



## Welcome to our Winter Newsletter 2025.

As 2025 fades into 2026, we can reflect on a successful year for the Monte Cassino Society. Renewed enthusiasm and support from both new and established members has enabled two successful battlefield tours in 2025, the first a pilot earlier in the year to study the campaign around the River Sangro, and in October a study of the Gothic Line. Building on their popularity, we have more planned for the coming year, details of which are in this issue.

In November, we were ably represented by one of our new members, Olivia Barnard-Firth at the MCS plot in the Garden of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey, where she enjoyed a brief conversation with HM The Queen while presenting her with a book written by a family member. A few days later, on 9<sup>th</sup> November our annual gathering for the March Past the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday was supported by twenty eight MCS members, including some new to the event who also joined us afterwards for a convivial lunch. BBC coverage and commentary of the March Past resulted in several requests to the Society for membership, proving that a little publicity goes a long way, and there are still many people out there who have an interest in the Italian Campaign.

Also on Remembrance Sunday, the Rev Fergus Cooke, wearing the uniform of Chaplain to the Royal Navy Reserve, led a very moving service at our 'companion' Church in Edinburgh, Blackhall St Columba's, where he addressed a full congregation, a member of which later kindly laid a wreath on behalf of the Monte Cassino Society. This service can be viewed on YouTube via the link on Blackhall St Columba's website.

MCS members around the country also attended their local Remembrance Day services on 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> November, some laying wreaths on our behalf. Reports of these are in this issue, along with other news and more individual accounts of the Italian Campaign. Please keep these coming in and remember to contact our Facebook page and website with your comments and queries. We love to hear from you!

Sincere thanks are due to our committee (who now meet online several times a year to plan, organise and publicise Society events), our members, and everyone who supports the Monte Cassino Society in many different ways.

With all best wishes for a happy and peaceful 2026,

Helen James,  
Editor

### **Membership Renewal**

Annual membership fees are due in January. Thank you for your continued support, enabling us to maintain the Society's aim of *furthering interest in the Italian Campaign*. Membership of the Society is £15 per household, payable to our Treasurer, Diane Soady - see Contacts at the end of the Newsletter.

If you can pay by Bank Transfer, this will save the Society the charges incurred when paying cheques into the Bank (please contact Diane for our Bank details). If you do, have you considered making this an annual Standing Order?

Thank you

Lesley Teasdale, Hon. Secretary

### **May 2026 Remembrance Ceremonies**

We will be marking the 82<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of the Battles of Cassino with two events in May 2026, both on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup>.

**National Memorial Arboretum, Lichfield** – we will gather at the Monte Cassino Memorial Stone at 13:45 for a 14:00 Service, followed by a catch up in the Cafe. The service will follow the same format as in recent years and will be supported by the Padre and Bugler.

As stated on the NMA's website, "entry to the Arboretum is free, however they recommend booking your visit in advance to guarantee entry and save on parking."

**Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh** – The Rev Fergus Cook invites all who can attend to join him at 16:00 (either in person or live streamed online at <https://www.blackhallstcolumba.org.uk/live-stream-services-and-info/>.) for a service of commemoration. This will involve the 'Monte Cassino Cross' which the Church holds.

Could members please let Lesley know if you are intending to attend either of the Services so that she can keep a tally of the expected numbers – her contact details are at the end of the Newsletter.

### **FORTHCOMING BATTLEFIELD TOURS**

The Society has organised four trips for 2026 which we hope members will find useful as insights into the Italian Campaign.

- **22-26 Mar 26.** The Eighth Army on the Sangro. This study is now full.
- **13-17 May 26.** Monte Cassino, the Garigliano & Monte Camino. Seven places are available.
- **2-5 Oct 26.** The Salerno landings. One place is available.
- **15-18 Oct 26.** Battlefield study of the Gothic Line.

Each trip will be guided by Frank de Planta, who is a good friend of the Society.

If you would like to take up any of these available places, please get in touch with Frank de Planta on [f.deplanta@btinternet.com](mailto:f.deplanta@btinternet.com)

### **October 2025 Gothic Line Battlefields Tour**

By Caroline McKendrick

Having recently returned from the Gothic Line Battlefields Tour, I was asked if I would put pen to paper and write “something” for the newsletter. Rather than a diary of events, I have written about the moments that I found most memorable, often involving a human story.

