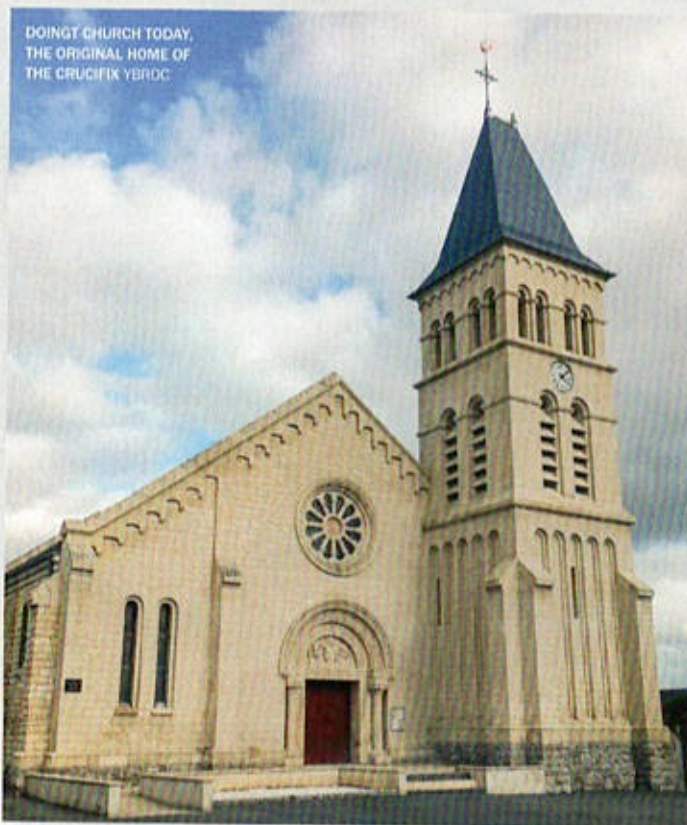


Somme crucifix to be returned

A Rutland church is returning a crucifix to its original home on the Somme, more than a century after it was salvaged by a British chaplain.
Tom Baker reports



DOINGT CHURCH TODAY, THE ORIGINAL HOME OF THE CRUCIFIX YBROC.

Members of All Saints Church, in the village of Tinwell, Rutland, are taking back a French cross more than 100 years after it was salvaged from the ruins of the church of Doingt-Flamicourt.

During World War One, the village of Doingt, a commune within the Somme Basin, was an integral component of the Hindenburg Line. The French village was often on the front line for much of the conflict, first witnessing heavy combat during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. It was progressively destroyed via shelling over

the next two years and by the time of the signing of the Armistice in 1918, the entire village, including the church, had been reduced to rubble.

However, one holy artefact from the church was saved from the ruins and brought to All Saints in Tinwell, near Stamford, and gradually the story of its recovery was forgotten.

