


# Bells will ring out: world to mark end of first world war, 100 years on

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 [theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/12/armistice-day-first-world-war-wilfred-owen](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/12/armistice-day-first-world-war-wilfred-owen)

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Before dawn broke over northern France on 4 November 1918, a 25-year-old British officer, Lt Wilfred Owen of the Manchester Regiment, headed out from a house in which British troops had been holed up in woodland near the village of Ors.

The Hundred Days Offensive was nearing its conclusion and Allied victory was just a week away. Owen had written to his mother from what he called the “smoky cellar” of that house five days earlier to reassure her that he was in good spirits. He intimated that it would all be over soon.

“It is a great life. I am more oblivious than alas! yourself, dear Mother, of the ghastly glimmering of the guns outside and the hollow crashing of the shells. There is no danger down here, or if any, it will be over before you read these lines.”

They were to prove prophetic words, though not in the way he had hoped. The operation that Owen was to take part in on the morning of 4 November was fraught with risk. The retreating Germans had dug themselves in on the other side of the Sambre-Oise canal that runs through Ors, and had destroyed its bridges and locks.

The British troops began work at 5.45am, when it was still barely light; their objective that day was to build a floating bridge on which to cross the canal and push the enemy back towards the Belgian border.

## Map of Ors, France

But they had barely begun before they came under heavy fire. As they worked to put in place the temporary crossing, both on the canal bank and on the water, many were gunned down. Owen fell while directing operations, shot through the head, either while on a raft or perhaps at the canal’s edge.

Forty soldiers were lost that morning and were buried in two cemeteries in Ors close to the canal. It is not known precisely when Owen’s mother received her son’s last letter, but it would have been close to, if not on, the date of his death. If it raised her hopes, it was not to be for long.

A few days later, on Armistice Day, 11 November, as the church bells rang out to celebrate the end of the war in the Shropshire town of Shrewsbury, where the family lived, she and Owen’s father opened the telegram every parent of a serving soldier dreaded, saying that their son had lost his life fighting bravely for his country.

A hundred years later, on 4 November, starting at 5.45am, dozens of schoolchildren from the Manchester area will retrace the last walk of the first world war poet through the same woods, setting off from the same forester's house.

The Maison Forestière has been reconstructed in honour of those who fell and was reopened in 2011 as a centre of commemoration, though with the cellar where they stayed, and where Owen wrote to his mother, left exactly as he described it.

There will be music, specially composed, and a ceremony by the canal's edge. Further events will be held in Ors on 11 November. The village's mayor, Jacky Duminy, says: "It is important that everyone learns from the mistakes of the past. It will be very moving, yes. The young people have to know that these soldiers died for us to be free." Through his poetry, Owen has perhaps done more than any other victim of the first world war to articulate its horror and futility to future generations. The story of his end would hit the emotions with the same force today whoever he was, though arguably it has a particular poignancy because so many of us have been affected by his work, and know his face from collections that sit on our shelves. Owen's was, however, just one of 17 million military and civilian deaths that people this 11 November across the world are planning to commemorate. Those involved in organising the events often make a similar observation: that families and communities everywhere feel their own unique sense of involvement. They feel that this year's commemorations and celebrations will be for them and their loved ones, their villages and towns, as well as their country.



▲ Crowds in London celebrate the armistice at the end of the first world war. Photograph: Alamy

"We see this all the time from people who come here," says Wesley Butstraen, the deputy head of tourism at the Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, Belgium, which has seen visitor numbers soar since 2013. "People come with their own stories, their own connections from their homes, and feelings of involvement. Almost every family has a link back to the first world war. There is a lot of emotion."

Ypres, close to the front line and trenches, was flattened by German shells in late 1914 and early 1915, but was rebuilt brick by brick after the war. On Armistice Day, the town and region will be the focus of global media attention.

When news broke in London that the war was finally over, the sense of national elation was almost uncontrollable. For those like the Owen family, however, who had so recently received terrible news, to behold the joy all around must have been impossibly difficult.

The *Manchester Guardian* of the next day captured the feeling and sounds on the streets of London. "Then the church bells that we have never dared to ring but once on any great day of war, burst into a confident ringing. Big Ben over all, letting themselves go, like all London below them ... Motor-cars in a steady stream came along, with people sticking to every inch of them like flies on treacle.

"Inside might be a small selection of the Allies, some dark Italian officer with cameo face, a blonde English staff officer, a land girl on the bonnet, all mixed up with accretions of Australians wearing Union Jacks instead of their slouch hats, a gorgeous Indian in a turban and perhaps a bright blue Frenchman."

