Richard Benson’s coal miner great-grandfather was one of almost nine million men who fought for the British Army during the First World War, and one of more than two million to be wounded. A century after Private Parkin first marched into battle, this is the story of his torturous journey from the Derbyshire pits to the Western Front and home again, to something less than a hero’s welcome.
His name was Walter Parkin, and he was born in a village south of Sheffield in 1894. There were seven kids in all. When Walter was 12, his father, who laboured in the Sheffield pits and on farms, abandoned them and his wife, and sailed to Australia. Mrs Parkin took in a lodger, and had three more children with him.

Walter kept himself to himself and when he left school, he went to work on a farm. Not long after starting, he came home to find his mother and stepfather packing the few things they owned into boxes. "We’re going to Doncaster," she said. "You mus’ look after yerself now, he’s old enough." He was 14.

Hearing that there was good money to be earned at the new pit in Shirebrook, a village 20 miles away in Derbyshire, Walter Parkin walked there and got work maintaining the 600-yard deep shafts. In those days, the booming pit villages were rough, like Wild West settlements, but Walter avoided the pubs and shebeens and went to chapel. In time, he became a faith healer, and when a brown-eyed, raven-haired, 16-year-old domestic servant called Annie presented him with a hair sample, he began a courtship that lasted. Walter kept himself to himself and his wife, and sailed to France in February 1915, probably as part of a reinforcement draft sent to replace casualties. His regiment was first billeted at Laventie, a small French market town on the flat, wet, potato-growing land east of Lille, and moved between reserve positions and holding trenches for two weeks until they were sent up to the front to fight in a three-day battle to capture the village of Neuve Chapelle. This was the first properly planned British offensive of the Great War; somewhere in the trenches on the other side was a young German soldier called Adolf Hitler.

In some ways, the battle was typical of what would follow, an idea of the way eventually amounting to little gain as equipment and communication systems failed. Find the records of the 268 men of the regiment were killed or wounded. Walter among them, at the time I couldn’t discover exactly what he was treated for, but after the battle he was sent to a hospital in Rouen. Around this time he wrote home to Annie. "I suppose you will have read about the big charge that has been made," he said. "I was amongst the leaders in that, and we had a lively time off it. I can tell you, but it was a surprise packet for them."

It is, of course, quite difficult to find a coal miner from 1915—no, 1916, when standing in a French trench as German soldiers tried to kill him in spades and muskets of the setting hit me when I went to France to look around Laventie and Neuve Chapelle. The only time I’ve really seen the system of drainage ditches besides the roads: most of the ditches were about threes; perhaps, and in a February of average rainfall, they all held at least a foot of water; what state would that be in, particularly those without pumps?

Then there was a sense of racism towards the location that must have affected the soldiers as well. It didn’t stop you until you go there how close the trench warfare was to Britain. Ypres, for example, is only 16 miles from the centre of London, roughly the same distance from the capital to Sheffield. In those days, you can take the train and be there in a little more than two hours. But in places like Neuve Chapelle, the dank, exposed, populated land stretches away for miles with only the occasional landmark to suggest exactly what you might be fighting for, and certainly where you are.
carried lists of the area’s dead on the front page.

I struggled to find records of Walter’s medal for bravery, as engaged a proper researcher called Chris Baker. Chris worked out that Walter must have received the medal in the autumn of 1917, having been moved up to the Ypres salient for the three-month struggle now known as the Battle of Passchendaele, after the village seven miles north-east of Ypres itself. Even in the context of the First World War, Passchendaele is notorious for its conditions, the landscape little more than an expanse of cratered mud, pooled water and battle wreckage.

At dawn one morning in autumn 1917, a lieutenant led a unit of men up a wooden ladder and across the stowing bag of limbs and bones towards the German lines. Among the first up the ladder and at the head of the charge, ready for the wire, was Lance Corporal Parkin. After crossing No Man’s Land, the men splashed over him and bore down on the enemy trench, but in front of Walter, the lieutenant somehow became tangled in the barbed wire.

Crouching to avoid fire, Walter moved to him. He shouted at the lieutenant to be still, and tugged at the wire. Grenades exploded and ahead, British men went down under fire. Again Walter pulled at the wire, and eventually the Lieutenant rolled free. He ordered a retreat, but Walter was caught in a blast and became entangled himself. He wouldn’t remember how it happened; he only remembered the struggling, his clothing in shreds, barbs ripping his skin, his back cut and bleeding, and then a quiet nothing.

Walter was sent back to England for hospital treatment, his back damaged and his hand seriously infected. His lieutenant wrote a letter to his unit’s commanding officer recommending Walter for the Military Medal, and its award was announced in the London Gazette on 28 January, 1918. The medal, and its award was announced in the London Gazette on 28 January, 1918.

