

Thursday 7 November 2013

## FLANDERS POPPIES BLOOMED IN RYDE FIELDS

While researching for the 2014 Centenary of the First World War (1914-18) commemoration, Ryde Local Studies Librarian, Angela Phippen, has uncovered the seeds of an enduring link between the town of Villers Bretonneux in France, the local families of those who fought there and the symbol of the Red Poppy.

Her search began with a “letter to the editor” dated June 1920 that relayed that children from Villers Bretonneux had gathered red poppy seeds from the Somme Valley to send to “the relatives of Australian and New Zealand soldiers who fell fighting on the battlefields of the Somme”.

While on a visit to the Royal Botanic Gardens Library this week, Ms Phippen discovered a register of “Seeds Received and Despatched 1899 – 1922” that contained the names of twenty-one households in the Ryde/Hunters Hill area who received the seeds in memory of their loved ones in 1920.

As the story began to unfold, Ms Phippen, said: “It was such an exciting moment to see the lists of names and suburbs. I started to cry and I had to move away for fear of damaging the register.

“Just image what the local residents thought when those poppies first bloomed.”

The discovery will be forwarded to local historical societies who can take the search further and possibly track down descendants of those soldiers.

*Letter No. 1 Transcript ... Sydney Morning Herald Thursday 15 June 1920*

### **POPPY SEEDS FROM VILLERS BRETONNEUX**

TO THE EDITOR OF THE HERALD.

Sir. In common with my colleagues in Melbourne and Christchurch, I have received from Miss Rout, the honorary secretary of the New Zealand Volunteer Sisters, of the above town, a small quantity of poppy seeds gathered in the Somme Valley by the school children of Villers Bretonneux. The sender asks us to distribute a few of the seeds “to the relatives of Australian and New Zealand soldiers who fell fighting on the battlefields of the Somme, and convey to the recipients the deepest gratitude and loving sympathy of the school children of Villers Bretonneux.”

As Miss Rout points out, the seeds were gathered very late, and the fruits had little seed in them when they arrived, but I shall be very pleased indeed to send a tiny packet to the relatives in New South Wales soldiers, in accordance with this lady’s wishes. I shall be glad if written applications be made to me, and they will be attended to in the order of receipt, and if there is not enough seed to go round I will endeavour to get an additional quantity next season. Poppy seed being a fine powder, recipients must be careful not to cover it up with soil. Sow in pots.

I am, etc.,

J. H. Maiden, Director,  
Botanic Gardens  
Sydney, Jan 15

*Letter No. 2 Transcript ... Sydney Morning Herald Thursday 18 November 1920.*

### **IN FLANDERS FIELDS**

TO THE EDITOR OF THE HERALD.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.  
We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.

Sir. The above are the first two stanzas of Colonel McCrae's famous poem connecting the poppies with our hallowed dead on the battle fields of Europe.

At the beginning of the year I wrote to you and told you that Miss Ettie Rout (now Mrs Hornabrook) who was in charge of the New Zealand Red Cross at Villers Bretonneux, had sent me some poppy seeds from the neighbourhood, and I offered to send a small packet to the relatives of fallen soldiers. My offer was promptly taken up, and the supply was exhausted in a few days. I then got into touch with Miss Rout, and through the kindness of the mother superior of an orphanage on the Somme, who does not wish her name or the name of the town to be mentioned, I received last September an additional quantity of poppy seeds of the new crop. In the meantime I had received 234 additional applications for this new seed. Every application was satisfied, and the supply was exhausted.

I only kept back for the Botanic Gardens the same amount that had been given to correspondents, and a member of the staff who had himself lost a son in the war, lovingly sowed those seeds in a pot, and last week they flowered. They turned out to be a mixture of two poppies – the ordinary common red or cornfield poppy, *Papaver rhoeas* (there was most of this), and the long, smooth-headed poppy, *Papaver dubium*, which has an orange or orange-red flower.

I expect that a number of my correspondents have also flowered these poppies and most/many of them will save the seed in order that they may replant them every year as an affectionate memorial.

I am, etc.,

J. H. Maiden, Director,  
Botanic Gardens  
Sydney, Nov 18