

NEWS

Story of the real war horse: The Staffordshire WWI hero, Christ Church



■ Captain F Meynell and Lady Jeanne Stonor Camoys



■ Lord Sandon on Christ Church. Left, Christ Church's head mounted on a wall at Sandon Hall

My unflappable and magnificent brother-in-arms

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HE was the REAL War Horse – the brave beast that could have been the inspiration for the West End play and blockbuster film – and he came from Staffordshire.

Courageous Christ Church swapped life running with the hounds as part of the Albrighton Hunt for the blood and mud of the Western Front in the First World War.

What's more, the horse survived the carnage and returned to country sports after the guns fell silent.

The part the amazing animal played in the 1914-18 conflict has been pieced together by Cannock historians Les Dent and Richard Pursehouse.

They reveal Christ Church was a nag with connections in very high places.

Just two days after war was

declared in the summer of 1914, Captain Francis Meynell of the 6th Stafford Battery, Royal Field Artillery, arrived at Stafford Grammar School to inspect horses commanded by the army from farms and hunts.

He was immediately taken by chestnut gelding Christ Church.

Standing over 15 hands high, the horse belonged to Lady Jeanne Stonor Camoys, who ironically went on to be a Nazi sympathiser during the Second World War, but the animal was ridden by her son with the Albrighton Hunt.

After seven months of training, Captain Meynell, Christ Church and the 232nd brigade of the Royal Field Artillery headed for France in February 1915.

Christ Church was a "front-liner" – one of the horses that charged at the guns.

His first taste of action was at Ypres Salient in Belgium.

It was the beginning of a bond with Francis Meynell, the captain later recalling: "He was a horse that passed through many

a barrage, who would close his old head down for five minutes, 'Pow, Pow.' Christ Church possessed amazing calmness in the face of enemy fire.

In No Man's Land at La Maisonette, Christ Church "performed a prodigious feat of faultless extraction from a sea of barbed and hooped wire and derelict shell holes."

Meynell was moved to write: "What does a horse think about when the shells are bursting and the bullets are whistling round his head?"

Meynell and Christ Church worked seamlessly together and, in a 1933 letter to *The Times*, the former soldier – by now Lord Sandon – likened the noble nag to Battle of Waterloo hero, the Duke of Wellington's charger, Copenhagen.

He recalled: "Should my stick, strafing on his shoulders to increase, say, the pace of his trot, be distasteful to him, he would turn his head round and bite my leg, not to the extent of pain, but as a tangible manifestation of disapproval. It was just like a

senior 'ticking off' a subordinate!"

However, throughout the war, culminating with a procession behind the victorious regimental bands as they crossed the Hohenzollern Bridge at Cologne in 1919, Christ Church represented "something eminently stable, steady and sane in a world that needed all that."

The horse, Meynell concluded, was his "firm, unflappable, magnificent, brother-in-arms."

Christ Church survived service and returned to England, living out his remaining days at Sandon Hall, near Stafford, and, until October 1933, rode with the North Cotswold Hunt.

But within months, his health started to decline and he was put down on December 15.

His head was mounted on a wall at Sandon Hall, and the death spawned a moving tribute from Lord Sandon, who said: "Goodbye to all our dumb pals who served us all those years without a day's leave."

And he supplied the equine epitaph: "He just did his job."

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