

## MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 17 - AUGUST 2015

Observing the first anniversary of the Great War, in villages/towns/cities throughout Sussex and Britain, public meetings were held during the early days/weeks of August. These meetings reflected on the changes, to daily routine, required and imposed during the previous 12 months and of the tragedies great and small that had befallen the nation. On a positive note the challenges past, present and future were aired with great enthusiasm and passion, particularly as to the 'right' of the Allied cause against a loathsome enemy and the inevitability of eventual victory. As one newspaper editorial put it, quoting unattributed political sources. 'Britain must win or go under, and she is not going under.' Recruitment continued to feature widely in local newspapers and the K & SC carried recruitment adverts aimed at men to enlist for Mechanical Transport duties for the duration of the war: 6/- per day with usual separation and other allowances.

On the Western Front no British large scale ground attacks were launched. However, August began a period of German air dominance and superiority over the allied air forces. This was a result of the German air force employing a technical innovation which allowed their Fokker monoplanes to fire forward a machine gun through its propeller blades. This provided them with a distinct advantage in air combat, commonly referred to as the 'Fokker Scourge' which the allies did not match until early 1916. However, innovation was not absent from British plans for the ground war and two important weapon advances were noted in August: first, a production order for 1000 Stokes light mortars (named after its inventor Wilfred Stokes) with a design much like today's mortars, for use by infantry; secondly work began on the world's first armoured track vehicle.

The Germans arrested Edith Cavell on charges of espionage, a British nurse who helped 200 or so allied soldiers escape from German occupied Belgium. Edith was to face a German Court Martial later, in October.

On the Eastern Front by early August the sustained pressure of the German advance, which had started in June, resulted in the occupation of Warsaw. Throughout August the Russians were in retreat along a long front; the Germans confident that Russian morale would dissolve offered Russia a peace plan which the Czar and his Government rebuffed.

In the Middle East, hoping to outflank Turkish forces in Gallipoli, British forces launched an amphibious assault at Sulva Bay, whilst the ANZACS attacked higher ground in a frontal assault. The latter attack gained early successes which were reversed within days by determined Turkish counter attacks. At Sulva Bay the landings were unopposed but slow progress allowed Turkish forces to reinforce adjacent high ground to great advantage; culminating in fierce fighting for 'Scimitar Hill' which, being largely unsuccessful for British forces, blocked hopes of further advance. Stalemate; with many men suffering and dying from the intense heat, disease and sniper bullets in wretched trench living conditions. All adding to the growing dismay in political circles at the failure of the Gallipoli campaign and the ever increasing casualties. Towards the end of August total British casualty figures for the entire war were announced as approx 382,000.

In early August the 5th (Cinque ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment remained stationed in the Pas-de-Calais area of France, around the town of Bethune. At the beginning of the month, the Battalion were continuing work on the new camp "Garden City": making roads, 3 road bridges and 6 foot bridges, building officers quarters, digging out and completing swimming camp bath and putting in surface drains over the entire camp. After 5 days of hard graft the battalion went to rest billets in Saily Labourse for 2 days, and then went into the trenches at Cambrin, relieving the 1/L.N.Lancs. On the 12th August, after four days in Cambrin trenches, the battalion relieved the 9/King's Liverpool's in Annequin, firing during the day with machine guns on the villages of Haisnes (about 3100 yds range) and Cuinchy (1800 yds). Later in the day the Battalion were in the line of some very accurate enemy shelling. The battalion diaries note *"The shells sent over us are apparently a new type of 4.2 shrapnel with a double explosion - very noisy & bright flash on explosion and two reports with green smoke."*

Mid month the 5th were warned to be ready to entrain for attachment to the 3rd Army (48th Division). Upon inspection they were told that they may be turned into "Pioneers", and were congratulated on "always having played the game" while with the 1st Division, which by this time had been exactly 6 months. On the 20th August the Battalion entrained and arrived in Doullens in the Somme region, and then marched through Sarton before billeting finally in Louvencourt. "D" Company, under captain Wood, went on a local detachment to Colincamps to fortify La Signy Farm.