Wet! Wet! Wet! Back in the day, yes, I confess to being a fan, but in this case, I refer to the weather on our first morning with the indomitable Frank and friends. Clouds gathered as we breakfasted but waited until we were just leaving our hotel to deliver the rain.

Spirits not dampened, the first stop on our Gothic Line battlefield study tour was at Gradara War Cemetery. At first sight, the Cross of Sacrifice dominated one’s view and the graves were not immediately obvious. This was in sharp contrast to all other war cemeteries I have visited, where the rows of headstones stretch out across the horizon. It was not until I started to climb the steps up the hillside that a row of headstones became visible. In all, there were eight terraces cut into the steep hillside, where a total of 1,191 Commonwealth graves lie in the most beautiful and tranquil final resting place. Although different due to the terrain, this cemetery upholds the two guiding principles and vision held by the original designers/ architects of Commonwealth War Graves: to arrange burial sites in a simple, soldierly way and to treat all as equals. I would recommend Dan Cruickshank’s BBC Four programme “Monuments of Remembrance” to discover more about this subject, or perhaps looking at the CWGC website for an overview.

Dripping wet, it was back on the minibus and we were on our way to Montefiore Conca. Once the medieval capital of the Conca valley, our party stood in the Malatesta Castle, where on a clear day, the coast would be visible. As we stood there experiencing horizontal rain and the wind blowing a hoolie, it was a murky landscape in view, but it did give some idea of the terrible weather conditions that had to be endured during the campaign. Nevertheless, we were able to see what a commanding position this was, for whichever side held the ground. The area was a key position in the German defences and saw intensive fighting when Operation OLIVE was launched with the aim of breaching the Gothic Line. The village was taken by 167 Infantry Brigade on 4th September 1944.

Now under blue skies, our journey took us to Point 449, on the Gemmano Ridge. Once again, owing to its high ground, the ridge formed a very important part of the German line of defence. Frank explained the background and battles for the ridge in detail (which I am not going to begin to attempt!) but it was after arriving back home, whilst scrolling through my photographs, that I did a little more research and found a moving account written by a soldier:

“All around the bullet-chipped cross on Point 449, the dead, khaki and field-grey, lay heaped, unburied, in score upon score; at their centre a soldier of the Lincolns whose hands were still frozen in death round the cross itself, which he had reached in his Battalion’s first attack. Few regiments of Eighth Army had ever known fiercer fighting than that of Gemmano.” \*



The original cross was wooden and has rotted away.  
A metal cross now stands in its place.

Gemmano Ridge was eventually secured by the Allies, but the battle continued towards the Republic of San Marino, against bitter opposition from German positions. The 1st Battalion 9<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles formed part of the Allied forces fighting their way forwards on 18/19<sup>th</sup> September 1944. Coming under heavy fire from well defended German positions, Rifleman Sher Bahadur Thapa and his Section Commander successfully charged the enemy post. Alas, another enemy post attacked the two men resulting in the section commander being injured by a grenade. Still under fire, and in an exposed position, the Rifleman attacked the German post with a Bren gun. He provided cover for others as the two Companies withdrew due to lack of ammunition. His own ammunition exhausted, showing a total disregard for his own safety, Sher Bahadur Thapa dashed forward to rescue two wounded soldiers. Tragically, he was killed by machine gun fire as he returned for the second time. His heroic commitment to saving lives was recognised by the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross. Frank took the party to view the memorial to this brave soldier near Faetano, San Marino and later to see his grave at the Rimini Gurkha War Cemetery. His Victoria Cross was received by his mother. What a courageous son she had, but a tragic loss to bear.

On our final day, we moved to Bologna and visited the Polish Cemetery and CWGC Bologna War Cemetery. There is a stark contrast in style between the two cemeteries, where we began our 'goodbyes', as from here members of our party began their journey onwards to other adventures or were homeward bound.

Reluctant to leave friends, old and new, we set off for the bus stop. Frank said, "Any bus will take you to the main station." Well Frank, we've got news for you. They don't!!





