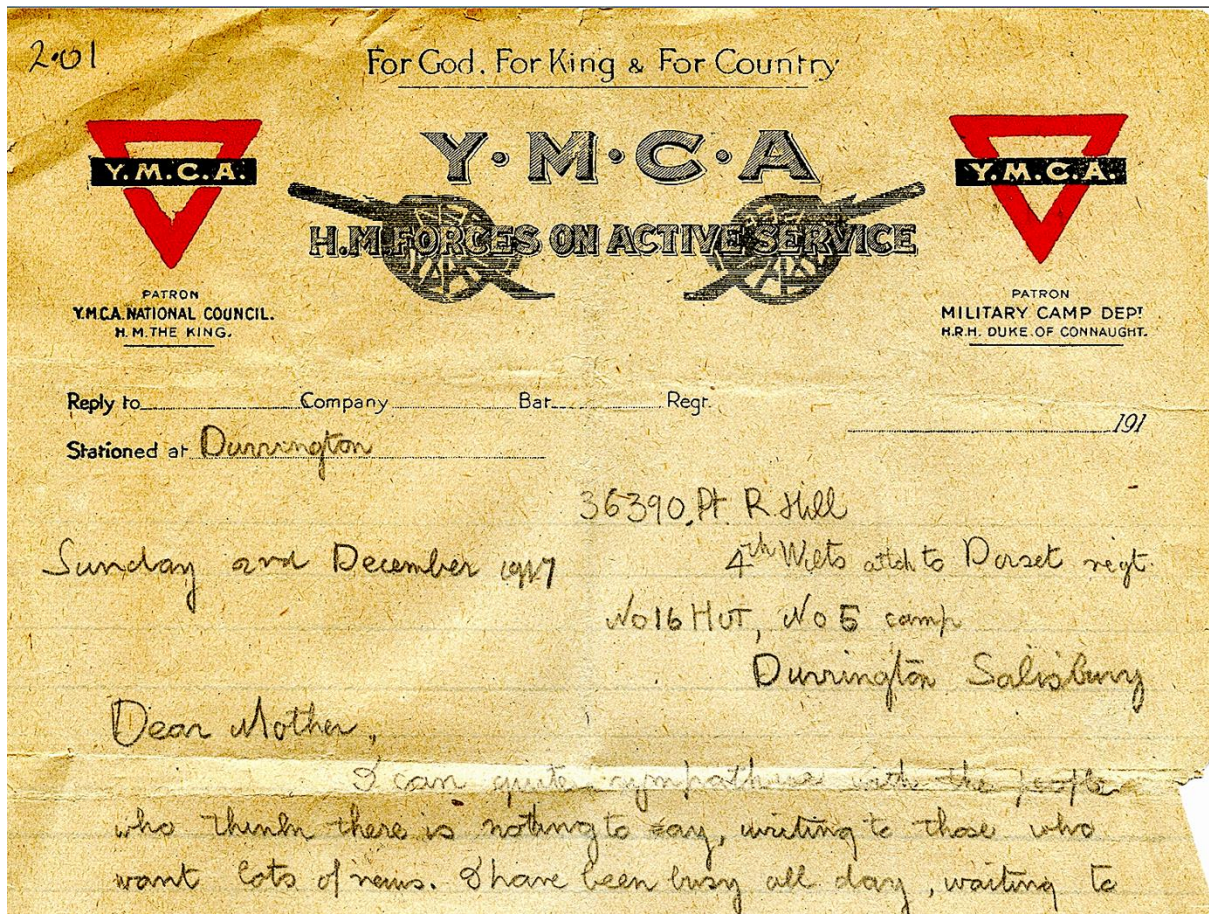


Audlem and District History Society

History Shorts 52 by Edwin Hill

Stonehenge 1917-18

Stonehenge has been in the news recently, so I was reminded of the visits my father made during the cold winter of 1917-1918 while he was on Salisbury Plain being trained for the Machine Gun Corps. Here are some unedited extracts from his letters to his parents.