Locally, the Sussex Agricultural Express 13th August 1915 featured another letter from William Pettitt of Mayfield. Writing on the 25th July and possibly trying to ease worries at home he describes his circumstances from somewhere near the front line. *'The battalion is now in the trenches in a village which has been occupied twice by the Germans. There is not a single house which has not been touched. Last night our shells set alight a village behind the German lines, we watched the shells bursting. Nice soft beds here but occupied by some of our old friends.'* (probably fleas). He writes about fruit being plentiful and then goes to say *'the craze out here now is making rings out of German shell heads. Directly a shell bursts we go out and dig up the head. The trenches are all chalk and the chaps pass the time away by carving things. You can see the trenches for miles by the white chalk on top.'*

Another letter home from a Crowborough man, D Company 2nd Battalion RSR stated that the most acceptable gift being sent out was condensed milk and the whole Company were loud in their thanks to the people of Mayfield who sent out a welcome gift of milk a few weeks ago. Sergt Jack Groombridge 2nd Coldstream Guards again featured in the K & SC which reported that he had sent his uncle in Mayfield a long poem composed by himself whilst in the trenches. Adding to the war poets was another Mayfield man Gunner G Harmer, RHA 1st Indian Cavalry Division. Both poems, too long to include here can be read on Page 4 K & SC 13 August 1915.

Returning to the theme of newspaper adverts there was a strong appeal to continue support for a Tobacco Fund so that every local soldier/sailor serving with the armed forces would receive a packet of tobacco/ cigarettes. Of particular note was an advert regarding Government Insurance against Air Raids and Bombardment. The advert stated that a public insurance scheme had been established and no liability is furthermore accepted by the Government, and no claims can be entertained, in respect to damage to property by Aircraft/bombardment unless the property has been insured under the scheme. Rates (per £100) are the same for all parts of the UK.

Rates 1) Building, rent and contents of private dwelling houses and buildings in which no trade or manufacture carried out	Against aircraft only : Aircraft/Bombardment	2/-	3/-
2) All other buildings and their rents		3/-	4/6
3) Farming Stocks (live and Dead)		3/-	4/6

ISSUED BY THE WAR RISKS INSURANCE OFFICE  
(Aircraft Department)

As mentioned in the July article, the Government required a National Register to be completed as at 15 August. This required every individual between the ages of 15 and 65 to register their names, occupations and other personal details. Each male between the ages of 19 and 41 was also encouraged ie voluntarily, to attest, to their willingness to enlist for military service if this became necessary. The National Register was seen by many to be simply the preparatory steps for general mobilisation. The local newspapers reported after the event that, *"In no previous Census was the information obtained with so little trouble or difficulty....we may conclude from the readiness and smoothness with which the National Registration has been carried out that the people are willing, nay anxious, to be used for any and every purpose connected with the War."*