THE RUINS OF DOINGT, AS SEEN IN 1919 AWM

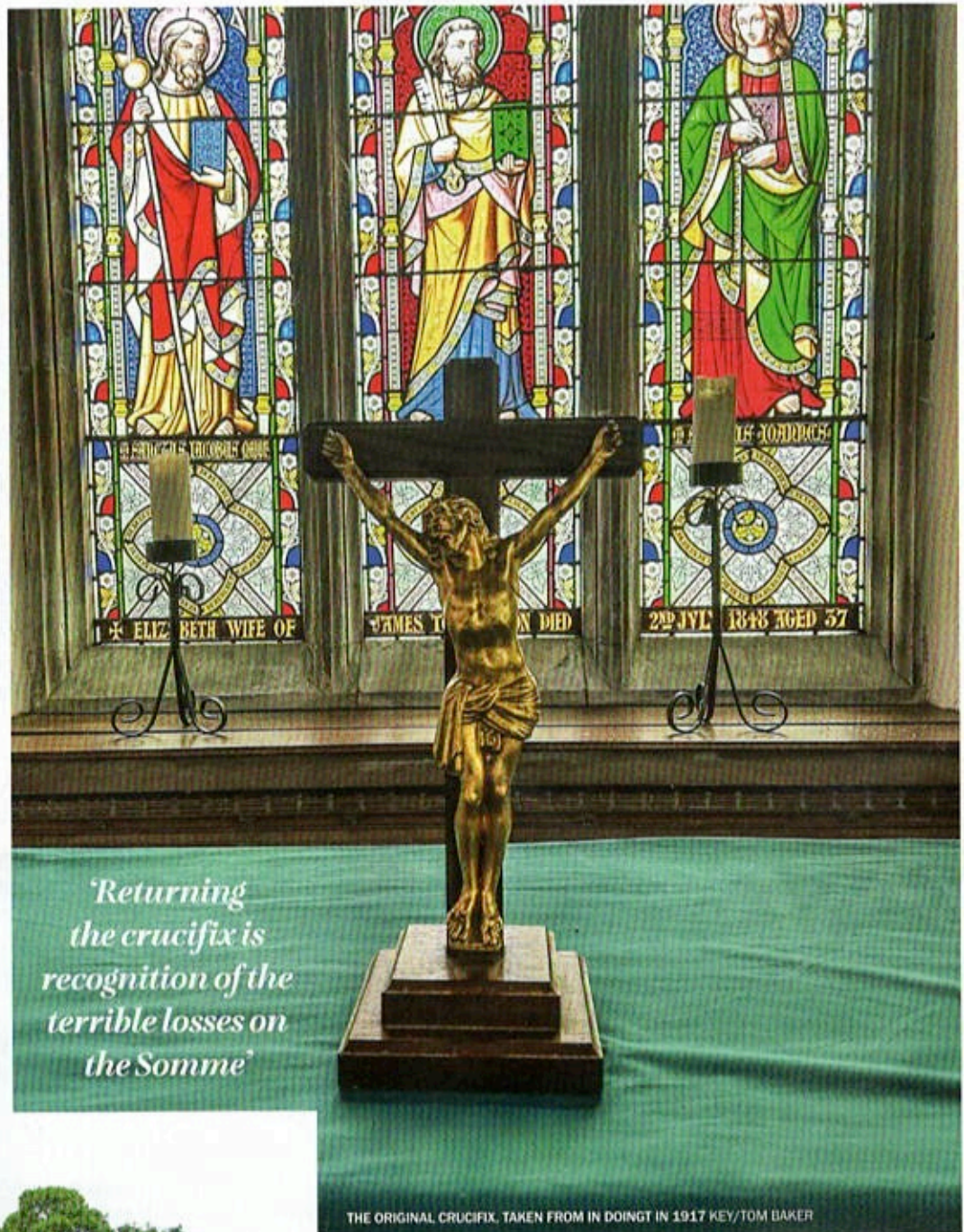


A century later, Mrs June Dodkin, a former churchwarden of the parish, decided to find out how the original French-style crucifix had found its way to England. She soon discovered from local parishioner Sir Giles Floyd that the cross had been found by Parson Percy Hooson. He had been ordained before World War One and later joined the British Army and served as a chaplain.

Hooson was stationed in the sector that contained the ruins of Doingt and in 1917 began searching through the rubble of the village. Incidentally, Hooson was described as a "great forager" by surviving family members.

It is believed that the chaplain came across the crucifix among the debris of the church and decided to keep it.

