

**Meldreth Local History Group Coffee Morning, March 2017:
Rory Stephens on "Exploding the Myths of the Great War"**

Review by James Hogg

When Terry Dash kindly suggested I come to a talk on the Great War of 1914-18 I wondered if I hadn't heard enough on that topic in recent times and I almost decided to give it a miss. What a mistake that would have been. Rory Stephens's approach to the subject was a revelation. His mastery of the facts, the result of many years of study, allowed him to explode the many myths which have clouded our understanding of those destructive years.

It was all the more remarkable that he was able to deliver such a long and complex analysis without notes, and still make it completely coherent. Even the odd interruption did not disrupt the flow. The schoolchildren to whom he talks on this subject are fortunate that they will grow up able to reject the misreadings absorbed by earlier generations.

Among the wide range of topics Rory covered were the reasons for going to war; misconceptions about the "stupidity" of the generals; political interference and the demand for results when the huge army of "amateur" soldiers was not battle-trained; the realities of trench life; the many deaths of staff officers often accused of hiding away from the front; and Haig's successes in overcoming the difficulties and emerging the ultimate victor.

In Rory's impressive analysis the reason for going to war was the age-old one in Europe - Britain's need to stop a single tyrannical power taking over the continent. Far from being stupid the British High Command did the best they could with the forces available to them. In fact much of the blame for the vast cost in lives lay with politicians setting impossible targets for the generals to meet and then blaming them for the inevitable setbacks. It was also revealing to hear that, far from cowering in danger-free comfort as is often suggested, staff officers gave their lives in large numbers.

Rory went on to correct the false picture of trench life still being painted in accounts of the fighting. Without in any way minimising the awful dangers and harshness of the experience he corrected the false impression of soldiers trapped in a muddy hole in the ground for weeks and months at a time. In fact the duration of trench duty was a great deal shorter than is often suggested.

All in all this was a salutary lesson in how history can become distorted by sensationalism and the demand for scapegoats. The Great War was appalling enough without them.