The first letter we have from Salisbury Plain, Sunday 2nd December 1917.

..... I can just see Stonehenge from this hut. It's looks wonderful 2 miles away on the great sweeping downs.



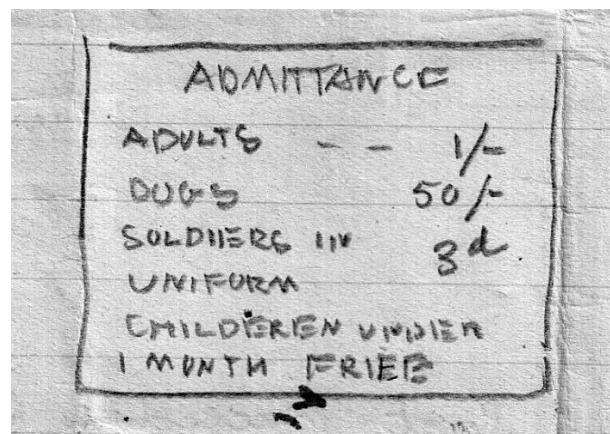


Durrington Camp – 28th December 1917

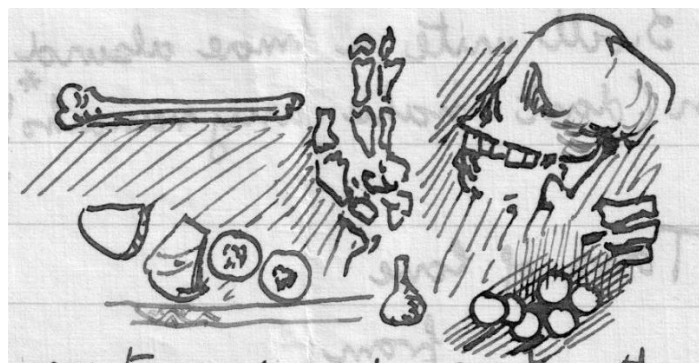
16th Dec 17
YMCA

Dear Mother,

I have at last succeeded in really seeing Stonehenge. I and another boy; quite a nice one, I've found several quiet ones which however are not very keen on what I like, went. We started and walked through the camp down, over the hut covered down, along a valley past huts – we could see our objective from the actual camp 10 minutes walk from our hut – then past desolate waste fields, over a trampled and desolate ridge, up a green slope and – I was surprised to find how near the camps approach this sacred spot but it is all enclosed with barbed wire and labelled OUT OF BOUNDS. I felt sure it would be impossible to get near it and there was an awful sentry box affair at one corner of the enclosure. I craned my head over the wire – the Stones looked glorious – lichen covered and huge on lovely green turf. Then a terrific brainwave – I went to the sentry box and looked at the notice board:



I hastily paid 6d and we walked through the revolving man gauge [sic] – I was terrifically excited in fact I can hardly write now. It gives you the feeling of the old Egyptian temples – wonderful proportion and size; the photos don't do it justice. At first glance it looks a trivial affair but when you get to it and feel it is worthwhile. The wind was cruelly cold, really too bad; there was a guide disguised as a police man and we talked to him. I squatted behind a good old stone where there was shelter from the main blast, and with hands which rapidly became numb plied my paintbrush and India rubber and pencil. The result needless to say was not excellent by any means but in my own mind I feel I have grasped the "complexion" and texture and guglyness [sic] of the monoliths – a thing which one can only do on touching and seeing the actual stones. I got some postcards at the "sentry box" and a one shilling book which I will send later when I have read it as I want to go again if possible with greater knowledge of it. The green barrows around it are very striking, they have afforded interesting skulls etc.



