

Once again in November we remember those who died in past wars and this year it is the turn of those Bicton people who fell in the Second World War. Their memorial inside the Church offers just a list of names, leaving plenty of scope for further details where these are known. With passing years and the typical mobile population of the parish there are, however, few around to remember them and supply this information. There are also fewer people who visit the Church and who are even aware of their names.

The list, with some additional information is as follows:

Bruce Herbert Bailey	R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve	d. 18.10.44	22
Marion T Bright (nee Price)		31.05.45	20
Dennis Brown			
Percy Crane	Durham Light Infantry	27.06.42	31
William H Edmonds			
John Reginald Evans	Suffolk reg	18.07.44	27
Jack Norton Green			
Charles Benjamin Griffiths	Royal Artillery	14.09.44	25
Dennis Griffiths			
Leonard Ratcliffe	Royal Artillery	26.11.43	40
John Phillip Williams	Royal Engineers	12.04.41	35

The deaths span several years of the war, starting with John Williams in 1941 and finishing with Marion Bright in 1945, both of whom actually lie in our churchyard, rather than in some foreign field.

John Williams, the son of Mr & Mrs E Williams, formerly of Calcott Moss, was then living in The Crescent, Montford Bridge with wife Gladys and son Norman. Before joining up he had been a driver for the County Council and this no doubt steered him into the road construction company of the Royal Engineers at a base in Northern Ireland. He died there suddenly, just after returning from leave so it was relatively easy for his remains to be brought home to Bicton. His standard 'War Cemetery' headstone also records that his wife then died five months later and joined him here, an unusual situation for an 'official' war grave.

Marion Bright, who had only recently married Dennis Bright of Bishops Castle, also originally came from The Crescent as part of the large family of Bob Price. She had become a nurse and unfortunately contracted tuberculosis while serving at a hospital in Reykjavik, Iceland, which forced her to return home. These were the days before the development of Streptomycin, so that TB was still a killer with little treatment available beyond fresh air and rest. She therefore lies amongst other Price family members in the churchyard, but lacks a separate headstone. There was even debate whether she should be included on the War Memorial, but it was rightly claimed that she had been 'doing her bit' in an important centre of activity during the war.

Between these two, other deaths mainly reflected successive stages of the war in Europe, including the role of the well known '8th Army'. This story really started with the success of Rommel's Afrika Korps in pushing back the allies in North Africa during 1942. They were, however, stopped at El Alamein, where Percy Crane, son of John and Annie Crane, became one of the casualties.

After a build up of men and materials and with Montgomery in charge, the 8th Army fought back and with the help of the Americans, eventually drove the Germans out of Africa, leading to the invasion of Sicily and Italy.

