



BEDFORDSHIRE AT WAR: News from the Front

Image (c) artist Hugh Byrne, Shop33 and SNAP

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The 4th August this year is the one centenary of the beginning of the First World War, at least so far as we in this country are concerned. At midnight German time (11 pm in London) a British ultimatum demanding that Germany honour Belgian neutrality was ignored meaning that a state of war existed between the two countries. The First World War lasted until 11th November 1918 when an armistice ended the fighting.

The Great War to End All Wars, as it became known, was the first war in which every person in Britain was directly affected, by the volunteering and conscription of over five million men (one in four of the total male population) to the armed services and the mass mobilisation of women for the first time, to serve on the land, as nurses, as factory workers and in other jobs in which they took the place of men who had joined up. During the war this country lost around 720,000 people in the armed services and merchant navy and 16,000 civilians as a result of military action. In addition around 1,600,000 were wounded. This meant that almost everyone knew someone who had died or been wounded. In addition new laws brought in as a result of the war affected everyone.

In order to shed some light on what was happening locally during the war we have decided to write two blogs. Both of these blogs will begin on 4th August 2014 and will have daily entries until 11th November 2018. One of the blogs will concentrate on the fighting and will be called Beds at War (<http://bedsatwar.blogspot.co.uk/>). The other will look at what was happening at home and will be called Beds Home Front (<http://bedshomefront.blogspot.co.uk/>).

Both the blogs will make extensive use of local newspaper reports, letters and diaries. The front line blog will also make use of the war diaries of the active service units of the Bedfordshire Regiment (1st, 2nd, 4th, 1st/5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Battalions) as well as 54th Field Company, Royal Engineers and the Bedfordshire Yeomanry.

The Home Front blog will look at events and people from all over the county and will bring out the various themes which developed as the war unfolded such as the deep-seated public phobia about spies, help for Belgian refugees, news about loved ones at the front, shortages, new laws, activities to support those at the front and the changing roles of many local women.

The front line blog will aim to give an exciting account of things happening to local units at the Front. Of course, at that time, newspapers were generally a week or a fortnight behind with the news and much was censored. The blog will introduce a fiction that communication with sources at the front was instantaneous and uncensored, much like modern correspondents' stories from conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. An important part of this blog will be a daily Roll of Honour listing details about the men in the Bedfordshire Regiment and Bedfordshire Yeomanry killed on that day. The majority of these men had no Bedfordshire connection – roughly a quarter did, with another quarter being from Hertfordshire, a third quarter from London whilst the final quarter was made up of men from the rest of Britain and the wider World, including USA, Australia and even Bohemia!

We hope that these blogs will be of general interest and help anyone wanting to learn more about the war to do so. We hope, in particular, that schools will find the material useful and we recommend any school with questions to contact our Learning Officer, Clare Rogers at clare.rogers@bedford.gov.uk.

Sergeant Richard Henry Wheeler DCM

During the First World War the local papers regularly carried letters home received from soldiers. The *Amphill and District News* for 14th November 1914 included one written by Private Dick Wheeler of the 1st Battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment to his parents at Amphill. He told them it was “jolly rough and cold out here at nights” but that he was being warmed by a new guernsey and a woollen “cap comforter” which had been sent by “some kind English lady”. The people of Enniskillen in Ireland had held a collection to provide “fags and tobacco” for the battalion, which had been serving in Ireland before the outbreak of the war, and he had also received a letter and some cigarettes from a young lady there. Describing conditions at the Front he told his parents: “We are fighting with the French and others from India, so we are all mixed up now. There are such a lot of dead Germans and others lying about. All the roads are full of great holes where the shells have dropped, and you cannot get any supplies over them: we have to walk a long distance and carry them up every night when it is dark. We got a lot of German prisoners the other night, and they look bad, there is no mistake, and if the truth were known, they would like the war to finish more than we do”.



Curious about Private Wheeler's fate I did some research and was able to piece together a short biography. Richard Henry Wheeler was born in Amphill in 1889 to John Wheeler, a railway coachbuilder who later became landlord of the Bird in the Hand beer shop and a carpenter. His service papers show that he enlisted as an 18 year old in 1908, when his occupation was listed as carpenter. After the outbreak of war in 1914 the 1st Battalion were recalled from Ireland and sent to France, arriving on 14th August 1914. Richard Wheeler served with the Bedfords in France and Italy for the duration of the war before finally returning home unscathed in February 1919.

Sergeant Dick Wheeler with his parents, brothers and sister. Back row L to R: Dick Wheeler (in uniform), Fred Wheeler, Jack Wheeler. Front row L to R: Mrs Wheeler, Mr Wheeler, Mrs Fred Facer (nee Florence Wheeler) all of Amphill [Z291/77/311]

British units in Italy were there to help our Italian ally fight Austria-Hungary.

Private Wheeler was promoted first to Lance-Corporal, then in April 1915 to Pioneer Sergeant. He was mentioned in despatches by Field Marshal Douglas Haig, and on 3 June 1919 he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his war service. The citation published in the Edinburgh Gazette of 15 March 1920 reads:

“9284 Sjt. R. Wheeler, 1st Bn., Bedf. R. (Amphill). He has served with the Battalion through the War. He has taken every opportunity in volunteering for and carrying out tasks under fire. On one occasion in Italy he personally constructed a raft, crossed the River Piave at night under heavy enemy machine-gun fire and successfully laid a cable for use in subsequent operations.”



