

## MAYFIELD, FIVE ASHES AND THE GREAT WAR - No. 6 - September 1914

Over the closing weeks of August the armies of Belgium, France and Great Britain had been in action to contain a German advance. After fierce fighting at Mons, an orderly and exhausting retreat was undertaken as September approached.

September 6th saw commencement of The Battle of Marne, which stopped the German advance and then pushed the Germans back to the River Aisne. This was the action that confounded the German war plan of sweeping west of Paris and taking the Channel ports. It also saw the first appearance of trench warfare, as the Germans started to dig themselves very strong defensive positions. First World War Casualties to date numbered in the region of 13,000 British, 250,000 French and 250,000 German.

The Royal Navy had an early success in the Bight of Heligoland, where three German cruisers and two Destroyers were sunk without loss to the British. Nevertheless, mines were a constant menace and later in the month three British cruisers were sunk by submarine(s) off the Netherlands.

On the home front Lord Kitchener's view that the war would not be a short affair and the British Army required rapid expansion had developed into a nationwide recruitment campaign. Every newspaper was full of exhortations for men between the ages of 18 - 35 to volunteer. Two local writers were prominent in the Sussex recruitment drive: Rudyard Kipling made a speech at the Brighton Dome, echoing the national need of the moment, which was for "*men and men and men*"; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was giving rousing speeches and published a penny pamphlet called "To Arms!" in which he again appealed to all local men to take up arms. One of the surprising aspects of newspaper coverage was that even at this early stage there was talk of 'white feathers' and 'Petticoat Posters' (suggesting, petticoats should be given to young men who did not volunteer) and which allegedly were being published/distributed by women.

Men were urgently required to enlist, and to be eligible needed to be broadly between the ages of 19 and 35, medically fit, 5ft 3 ins or over in height and have a chest measurement of 34 in. Their enlistment could be just for the duration of the war. Married men and widowers with children were accepted, and separation allowances were paid.

There were early signs that forming "Pal's Battalions" was going to be a useful recruiting device. Mr. Claude Lowther, local M.P. of Herstmonceux Castle, received sanction from the War Office to form a Sussex Pal's Battalion, popularly referred to as the Southdown Battalion, which would be a Special Service Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment of up to 1000 men.

'G' company of the "Fifth" (many Mayfield recruits) at this time were under the command of Captain Wood and were still stationed at Dover Castle. Captain Courthope, MP for the Rye Division of Sussex, serving with the 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion RSR, writing in the Sussex Daily News, said "*Notification has been received today that the 5th (CP) Bn RSR has been accepted for service abroad. A large proportion of the officers, non-commissioned officers, and men have already volunteered to go abroad with the battalion.*"

Another hot topic exercising national and local newspapers was the continuance of fixture lists for football, rugby and athletic meetings. The notion of fit, able men playing games whilst others of similar age were fighting for their lives, was for many intolerable. This only cooled off when the various associations, national and local, agreed to cancel all competitive and cup fixtures, e.g. Lewes Wednesday F.C. and Lewes Athletic Club. Mayfield F.C. decided to abandon all League Cup fixtures for the ensuing season; games would be played on a friendly basis with any proceeds going to the Prince of Wales Relief Fund.

In the middle of the month Sussex residents, who had seen little evidence of the war except for the movements of Territorials and recruits, were subject to a large influx of troops. Sussex had been selected to station 2 new divisions of the British Army: the 22nd were to be stationed on the South Downs, east of Seaford; the 24th on the Downs, near East Shoreham and Patcham. Lewes saw an invasion of 11,000 men, who were all billeted within the town; and large tented camps were established at Crowborough and Maresfield (at Maresfield Park, the residence of the absent Count Munster, a German nobleman, who had fled the country shortly before the outbreak of war!)

One result of this large surge of uniformed/un-uniformed "Tommys" was the application of restrictions to licensing hours, with many public houses and registered clubs closing early. Lewes even saw military pickets on duty for the first time. Many troops had to be billeted with the civilian population because camps were either full or not ready. Typically, daily billeting rates for providing quarters to NCOs and Privates were: for a bedroom 9d; breakfast 7 ½d; dinner 1s 7 ½d; supper 4 ½d; total 3s 4 ½d per day, or 23s 7 ½d per week.

The Mayfield Scouts, assisted by some of the Five Ashes Troop, were employed during the course of the month in watching telegraph wires. The Troop had recently had a bicycle presented to them for Scout messenger work.

