



As the minister responsible for the Government's First World War Centenary commemorations, I want to update you on what's going on across Kent and the constituency as we approach the hundredth anniversary of Britain's entry to the war this Monday August 4. *(Pictured right: At the grave of a West Kent Regiment soldier at the Pieta Cemetery, Malta)*



I've been thinking about ways in which younger generations can engage with this milestone in world history, so recently I invited 45 schools across the constituency to join others in creating a different type of war memorial. One made only of words. On platform 1 of Paddington station stands a statue depicting an unknown soldier from the First World War reading a letter. *(pictured below)*

I asked students to pause, take a moment or two, and write that letter to the Unknown Soldier. The responses I received, like Ellie's from High Weald Academy in Cranbrook, have shown incredible creativity and empathy towards those that sacrificed their lives for their country.



*Dear soldier,*

*It's hard to imagine what you went through. The heartbreak of leaving your loved ones behind. The fear of facing almost certain death. The nightmares that haunted your uneasy sleep...The sound of the gun shot, loud and terrifying...The shake in your voice as you muttered your final goodbyes...The mourning that could never be laid to rest. Not being able to say goodbye, to your son, brother, friend. The great pride that swelled in their hearts at the thought of you. The stories they told about you. The courage they gained from losing you. It's hard to imagine.*

*Yours, Ellie D-W*

Ellie's poignant and thoughtful piece is just one of over 9,000 letters that have been written, from the Prime Minister, Stephen Fry, Andrew Motion, Malorie Blackman, and Benjamin Zephaniah – to grandparents, schoolchildren, the Gurkhas, current and former serving men and women, musicians and midwives, among others. Anyone can get involved.

The campaign forms part of the wider cultural programme that is taking place all over the county. Whether that's a drumhead service at Maidstone's Brenchley Gardens War Memorial on Sunday - with the Last Post and names of local men who died in the fighting read out; or Maidstone Memories - an exhibition of photographs, postcards and posters held at the Mall and Royal Star Arcade between August 3 and 10. These events are just a small way to appreciate the sacrifice made by so many men and women one hundred years ago, a sacrifice that has shaped the world we live in today.



Many of our villages will be joining the commemorations too, Benenden has invited the descendants and families of all of the 32 casualties named on the war memorials to return to the village on Sunday August 3 for a special service of Remembrance at 4.30pm; while the Marden History Group has launched a fascinating exhibition of war memorabilia to run for the next 7 months - which I was lucky enough to experience earlier today. *(pictured left)*

Kent Life in Sandling will be putting on a special memorial with picture and film archive in association with the Royal British Legion - with free admission for serving Armed Forces members and veterans on August 2 and 3; while the Kent History and Library Centre in Maidstone have been restoring 50 original posters for Kent County Council's 'Voices of the First World War' exhibition which starts on Monday.

So, an array of events and gatherings throughout the county to mark this first step in a programme of commemoration over the next four years. Perhaps if you can't be there in person, you could join thousands of others across Britain in a small but fitting tribute. We are inviting everyone in the UK to turn off their lights between 10pm and 11pm on August 4, leaving on a single light or candle for a shared moment of reflection to mark the centenary of the outbreak of war.

I was recently in the room at the Foreign Office with Adrian Graves (pictured right), the great-great nephew of British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, where he made his famous remark on the eve of war in 1914.

"The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

'Lights Out' is a tiny, respectful gesture then, in remembrance of those who made the ultimate gesture for us, a hundred years ago.