But even if most of their time was spent in trenches, the men were still on a sort of shift pattern; a few days’ rest in the town, more days working in the support trenches, and then a route march or ferry ride out of the town gates and back across the mud to be shot at again — perhaps in the same place they’d been two weeks ago, while three months had passed for them. Somehow, the thought of the carving being organised in these slogging schedules, the thought of marching back out of the gates made it seem even worse. Today, it certainly makes worrying about a forthcoming awkward work meeting seem pitiful.

Walter returned to the front in a new unit, the 10th (Service) Battalion (The Glimpsby Chums). He was in the forward positions at Arras in France one foggy night in March 1918 when the Germans launched the biggest barrage of the entire war. Mortars, smoke canisters, tear gas, mustard gas, chlorine gas — a million shells in five hours hit an area of 150 sq km, causing 7,500 Allies casualties even before the German infantry went in.

Walter was caught in an explosion, his body ripped with shrapnel, spine damaged and skin burned by mustard gas. Inside his lungs and bronchial tubes, the gas stripped off the mucous membrane; his skin turned greenish yellow and blistered, although he couldn’t see because he was blinded (another effect of the gas was to glue the eyes together). He was back to Bighty again, this time temporarily blind and unable to walk.

He was honourably discharged on 2 May and, after a long spell at a military hospital near Oswestry, he was sent home to Shrewsbury. He still could not see and injuries to his spine and shrapnel in his legs meant he could hardly walk. Winnie had pinned for her father and now tried to rehabilitate him, holding his hand and leading him on walks around the village, sharing the lanes with other kids and their wounded, blinded fathers. She was nine years old, and Walter wasn’t even 30.

In 1918, British men returned from the war to find food scarce and prices rising so that their wages were devalued. Miners — and at this time, a bottle of Passchendaele please hold for me. It was in Ypres town, rebuilt from the ground up by thousands of British soldiers.

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When the shells started to fall, the first up the ladder and at the head of the charge were the British infantry. In 1914, the first wave of British troops had been sent to Belgium, for saving the officer. Looking at the fields and the village with its modern graves and war memorial, there is a vast memorial to the British Empire troops who died in the battle of Passchendaele.

The officer was killed, and the troops were pinned down by shrapnel and barbed wire. The British launched the biggest barrage of the entire war. Mortars, smoke canisters, tear gas, mustard gas, chlorine gas — a million shells in five hours hit an area of 150 sq km, causing 7,500 Allies casualties even before the German infantry went in.

The biggest single group of visitors is now schoolchildren — with many of the souvenirs taken home as gifts for family and friends. The internet has made research into the subject easier; and schools across the world have begun to feature the First World War in lessons. The subject is easier; and schools across the world have begun to feature the First World War in lessons.

As more people get interested, the attitude to remembrance seems to be changing. Since 1914, every year at Ypres’ Menin Gate, there is a vast memorial to the British Empire troops killed in the First World War who do not have known graves. A bugler has played the “Last Post.” On some nights, a large crowd gathers, on others there may be just one or two people. For about 70 years, the end of the music was met with silence as those who came stood, unspeaking, with their thoughts before drifting away. These days, a crowd of any size tends to applaud. You have to let people respond to loss however they feel is right, so long as it doesn’t harm anyone else, but I have to say that to me, a round of applause seemed a strange way to acknowledge what happened here.

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bad. Old wounds often burst open under the strain of bending and lifting, while head injuries caused dizziness and fainting in the heat and air pressure underground.

When injuries were caused by work, most pit managers would sanction compensation, but when wages were low and it was the managers often claimed the responsibility lay with the armed forces. The forces counter-claimed that the injuries were the fault of the mine owners, thus the men who fought the Great War for civilisation and freedom were left unable to work and unentitled to any support.

From 1919, a series of disputes, strikes, lock-outs and government interventions in the coalfields culminated in the General Strike of 1926. As widespread poverty set in which would not lift until coal was needed for the steel mills and foundries making arms to fight the Second World War, 13 years later. Walter and Annie had a son, Ralph, while loathing Winston Churchill’s war, and moved the family to Goldthorpe in the Thirties and Eighties as chapters of the same story.

It was this experience, not the war service, that embittered Walter Parkin, and the same was true for many thousands of other veterans. Walter died from tuberculosis of the spine in February 1933, but in all the years since 1918 he’d walked, if able, to a war memorial on Armistice Day. Years later, Winnie would remember other Armistice Day mornings when he was bedridden, hearing him force himself out of bed to get dressed. At 11am, alone in his bedroom, he would salute his comrades, and then march up and down the room before falling back onto the bed. “We ended greatly disillusioned as to the nature of the adventure,” wrote ex-soldier Henry Mellors in A Schoolboy into War in 1978, “but still believing that the cause was right and we had not fought in vain.”