January 12, 1918

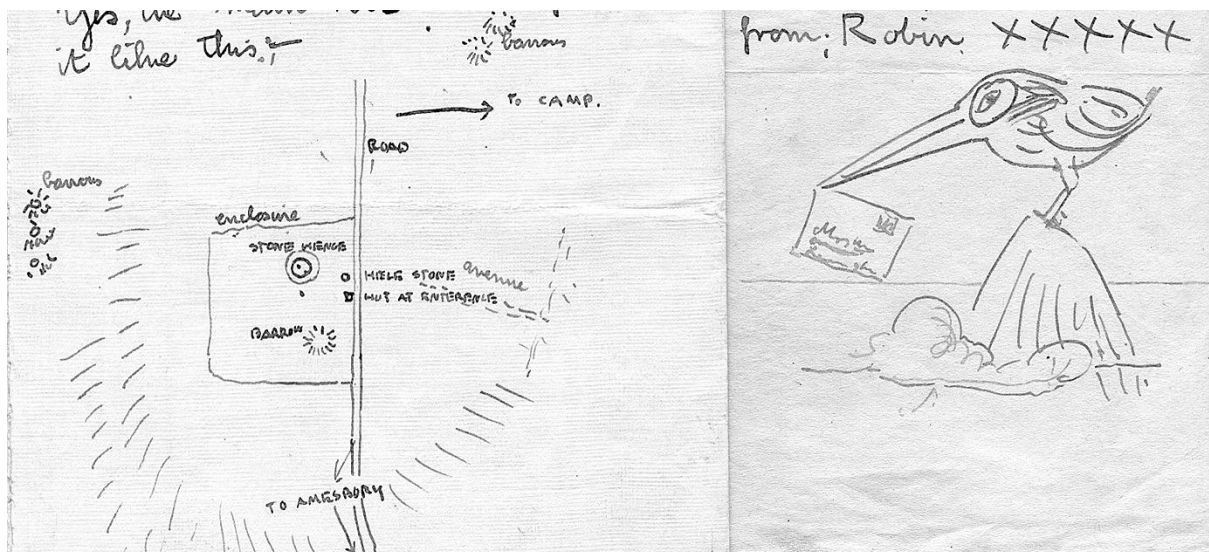
Durrington, Salisbury

Dear Father,

Your letter of the 11th came at dinnertime today, and it was lovely. You had a real spring day for your birthday – here – I hope you did where you were.

I took advantage of this Saturday free fine afternoon and made for the beloved Stonehenge again. It is a glorious place even for tired bodies and minds! There was no sun or blue sky. I hope to see it under those conditions soon. The stones looked stronger and more like “the immovable Rock” than ever. The lichen designs on them were alive with different colours and forms. I went with Frogett from Coventry and although we were both tired we appreciated it and didn't talk much. I found a beautiful “sketching view” which I should love to do “after the war”. I'd dabbled it in roughly for your benefit as well as mine as it was very bad but shows the subject a bit – I had to sit too low to do it justice. I will send this wonderful sketch(!) soon. Now this time I rather gulged [sic] the setting of the stones. Their enclosing circular ditch the nature of the turf and the single splendid barrow quite near. I felt the mightiness of their situation and forgot the hut – disfigured slopes of the hills.

Again I was reminded of Egypt in the barrows – having a great pile on the tomb – of course minute compared with the pyramids but although small, there is such a sense of seriousness as you can compare the Lakes with the Alps – but the difficulty for me is to forget the military disfigurements and barbed wire fences. The turf of the Barrow was like Fleam Dyke. I enclose a “nose gay” which as I held in my hand seemed brilliantly coloured and of course full of reminders. The heather is from the Avenue, Northeast of the Henge. Gentian, salad burnet, dropwort (Spirea), carline thistle were in evidence on the barrow. So you can tell how a second visit repaid! I want to go again; I do wish you could see it but I am afraid at first you would find it a disappointing affair altogether, but if I tell you all I feel about it first, then you will like it, perhaps first time of seeing. Yes, the main road does go near it like this:



I hope you will tread that main road sometime. All the lights have just been out for half an hour so I have been unable to go on with this, and now it is late; so I must say good night and tons of love kisses, from Robin XXXXX



Stonehenge – 12th January 1918