Mr Lothian D. Nicholson of Skippers Hill, Five Ashes, generously offered to receive one or two Belgian Ladies at his house, or if thought more desirable, defray the expense of their stay at an hotel at Mayfield. A

further four Belgian refugees were housed in Mayfield at Northbin Cottage, under the care of the Mother General of the Palace Convent.

During the course of the month there were reports of two contingents of recruits leaving Mayfield. Early in the month local newspapers reported "*The following young men have responded to the call: F.Cole, J.Bale, P.Whitewood, T.Bellingham, F.Coomber, H.Maskell\*, B.Jones, Geo. Hill, J. Weeks, Russell, and T.Church. The majority of these were motored from the top of the High Street on Monday morning. A large number of people assembled, and gave them an enthusiastic send-off.*" Later in the month another 16 departed, but unfortunately their names were not recorded.

In summing up the reality of the position, the SAE reported that "*Whether the dread news, when it arrives, be good or ill, there is no doubt the time has arrived when Sussex families must be prepared for the inevitable toll of war.*" Sadly, this was the case for Mayfield and Five Ashes' first known casualty, Frank Heasman.

**Frank Heasman** was a Private in the 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment and was killed in action on the 10th September 1914 at Priez, France on the day that the RSR suffered its first casualties. He was aged 32. During the day of the 10th September 1914, the 2nd engaged the enemy in heavy fighting, during which they suffered 22 killed, 83 wounded and a number missing. 4 horses were also killed plus two wounded.

Frank was born in Laughton, East Sussex, and was one of at least 9 children. In 1901 Frank was recorded as being a milkman, living at The Brook, Salters Green, Mayfield. Subsequently working as a gardener/groom/bricklayer, he enlisted in the RSR at Crowborough as a regular soldier on the 27th November 1905 aged 23. After 12+ months of training he was sent to India in January 1907 where he joined the 1st Battalion of the RSR. His younger brother, Charles, was also serving in the army and changed regiment to serve with Frank in the Royal Sussex Regiment. Frank spent 5 years in India before returning to Britain early in 1913 and transferring to the Army Reserve list. At this time he was recorded as 5ft 6in tall, with a chest measurement of 41" and a waist of almost the same at 40". He had a dark complexion, with brown eyes and hair. He had a tattoo of a swallow carrying a letter on his left arm, and on his right arm a snake in a tree and a centipede. He went back to work in 1913 as a gardener/bricklayer. Frank would have been one of the men called back to his Regiment in the period around the outbreak of war. His Service Record shows that on 5th August he was mobilised and posted to France on 21st August. He was eventually laid to rest in a permanent grave at Montreuil-Aux-Lions, France.

His parents, Harry and Ellen Heasman, are recorded living in 1911 at Burnt House Farm, Burwash. It wasn't until 1918 that his personal effects of 1 diary, 4 postcards and 13 letters were passed on to his girlfriend, Miss S Geer, his next of kin, who was living at that time in Crowborough. A commemorative scroll was sent to his Aunt who lived at Ellis Cottage in Mayfield in 1920, but it wasn't until 1921 that Miss S. Geer received his 1914 star and clasp.

The authors are attending the unveiling of a new Royal Sussex Regiment Great War Monument in Priez, on the 10th September 2014 and will be placing a wreath to Frank Heasman on behalf of Mayfield and Five Ashes. It is also intended that a small memorial cross will be placed at the Mayfield War Memorial on the centenary day of the death of each of the fallen. There will be a cross for Frank Heasman at the Mayfield memorial on 10th September, at which all are welcome to pay respects.

In the 1915 Mayfield Roll of Honour one of the nine casualties recorded at that time was Luther Heasman. Frank had a younger brother, Luther, and it is possible that it was him, although there was another Luther Heasman, unrelated, who was also living locally. Unfortunately no army records have been found at this stage for Luther Heasman - does anybody in the village know anything about him?

\*Denotes one of the Fallen.

This series is written by Carole Stilwell and Brian Oldfield. If any reader has any information, however seemingly trivial, to add to the research being undertaken please contact Carole Stilwell on 01435 873407 (e-mail [carolestilwell@hotmail.com](mailto:carolestilwell@hotmail.com)) who is Events Coordinator for Mayfield, Five Ashes and Hadlow Down Branch of the Royal British Legion.