

## Harry Patch – 1898-2009

Harry Patch was born on 17 June 1898 and lived to become not only Europe's oldest man, but the third oldest man in the world. Since 2008, he had been the only living veteran of any nationality to have served in the trenches that so define the public perception of the Great War.

Harry was the third and youngest son of a master builder and grew up in the Somerset village of Coombe Down, where he went to school and later became an apprentice plumber. He did not volunteer to fight in the Great War, but was conscripted in October 1916 and, once abroad, joined the 7th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, serving as No 2 on a Lewis gun in the Ypres salient for four months in the summer of 1917.

After the war, Harry returned to his trade and qualified as a Plumber and later as a Sanitary Engineer. In 1919 he married Ada Billington, the young girl he had met while convalescing after the Battle of Passchendaele. They had two sons, Dennis and Roy.



In the Second World War, he joined the Auxiliary Fire Service and helped tackle the fires caused by heavy German raids on Bath and Bristol. Before D-Day, he was sent to organise sanitary arrangements for GIs at a camp near Yeovil. He remembered the shock of finding the camp deserted, with coffee still hot and meals half-eaten, on the morning that the soldiers had gone off to France.

Harry continued to work in Somerset until his retirement in 1963. His wife died in 1976 and his sons also predeceased him. Harry married again in 1980 and his second wife died in 1984. In 1996 he moved to a residential home in Wells.

Until he was 100 years old, Harry never spoke about the Great War. He tried to suppress the memories and to live as normal a life as possible; the culture of his time said that he was fortunate to have survived and that he should get on with his life, and that suited Harry; he could 'forget' his demons, the memories of what happened to him and to his close friends.

But towards the end of the twentieth century, interest in the First World War grew as the veterans themselves died and there were fewer first hand memories to tell people of the horrors of the trenches.

In 1998, Harry had a visit from a television producer with an interest in the War, and as they talked, Harry made the decision that at last he would speak out, and he agreed to be interviewed for the BBC1 two-part documentary *Veterans*. Gradually, he opened up and, as other veterans died and he became a spokesman for his generation, he spoke more and more freely not only about the horrors of that life but also about his own emotions and reactions.

Most of all, Harry was haunted by the death of his three close friends, all part of a Lewis gun team, who were killed on Pilkem Ridge in Belgium on 22 September, 1917, and by his own injury, received at the same time, and his battlefield treatment without anaesthetic.

In speaking about his experiences, Harry began at last to come to terms with his war, and was at peace with himself and his memories. His thoughts then turned to reconciliation, to the long term effects of suffering and coming to terms with that suffering. He began by returning to Belgium, in 2002, something he had said he would never do, and laying a wreath to his battalion; this was a big first step.

The next was a decisive one in Harry's emotional journey. In 2004, he met a German artilleryman from the Western Front, Charles Kuentz; they talked through an interpreter, and shook hands. Harry was asked if he would have shaken hands with Charles if he had known that it was Charles who had been responsible for his friends' death, and Harry replied 'Yes.' Since that historic meeting, Harry has laid a wreath not only for his own battalion at Tyne Cot, the largest Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in the world, but also at Langemark Cemetery, to the German war dead.



On his last visit to Belgium, in September 2008, Harry opened a memorial that he had himself paid for, to his battalion at the very spot where he had gone over the top on 16 August 1917. It was the first time that he had ever returned to that particular place. That evening, Harry laid a wreath at the Menin Gate at Ypres and, in a final act of reconciliation, remembered all those who served 'on both sides of the line'.

With his increasing age and status as one of the few survivors of the Great War, Harry was confronted with unlooked-for fame. He responded to this challenge, which would have overwhelmed most men his age, by speaking his mind on the futility of war.



In spite of his occasional complaints, Harry rather enjoyed his unlooked-for fame, going to Buckingham Palace and 10 Downing Street, and being an honoured guest at the Chelsea Flower Show. He was painted, sketched, sculpted and endlessly photographed.