The memorial and grave of Sher Bahadur Thapa

I will apologise in advance for any factual errors spotted here by those with an eagle eye and far greater knowledge than I have. Written largely from memory (probably my first elementary error) and from a little further reading, it is simply a few recollections of memorable moments that I have. For anyone serious about the subject, I recommend a lot of further research (aka 'ask Frank!').

Thank you to everyone for making it such an enjoyable and memorable tour.

\*Rickard, J. 'Battle of Gemmano' (HistoryofWar.org). Dated 4 Apr 2019



The Gothic Line group at Bologna CWGC cemetery

## November Remembrance Ceremonies 2025,

Report by Lesley Teasdale

### The 97th Field of Remembrance, Westminster Abbey, Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2025



It is always an honour to be able to attend the service held here. When I first walk onto the Green, I am always taken aback by the sight of all the plots and the sheer number of crosses within them. This year there were a total of 229 plots, which included new ones to represent the Army Benevolent Fund, RAF Cadets, Fighting with Pride and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

It was a pleasure to see Her Majesty the Queen in attendance. She was wearing a coat inspired by the uniform of The Royal Lancers, in which her late Father, Major Bruce Shand, served during the Second World War.

The representative for the Monte Cassino Plot this year was Olivia Barnard-Firth. The Queen stopped and spoke with Olivia, who was able to give her a signed copy of a book her cousin wrote recently, "From the Hands of Heroes". The book tells the story of the St. Paul's Cathedral altar cloth, which was made by injured soldiers from the First World War.

Supporting Olivia were Susan Deadman, Sharon Shaw, Maureen Stringer and myself. A huge thank you to Maureen and Susan, who laid out the Monte Cassino Plot so beautifully.



Olivia meeting HM the Queen



## **National Service of Remembrance at the Cenotaph, Whitehall, Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2025**

As I arrive on Horse Guards Parade it is always so good to meet with other Members of the Society, who like me are determined that family members and their comrades who served in Italy are not forgotten. It is a feeling like no other, you are with and surrounded by folk who understand. This year there were twenty eight Monte Cassino Society members on parade.

From Horse Guards Parade, the columns then moved through Horse Guards Arch to form up on Whitehall itself, amongst 10.000 veterans and eligible participants. This year we were towards the head of the parade and so were able to look down towards the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. There we waited for His Majesty the King to arrive and the Service of Remembrance to start.

The Society's wreath was carried and laid by Liz Longman this year. Liz organises our attendance at the Cenotaph every year with the Royal British Legion and I would like to say a personal thank you to her as I have seen the amount of work that goes into making everything run so seamlessly.

We are also grateful to Robert Deakin for acting as our Platoon Commander and giving the 'Eyes Left' as we passed the Cenotaph and the 'Eyes Right' for the Duke of Edinburgh, who was taking the salute as we returned to Horse Guards Parade at the end of the March Past. I am always amazed to see how many people come along to stand, watch and support the parade from the sides of the road. That is when I think, "We Do Remember".

Being one of the first groups back onto Horse Guards Parade, we were then able watch everyone else return. It is at this point that you begin to appreciate just how many of us were on parade in the November sunshine. Once the final platoons are back, the National Anthem is played and the Parade is dismissed. Time for a quick photo opportunity and an update from those watching on the TV who reported that the MCS had been mentioned in the commentary, then some of us gathered for a spot of lunch before we all started our various journeys home.

Please join us next year if you are able, we would love to see you.



Jim and Kate Goldsmith on Horse Guards Parade



Members enjoying lunch after the parade



MCS members on Horse Guards Parade after marching past the Cenotaph in Whitehall.

**Armistice Day service, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025, Blackhall St Columba's Church, Edinburgh.**

By Michael Wilson

The Armistice Day service at Blackhall went very well despite the pouring rain!

About 25 people attended and Fergus as usual achieved just the right balance, even though that was his fifth service in as many days! Last year he had pointed out a chap across the road evidently working from home who watches, and stands at the correct points, and he was present as well.

The congregation were as warm and welcoming to me as ever. Some were keen to have the service inside, but as Fergus pointed out, the location of the War memorial is extremely obvious being next to a busy main road, and the service is seen by everybody going by, which is as it should be. The request was gently turned down!



