

High Wych History – 25 – The Home Front during WW1

The past is another country. England one hundred years ago was very different from today and that was particularly true in a small hamlet such as High Wych. Just look at the picture below: some people still got their water from a pump on the green!



The pump on HW green stood there until 1919.

On 28th of June 1914 in Sarajevo, a Serbian nationalist named Gavrilo Princip, shot the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, when their car stopped on its way out of the town. In the weeks that followed war spread quickly across the continent and on 4th August Britain joined the fray. It is said the various empires then dominant, “sleepwalked” into the conflict, but it is also claimed that many leading elites simply thought war was necessary and unavoidable. Whether the war was just is of course another matter

Between 1914 and the end of the war the British army expanded from a small volunteer force of 400,000 men to a massive strength of 4,000,000. Your country needs you so Lord Kitchener proclaimed and (some) High Wych men heeded that call. Casualties mounted however and in early 1916 the government introduced conscription in order to replace the fallen. Conscription applied to all men between 18 and 51.

Exemptions were made for widowers with children, those serving in the Royal Navy, members of the clergy and those in a reserved occupation. What exactly that meant was not always clear so in some cases tribunals had to decide. I found several local examples of those. On 3rd June the Herts Mercury reported on the case of Arthur Wybro (Wybrew perhaps?) and William Fish. "Both horse keepers employed by Mr. J.S. Anderson at Blounts Farm on 450 acres with 10 men and a boy, they were given exemption until August 31 of that year." On 1st July the same paper told of an application on behalf of Tom P. Brown bailiff and gardener for captain H.F. Buxton of the Manor of Groves. "It was stated that the captain was on active service and Mrs. Buxton in poor health. Applicant was entirely responsible for the farm and the garden, attended the electric light and generally managed the place. The case was adjourned for a fortnight for applicant to go before the medical board." Two weeks later Brown is excused until 1st January 1917. In that same 1st July issue the case of Francis A. Lukies is reported. "An earlier exemption granted by the tribunal had been cancelled by the new regulation. Applicant's father, F.J. Lukies of Shingle Hall, it was stated, was too ill to do much work and the son was absolutely indispensable. A medical certificate was produced stating the young man was unfit for service and conditional exemption was allowed." On the 22nd July Frederick (Baker) White was also excused from military service until 1st January 1917. Sadly details for our area are scarce as most records were destroyed. For more information I suggest you read an article by Jon Mein in Herts Past and Present Spring 2013.

BRITONS



JOIN YOUR COUNTRY'S ARMY!
GOD SAVE THE KING

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MILITARY SERVICE ACT, 1916

Every man to whom the Act applies will on Thursday, March 2nd, be deemed to have enlisted for the period of the War unless he is excepted or exempt.

Any man who has adequate grounds for applying to a Local Tribunal for a

CERTIFICATE OF EXEMPTION

UNDER THIS ACT

Must do so BEFORE

THURSDAY, MARCH 2

Why wait for the Act to apply to you?

Come now and join of your own free will. You can at once put your claim for exemption from being called up before a Local Tribunal if you wish.

ATTEST NOW

PRINTED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY AND POST OFFICE PRINTING OFFICE, LONDON. POSTER No. 1275. BY A. THOMAS.

Lord Kitchener's famous poster: High Wych men were also needed.

Some sought exemption; not many succeeded

A crucial consequence of war was reduced availability of some foodstuffs. By 1917 the country actually was in danger of starvation and by 1918 rationing was brought in. Substitutes for wheat, such as mixtures of peas, arrowroot, parsnips, beans, lentils, maize, rice, barley and oats were occasionally used to make bread. Luxury items such as fruit buns were definitely not allowed. The government fixed a maximum price for bread and issued rules for reducing waste. Bakers were forbidden to sell bread until it was twelve hours old. The reason perhaps being, that you can cut thinner slices from older bread! Susan and Harriett Tyser, owners of the Rising Sun, who also had a bakery, found themselves in court for breaking that last rule. Mr. Beard of Harlow noticed a man employed by the Tysers delivering bread which had been baked the same morning. The sisters Tyser were fined 10 shillings.

Air raids were another development. Just three weeks into the conflict, a German Zeppelin dropped several bombs on the Belgian city of Antwerp, killing six citizens in their homes. The UK then brought in lighting restrictions, but initially these were not taken very seriously. That changed when in January 1915 two Zeppelins attacked Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn, killing four civilians and in May when a further seven people were killed in the first Zeppelin attack on London. The local press reported a number of cases of people fined for failing to shade their lights. On 14th October 1916 the Essex Newsman reported a case involving Horace Fuller Rackham, the vicar of St James's Church. Rackham, who could or would not appear in person, wrote to the court "explaining that the windows of the church were filled with stained glass which reduced the light." It did not help: he was still fined three pounds, a hefty sum in those days.

With so many men away at the front, an increasing number of young women worked on the land. At the time some regarded that as quite unusual. In order to promote this development further, a contest was held in Bishops Stortford in July 1917. The event created quite a stir, so I gather from an article in the Chelmsford Chronicle. There were 34 women entrants from a dozen different counties and the competitions ranged from milking cows to spreading manure. I quote: "Although the girls appeared in masculine attire, they remained very feminine all the same and it was quite amusing to see fine girls in breeches welcome farmer school friends from agricultural colleges with a fond embrace and then go marching off arm in arm to their several scenes of contest. As the day was warm, the girls in many cases threw off their smocks and set to work in earnest wearing just a plain shirt above their breeches." Obviously enthralled by this display of fine country womanhood the author goes on and on in praise of "this demonstration of the girls of today in holiday mood showing how splendidly they have risen to the occasion and helped the mother industry in the nation's time of need." Prizes were won and of course there were local girls amongst them: a Springham girl.

As obviously, there were no WW1 survivors available to interview, my article this time drew exclusively on information from the public domain. My sources were The Chelmsford Chronicle, the Essex Newsman, the Herts and Essex Observer, the Herts Mercury, Wikipedia and of course material from HALS as provided by the kind staff at Hertford. Thanks to all. The High Wych History Project needs your contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism be it positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468