

## MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 10 - JANUARY 2015

Along the Western Front, armies became bogged down or frozen as they laid siege to each other along parallel trench systems, which stretched from the North Sea to Switzerland. Attacks were launched with little, if any, success as forces similar in strength/manpower allowed defences to dominate in head on confrontations, there being no wing to outflank. On the Eastern Front difficulties mounted for the Russians as northern ports became icebound and Turkey closed off the Dardanelles and access to Black Sea ports. Again there was mixed news from the Royal Navy. Early on New Years Day the Battleship HMS Formidable was sunk by torpedo, with a loss of nearly 500 men. Later in January off the Dogger Bank, Admiral Beatty intercepted a strong German Battlecruiser Squadron whose intent was a repeat of the earlier shelling of the East Coast. The German Squadron withdrew but not before suffering the loss of one Battlecruiser and another severely damaged.

On the national front the recruitment campaign for Kitchener's New Army had produced good results, as by the end of 1914 more than a million men had volunteered for service. Most of these were undergoing training whilst replacements/reinforcements for front line duties gradually increased the field army. The most contentious event was the bombing of Great Yarmouth and Kings Lynn by Zeppelins which resulted in 20 civilian deaths and 40 injured. This was the start of an ongoing air campaign by Germany to intimidate the civilian population. January was also the month in which the London Stock Market reopened for the first time since the day war was declared on the 4th August 1914. Mid January the London & County and Westminster Bank declared a dividend of 10 3/4% for the half year making a total of 21 1/4% for the whole year. Cannot imagine the Shareholders complaining about fat cat bankers!!!!

At a local level the contribution of Tunbridge Wells to recruitment was within a score of reaching 1000. There were invasion concerns along the south and east coasts and a flurry of activity between civil and military authorities as guidelines for the civilian population were drawn up. The arrival of a German aircraft over Dover certainly sharpened minds and towards the end of January orders were introduced in Tunbridge Wells and other large communities for the extinguishing/dimming of external lights in roads/domestic/commercial premises, cars, bicycles and traps between the hours of 5.00 PM to 7.30 AM. Whether and how these orders were enforced in outlying southern areas is for the moment unknown. There were also rumours of curfews, although by the end of January they had not been introduced.

Severe weather conditions were reported for the end of December and from the comments of the local newspapers the severity and effect had strong similarities with the great storm of 1987. At the start of the New Year services of Intercession were held for large congregations and in Mayfield muffled church bells were rung prior to the service. Little reporting of current military events was contained in local newspapers although many personal accounts from returning soldiers, of actions throughout the final months of 1914, were often repeated at more detailed length. A topic which appeared to find great favour with newspaper readers and serving men alike was the provision of horse ambulances. At a time when the horse was such a familiar sight at all levels of society perhaps it was not unusual for a great deal of sympathy to be held for those animals wounded alongside their soldiers. Getting wounded horses away from the front to an appropriate treatment centre was fraught with difficulties and the provision of horse ambulances made a significant contribution to the number saved rather than having to be put down.

The 5th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment were still in training at the Tower of London. The Sussex Daily News reported mid-month that Crowborough Railway Station had witnessed stirring scenes at the arrival of the Service Section of "G Company" (the local company for Mayfield men). The men were being billeted at home whilst they entered upon a week's trench digging. Just a few days later, the battalion received a letter from Major Gilbert Smith from the War Office, saying: *"I am directed to inform you that the following territorial unit has been selected for service on the Continent:- 5th Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment. All personnel proceeding with this unit must be medically fit for service, fully trained, and 19 years of age or over."*

The Mayfield water supply continued to suffer from contamination, which whilst not making it poisonous, certainly made it very unpleasant to drink. The local authorities appeared to be very slow in insisting on prompt action. In the same vein a local milk parlour/distributor, the Glynde Creamery, won a court action against a local farmer who had not produced milk of the required, contractual, standard. The farmer was unsuccessful in pleading that the lower quality was due to the lack of processed feedstuff for his herd and as a consequence that were only being fed on wet grass!!!

In mid-January the newspapers reported that for the last 2-3 weeks St Dunstan's Choir, numbering about 30, had been out on seven evenings carol singing, visiting the main houses and streets. In spite of the occasional unfavourable weather they had raised £28 12s in aid of the Belgians.

No casualties for local men were reported/recorded for January 1915. However, an account of two weddings were reported for the 23 December 1914 at St Dunstan's. At one wedding Charles Pettit performed the duties of Best Man for his brother and his bride. On the same day the sister of Frank Skinner was married.

Frank was already serving with the army, having enlisted in August 1914, and it is unclear whether he was at the wedding. With the benefit of hindsight the poignancy of these two weddings is that within 21 months both Frank Skinner and Charles Pettit had been killed in action. Details will follow at the appropriate date. Private W.A. Luck, home injured since November, returned to the Scots Guards in early January, having been part of the St Dunstan's carol singers over Christmas.