I was amused and delighted later in the day when my 11 year old granddaughter asked me if I had been silent at 11 am? I have spoken often with her about her great grandfather and Italy, and it was great to hear that her school had made a big thing about the day, and it had clearly made an impression on her.



There was also a Remembrance Day service at Blackhall St Columba's Church



Pat Horn laying the wreath on behalf of the Monte Cassino Society

### **Remembrance Day around the UK, November 2025**

Finding ourselves in Portsmouth on November 11<sup>th</sup>, Des and I stopped on our way into the Dockyard just before 11am to join a Remembrance service being held by the Memorial to HMS Royal Oak, the battleship sunk in Scapa Flow in October 1939 with the loss of 835 men and boys. During the service the Minister asked a single question: 'Why do we remember?' The simple answer to which was, 'Because otherwise we will forget'.

A simple statement indeed, but one which for many of us sums up why we continue to do what we do, and why we think Remembrance is important.

Helen James



The memorial to HMS Royal Oak 11th November 2025

*Sent in by Dave Mann:*

I am a member of RBL Riders Branch (Kent) and we run the poppy appeal at Junction 8 services on the M20 each year. I was there right through from 6.30 am (Oct 3rd – November 8th) until about 3 p.m. There is always plenty of merchandise on our stand there and people are very generous (having a card reader helps a lot as many do not carry cash) and we managed to raise £6K there this year, so a good result. We had another memorable Remembrance Sunday at Blackheath, just outside Greenwich Park. At the memorial Meridian Chapter members joined around 100 people also attending, including the local Cub Scout group. It was particularly nice to mix and chat in advance with residents of all ages and from all walks of life. Some familiar faces were there from last year and all were engaging and welcoming to our group. Many thanks to Lee Bouchard and Graham Alan, our nominated members for laying wreaths this year on behalf of both Meridian Chapter Harley Owners Group and The Monte Cassino Society, in memory of all who gave and those who gave all ...We will remember them.

It was as always, an honour to represent the MCS again this year. Whitehall looked very moving as did the Service of Remembrance from The Royal Albert Hall on the Saturday. It would be lovely if they would actually do a feature on the Italian campaign and Monte Cassino one year, time to bury the 'D-Day Dodgers' bit and focus more on our often-overlooked heroes!





The Remembrance service at Blackheath memorial

Bob Davies attended the service at the memorial on Swansea Promenade.





While Helen Prescott was at the service in Douglas, Isle of Man



And Sue Hughes, on holiday in South Wales, attended the service in rainy Pembroke



## **WHERE FIREFLIES DANCED**

If you have recently visited our MCS website, you may have noticed the addition of a new page headed 'Poetry', in which we are honoured to feature a new collection of twelve poems written by Monte Cassino Society member and poet Patricia Rigg and entitled "Where Fireflies Danced, Poems of Remembrance". Here, we introduce the collection with one of the poems, 'Mountain of Memories'.

Heartfelt, evocative and beautifully crafted, the poems are dedicated to Pat's late husband, Captain William Brian Rigg, who served throughout the Italian Campaign in the Fourth Indian Division. Pat has visited Cassino and other Italian battlefields many times over the years, and the poems reflect her thoughts and impressions gathered during those visits, along with precious memories stored from conversations with her husband.

# **MOUNTAIN OF MEMORIES**

Mysterious, mesmerising,  
Swathed in mystique, stroked by the stars,  
Brushed by the breeze.

High above Cassino,  
The Monastery,  
Iconic, enigmatic.

Beneath the clouds, above the clouds,  
Within the clouds.

All-seeing mountain,  
Witness to life, witness to war.  
Custodian. Guardian.  
Keeper of secrets.  
Stories of the past. Tales of years gone by.

