ADELAIDE HIGH SCHOOL

The Harefield Flag: How a Union Jack flag used in World War 1 connects an English village with Adelaide High School

 Adelaide High School's connection with the spirit of the Anzacs stretches as far back as 1915 and the Australian landing at Gallipoli. Many old scholars of Adelaide High School sent letters back from the frontlines of World War 1 outlining their experiences, and many of these letters were published in the school magazines of the time.

Sergeant J E Pearce, B Company, 10th Infantry Battalion, AIF, was one such old scholar whose experience of storming the beaches at Gallipoli is recorded in the school magazine. He wrote:

I am proud to have amongst the first Australians to do something on this side of the world, but I realize how easily I might have been amongst the slain. When the 10th Battalion rolled was called on our landing on Gallipoli, only one officer and twenty-four men responded out of over 1,000. Sergeant Pearce, himself wounded in the battle, graphically described the events of the day end, through his words and those of many other servicemen from Adelaide High School who answered Britain's call, the school community came to understand the price of freedom.

Anxious that the school should not forget the sacrifices that the Old Boys were making to keep the Flag flying, the Adelaide High School noticeboard was turned into a temporary honour roll, funds were gathered to erect a Roll of Honour Board in Price Hall in the Grote St buildings of the school, and the school magazines continued to contain letters, Rolls of Honour and photographs of serving old scholars or those killed in action.

Whilst these reminders of the sacrifices made by Adelaide High School old scholars endure (copies of the magazines remain in the school archives and in the Mortlock Library of South Australia), and the Roll of Honour Board was moved to the West Terrace site of Adelaide High School when the Boys' and Girls' Schools amalgamated in 1977, the most significant artefact from WWI in the possession of Adelaide High School is the Harefield Flag.

Harefield is a very picturesque, old-fashioned little village about 27 kilometres north-west of London in Middlesex, England. In November 1914, wealthy Sydney expatriate Mr Charles Bilby-Leake offered his manor house, Harefield Park, and 250 acres of parkland in Harefield to the Australian Ministry of Defence to be used as a home for convalescent soldiers of the AIF for the period of the war and six months afterwards. The hospital was meant to have just 80 beds for diggers to convalesce before being shipped home, but from June 1915 when the wounded from Gallipoli began to arrive until the end of the war, it evolved into a fully-fledged hospital which saw 50,000 Anzacs pass through its doors. Many wounded Australian soldiers were taken to the hospital and some of those men died from their wounds and were buried in a small cemetery adjoining the village church. One woman, a nurse, was also laid to rest there.

Each of the Anzacs who died at the hospital received a military funeral. Ceremonial corteges with flag-draped caskets passed down the main street of the village of Harefield to the final burial place in the Australian burial ground at the Harefield village church, St Mary's Church.

Mr Ernest F Jeffrey, who was the headmaster of the Harefield Council School at the time, described how the Harefield Flag, which now belongs to Adelaide High School, came to be symbolic of the bond between a village in England and a South Australian high school.

Many of us welcomed the convalescent soldiers into our homes, and they came to see us at my school. When the first death in the Hospital occurred, the school's Union Jack was borrowed to cover the coffin at the burial, and throughout the war it was borrowed whenever the sad need for it arose.

The first few graves in the Anzac Cemetery, 1916. These headstones were subsequently turned as moss was added, and their row of brave pioneers were added.

After the Armistice, it was thought that the children of Australia would treasure the flag because of the use to which it had been put. (Cootamundra 1972, p. 30)

In early 1920, Mr Jeffrey presented the Union Jack flag to Lieutenant Colonel Yeatman, the last Officer Commanding the Hospital, with a request that he would hand it to an Australian school willing to send its own Union Jack in exchange. On his return to Australia, Yeatman handed the flag to the Schools' Patriotic Fund which considered Adelaide High School had earned the honour of receiving because of the work it had done for this fund during the war by sending relief parcels to Harefield. The Schools' Patriotic Fund later arranged for a British Union Jack to be sent to Harefield and Adelaide High sent Harefield an Australian flag.

An Australian funeral passing the Harefield village common and blockchain.

Mr Jeffrey, the Headmaster of Harefield Council School, with the first group of Harefield School children visiting the cemetery with their flowers on Armistice Day, 1921.
which they still have hanging in their chapel, and of which a Harefield boy wrote in 1946, 
"...your Australian flag, always served during the darkest days of the War (1939–45) to remind us of the loyal friends we had far away."
(Pearce, W. 1946, p. 26)

The Education Gazette, dated December 15, 1920, (p. 233) reporting the exchange of flags said:

"We doubt not that both schools will treasure the memories of an awful yet glorious period of the Empire’s history."