The same report recorded ecstatic crowds converging on Downing Street where the prime minister, David Lloyd George, appeared and announced: "I am glad to tell you that the war will be over at 11 o'clock today." He waved, then disappeared inside, but the crowds bayed for more until he reappeared at the first-floor window of No 10, along with Andrew Bonar Law, the chancellor, and Winston Churchill, the minister of munitions. All this, the paper said, as "the housemaids of Downing Street waved their dusters and feather mops overhead".

This year, Armistice Day will fall on a Sunday. Thousands of local events are being coordinated by the [Imperial War Museum](#). And again the ringing of bells will play a large part. A careful balance will be struck between the solemn sound of remembrance and peals of celebration.

Christopher O'Mahony, president of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, says he and others across the UK have been planning their contribution for years. "Wherever you have grown up, bells are part of the soundscape of the nation, whether it is a sound of joy as at a wedding or of sadness at a funeral," he says.

In the early morning of 11 November more than 3,000 bell towers across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will ring out with the sound of "half-muffled" bells, like a slow march, in solemn memory of those who lost their lives.



Then, at midday, bellringers at each tower across the UK will remove the muffles from the clappers and at about 12.30 they will ring open. "The national mood swings then to gratitude and gratefulness and thanks," says O'Mahony.

Before 1914 the vast majority of bellringers in the UK were male, but the loss of so many men to war meant many more women took up the role. Today there are between 30,000 and 35,000 men and women bellringers in the UK, and still more are being sought for Armistice Day. The aim is that bells sound not just in the UK but across the world.

The British and German governments are encouraging other countries to ring bells at the same times in the same way, expressing the reconciliation of former enemies in sound. “Bells will ring out across the world to replicate the outpouring of relief that took place in 1918, and to mark the peace and friendship that we now enjoy between nations,” says the culture secretary, Jeremy Wright.

Formal events in this country will include a march past the Cenotaph by 10,000 people, who can apply online to take part in a ballot to join the “people’s procession”.

There will be a service at Westminster Abbey and an international event organised by the Belgian city of Mons, likely to be attended by both the prime minister, Theresa May, and the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, near the place where some of the first and last battles of the 1914-18 war took place.



▲ Wilfred Owen and fellow officers of the 5th battalion of the Manchester Regiment at Witley North Camp in Surrey in 1916.  
Photograph: Granger/REX/Shutterstock

That these events will have to be carefully choreographed to avoid diplomatic upsets between those who emerged victorious and those who went down to defeat 100 years ago goes without saying.

The fact that they will take place just as the UK will be preparing to leave the European Union – a project launched after the second world war to cement peace in Europe – also escapes no one. Peter Slosse, the director of tourism in Ypres, who has worked for more than 30 years to bring visitors to the town, says: “It is something we are looking at with some regret. Will it be more difficult to travel here after Brexit?” He sincerely hopes not.

A few hundred yards away from the museum where Slosse works, three firemen sound the Last Post under the Menin Gate, as they do every night at 8pm in memory of those who fell.

On a wet Thursday evening there are several hundred, mostly British, people standing silently under the giant structure, which bears the names of 55,000 soldiers who died in the Ypres Salient but who were never afforded formal burials because they were never found.

Benoit Mottrie, chairman of the Last Post Association, says that, while the 100-year anniversary of Armistice Day will be a big event, the important thing is that time never forgets those who gave their lives. Like Slosse, he wants British people to keep coming to Ypres and

insists the bugles will always sound at 8pm. Anniversaries come and go, but not the need for remembrance.



▲ Wilfred Owen and some 40 other British troops were lost on the morning of November 4, 1918, and were buried in two cemeteries in Ors close to the canal. Photograph: Alamy

“We have a duty under our constitution to have a permanent commemoration for these people,” he says, throwing his gaze up at the giant arches and the huge long lists of names of the missing inscribed on them. “The 100 years changes nothing for us.”

**21 October 1915** Owen is enlisted in the Artists Rifles Officers’ Training Corps. He trains at Hare Hall camp in Essex

**4 June 1916** Commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment

**25 June, 1917** Suffering from shell shock, Owen is admitted to Craiglockhart war hospital, Edinburgh, where he meets fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon

**October 2017** At Craiglockhart, he writes first drafts of Dulce et Decorum Est and Anthem for Doomed Youth

**June 1918** Owen is judged fit to resume service

**July** Returns to active service in France

**1 October** Owen leads units into battle near Joncourt, for which he is later awarded the Military Cross

**4 November** He is killed in action on the Sambre-Oise canal