Mountain of Cassino,  
Waiting, watching,

**Watching, waiting,  
Until the end of time.**



**Bari CWGC – the story of Charles Henry Simms, Royal Army Ordnance Corps  
Warrant Officer Class 2. Died 14 Jan 1942 (aged 29)**



Major Anthony Bevington Simms

Wounded in North Africa, Charles was captured by the Italians and taken to Italy. A Red Cross message via the Vatican told the family that he had lost his right arm but was doing well in hospital. However, due to delays with messages, he had died by the time they received it; he was buried in the hospital grounds with the Royal Armoured Corps badge on the grave because he was attached to the County of London Yeomanry at the time.

The County of London Yeomanry drove tanks and were part of the Royal Armoured Corps. His son, Major Anthony (Tony) Bevington Simms, says Charles was part of the County of London Yeomanry Light Aid Detachment. His role as Warrant Officer Class 2 would have been to demand spares from the Brigade Ordnance Warrant Officer for the repair of armoured vehicles. Charles was called up as a territorial at Hilsea Barracks, Portsmouth (near to where Tony lives), shipped to France, got out of Dunkirk, and was sent to Horsham prior to

deploying to Egypt.

Tony visited Bari after a Special Forces hike through the Dolomites to commemorate Bill Tilman, the mountaineer who parachuted into the area to communicate with Italian partisans and organise parachute drops to them. The Tilman Way links all the Drop Zones with safe houses used. The Special Forces Club was invited to send a group to make the initial week-long walk, and one town near the walk holds an annual Tilman Day commemorating his WW2 contribution. Tony met veteran partisans, and when the walk was over, he drove down to Bari to see his father's grave.

Charles's personal belongings were sent home and included a Hunter pocket watch with his mother's picture on one side. Charles never met his daughter Christine (Tony's younger sister), who was born in November 1941. Tony's grandmother altered the picture stripes (the Sergeant stripes are on the wrong side!) – "granny wanted her picture to have them in... this caused much amusement in the family because it is Charles' enlistment photo – enlistment as a Private".

Major Anthony Bevington Simms completed National Service then transferred to be a Regular and was selected for officer training. He served with the RAOC, the Royal Pioneer Corps, the Worcester & Sherwood Foresters Regiment, the Prince of Wales Own Regiment of Yorkshire and 21 SAS (Artists' Rifles) Trooper reserve.

My late father, Captain Wilfrid Potter, 8th Punjab Regiment, worked with Tony for many years in Portsmouth prior to retirement. Many of my father's men are buried at Cassino CWGC. I have added this story to recollections here at Bari for Tony's daughters, Sarah and Roz, and their children.

Sue Hughes 2025



The grave of Charles  
Henry Simms



*This story, sent in by MCS member Simon Roots, is a good example of how complicated a search for past relatives can become, a meandering process which may often uncover some fascinating twists to one personal story, and others:*

Have you ever wondered about the story behind the headstone?

I began seriously researching my family history about four years ago (as a lot of people did during Covid). The following is the story of two men killed on the same day during the Italian Campaign.

### **Signalman Lewis Albert Roots.**

One of my cousins was Lewis Albert Roots, born in Staines, Middlesex on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1920. His father was Lewis Arnold Philip Roots, my great uncle. Their names were recorded in a large one hundred and forty-year-old "Cassells" Family Bible, of which I am custodian.

Lewis senior had served as a Sergeant with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Welch Regiment from 1911 to 1919, throughout WW1 in France and Flanders, including Messines and Passchendaele, and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1916. *"For conspicuous gallantry in taking command of his unit after his officer was wounded, until Sgt. Lewis Roots was wounded himself."* He was later a Major in the Home Guard in Maidstone during WW2.

Signalman 14338334 Lewis Albert Roots was an apprentice carpenter and joiner before he was called up in WW2 and joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Signals. During my search for more information about Lewis and how he died so far away from home, I was able to find a cousin, David Roots, Lewis junior's nephew. We had begun to exchange the first couple of emails when David very sadly died from Covid in 2020. He was my last link to the Maidstone side of the family and possible sources of information.

Lewis was killed on Monte Cerasola on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1944, at the age of 23, and is buried in the Cassino War Cemetery. The inscription on his headstone reads, *"Son of Lewis Arnold Philip Roots and Emily Roots, of Maidstone, Kent. He died that others may live, we will remember him."*

### **Lance Corporal Frank Astley. (Part 1)**

When I was researching cousin Lewis, I noticed another member of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Signals, 2331142 Lance Corporal Frank Astley buried just a few graves away from him. Frank was also killed on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1944, at the age of 25.

