Philip is mobilised. But the Royal Navy has more than enough men for the Fleet, and Philip fears that his chances of seeing action are slim.

However, Winston Churchill (then First Lord of the Admiralty) has other ideas, and combines the surplus manpower with the Marine Brigade to form the Royal Naval Division to fight on land.

The story follows Philip's progress as the Division takes part briefly in the defence of Antwerp, before moving on to the Gallipoli campaign. There, Philip gets his first taste of trench warfare. He survives the terrible summer heat, and the dysentery epidemic in the Allied trenches, only to endure the gales, blizzards and flooding as winter sets in. After finally being evacuated from Gallipoli, Philip moves on to the Western Front.

The book describes in graphic detail the horrors of the fighting in the Great War, in particular the barbaric hand to hand fighting using the medieval weapons of bayonet and cosh. In contrast, men die in their thousands without ever seeing the face of the enemy – machine gunned to death on the barbed wire. Heavy artillery inflicts horrific injuries and sudden death until finally, at Passchendaele, the battered landscape becomes a mass of mud and water-filled shell holes where wounded men are left to drown in the rising waters.

Meanwhile, in England life goes on. Men who have not gone to war are taunted with white feathers by young women who have no idea of the horrors unfolding across the Channel. And staff officers parade in their polished uniforms, sending thousands of young men to their deaths without ever facing the realities of the battlefield.

This is a hugely thought provoking book that brings us face-to-face with the horrors of war that most of us could hardly have imagined otherwise. But it is also a tale about the human spirit. And how men and women can endure and survive great hardship and emerge changed but unbowed.

If you thought you knew all about the Great War then think again and read this book.