Leonard Aspin standing outside the Crown & Sceptre at Amphill where he was landlord from 1916-1927. Sgt Wheeler mentions in his letter that Len Aspin had sent him 3oz of tobacco and two packets of Players cigarettes. [Z1306/1/5/2]

The Story of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment describes the crossing of the Piave by the 1st Bedfords in February 1918:

“The Italians intended crossing the Piave near its mouth and making a big attack. The 15th Brigade was to make a demonstration by crossing the Piave the same day, and remain 48 hours in position so as to draw the Austrian Reserves. To facilitate the crossing it was first necessary to pass a strong cable across the main channel. To hold this a heavy anchor had to be taken over the stream which was about 4 to 5 feet deep with a current of 10 miles an hour and about 300 yards wide. Several attempts were made, but in every case the boat capsized. Then a craft was designed and made by Sgt Wheeler and the Regimental Pioneers and by this means the anchor was got across and all preparations completed.”

Sergeant Wheeler married Elsie Mary Chandler of Watford at Amphill in December 1916. After the war they had three children, Norman in 1919, Eileen in 1922 and Jean in 1926. Tragically all three babies died within a few days of birth. Richard Wheeler himself died in Amphill in 1977, aged 87.

 **Remember: for more information about our World War One blogs, for updates, photographs and interesting snippets follow the blog's Twitter feed at [@BedsAtWar](https://twitter.com/BedsAtWar)**

Everton Soldiers' Family Reunion

Everton Village Hall contains a unique wood-panelled fireplace as a memorial to those men from the village that lost their lives in the two World Wars. As part of the hall's recent refurbishment, with the financial support of Everton Parish Council, the memorial wall has been restored to its former glory. To commemorate the lives of the ten soldiers who fell in the First World War they have tried to contact all their living relatives using local contacts and parish records. This has been a difficult task. They are now planning a reunion of all the families from 3 p.m. on Saturday 4th October 2014 in the Village Hall. It will be a chance to reunite lost family members and strengthen bonds between families that inter-married. At the beginning of the 20th century, Everton was a small village with just a few families living closely together. Today those families are widely separated.

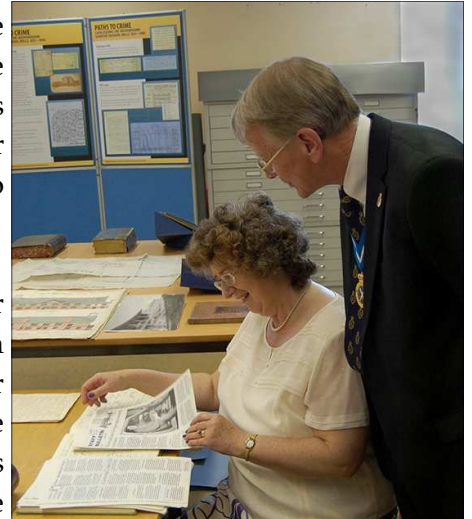
Because of the numbers involved, the reunion will be by invitation only. If you are related to Archibald Frank BAKER, William James CHAPMAN, Herbert Edward DARLOW, John Frank ENDERSBY, Parker GIGGLE, John HULL, William James HULL, James LAWSON, Walter Lee LAWSON, or Thomas George MEEKS please contact Mike Collins if you have not already heard from him. Mike is at 12 The Lawns, Everton, Beds. SG19 2LB, 'phone: 01767 692268 or e-mail: mike.collins12@tiscali.co.uk. Copies of your family tree and an image of the soldier can be made available.

High Sheriff's Visit

On the 20th of May the Archives Service was very pleased to receive a visit from the new High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, Mr Colin Osborne, and his wife Diane. The office of the High Sheriff has given the Archives Service a great deal of support and encouragement in recent years and so we were delighted that Mr and Mrs Osborne accepted an invitation to learn more about the service.

The Archives Service holds the records of the office of the High Sheriff, including the official papers regarding the appointment of Mr Osborne on the 3rd of April 2014, which goes to show just how modern some archives can be. After a tour of the office and a discussion of the work the service does, Mr and Mrs Osborne settled down to view some archives that we hoped they would find interesting – these included the parish register containing the entry for their own marriage, photographs of Mr Osborne's old school, a range of material connected to Mr Osborne's home town of Sandy and some documents connected to former High Sheriffs.

However, some county council staff newsletters stole the show as Mr and Mrs Osborne had first met when they both worked at the then County Hall. The newsletters brought back memories of former colleagues and interesting times, such as when female staff were allowed to wear trousers rather than skirts for the first time. This was during the power cuts of the 1970s, the building was cold so allowance was made; the female staff never looked back.



CHANGE TO MONDAY OPENING HOURS

From July 2014 we will open at **9.15am** on Mondays. We remain open until 7pm on Mondays and 9am to 5pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays and closed on Thursdays. Please also remember that you need to book an appointment in order to visit the Archives.

Staff News

We welcome Jean Gambold to the staff, in the role of Reader Support Officer. Jean will be working in both the stack room and the search room on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.



How would you like to receive your newsletter?



Here at the Archives Service, despite our focus on historical documents, we do try to move with the times! We already spread information about our service via our Twitter account, Facebook page and website. We'd now like to know if any of you who currently receive our newsletter by post would prefer to receive it by email. We've asked before, and quite a few of you took up the offer, but if you'd be happy to receive your newsletter via an email, please contact us either by phone 01234 228833 or via email archive@bedford.gov.uk

We welcome ideas and material for future issues.

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