In the hope of finding more information about Lewis, I started looking into Frank Astley. What I discovered is, I believe, a sad story of a child abandoned by his mother, and the love and care of an adoptive family.

Legally speaking, there is no Frank Astley. I searched for Frank Astley, born around 1918 (making him 23/24) on the usual genealogy websites, but could not find a Frank Astley born around the correct time. I did find Frank Mahon Astley marrying Irene Hope in Bury, Lancashire in 1940. Playing around a bit with the Frank Mahon details, I found Frank Holt Mahon born on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1918 at 66 Georgiana Street, Bury. His mother was recorded as Bessie Mahon, a Shell Examiner at a munitions factory. Notably, there was no record of Frank's father on his birth certificate. Frank was illegitimate.

Frank appeared in the 1921 census with the name Frank Holt, living with Alice Astley and her husband William, at 66 Georgiana Street, Bury, the same address Frank Holt Mahon had been recorded being born at in 1918. Frank was recorded as a boarder aged 3 in the 1921 census. There is no trace of Frank's mother Bessie Mahon in the census.

Frank's elder sister, Mary Edna Mahon, was born to Bessie Mahon in 1914. As before, there was no father recorded on Edna's birth certificate so, like Frank, she too was illegitimate.

In 1921, Edna is recorded as living with her grandparents, Bessie's parents, in Widnes, Lancashire. Frank

was separated from his older sister and mother.

On 27<sup>th</sup> March 1920 there is a report in the Bury newspaper, relating to Bessie Mahon and her daughter Edna. Bessie is summoned before the magistrates for alleged cruelty. Giving her address as 66 Georgiana Street, Bessie is accused of ill-treating her daughter Edna *"in such a manner likely to cause it (sic) unnecessary suffering or injury to its (sic) health."* The matter was adjourned for twelve weeks for Bessie to prove her suitability as a mother and amend her treatment of Edna. In June 1920, the case against Bessie Mahon was dismissed, as the Inspector for the NSPCC had given evidence to the court that there had been an improvement in Bessie's care and treatment of Edna. There is no mention of Frank.

In 1939, Alice and William Astley are recorded as living at 109 Manchester Road, Bury. William is recorded as a Felt Hat Presser and Alice is a Picture Hall Cleaner.

### **Bessie Mahon.**

Frank's mother Bessie Mahon, born on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1893 (Exactly 51 years before Frank was killed in Italy) is recorded in 1911 as living with her family in Widnes and is a Domestic Servant. In November 1920, aged 27, Bessie is on board Cunard Steamship "Vestris" heading for a new life in America. There is no record of her children, Edna aged four and Frank aged two on the passenger list. Bessie marries 24 year old Englishman Douglas Nuttall, a Carter from Bury, in Manhattan on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1920. This marriage is illegal as Douglas Nuttall is a bigamist, having left his legal wife Annie in England to emigrate to America and marry Bessie Mahon. Douglas Nuttall died in April 1925 in Rhode Island, and Bessie's story ends on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1969 when she died in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, aged 76. She is known as Bessie Ferreira, husband of José Pedro Pires Ferreira, and mother to their nine children. I cannot find any evidence that Bessie legally married José Ferreira, but she had clearly found a new life and happiness in America.

### **Lance Corporal Frank Astley. (Part 2)**

So, what of Frank? Records show that Frank Holt Mahon Astley, a Cinema Operator, married Irene Hope, a Cotton Spinner Operative, on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1940. He was living at 109 Manchester Road, Bury. (The same address of Alice and William Astley in 1939), and one of the witnesses to the marriage was Alice Astley.

Frank and Irene had a daughter, Margaret in March 1943, when Frank had been serving with 4<sup>th</sup> Division Signals for three years. Frank had been serving abroad for twelve months prior to his death, suggesting that daughter Margaret would have only been two months old when Frank left, possibly for the last time.

