

Tribute delivered by Robert Vickery at St George's, Holcombe, 6 November 2018.

George Henry Cole may never have lived in Dawlish but his parents came here and were living at 11 Queen Street according to the Commonwealth War Graves entry. His name appears on the supplementary panel to the 1914-19 War Memorial.

His great-grandfather lived at Hennock and in the early 19th century worked in the tin and lead mines that line the upper Teign Valley, if you travel from Chudleigh towards Christow.

The next generation escaped mining when John Cole became a Police Constable and married Eliza Ann Gibbs in 1871. They had ten children of which the third was George Herbert Cole who married Ellen Dist of Cockington and their eldest child was our George Henry Cole. He was 15 when the family had moved from St Marychurch, Torquay to Bow in central Devon and the father was a coachman to the Pidsley family on the Great Wotton estate, and young George was a groom.

George was 18 when he joined the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and on 24 November 1917 it moved to Italy.

The main news about the First World War in 1917 and 1918 focused on the Western Front, closest to home. Another region of attack was that in the Middle East where British divisions were drawn from India to sweep the Ottoman armies out of Iraq and Palestine. Great progress was made there, resulting in the peaceful entry on foot of General Allenby into Jerusalem. Further north a French and British campaign in northern Greece was defeating Bulgarian forces of the Central Powers.

Prior to the war, Italy had formed an alliance with the Central Powers of the German Empire and the Empire of the Austria-Hungary in the Triple Alliance. Italy should have joined on the side of the Central Powers when war broke out in August 1914 but instead declared neutrality.

Over the course of the months that followed, Italy's leaders considered how to gain the greatest benefit from participation in the war. In 1915, Italy signed the secret Treaty of London and came into the war in April 1915 on the side of the Triple Entente (Britain, France, Russia). By its terms, Italy would receive control over territory on its border with Austria-Hungary stretching from Trentino through the South Tyrol to Trieste as well as other areas.

The new front was along Italy's northern border which was 400 miles long, mostly in the mountainous Italian Alps and along the Isonzo river. Despite being numerically

superior, the Italian army was poorly equipped, lacked strategic leadership and was unable to move equipment and supply lines quickly. In addition to which, the Austrians owned the higher ground and consequently, after several quick Italian successes on the Isonzo front, combat settled into stalemate. As in the Western Front, it became trench warfare with the Italian army repeatedly attacking Austria, making little or no progress and suffering heavy losses. However, unlike the Western Front, the main difference was the fact that the trenches had to be dug in the Alpine rocks and glaciers instead of in the mud and often up to 3,000 m of altitude. Between 1915 and 1917, Italian troops only advanced 10 miles inside Austrian territory, having launched eleven offences in Isonzo with heavy losses on both sides.

In late October 1917, Germany intervened to help Austro-Hungary, by moving seven divisions from the Eastern Front when Russia withdrew from the war. This resulted in a victory over the Italians in the Battle of Caporetto (otherwise known as the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo). When the battle had run its course, 11,000 Italians were dead, more than a quarter-million had been taken prisoner and Italy had retreated well behind their original lines. Caporetto was an unmitigated disaster and the whole Italian front along the Isonzo disintegrated, sparking a crisis in Italy.

With the Central Powers now threatening Italy's territory Allied troops arrived (mainly British and French) to reinforce the front. The Warwickshire Regiment moved to Italy to strengthen the Italian Resistance and was involved in various actions including the Battle of Vittorio Veneto. This was fought from 24 October-3 November 1918 near the town of that name, north of Venice in the north-east of the country.

In the spring of 1918, Germany pulled out its troops for use in its upcoming Spring Offensive on the Western Front. Due to news of increased civil unrest in Austro-Hungary, the Italian and Allied troops attacked on 24th October 1918. The Austro-Hungarian army finally broke, and the Allies drove deep into Austria, becoming the first troops to cross the pre-war boundaries. Once the line was broken, the advance was so fast that the Allied supply lines took two days to reach the troops at the front pushing into enemy territory. Austria asked for an armistice which was signed on 4th November 1918, a week before the general armistice. In the mountains around Asiago in northern Italy, there are 712 British soldiers who now lie in cemeteries. George Henry Cole died of influenza, probably Spanish Flu, aged 22, on 6 November 1918 and is buried in Staglieno Cemetery, Genoa.

By the end of the war, it is estimated that 600,000 Italians were dead in combat and more than a million were wounded or crippled. The Italian government spent more on the war than it had in the previous 50 years.

The war debt, food shortages, bad harvests and significant inflationary increases effectively bankrupted the country, with an estimated half a million civilians dying. In addition, the territorial gains were small in comparison to the monetary cost of the war - the debt contracted to pay for the war's expenses was finally paid back in the 1970s.

After the war ended, at the Paris Peace Conference that led to the Versailles Treaty, the Italian government struggled against the other Allied leaders, the Big Three (Britain, France and the US), to gain all that they believed had been promised to them. Although Italy did receive control of most of the European requests, they failed to gain their colonial ambitions and felt they did not get what they had been promised. This engendered resentment towards the Allied countries, especially as Italians felt they had paid a high price, in terms of men and money, fighting for the Allies. These resentments helped drive the success of Benito Mussolini and his fascist movement - four years after the war, Mussolini and his blackshirts gained power. This was at least a decade before Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor and another fascist regime prepared for the second World war.