A Nation’s Thank You - The People’s Procession, 11 November 2018.

As part of the 14-18 celebrations, the 14-18 Committee invited the general public to take part in a procession past the Cenotaph on 11 November as part of the Remembrance Ceremony. I was lucky enough to be selected as one of the 10,000 to take part. After seeing the efforts the Civic Trust and Parish Council were making to commemorate the end of the war, I contacted the Parish Council to ask permission to march on behalf of the World War one servicemen of Rolleston who didn’t return.

I arrived at The Mall at 8.30am, wreath marked with Rolleston’s dead in hand, ready to muster. After my ticket and passport was checked, I was given a wristband with a letter that dictated where I would march – ‘A’ meant that I would be in the first cohort. The Mall had been fenced off, and teas, coffees, muffins, loos and huge screens to watch the ceremony. Instant friendships were made, as people discussed their pride in their relatives who had fought, and the research they had done to find out more. Commonwealth diplomats passed us in their cars, along with a piped band and the guns that would signal the start and end of the 2 minutes silence. As 11am approached silence fell across The Mall, as we listened to Big Ben chime the hour. The first gun fired. The only sound was the rustling of the trees. I was so deep in thought that as the second gun fired, I jumped.

We were given the Order of Service, so that we could take part in proceedings. The World War gun carriages returned. After that we were asked to align into rows of 6 people, with those with wreaths on the left hand side, so that when we passed the Cenotaph, we could hand them over to be placed alongside. I found myself in the second row, so Rolleston’s Wreath would be one of the closest to the Cenotaph.

As noon came, a Church School Band led us down the rest of the Mall, through Admiralty Arch. As we marched (you can’t avoid doing this, as It’s a Long Way to Tipperary played), the watching crowds clapped us. I didn’t expect this, we weren’t special, other than to be chosen via ballot. We were held temporarily at the top of Whitehall to wait for the peel of bells from Westminster Abbey that would lead bells ringing across the country. Many people had stayed to watch the parade, and again clapped us down Whitehall, as we approached the Cenotaph, Scouts and National Citizens Service Volunteers took our wreaths for laying. We turned our eyes left as we passed the Cenotaph to honour Our Glorious Dead, and as we marched onto Green Park where we dispersed, we were still being clapped. I had assumed that the event was confined to Whitehall, but people lined the Mall, Trafalgar Square and Green Park to give thanks to the Armed Forces. The whole experience was an unforgettable honour, and the memories will last a lifetime.