

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE ARMISTICE

The First World War was a conflict on a scale the world had never seen before. It lasted over four years and it is estimated that over 18 million people died, soldiers and civilians, while over 23 million were wounded.

In 1918, when it became clear that they could not win the war, the Germans had to agree to the demands of the Allied leaders of Britain, France and the USA. The war ended with the signing of the Armistice, or peace agreement, in a railway carriage in the French forest of Compiègne. At 11 a.m. on 11 November 1918 – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month – the guns finally fell silent.

The Armistice was signed early in the morning of 11 November. Most soldiers were told quickly by their officers, who had heard via radio, telephone and from runners, that hundreds of thousands of men on both sides would lay down their arms at the same time later that morning. But some were harder to reach, even using



runners. As a result, there were several skirmishes and confused firing of shells and bullets even after 11 a.m., leading, sadly, to the deaths of even more young men.

For many, the war would never be over. The horrific things that they had seen would live on in their minds for ever. A whole generation of young men had been lost and their families left to grieve.

In most towns and villages in the UK, there are memorials to those who died. During my research, I have also visited the graveyards in France and Belgium. As you travel across what is now beautiful countryside, it seems there are endless cemeteries, each with hundreds or thousands of bodies laid to rest. The cemeteries are confusing places. On the one hand, you feel horrified by the number of perfectly tended graves; on the other, you are inspired by how they are remembered in this way over a century later.

The First World War was supposed to be the war to end all wars, but only twenty-one years later, after the rise of Hitler in Germany, the world would find itself caught up in another horrific conflict.

