

## SPEAKER INFORMATION

# ROBINA HODGSON

<i>Speakers Name:</i>	Robina Hodgson		
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<i>Sp-E-mail address:</i>	rhodgson@iwm.org.uk		
<i>Lecture Titles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World War 1 Trench Experiences</li> </ul>		
<i>Lecture Cost</i>	Please ring to discuss		
<i>Travelling Distance</i>	Anywhere in Cambs	<i>Travel Expenses</i>	40p per mile
<i>Availability</i>	Most		
<i>Equipment Needed</i>			
<i>Add-information:</i>			

### Trench Experience of the First World War by Robina Hodgson

Comment from the internet

Our first meeting of the new decade was a somewhat sombre account of life and death in the trenches of the Western Front in WWI. This was very eloquently given by Robina Hodgson of the Imperial War Museum at Duxford. She explained that, by the end of 1914, the western front stretched from Switzerland to the Belgian coast, over 400 miles long.

What now distinguished the initially named “European War” (essentially between two competing blocs comprising the major European imperialistic powers) from previous major wars (such as the Franco German War some 40 years before) was the static nature of the war, after the preliminary German surge through Belgium and north east France. This necessitated the digging of defensive trenches, giving shelter to the combatants. Intriguingly, the construction of these trenches differed, the German trenches being deeper and often

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constructed in concrete, while the British trenches were regarded as being more temporary and therefore shallower and less well constructed.

Life in the trenches, was, 90% of the time, boring. Although mostly having to endure appalling conditions, the remaining 10% being of unspeakable terror. Even during the “boring” times, however, there was often frequent shelling, which caused the most casualties. However, the average soldier was expected to endure the awful conditions, such as continual exposure to damp, cold rain, often infrequent meals, exposure to lice, and, of course, the continual hazard from shells and eagle eyed snipers. These appalling conditions were responsible for more soldiers being unfit for active duty than combat injuries. Common ailments were trench foot, cholera and typhus, and, not widely recognised, acute stress syndrome. Many soldiers accidentally-on-purpose gave themselves a wound to get a “Blighty” ticket back home, and who could blame them!

An iconic feature of WWI trench warfare was barbed wire, which made an extremely effective barrier against charging troops, and, of course, machine guns. They came into their own, especially during the abortive Somme offensive. Digging and laying explosive mines was another innovation and the miners, mainly recruited from coal miners, were regarded as an elite corps. There were instances of tunnels breaking out into German tunnels. The successful explosion of many mines, with up to 40 tons of explosive underneath the German lines on the Somme, resulted in craters nearly 100m across.

Of course, the poor volunteer soldier who rushed to sign up in August 1914, on the wave of national hysteria fed by cynical propaganda, would have had no idea what he was letting himself in for. The voluntary recruitments were quite unique as there had never before been up to 400,000 volunteers. As many of these came from the same communities; factories, clubs, etc, there were many “pals brigades” formed, who often died together in the killing fields such as the Somme, Ypres and Paschendaele.

After signing up, having assured the recruiting sergeant that he was over 18, the volunteer was given an armband and, later, a khaki uniform, which was quite different to the “feld grau” of the German Army. The French initially had red trousers and blue jackets, but these were rapidly changed to a less conspicuous blue grey. Steel helmets were not introduced until mid 1915, the iconic German “pickelhaub” being ceremonial and not capable of withstanding bullets.

There were numerous WWI artefacts on show, including webbing, steel helmets, coats, billy cans, bits of shrapnel, a Mills bomb, a gun, and a bayonet, the last mentioned bringing to mind Corporal Jone’s inimitable, “They don’t like it up ‘em”.



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Robina's talk gave a powerful and moving indication of what the poor soldier in the WWI trenches had to endure in what was a cataclysmic power struggle, laying the foundation for the even more cataclysmic WW2 where, at least, there was an easily identifiable bad guy. When will they ever learn!!

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