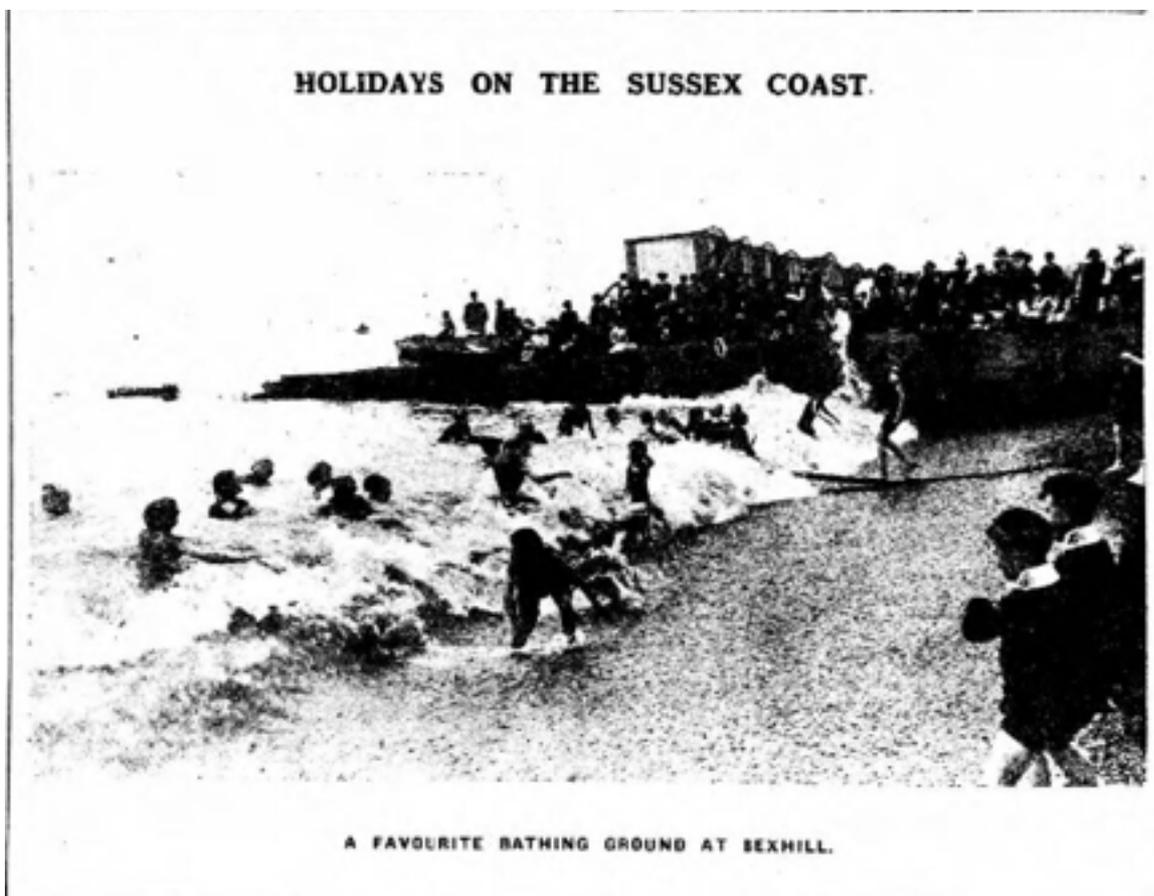


Image 1 - Sussex Agricultural Express, 13th August 1915

The month of August also saw many happy holiday crowds visiting Sussex, and on the surface coastal towns were crowded with well-to-do visitors who seemed light of heart as usual. However, subtle differences abounded. The August holiday visitors were not the usual crowd - they were either people who would usually have gone abroad for their holidays in previous years, or those who were afraid to visit the East Coast for fear of enemy shelling. There seemed to be an enormous number of women and children, with men numbering just 1 in 10 of the visitors. The crowds were quieter - voices were noticeably lower, with none of the shrill laughter of bygone years.

The Sussex harvest was generally plentiful, with hay, corn, wheat and oat crops of good quality and quantity; although severe hop blight had reduced the hop harvest to just half the yield of the previous year. Food prices had continued to rise since the start of the war, and by August 1915 had risen by 36% overall. The "Labour Gazette" published detailed price increases across a broad range of food items, with the biggest rises being fish (up 77%), sugar (up 70%) and thin flank of beef (up 70%).



There is one name on the Mayfield/Five Ashes War Memorial for August 1915.

Sydney Hall. Service No: G/5744. Private 7th Battalion Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment. Killed in Action 28th August 1915 on the Western Front near Dernancourt and buried in the Norfolk Cemetery Becordel-Becourt France.

Sydney, one of a family of four children, was born 1889 in Five Ashes and is recorded as living at Skippers Hill in 1891. By 1901 the family had moved to Roundabout Cottage, Five Ashes where his father William, by then a widower, was still living in 1915. Prior to enlisting Sydney was a domestic gardener and found occupation prior to the war at West Horsham and Outwood. His Army Service records are missing but he enlisted early in 1915 and had been at the Western Front only weeks before being killed. The War Diaries of the RWSR do not, unfortunately, refer to the 28th August 1915 but do substantiate the position of Lt Haggard (see below) Sydney's Platoon Officer.

*Image 2 - Sussex Agricultural Express, 1st October 1915*

Sydney attended Five Ashes school where in late October 1915 his name was recorded on a Roll of Honour prepared at the school of all former pupils who were serving. The SAE 29 October 1915 reports this and names 40 former pupils serving in the armed forces. Three of the named having already lost their lives.

The SAE 1 October 1915 published extracts from letters, sent to Sydney's father, from his Battalion; these moving letters are quoted at length as they must be typical of many such letters sent to bereaved parents/next of kin from the front line.

From his Platoon Commander Lt. Haggard. *It is with the deepest regret and sympathy that I write to you to give you details of your poor son's death, as I have heard it from his companions. I was not with the platoon at the time owing to a wound in the elbow which necessitated my going to hospital, and it was a great blow to me to hear of his death on my return. Although he has not been with us for long, all his comrades in the Platoon and myself have always found him a really good fellow and he was a favourite with us all. He died doing his duty to the last. He was a sentry, and in aiming at one of the enemy had to expose his head and shoulders, and was immediately shot in the head by a German sniper; death was instantaneous and he suffered no pain. He has been buried behind the trenches in a sheltered spot in the valley with a large wood on the hill behind and lies besides those of his comrades, who have had the misfortune to meet with a like end.*

A further letter from a Sergeant of the Stretcher Bearer Section echoes Lt Haggard's explanation and adds *'his was a noble death and with him all is well. 'Thy Will be Done' is very hard to say when those that we love are called away, but I feel sure that God will comfort you in your deep sorrow.'*

To this latter letter was appended a postscript from the Chaplain. *'Just a word of sincere sympathy as I go out to bury your son. His is a sacrifice which we all admire and his death is that of a good soldier.'*

Image 1 - Sussex Agricultural Express, 13th August 1915

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000655/19150813/250/0012>

Image 2 - Sussex Agricultural Express, 1st October 1915

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000655/19151001/082/0005>

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