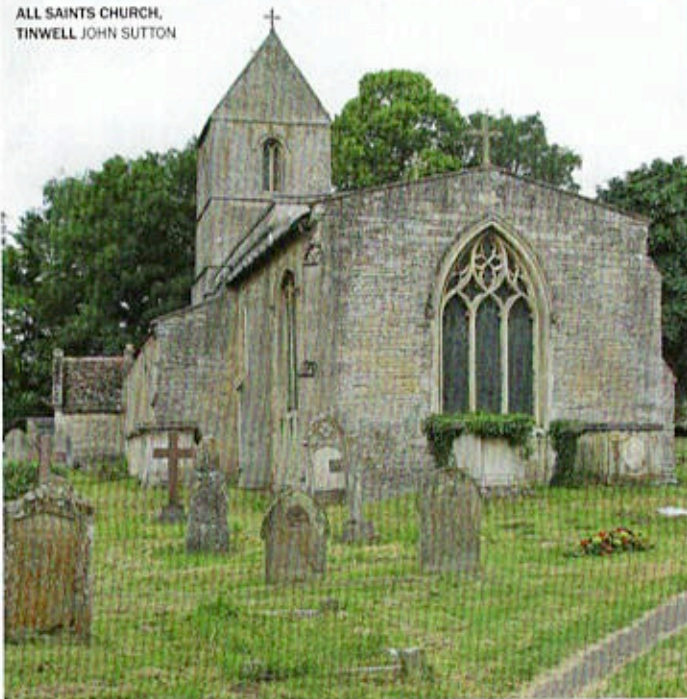
After the Armistice, Hooson returned to England, bringing his holy keep-sake with him. Taking up a position as vicar at Easton-on-the-Hill, close to the Rutland border, it is believed that the crucifix remained at Percy's house until 1932. Speaking to *Britain at War*, Reverend Olwen Woolcock continued the story: "Percy Hooson then took up a post at Tinwell All Saints, and decided to bring the aged crucifix with him – placing it on the altar."



'Returning the crucifix is recognition of the terrible losses on the Somme'

THE ORIGINAL CRUCIFIX, TAKEN FROM IN DOINGT IN 1917 KEY/TOM BAKER

ALL SAINTS CHURCH,
TINWELL JOHN SUTTON



There it would remain for the next 91 years.

Doingt was assumed destroyed and unrepaired by parishioners and local clergy, so it was a revelation when, during commemorations for the centenary of the conflict in 2018, news of the village's renewal reached them. Reverend Woolcock said: "We were using the crucifix on Remembrance Day in 2018 as an educational tool to explain to local children the importance of World War One." She added: "It was during this service that a young boy, 16-year-old Jonno

McDevitt, asked why the cross hadn't been sent back to its home in France.

"We were stunned, it had never occurred to anyone here to do this, as we had all thought Doingt was still destroyed. However, Jonno got his mobile phone out, looked it up, and that's when we discovered the village and its church had been completely rebuilt in 1925."

June Dodkin contacted the mayor of Doingt in 2018 about repatriating the crucifix. "We were open-mouthed," she said. "We thought the village was gone. I wrote a letter to the

mayor of Doingt and had it translated into French.

"It took a very long time to receive a reply, but eventually the new mayor, alongside Doingt's local historical society, expressed their interest in the crucifix's return," added Woolcock.

Preparations then began to send the cross home – the process assisted by Doingt villager Hubert Boizard, who said: "The return of the crucifix symbolises the friendship between our two nations who fought together for freedom."

Special dispensation was obtained from the Chancellor of the Peterborough Diocese to remove the artefact from the Tinwell church, but by this point, the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing – delaying the planned repatriation for more than four years.

However, a ten-strong delegation has arranged to finally take the 22-inch oak cross back to the Somme in late June. "The villagers of Doingt are extremely excited about the prospect of the cross being returned," said Reverend Woolcock. "They are being very hospitable. The main day

of commemorations will see the Doingt community host a ceremony in the church, where the handover will take place, followed by a reception." She added: "In the afternoon, our delegation will visit the Doingt Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, where we plan to lay a wreath to the more than 419 British soldiers killed there between 1916-1918. The evening will see us attend the Doingt mass.

"The following day, the Doingt local historical society is going to give us a guided tour of the Somme war graves, including Thiepval, where we will remember those who gave the ultimate sacrifice."

Reverend Woolcock concluded: "This is a story which has really captured people's imagination! I have been surprised at the level of interest from the media and the public. I think it is because returning the crucifix to Doingt is a recognition of the terrible losses on the Somme, and that's part of our shared history, and is still deeply embedded in the collective memories of most families in England today." **BV**



THE HINDENBURG LINE IN 1917. DOINGT IS LOCATED CLOSE SOUTHEAST OF PERONNE, ALTHOUGH NOT REFERENCED ON THIS MAP



AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS RESTING DURING THE 1918 BATTLE OF MONT SAINT QUENTIN, ONE OF THE ACTIONS THAT WOULD SEE THE VILLAGE OF DOINGT REDUCED TO RUBBLE AWM