Frank Astley was initially buried, as was my cousin Lewis Roots, on Monte Cerasola. At some point, they were both reburied in Cassino War Cemetery, where Frank's grave is a short distance from Lewis, the source of this story, in Block 18, Row 7, Grave 18. His headstone is inscribed. *"A dear husband and daddy. Ever remembered by wife Irene and daughter Margaret."*

A newspaper report in the Manchester Evening News on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1944 reports on Lance Corporal Frank Astley. It reads:

*"Former projectionist at Bury Odeon Cinema before he joined the Forces four years ago, L/Cpl. Frank Astley of Manchester Road, Bury, has been killed in action. He was serving with the Signal Corps in the Mediterranean theatre of operations. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Astley, have been informed that his death took place on February 28<sup>th</sup>. Twenty-five years old, L/Cpl. Astley was educated at Holy Trinity School, and had been projectionist at several Odeon cinemas. He met his wife while he was working in Skipton and has a 14-month-old baby. Children belonging to the Odeon Club at Bury will remember him as the man who always entertained them on Saturday mornings with his accordion."*

What is evident is that Frank was never legally adopted by William and Alice Astley. The likely scenario is that Alice and William Astley, perhaps witnessing Bessie Mahon struggling on her own with two babies, perhaps also aware that she had been under the scrutiny of the NSPCC and the courts and was planning to emigrate to America, took baby Frank Holt Mahon into their care. They were, without doubt, Frank's true parents.

The final chapter of this story is the reward of identifying and contacting one of Bessie Mahon's great granddaughters, who lives in America. After exchanging a few emails, I was able to provide evidence to confirm that Frank Astley was the son of Bessie, enabling a new and previously unknown family member to be brought back to their family tree.

I must thank Frank de Planta for his patience and knowledge. Frank has been a huge help in trying to piece together details of Lewis Roots and the Royal Corps of Signals during February 1944.

In Memory of Signalman Lewis Albert Roots and Lance Corporal Frank Astley, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Signals.

Simon Roots, 2025



The graves of Lewis Roots and Frank Astley in Cassino CWGC cemetery



*In the autumn, Eddie O'Sullivan sent this message with news of the **Fourth International Second World War History Network** bulletin.*

#### **Contents include:**

1) The network has launched a **YouTube channel** with Dr Joe Quinn, who I am sure you know!

You can see the first episode here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlyPSV55GWQ>

We are looking for guests.

Please volunteer if you'd like to share stories!

2) WW2TV is backing **our annual conference in London** next May 2026 (\*See up to date information on this below). Paul Woodadge is speaking and says he will help with others, particularly fellow YouTubers.

3) Two nice family stories (sad ones actually) from Lee Bovington who I met last month at the Fusiliers Museum in the Tower of London and David Jones, chairman of the London Welsh Male Voice Choir. Lee is going to talk at our conference next year.

4) I had a useful Zoom with John Willis. former top BBC documentary maker, who has published *The People's War*. This is based on the BBC Second World War Archive recorded in 2005. He read no less than 47,000 eyewitness testimonies. I have asked him to speak at our May conference.

5) More than 30 events are taking place across the world this autumn about the Second World War.

I hope you find the bulletin useful! Please share.

Edmund O'Sullivan

**The International Second World War History Network**

**Vice-Chairman**

\*This is the link for the Second World War History Conference in May 2026. You can see the full line-up so far here; <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-second-world-war-history-conference-tickets-1816432772319?aff>

#### **Snippets**

For anyone researching antecedents who served in one of the Irish Brigades, there is a wealth of information on the website managed by Eddie and Richard O'Sullivan, [www.irishbrigade.co.uk](http://www.irishbrigade.co.uk)

