

2018-11-11; Remembrance Sunday

Address

Over the last 4 years we have heard a great deal about the 1st War and much of what we have heard has been the experience of individuals - those who served in the armed forces, and those who remained at home. I want to reflect very briefly on what the experience of war may have been like for 3 men whose names are written on the memorial here. They are all very different - one a regular soldier, one a volunteer and one a conscript, and each became involved at a different stage of the war. I am indebted to Andrew Surry for making his extensive research available to me.

We begin with Joseph Clark. Joseph Clark wasn't originally a Walsworth man though his address was given as St Michael's Mount. He was born in Lincolnshire, in Tattershall, and he enlisted there in 1906. So he was an established professional soldier when Britain entered the war on 4 August 1914. His battalion, 1st Lincolnshire, was stationed in Portsmouth at the time, so he probably knew days earlier that the Navy was already on a war footing to defend the coast of France and that war was imminent.

The battalion travelled by train from Portsmouth to Southampton and from there across the Channel to Le Havre aboard the SS Norman. From Le Havre they travelled to Mons, in Belgium, by road and rail. We can't know what the soldiers must have been feeling at this point - a mixture of apprehension and quite possibly excitement, inspired by the rapturous welcome they received from the folk in the many towns and villages they passed through on the way.

The Battle of Mons ended in retreat. Arriving at the River Aisne, by way of Marne where there was more fighting, and by this time, utterly exhausted, the British soldiers found themselves in an exposed position, so, ever resourceful, they borrowed spades from local farms and dug themselves in - and made trenches; thus began a new style of warfare.

Joseph Clark was killed 2 days later and is buried in Vailly British Cemetery alongside other British soldiers who died at Aisne.

For George Gentle's story, we move away from the mud and trenches of the French and Belgian battlefields of the Western Front to the Eastern theatres of war. George was a platelayer on the railways; that is, he maintained the track. The army needed his skills to maintain the track which facilitated the movement of ammunition and supplies to the front line. So, George Gentle left Ivy Cottage in Orchard Road, where he lived with his wife Lizzie and 4 children to volunteer with 117 Railway Company of the Royal Engineers. In July 1915, he arrived in Egypt where the weather was very hot. The coarse fabric of the army uniform caused sores to form on warm, moist skin. Infection was rife; scorpions and poisonous snakes were another hazard.

Some time the following year, 117 Railway Company of the Royal Engineers was transferred to Salonika in Greece, across the Mediterranean Sea - a difficult journey because of the risk from mines submarines. Heat and disease were factors here too, and George succumbed first to heat stroke and then to malaria. George was one of 787 soldiers to die from the disease. He is buried in Salonika.

Before moving to Leicester, Arthur John Pilsworth was an apprentice at International Stores in Hitchin. Arthur was most probably a conscript, that is, he was required by law to serve as a soldier.

The Military Service Act of 1916 at first applied to only single men but was extended to include married men and men up to the age of 50 as the need became more pressing. Arthur's wife had died in 1913, leaving him with twins, a son and a daughter. Perhaps she died in childbirth. Arthur joined the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards in October 1917. By this time, the practices of warfare had changed, becoming more modern, more horrific. 1st Battalion Welsh Guards was an elite Guards regiment, so Arthur would have found himself in the thick of the hostilities. Fortunes in war are

never straightforward, always mixed. An operation at St Leger Wood did not go to plan. Tanks, a new introduction and not always reliable, failed to arrive; the soldiers came under fire in thick fog. Prisoners were taken by the British, and guns were captured, but Arthur died from his injuries in August 1918.

3 thumbnail sketches of the what might have been the Great War experience of 3 men with Walsworth connections; 3 men whose names are among the 17 on the Walsworth memorial. Some of the the families of those men still live locally. War is an indiscriminate thing which, one way or another, touches everyone.

The love of God is also indiscriminate. Even the awfulness of war and the lives it touches so cruelly are held in God's love, as our lives are now. All one in the same embrace. Every life in all its detail is known to God. Each life throughout all history, today, and in time to come, is precious to him.