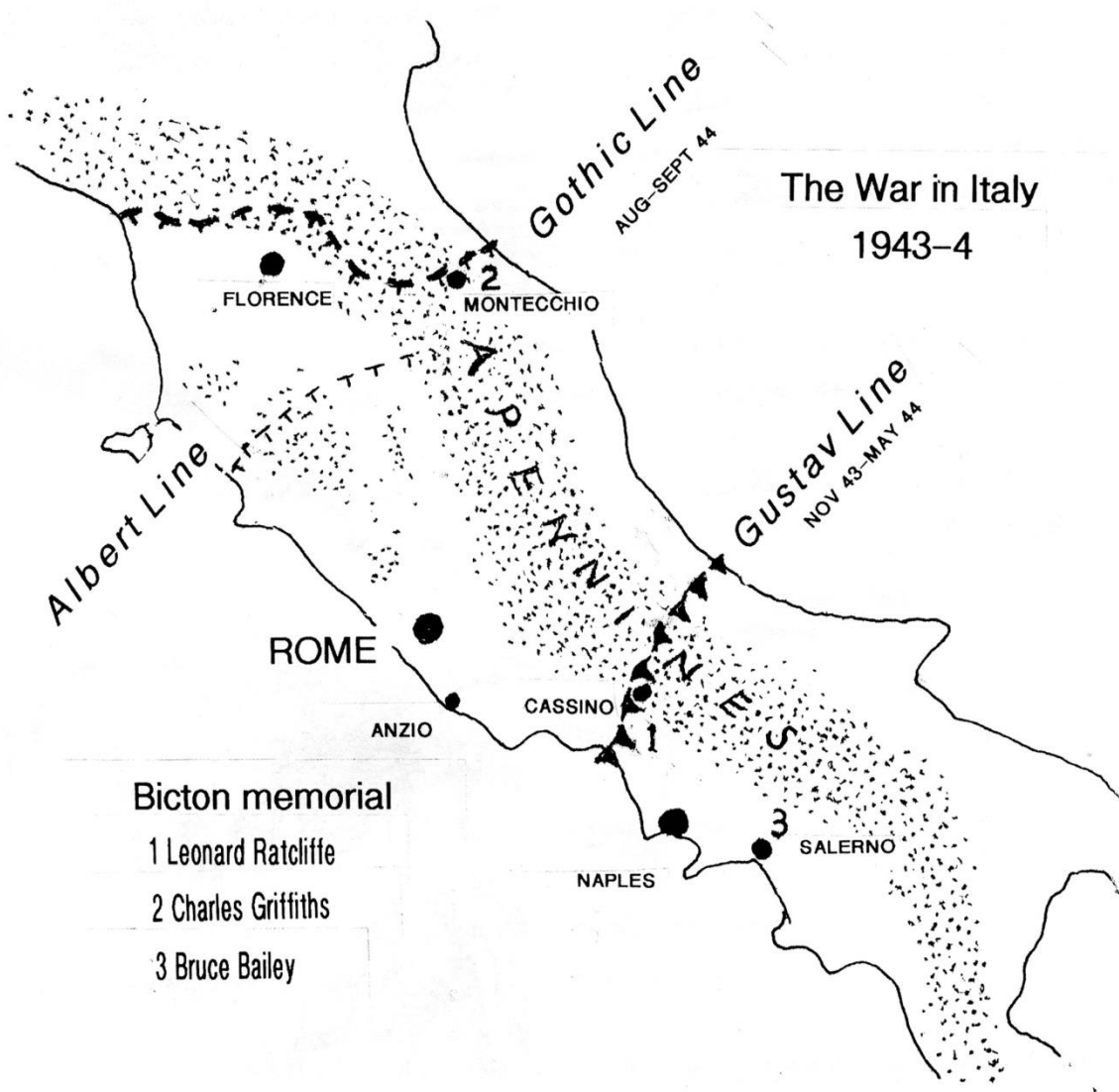
Politicians may have described this area as the 'soft underbelly of Europe', but the geographical reality was quite different thanks to the mountainous terrain. For the retreating armies this gave ideal opportunities for defence, but only a 'hard slog' for those advancing. In particular, the German forces established a series of defensive lines which became the scene of the most intense fighting. In this way, Gunner Leonard Ratcliffe died near Cassino on the 'Gustav Line' along with many others. He was the son of John and Joanna Ratcliffe from Calcott Lane and left a wife, Violet, on Holyhead Road. His father was an attendant at the Shelton Mental Hospital.

Later, at the 'Gothic Line', gunner Charles Griffiths, son of Charles and Martha of Isle Lane, also died. At the same time there was plenty of supporting action in the air, from bases behind the advancing front and some of this led to the death of Bruce Bailey, son of another 'Asylum' attendant, Herbert Bailey and wife Irene. Their large family grew up in a small cottage which no longer exists, near Grove Farm.

This Italian campaign posed many problems which prompted much debate amongst the allies about its value, when France should have been an easier target. Eventually, however, the Normandy invasion did take place as another joint enterprise with the Americans, who landed in the east. Here it was important to secure the left flank along the Caen canal, hence the famous airborne commando drop on to 'Pegasus' Bridge (subsequently named after them). Then, as the invasion progressed in the next days and weeks, conventional infantry took over to resist the German counterattacks. The resulting casualties included John Evans, serving with the Suffolk Regiment, who now lies in the War Cemetery at Ranville.

He had been a police constable in Stoke, but married Enid Lancett, school teacher from Calcott Lane, with whom he had a daughter, Hillary. Since the war his memory has been kept alive by them, including frequent visits to France.

We hope this essay will also help in this, thanks to information supplied by friends and families which has made it possible. There are more stories to tell some other time when similar information has been gathered together for them... any help most welcome.



The War in Italy
1943-4

Bicton memorial

- 1 Leonard Ratcliffe
- 2 Charles Griffiths
- 3 Bruce Bailey

