

## MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 23 - FEBRUARY 2016

Early in February 1916 airpower made its presence felt as an effective weapon when the British Merchant Ship Franz Fischer became the very first merchant ship to be sunk by air bombardment, after being attacked by Zeppelin Airships. Further evidence of the increasing importance of airpower was provided by the British deploying their first single seater fighter squadron on the Western Front.

On the Western Front itself, the major German offensive at Verdun against the French was rescheduled for late in February. Verdun, one of the most fierce and costly of WWI offensives, commenced on the 21st with a nine hour barrage from 1,240 artillery pieces. Two and a half million high explosive and gas shells were fired across an eight mile front, an offensive of 150 guns per mile. The British meanwhile made their plans for a July, Somme offensive.

On the national front the Government formed a Blockade Ministry to reduce/cut off supplies to Germany. A strategy that must have received a boost by the riots in Berlin over food shortages earlier in the month. Further encouragement must have also been drawn when Germany was forced to introduce food rationing later in March.

The Battalion diaries for the 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment read rather pitifully for the month of February. During the month all four companies took over work on roads; "D" company, where local Mayfield men were serving, was moved to Bertrancourt, specifically to work on roads in the forward area behind the 48th Divisional front line. Sadly Lieutenant Bingen was instantly killed by shell whilst superintending work on the 10th February. Lt. Col. Langham noted at the end of the month that the Battalion's strength had been reduced to 31 officers, 747 other ranks, and that 250 men were urgently needed to enable work to be proceeded with. (\*\*see final paragraph for more information).

Nationally, the Military Service Act to be brought into force on the 2nd March caused excitement, consternation and despair in equal proportions. Exemption Tribunals commenced, allowing individuals, employers and other interested parties to argue a case for exemption from conscription. Unless a compelling case was made conscription was enforced, although in the event of hardship or seasonal demand in agriculture, for example, a temporary deferment could be allowed. In addition various organisations/committees were formed to support and represent the claims and interests of conscientious objectors. Adding to the moral fervour were strident demands and meetings nationwide promoting temperance and requesting that the nation follow the example of King George and Queen Mary who had vowed to abstain from alcohol for the duration of the war. Responding to concerns about the lack of available manpower in agriculture the Government announced plans to recruit 400,000 women to work the land. Aware of the many pitfalls in recruiting women for what had largely been male occupations the Government later added that *'women doing men's jobs will be paid the same if they are equally efficient'*. Again, this was a topic that raised much comment.

How much these matters exercised the residents of Mayfield is unknown but it seems safe to conclude that opinion would be divided much along the lines nationally. Considerable local effort and organisation was devoted during February to raising funds for the VAD Hospital at 'Claytons', where provision for 15 soldiers was a constant demand. The Red Cross held a successful event at which a large volume of produce was collected for use at the Hospital. This was closely followed by a Sale of Work and Whist Drive organised by Mrs G Bassett-Gabbitas which raised the grand sum of £50.00 for the hospital. In today's money in the region of £3,000.

There are no individuals recorded on the War Memorials for the month of February. However, the K & SC of the 25 February reported as follows:

*"Private Frank Rogers of the Royal Sussex Regiment, son of Mr and Mrs Harry Rogers of Mist Cottages, has just been home on leave after twelve months at the Front in France. He has had many narrow escapes, his clothes and belt been torn by bullets and fragments of shell."*

Frank Rogers. Private 5th RSR. Service No 2228 (240430) enlisted in the Cinque Ports Territorial Battalion at Hastings 16 August 1914, designated as Signaller. His enlistment papers show he was 5' 7 3/4" tall; had a fresh sallow complexion; hazel eyes; brown hair and a mole on the left hand side of his chest. A month later in September he signed up for overseas service and subsequently embarked for France in February 1915.

During the course of 1915/16 he appears to have moved between the RSR/Royal Field Artillery (where his position is described as wagon line carpenter/Royal Engineers/Hospital and even a temporary move to a Pioneer battalion is suggested. In 1917 he was posted to Italy, although his service records do not show in what capacity. Surviving the war and demobilised March 1919, in 1920 he applied for an increase in his war pension on the grounds of Hyper Thyrodictin. Classed as non attributable to war service the application was rejected. He received three service medals in 1920.

Frank was born in Mayfield 1896 to parents Henry (labourer/bricklayer) and Jessie and had 4 siblings. The 1901/1911 census returns record the family living at 2 Mist Cottages, Station Road, Mayfield. In 1911 Frank's occupation is shown as House Boy although his enlistment papers 4 years later record him as a Painter.

*"Private Alfred Buckwell of 5th Royal Sussex Regiment , son of Mr and Mrs Henry Buckwell, who came home last week for seven days leave has been at the front for twelve months. He has also had several narrow escapes"*

Alfred Buckwell, Private 5 RSR. Service No 1499 (240095). No service records survive for Alfred but it seems likely he enlisted with the 5th Cinque Ports Battalion in August 1914.

Alfred was born in Mayfield 1893 the only son of parents Henry (Domestic gardener) and Fanny who had ten children, only five of whom survived to be recorded on the 1911 Census living at Cottages, Old Place or Palace, Mayfield.

The absence of service records for Alfred leave a general account of the 5 RSR in WWI to provide some notion of his military involvement between 1914-1919. After the war there is a brief mention of his marriage to Anna Turner at St Dunstan's in September 1923. On this happy occasion the married couple were presented, by Miss A Bell-Irving, with a Wedding Cruet from the St Dunstan's Brass Band with whom Alfred was an instrumentalist.

*"Private Jesse Gadd 5th Royal Sussex Regiment , son of Mr & Mrs Gadd, who has had a term of twelve months in the trenches, also came home last week for a well deserved seven days leave"*

Jesse Gadd, Private 5 RSR Service No 1614 (240132). No service records survive for Jesse but again it is likely that he enlisted with the 5th Cinque Ports Battalion in August 1914.

Jesse was born in Rotherfield 1895 to parents Jesse (Garden Lab) and Ellen and had 5 siblings. In 1901 the census reveals an address in Five Ashes and by 1911 the family were living at Cranesden's Lodge, Mayfield. In the same census Jesse occupation is recorded as Grocers Errand Boy.

Again, the absence of service records for Jesse leave a general account of the 5 RSR in WWI to provide some notion of his military service between 1914-1919. After the war there is a brief account of his marriage to Gladys Smith in 1921 at St Dunstan's. Whilst the Gadd family had not suffered any loss of life during WWI tragedy was to strike in 1927 when Harold, a younger brother of Jesse, was killed by a train in the Crowborough Tunnel where he was working as a platelayer.

\*\*In general the deployment and engagements of the 1/5 RSR between 1914-1919 follow the outline provided by the service records of Frank Rogers. In August 1914 the 5th Cinque Ports Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment was reorganised with a Service Battalion 1/5 forming the active service unit which was maintained/reinforced by drafts from 2 Reserve Battalions. In February 1915 1/5 Battalion embarked for France where it was engaged by mid year in fighting at Aubers Ridge. In August 1915 it became the Pioneer Battalion of the 48th (South Midland) Division and in 1916 fought on The Somme from July to November eg at Bazentin Ridge and Ancre Heights. In 1917 it was involved in the Third Battle of Ypres and later in the same year was deployed to Italy. Here and in Austria in 1918 it was involved in action. Prior to being posted to Italy the Service Nos were renumbered as part of a general renumbering of Territorial Forces.

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