“Think it may be worth remembering those words this year,” Wells says, where the commemorations of the Great War’s 90th anniversary get underway, and the newspapers and campaign groups start up with the competitive patriotism and witch hunts against people not wearing poppies. It is quite possible to have been a British patriot while loathing Winston Churchill and being an active trade unionist, just as it is possible to show your gratitude by applauding or by standing in silence. If there was a point to the Great War, it might well have been to allow us to choose how we express our feelings about our country as we like. If we’re really want to honour those fallen men from the First World War, we could start by treating contemporary veterans better and fully finding some decent politicians to represent us.

Between 1916 and 1918, a group of British soldiers on the Western Front used a printing press they’d discovered to produce a new legendary magazine called The Wipers Times. A collected set of editions is currently in print, and if you want to know how ordinary soldiers actually thought and felt about the war, this is without question the best place to start.

First readers always notice that while the pages are full of typical British piss-taking, they are also almost entirely devoid of anger.

The only note of resentment in the magazine’s pages come in the attacks on, as the editor of the most recent compilation puts it, “the lurid, self-congratulatory dispatches by certain journalists who lauded themselves more than the men whose efforts they were meant to record.” The journalist most often targeted, it’s worth noting, is William Beach Thomas, who was then the war correspondent of the highly patriotic Daily Mail.

I remember her telling me about it, the endurance of the tale one reason why British miners regarded the national strikes of the Seventies and Eighties as chapters of the same story.

I had enough material to write about my great-grandfather, but of course nothing had ever come up about the bullets bouncing off him story. I had asked everyone involved if they knew what it might have meant, and in the end put it down to foolishness, perhaps even a bit of vanity. Every man who served would have had their own story to tell, and if it was honest, I supposed had wanted mine to be as individual and dramatic as possible. Trying to make it real, I had clutched at a scrap of what was obviously family anecdote. I put away the idea, and started to write Walter’s story, starting with the evening when Annie brought her poorly thumb to him in the chapel in Shirebrook one sleeping night in 1907.

And then, out of the blue, on 22 January 2012, I received an email from Chris Baker, the researcher. “Dear Richard,” it read, “a pal of mine was delivering letters. It was peaceful. Across 96 years, I salutted Lance Corporal Walter Parkin, and that day down to rewrite his story. It was a story from the Mansfield Chronicle dated 27 March, 1918. “Saved by his Button: A Shirebrook Soldier’s Experiences” Knocking about in hospital at Rozen after having been shot in the chest, Walter Parkin of the 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment, writes to his wife a most cheerful letter, and also sends up to see the button that has saved his life. Accompanying the valuable metal, which has been pierced through, is the deadly bullet, with spiked lead, and the two will doubtless be kept by Mrs Parkin, who resides in Shirebrook Market place, and handed down to children’s children as family heirlooms. The souvenirs are to be seen in Mr Mark Williamson’s shop window in King Edward Street, Shirebrook. Private Parkin spoke of the button, which he hoped had been received, as his friend, and added that the bullet came to stay with him after it had done the damage. A pal of his had said that if a bullet was for you it would go round corners to get at you, and it was no use trying to get out of the way. He hoped for better luck next time.”

Writing in cheerful vein, Private Parkin says: “I am all right except for a slight wound in the chest. I am knocking about in the hospital and all the time the button was in my chest. It is a strange time, so don’t worry, lass. Another mate of mine was left on the battle field and he never came back in the end. I have got the bullet and button. I will send them on for you. I don’t think we shall be long before we are back again, if we go on as we are doing now. They will soon have to give in. Keep your spirits up. They have not broken mine, as heady a fire as I have been under, and I don’t think they will. Kiss the children for me, and remember me to all at home.”

I had checked the local papers in the newspaper library, and couldn’t understand how I’d missed it. I also have no idea what happened to the button and bullet. But there it was, in black and yellowed white; a bullet with its own way, bounced off him. Sorry, Walter.

I stood up from the computer and walked to the window and for a long time just looked out at the street. It was an ordinary day, everybody going about their business. A woman walked past pushing a kid in a baby buggy, and down the street the postman was delivering letters. It was peaceful. Across 96 years, I salutted Lance Corporal Walter Parkin, and that day down to rewrite his story. It was a story from the Mansfield Chronicle dated 27 March, 1918. “Saved by his Button: A Shirebrook Soldier’s Experiences” Knocking about in hospital at Rozen after having been shot in the chest, Walter Parkin’s name, number and unit.