On his 101st birthday he was awarded the Knighthood of the Legion of Honour and in 2009 the President of the Republic of France upgraded this prestigious award to the Rank of

"Officer". In 2008 Albert II, King of the Belgians, honoured Harry by appointing him a Knight of the Order of Leopold. Harry was delighted to receive these awards and

wore the medals with great pride, but he always made it clear that he wore these medals as a representative of the selfless generation he had come to represent. The University of Bristol awarded Harry an honorary Masters of Arts degree in 2005 and in 2007, the 90th anniversary of Passchendaele, the audience of the Festival of Remembrance at the Albert Hall paid tribute to the memory of these soldiers by according Harry a standing ovation as he sat, in his wheelchair, at the centre of the stage.

Harry lived in Wells for many years and was proud to live in such a beautiful and friendly part of his beloved Somerset. He was therefore delighted to be awarded the Freedom of the City of Wells and the large framed scroll attesting to his honour was granted prime position on the wall of his room, surrounded by numerous honours and mementoes.

Harry became the UK's oldest author when, with Richard van Emden, he wrote a detailed account of his life in **The Last Fighting Tommy**, published in 2007. It was typical of his generosity that, using his proceeds from the book, he paid for an inshore D-Class lifeboat which he launched in 2007.

In 2008, at 110, Harry became a member of the Wells branch of The Royal British Legion. Although supporting the Legion for many years, he had not actually joined and became the Legion's oldest member.

Although Harry tired of speaking about the War, he never forgot the sacrifices of soldiers on all sides of the conflict. On his final visit to Belgium in 2008, it was evident to those who looked after him that he was finally at peace with both himself and with his war, and he was proud to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph in London on Armistice Day in 2008.



## Quotes from Harry

### The trenches

“If any man tells you he went into the front line and he wasn’t scared – he’s a liar. You were scared from the moment you got there. You never knew. I mean, in the trench you were all right. If you kept down, a sniper couldn’t get you. But you never knew - if the artillery had a shell that burst above you and if you caught the shrapnel that was it”.

“As far as I knew, none of my crew used that gun to kill. We would wound, yes, in the legs, but not above. And you can tell the Government that”.

### 109th Birthday

“I feel 50 years old. It is all a lot of fuss about nothing”.

### The secret to long life

“Fresh air”.

### On War and the German war dead

“Noone was looking at the German graves. I had a German with me. We went into the cemetery and I had a wreath left and I put it on a German grave. That’s what I think of war. It’s just really hopeless”.

“Too many died. War isn’t worth one life”.

“War is the calculated and condoned slaughter of human beings”.

### Life after death (upon coming across a British soldier dying on the battlefield)

“...and the final word he uttered was “Mother!” I was with him in the last seconds of his life. It wasn’t a cry of despair, it was a cry of surprise and joy. I think – although I wasn’t allowed to see her - I am sure his mother was in the next world to welcome him and he knew it. I was just allowed to see that much, and no more. Yet I’m positive that when he left this world, wherever he went, his mother was there. And from that day until today I shall always remember that cry and that death is not the end”.



## Quotes from the Staff at Fletcher House, Wells

“He is amazing. You wouldn’t think he was 109. We have a big community here and he is a popular part of that community”.



“Harry is a joy to look after. He has a mischievous smile and he beckons me with his finger when he wants to speak to me. He does this with a twinkle in his eye”.

“Harry blossoms when he sits with the ladies.”

“Harry is quite a character and he has many interesting stories to tell. He blossoms when he gets visitors and will always have time for the children that want to come and meet him”.

“Harry has always had a very interesting time since I have known him at Fletcher House. I have arranged trips and outings with his friend Nick Fear. My fondest memory was when he went to the University of Bristol to get his Honorary Degree and his eyes twinkled down at me and his many friends witnessed this wonderful day with him.”

“I will always remember Harry for always looking forward to his bath days. Harry always said once he was in that bathroom he could relax away into his own little world, where he didn’t have to talk about his life experiences in the war. It was where he could talk to me about general everyday day-to-day life. Harry has told many stories and some that would make anyone blush. Harry was always a very cheeky man whose grin and the glint in his eyes said it all. Harry and I developed a close key worker / resident relationship and it was a privilege to have cared for him. When I used to assist Harry to get ready for special events he was attending he used to say “That will do” but of course I had to make sure everything was 100% perfect, and he used to call me fussy! We had our own little banter and I used to see a side of Harry that not many other people have seen”.