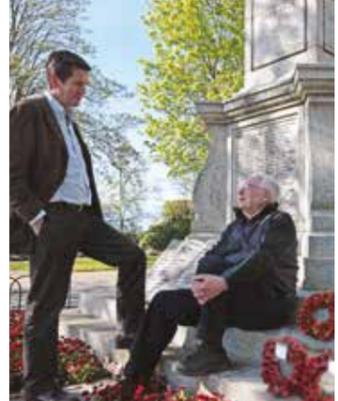




Main picture: the informal, but moving, remembrance service; inset: the Duke of York chats with young Lancers; top left: WWI medals, kindly lent by Bondholder and Theme Week attendee Bill Acraman; middle left: soldiers of the 9th/12th Royal Lancers march to the Fretoy Communal Cemetery; bottom left: perfect parade dress, perfect unison; centre: a detail from the "Lance versus Lance" picture; bottom centre: Bondholders – and army – settle in for lunch with HRH; bottom right: memorial marking the site of the British army's last lance-on-lance cavalry charge. **These photos and more can be seen online, at [mybond.hpb.co.uk/in-their-footsteps](http://mybond.hpb.co.uk/in-their-footsteps)**

Far top right photograph: Jonathan Broom chats to military historian, Bondholder and Theme Week organiser Peter Cates at the Neumarket memorial gardens.

# Theme Week by royal appointment



by Jonathan Broom

To misquote the Bard (not for the first time): some Theme Weeks are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em.

We always knew that "In Their Footsteps", a Theme Week timed to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of the Marne, would be a bit special – but we had no idea how special.

Twenty-six Bondholders attended the week, based at the Bond's Le Mont de St Siméon home – appropriately enough, as St Siméon was one of several small villages integral to that early action, itself key to how the rest of the First World War was conducted, and thus a perfect jumping-off point from which to visit the various battlefields, monuments and cemeteries that collectively, and very effectively, tell the story of the Battle of the Marne.

One of the most important days of the battle, at least historically, was 7th September 1914, which saw the last lance-upon-lance cavalry charge ever carried out by the British army. In the fields around the village of Le Montcel, a few miles south of St Siméon, two troops of the 9th Lancers charged and defeated a larger force of Prussian Dragoons. The event is brought graphically to life in a painting by Richard Caton Woodville. Entitled "Lance versus Lance", the picture is not without error; but it does splendidly capture both the glory and the terror of the melee.

And this is where the Theme Week really grew wings.

In planning the week, military historian and Bondholder Peter Cates was, naturally enough, in close touch with the army – specifically, the 9th (now 9th/12th) Royal Lancers. Let's just say one thing led to another... they were as interested in us as we were in them... local mayors got involved... friendships were formed... and thus it was, much to our surprise and delight, that on 6th September, the eve of the centenary of the charge, Major Phil Watson of the 9th/12th presented HPB with a handsome copy of "Lance versus Lance" at a small reception at St Siméon, attended by the Theme-Weeking Bondholders, the mayor of Le Montcel-Fretoy Fabien Delaunay and yours truly. The picture will take pride of place in the St Siméon clubroom.

That could have been that – but it wasn't. The next day – the anniversary itself – we found ourselves almost honoured guests of the mayor. The day started with a drumhead memorial service at Fretoy Communal Cemetery, attended by local dignitaries, the just-curious – and 130 young Lancers in full parade dress, just back from Afghanistan, plus their wives, girlfriends and families. Despite all the braid on show it was a surprisingly informal affair, but no less moving for that; it's hard to get through "O Valiant Hearts" at the best of times without a lump in the throat, but when accompanied by the Band of the Brigade of Gurkhas and surrounded by young soldiers, some of whose brothers-in-arms have not come back, well nigh impossible.

Service concluded, we made our way back into the village. In marched the Lancers, for an appointment outside the Mairie with their Colonel-in-Chief, HRH the Duke of York.

Prince Andrew did not disappoint. "9th/12th Royal Lancers, it is a great pleasure to be here today to coincide with events that occurred 100 years ago. I, for one, want to thank you for your personal commitment and dedication... and for your service in Afghanistan," he said, before presenting the young men with their Operational Service Medals.

And then, to lunch – an al fresco do, with trestle tables set up on the municipal tennis court, canopied with army groundsheets to provide some shade (it was a gloriously sunny day). For the record I can report that HRH, like the rest of us, lunched on boeuf bourguignon, but passed on pudding.

And then he was gone. And the next day, so was I, leaving the Theme Weekers to enjoy the rest of their holiday. Which, I am sure, will live long in the memory. It certainly will in mine. □