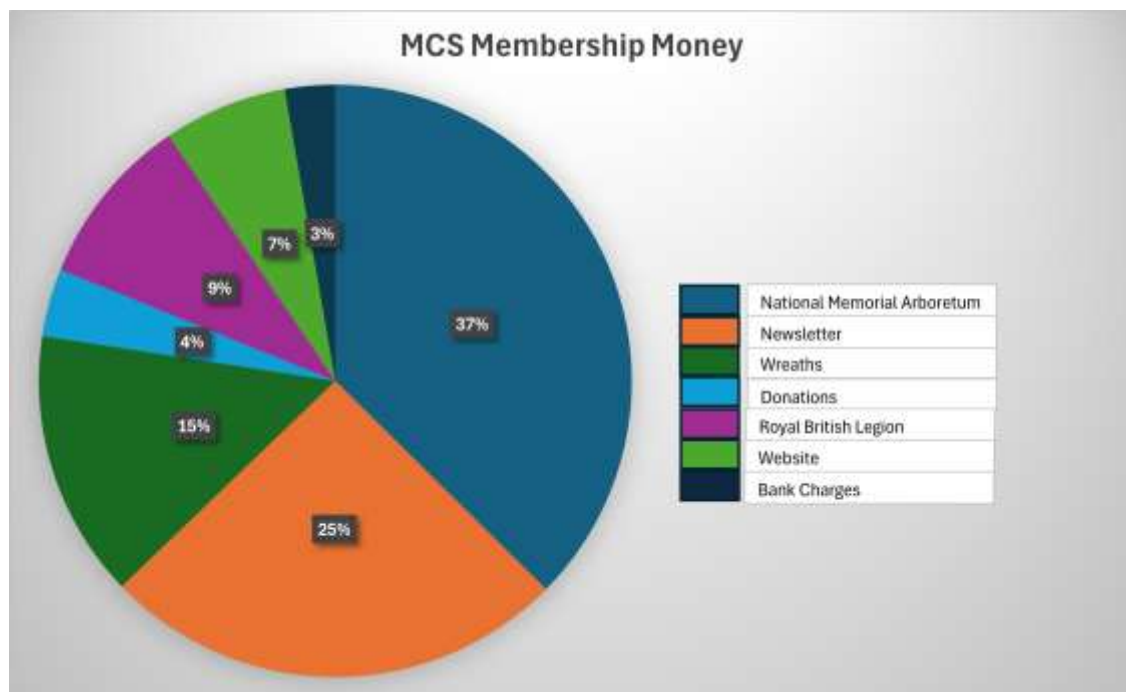
*I found this site while researching the movements of a Corporal serving in 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers in North Africa and Italy. With the only reference being the very limited information he gave in his letters home, it was difficult to place him before the discovery that all the Irish Brigade War Diaries have been transposed into a day-by-day accessible format, enabling the researcher to identify where a particular Battalion was engaged at any one time.*

*Go to 'War Diaries 1942-45' on [www.irishbrigade.co.uk](http://www.irishbrigade.co.uk) and follow the link to the individual Irish Regiment.*

I am always delighted when members send in articles, anecdotes and accounts for the newsletter, so thank you if you have already done so. If you are considering sending something in, please note that it is extremely helpful if you can send written text as a Word document, and photographs in jpeg format, separate from the written text and not embedded in the text.

Helen James,  
Editor

Have you ever wondered where your £15 annual subscription goes? Then rest assured it all goes on keeping the Society afloat. Here is a breakdown of the way it is spent.



### **Monte Cassino Society pin badges, scarves and ties**

We have Monte Cassino Society pin badges featuring the new society logo, available for purchase.

Measuring 1 inch (2.5 cms) in diameter, the badges are available from Lesley Teasdale ([lesleytea.lt@gmail.com](mailto:lesleytea.lt@gmail.com)) at £5 each, including postage and packing.

MCS ties and scarves are also available. Ties are £13 and scarves £20, both include postage and packing.



**New members**

**Terry Damer**, Son of Lt George Damer, C Battery, 1<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery

**Christian Finn**, Relative of Society member Rob Evans

**Susan Hughes**, Daughter of WO2 Arndell Warren Lewis, RAMC

**Maria North**, Daughter of Lance Corporal Jozef Bal, 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Rifle Division, II (Polish) Corps

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**Frank de Planta, Committee member** : f.deplanta@btinternet.com; www.cassinobattlefields.co.uk

**John Leach, Committee member** : johnleachportloe@gmail.com

**Website** : [www.montecassinossociety.co.uk](http://www.montecassinossociety.co.uk)

**Facebook** : **The Monte Cassino Society** and **The Monte Cassino Society Group**

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Helen Prescott, Sue Hughes, Pat Rigg, Simon Roots.