

Wheathampstead School in the First World War

An account based on the school logbooks

By Patrick McNeill

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914 but, when St Helen's Infant and Mixed schools reopened after the holiday on 1 September, there is no mention of this in the logbooks which were conscientiously kept by Headmaster Thomas Clark. The main event of late 1914 was a diphtheria epidemic in September in which several children died and which caused the closure of the schools for the month of October. At the time, of course, it was thought that the war would be 'over by Christmas'.

The first war-related entries are therefore relatively positive. For example, on 3 September 1914 Miss Hutchinson 'sent a quantity of needlework to be done in school for soldiers' and 'Mrs Cherry Garrard sent 'needlework – bags – to be made and numbered by girls' in the Mixed School. Next day, Miss Hutchinson 'brought wool for socks'. On 13 November, there is a note that 'the war news has been read each morning by First Class children'. On 26 November, the Infants' logbook records that Mr Long brought a 'Roll of Honour' to be framed and hung in the Main Room. By the end of the year pupils were making various items for soldiers at the front, sometimes with materials provided by Lady Cavan of Wheathampstead House (eg 'calico for splints') or Mrs Cherry Garrard of Lamer.

On 14 May 1915 the Mixed School logbook records that 'Tom Pearce, H.Mundon, W.Fisher are excused attendance at school on account of the War'. These three boys were all aged 13 at the time so would normally have stayed at school until their fourteenth birthday. The system that allowed such exemptions was abolished in 1919.

On 15 June, eight shillings were 'sent to Overseas Club Fund – to be spent on gifts for the soldiers of the Empire' and on 18 June the Infants School closed early at 2.50 pm 'so that the children may see the soldiers marching through the village.'

Lord Cavan of Wheathampstead House perhaps took advantage of his distinguished position when, on 8 November 1915, the Head Master received this note:

'Major General Lord Cavan presents his compliments to the Schoolmaster and as he is only home from the front for a few hours begs leave to keep Boy Andrews for a round of golf this lovely afternoon.'

Five evacuees from St Martin's Home in London were admitted to the school on 13 September 1915. More evacuees came and went in the following year but in some cases their age, and in one case his name, was not known, suggesting some confusion in the evacuation arrangements.

The reality of the war begins to become apparent later in 1915 so, for example, on 4 October 'Woodwork boys are making splints for the soldiers'. On 6 October, the logbook shows 'Carter, Pearce, Latchford wounded' and also records the first death of a former pupil: 'Cyril Bruton was killed at front.' Cyril's biography appears in Pankhurst (2014b). We know that his brother Robert joined up in April 1918 and, on 19 May of that year, the Headmaster wrote a

testimonial for 'B.Bruton who is going on the line'. Robert Bruton survived the war but died of 'pulmonary tuberculosis and exhaustion' in November 1922 aged 22. His name is not on the village War Memorial but he is included in the Roll of Honour (Pankhurst 2014a).

In October 1915 'Mark Baldwin of Hemel Hempstead wrote to ask for reference as he is applying for a commission in the army'.

In the next three years, the children did an increasing amount of war-related work. On 31 January 1916, 'Lady Cavan sent 24 yds of calico for covering splints'. On 1 February 1916, 'Mrs Cherry Garrard sent War Work. 60 yards khaki flannel; 5 doz buttons; 4 reels of cotton; 1 doz neck bands.' A week later, she sent '2 lbs of wool for children to knit for soldiers.'

On a happier note, 39 boxes of chocolates were sent out 'to our boys at the front' on 8 February 1916. Thank you letters and cards were received from the soldiers on 21 February and twelve more boxes were sent – '60 in all' – on 3 March, with more letters and cards arriving from the front shortly afterwards. On 13 February, the Master read to the pupils a letter from G.Dunham who was serving at the front; a week later he read two more letters, one from Private Hall and one from Private Hiller. They do not appear to have been pupils at the school.

A number of former pupils serving in the army visited the school in 1915 and 1916. The first of these was Phillip Latchford 'a former scholar who has been out at the front since September' who visited on 29 July 1915. On 16 November 1915, 'F.Hannell belonging to the Canadian contingent and a former scholar visited the school after being absent eight years' but a later entry, dated 6 October 1916, records that he was wounded and passed away on September 21. Details of his life are available in Pankhurst (2014b).

Other past pupils, now on active service, who visited the school in 1916 included Ernest Barker, a sailor on the 'Duke of Edinburgh', who visited on 17 March, Drummer Sergeant Lionel Westwood (18 May), and Private Arthur Taylor (19 May).

However, more deaths of former pupils are noted in the logbooks, such as on 9 March 1917, those of Aubrey Pearce, who has a plaque dedicated to his memory in Wheathampstead United Reformed Church, and Auburn Freeman, who died at Woolwich. The latter is recorded elsewhere as 'Alban Freeman'; he is buried in St Helen's churchyard. Accounts of their lives appear in Pankhurst (2014b). The entry of 20 November 1917 records that Maurice Hampton visited the school; he had been gassed at Passchendaele.

There was great excitement on 15 February 1916 when 'Gilbert Smith a former scholar who had returned from India brought a monkey to the school much to the excitement and jubilation of the youngsters.'

On 8 March 1916 'A number of officers of the Lincolns came to school this morning to estimate the billeting capacity of the rooms.'

On 15 November 1916 'A large silver-coloured airship came over Wheathampstead. All the children were let out to see it. The upper classes wrote essays about it.'

On 15 December, the Headmaster 'filled up government forms for Philip Latchford and Frank Neal who are applying for commission.' 'Master Gadsby' applied for a commission on 19 January 1917 having already been awarded the DSO.

