

Was the tunnellers' secret war the most barbaric of World War One? Video transcript - Hellfire Jack and his moles and clay-kickers

This manhole here in Manchester introduces one of the great characters of the tunnelling story, John Norton-Griffiths. He was a millionaire, entrepreneur, engineer and it was his men who were digging these sewers in 1913 beneath Manchester.

When war was declared, Norton-Griffiths' company was building an extension to Manchester's main drainage system. He relied on a unique breed of workers to dig through the clay geology of the area. They were known as clay-kickers. Norton-Griffiths called them his moles.

It so happened that Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, was a family friend. Norton-Griffiths wrote to him, proposing that clay-kickers might be very useful to the army.

His men, his moles, could dig small, narrow, constricted tunnels which would get underneath the German lines swiftly, but most important of all silently.

There was no time for military niceties. On Thursday 18 February 1915 the first party of 20 kickers were told to leave these very sewers. That very same evening they travelled to France and within 36 hours Norton-Griffiths had them tunnelling towards the enemy. His moles were now the most valuable commodity on the Western Front.

This is the clay-kicking team. You've got the kicker here with his kicking iron, the bagger who's passing the lumps of clay back to the trammer, who will pass it to somebody else and they will take it out of the system. Everything is being done in silence. The kicking is done in silence. It's not really a kick, it's a push, and that's absolutely deliberate.

Once they've taken out nine inches they put another set of timber in, so what you're doing is you're moving towards the enemy nine inches at a time.

The men are working in silence; they're working in very bad air. The rule was if a candle could burn, the air was good enough to work in. If it went out you left the tunnel because there wasn't enough oxygen.

And they are also searching for the enemy. You never knew where the enemy was. He could be 40 metres away, he could be 40 centimetres away. But the more noise you made, the less likely you were to survive.