In 1921, a tradition began which continues today. As Ruth Batchelor wrote in the Adelaide High Schools Jubilee Magazine (p. 38), each year since the end of the 1914-1918 war an Anzac Day service, in which the children of the school pray a large part, has been held in the Harefield Church. In 1952 I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the afternoon Anzac Day service. As usual the early morning service, in which the children took part, had been broadcast in Australia. After the service everyone filed in procession to the Australian Cemetery for the Act of Memorial. On each Australian grave was a bunch of flowers, not a stiff formal wreath, but posies of fresh field flowers, bluebells, primroses or daffodils which the children themselves had gathered in the woods and fields and placed there before the early morning service.

Today remembrance services are still held in St Mary’s Parish Church, Harefield, Australian, New Zealand and English officials lay wreaths under the granite obelisk inscribed with the words: “To the Glory of God who giveth the Victory and in memory of Brave Australian Soldiers who after taking part in the Great War now rest in Harefield Cemetery” while a bugler plays the Last Post, and local school children place floral tributes on each of the graves in the Australian Military Cemetery.

In World War II also, the Adelaide High School community did what they could to support the people of Harefield. In 1946, the then Headmaster of Adelaide High School, Mr R A West, was aware of the serious shortage of food in Great Britain, (...) thought it would be a fine gesture if the school could send parcels to the students of Harefield School. Originally it was his intention to send one parcel to two children, especially when he discovered that the village school had a roll of three hundred and fifty! However, so enthusiastic and generous was the response from the school community with both food and money donations that we were able to send every student and teacher an individual parcel.

(Harefield and Holland, Aug 1946, p. 2)

Whilst the traditions surrounding Anzac Day continue in Harefield, the significance of the "Harefield Flag", the original Union Jack which had been given to the school in 1920, has been an enduring feature in the history of Adelaide High School. Post scholars remember school assemblies where the school displayed the Harefield Union Jack, and the connection with Harefield School continued, not only on Anzac Day, but through correspondence between students of the two schools. The flag hung in Price Hall at Adelaide High School in Grove Street until the amalgamation of Adelaide Girls’ and Adelaide Boys’ High Schools in 1977, when it was transferred to the Honour Roll Foyer at Adelaide High School, West Terrace. Here it was hung next to the Honour Roll Board containing the names of students from Adelaide High School who served during World War I, together with those who gave their lives in service for their country. The Lady Galway (Red Cross) banner, presented to Adelaide High School by the Students’ Patriotic Fund at the end of World War I, is also displayed in the Honour Roll foyer.

The Harefield Flag provides a real historical link to South Australia’s involvement in World War I as it is the actual flag used to honour servicemen who gave their lives for their country. The Harefield Society in South Australia also holds the view that the flag may have once belonged to Lord Cardigan.

Whilst the original flag is still in the possession of the school, over the years constant display has made it fragile and faded and in 1995 it was treated by Artlab to prevent further deterioration. At the time, the school was unable to afford the cost of fully restoring the flag so it was then stored in Adelaide High School’s archives, being too fragile to continue to display. A replacement Union Jack, provided by the RSL at the request of the school, currently hangs in the Honour Roll Foyer in place of the Harefield flag.

In 2010 the school received a grant from the Premier’s Anzac Day Fund to help restore the original flag and the school is currently looking at raising additional funds to allow this to happen. The flag is currently at Artlab undergoing restoration. Artlab found that:

"At some point in its life the flag has undergone restoration with sections of the blue and cream replaced. Since then it has been displayed with the back to the front as this side is less faded. It was decided not to remove the previous restoration and leave it displayed as is. The repairs are very much part of its history and reflects the effort and care taken to look after the Flag by the school community."

(Artlab 2012)

It is hoped that following its restoration the school will once again be able to display the original Harefield Flag for the centenary of Anzac Day in 2015. Adelaide High School is also looking at the possibility of taking a group of students to Gallipoli or France for the centenary celebrations and is hoping to visit Harefield.

The Lady Galway (Red Cross) banner presented to Adelaide High School in 1919.
In 2011 the Harefield Flag was sent to Artlab. Initially the flag was wet cleaned. It was sandwiched between net to secure fragile sections and washing out flax in a shallow depth of water.

The Adelaide High School community, like the people of Harefield, will continue to remember and honour the sacrifices made by the Australian and New Zealand servicemen during World War 1. The Harefield Flag is part of the history and tradition of Adelaide High. Respect it, be proud of it, for as such it is an integral part of our school.

(The Harefield Flag, Dec. 1963, p. 2)

Further information
Please contact Adelaide High School if you would like to make a donation towards the restoration of the Harefield Flag.
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References