Conscription had been introduced early in 1916 and on 6 November of that year the logbook notes that 'Military Service form re ages of male teachers filled up and returned to Hertford.'

The following entry appears on 7 June 1918 concerning John Rumball, who was a pupil teacher at the school: 'J.Rumball is now over 18, he has been attested goes to Hertford on Monday and terminates his duties here today.'

World War 1 military records show that young John was given a Grade II Medical Classification and that his conscription was approved on 10 June. He joined the Young Soldiers Battalion of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps with regimental number 83182. More research is needed to determine whether or where he saw active service.

Then, on 10 June 1918, the logbook reads: 'Mr Beard has received papers for Military Service, he goes to Watford for attestation on Saturday.' Mr Beard, who lived at Gable Cottage just across the road from the school, was aged 46 at this time and was therefore caught by the Military Services (No. 2) Act. This came into effect in May 1918 and extended the maximum military age from 41 to 47.

Research to date has found no evidence of Mr Beard's war service but he is mentioned again in the logbook on 15 October 1918 so it may be that, for one reason or another, he was not conscripted.

The war was of course ruinously expensive. The first mention of "War Savings" is on 25 September 1916 and, by the end of that year, the pupils and their parents were contributing to War Loan, War Savings, and the Penny Bank, as well as the Clothing and Coal clubs. For example, the Infants logbook shows that on 24 May 1917 'A collection was made for the Over-Seas Club Tobacco and Comforts Club, and the sum of 2/9 was given by the children' and, on 25 May 1917, 'A postal order for 4/6 has been forwarded to the Over-Seas Club by the Head Mistress.'

Though the first German air raids on England were in January 1915, it is not until 24 July 1917 that the Mistress of the Infants School 'Received from the Clerk of the Hertfordshire County Council a Memorandum as to precautions that should be taken in the event of day-light air-raids, issued by the Board of Education.'

There was an air raid over the village on the night of 1 October 1917 and 'The anti-aircraft guns of Harpenden and Hatfield were much in evidence.' Some children were absent from school next morning 'in consequence'.

On 16 October 1917, two children from Southend-on-Sea were admitted because air raids on that town were anticipated and three from Wood Green and Willesden were admitted in the following week following an air raid by zeppelins.

From the day the school opened, the logbooks record the many ways in which the older children, especially the boys, were involved in agricultural work but this activity intensified during the war years as the school contributed to the nation's food supplies. The logbooks

record how the boys measured out gardening plots, planted, tended and harvested crops, including potatoes, beans and turnips, in The Wick. On many occasions children were absent working on local farms including Bury Farm (Mr Throssell) and Maltings Farm (Mr Lattimore). The school garden produced 30 hundredweight of potatoes, two hundredweight of onions, 33 pounds of beans and 60 pounds of turnips, all of which were distributed among the pupils' families. Remarkably, the children collected a total of 256 pounds of blackberries between 18 and 27 September 1918.

The last eighteen months of the war were a difficult period for the school and for the Master, Thomas Clark. The routine life of the school carried on through 1917 and early 1918 but there were problems with staff sickness, staff turnover, and the quality of their work. For example, Miss Stewart started work on 1 May 1917, declared on 28 May that she 'will not stay', resigned on 30 May, made mistakes in her register on 31 May, and left on 30 June. Mrs Grice started work on 6 July, declared her intention to resign on 11 July because 'she is not robust and the effort required to teach in such a room (the large room) is sapping her strength'. On 5 August, she sent in her resignation and stated her highly critical opinions of the school buildings: 'it required far too much energy to teach in such a building. The air was bad and the floor produced too much noise.' She also took exception to the headmaster's report on her ability to maintain discipline and stated that 'she could not trust her professional reputation in the Headmaster's hands'.

One of the saddest notes in any of the logbooks was made by the Mistress of the Infants School on 2 May 1918: 'Herbert Waters, a scholar in the Second Class was accidentally (*sic*) run over by an army motor lorry last evening and died almost immediately.' He was buried on 7 May; a wreath was sent.

It may be a sign of the Master's war-weariness that the Mixed School entry dated 11 November 1918 reads simply 'News came at noon that the armistice was signed. Flags were put out' and 'Head Master spoke to whole school about armistice'. In contrast, the entry for the Infants School on 13 November reads: 'A holiday given today to celebrate the signing of the Armistice.' And on 20 November 'Miss Robins called in the afternoon and had a little chat with the children on Sunday's Rejoicings in Wheathampstead, at the signing of the Armistice by the Germans.'

The last mentions of the war appear a year after it ended.

On 10 October 1919, the logbook states that a plaque was put up in St Helen's church on the first anniversary of the death of 'Mr Sibley's son' who had been killed in France. This was Major Robert Dymond Gladman Sibley, a fighter pilot who flew a single seat Sopwith Camel biplane on the Western Front. He was posted missing on 1 October 1918. Pankhurst (2014a and b) include detailed information describing his life.

Finally, Lord Cavan's homecoming on 21 November 1919 is described in some detail. 'Head Master and Mr Beard were away helping to arrange street decoration in honour of Lord Cavan's homecoming. It was wet all day. School met soon after one pm and closed at 3.10 pm for children to get tea. They returned at 4 pm and formed part of the procession to the station where Lord Cavan received an address of welcome.'

References

Pankhurst, Margaret and Terry G. (2014a) *Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: Details of the fallen 1914-1918*

Pankhurst, Margaret and Terry G. (2014b) *More than just a name; the stories of the men who died in both World Wars from Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire*

Enquiries about these books should be made to: terence.pankhurst@btopenworld.com

Note

The St Helen's school logbooks are kept at HALS, County Hall, Hertford. They are being digitised and will be available in due course on the website *Findmypast*.