FEATURE

Gresham's School Holt, where teams will battle it out on the cricket pitch to commemorate the centenary of the First World War.

**Flower of youth whose dreams ended in tragedy**

As the nation marks the centenary of the First World War, RICHARD BATSON looks at how an innocent north Norfolk school cricket match brings into sharp focus the horror and tragedy of conflict...

It was just an end-of-year school cricket match during a sun-drenched idyllic summer. But it turned into a snapshot of the horrors of the First World War.

A picture of the Gresham's School first team from July 18, 1914 shows 11 schoolboys in spotless white trousers and dapper blazers looking forward to batting, bowling and grateful lives ahead of them.

But within months the teenagers would be pitched into the bloodbath of trench warfare — many as officers because of their school cadet training — leaving their men "over the top" into a deathly barrage of German bullets.

Six of them would not return and now lie buried in battlefields across the Channel.

Five of the old boys' opposition team also perished, meaning half the players in the match of July 18, 1914 never bowled, batted or breathed again.

The match still takes place every year and is being staged on July 18 this year to mark the poignant centenary.

Because it falls after the end of the school term and most of the pupils have gone home for summer, this year's match will be a school versus invitation clash.

Organiser deputy head Simon Kinder said the cricket fixture dated back to Edwardian times.

This year's game marked the start of a series of events marking the centenary of the outbreak of the war.

Mr Kinder said the school did annual trips to the war battlefields and cemeteries, but the most poignant moments were researching the stories of fallen former pupils and seeing the names on memorials.

"You can talk about the loss of 20,000 lives on the first day of the Somme but the students' stories bring home the reality of war," he added.

Looking at the 1914 picture was a sobering reminder of "lives snuffed out" by the conflict.

"As a teacher you see pupils' hopes and aspirations — so a school losing a fifth of those that served is very powerful."

Among the guests at this year's match will be Richard Jefferson whose father, Julian, played for the school.

Mr Kinder said: "He should have been going to see the test match against India at Lords but he is coming to see our match instead."

The match starts at 1.30pm on Friday, July 18, and is at Gresham's School.

Holt and the public is welcome. It will raise funds for two charities — Walking with the Wounded and Holt Young Carers.

The match and centenary has also triggered a republication of the book When Heroes Die, telling the stories of the 106 Gresham's pupils and three staff who died in the First World War.

It was first released by former Gresham's history teacher Sue Smart in 2000 but new research has thrown up more stories to update it. It will be launched in September.

The school is also holding a special service on October 15 to mark the anniversary of the first of Gresham's boys to be killed. It will be held in the school chapel which is dedicated as a memorial to the fallen pupils, whose names are on a roll of honour and on seats.

Above, George Houson, reforming head teacher of Gresham's School from 1900 until his death in 1919. Under his headship, a new School Chapel was completed in 1916.

Right. Gresham's present First XI. Back row from left, Mark Sorrell (visiting cricket coach), Will Wright, Jack Webster, Tom Hancock, Callum Finn, Tom Sheridan, Tom Perry-Warnes. Kieron Peters, Al Horsey (First XI coach). Front row, Jack Park, Patrick Sheridan, Matthew Barker, Edmund Parlier.

Left. Winter landscape along the River Somme in late 1916 after the close of the Allied offensive.
Left, British infantrymen marching towards the front lines in the River Somme valley.

News