



Life at home: January - March 1916

The Government soon realised that the Derby Scheme was not going to provide enough men for the army. In January 1916 the Military Service Act was introduced making men between 18 and 41 liable for service, unless they were married, widowed with children, ministers of religion, or working in a 'reserved' occupation. This was effectively conscription.

With the beginnings of food shortages, agricultural work was a 'reserved' occupation and Charles Seward of Weston Farm served on Local Tribunals examining claims of those seeking exemption. The Tribunals tried to keep workers for local farms, but men could only be exempted if there was no-one else who could do their job.

The war was also having other impacts with stricter lighting restrictions due to increased German air attacks. Houses had to have dimmed lighting or blackouts, all wheeled vehicles had to have dim front lights (not headlights). In Buriton, Percy Legg tried out the front light on his young daughter's pram!

News travelled fast in Buriton: the death of George Watts was known about before the 'official' announcement and heavy fighting around Verdun was discussed soon after it started. Men like Fred Legg, and the Treagus brothers, Billy

and Basil, probably brought news from the Front when home on leave.

Winter was hard on the elderly with Buriton losing three of its older residents in February: Anna Gough from Stanbridge, wife of David Gough; Sarah Pretty of South Lane, the widowed mother of limeworker Edward Pretty; and Henry Walton, 95, who had lived in Buriton for many years but died in the infirmary of Havant Workhouse - a sad reminder of what happened then to people without the support of a family.

In February the stained glass window in memory of Mrs Bonham Carter was placed in St Mary's. In the same month residents were happy to hear that Harriet Bennion, of Nursted House, had become engaged to Bishop John Mercer, but perhaps a little saddened as his new parish in Brighton would take her away from the village, where she was well-known and well-liked.

Spirits were raised when Frederick Marriner brought his new bride back from Slinfold, and no doubt Manor Farm workers raised a glass to celebrate the birth of Algernon Bonham Carter's daughter, Pansy.

It was certainly a relatively 'wintery' winter with the village enduring a week of heavy snow at the end of February which prevented outdoor work and practically cut the village off.

On the Western Front: January-March 1916

Winter passed with no notable push by either side and, early in 1916, new British CiC, Douglas Haig, agreed to join forces with the French for a big summer offensive by the Somme. However, within days of this agreement, the Germans launched an attack around Verdun: an area with historic sentiment for the French and for which they would wish to fight ferociously.

The Battle of Verdun was to become the longest single battle of the war with France allocating all her resources. The Battle of the Somme, later in the year, would therefore have to be an exclusively British effort – and large enough to draw Germans away from Verdun.

By now, many Buriton men had been away for eighteen months and many were re-grouping for the Somme offensive. Those in the 1st Hampshire's who had fought in Belgium were now around Arras, heading toward positions near Beaumont Hamel. George Harding, Basil Treagus, Arthur Watts and Fred Legg were joined here by new replacements including James Hills, Percy Case and Alfred Cook arriving from UK.

The 5th Division moved south including Douglas Harfield and Victor Welch. The Artillery, in which Wilfred Aldred served, re-joined their 36th Division taking a central position in the Somme front.

Men arrived in France from other theatres of war and many who had enlisted at the outbreak were finally crossing the channel.

Frank Newman had served in Gallipoli

Craters near Hohenzollern Redoubt



and arrived in France late in February. Albert Bunce, Albert Marriner, James Powell and Percy Strugnell also joined him in March around Marseilles before moving to an area east of Pont Remy, 30 miles back from the Somme lines.

Godfrey Harfield, back from service in India, re-enlisted with a Battalion bound for the Somme, based 20 miles behind the main front. Algernon Bonham Carter returned to minor operations, close to others around Loos.

Caleb Chitty, William Fisher, Herbert Francis, Edward Lee, Albert Strugnell and Victor Windibank were mobilised in February and by 11 March were near Blaringhem, 25 miles back from the Somme lines.

The one Buriton fatality in this period was George Watts, 25, from the High Street. He was still fighting in the same area as before Christmas, near Hohenzollern Redoubt. On 2nd March, he worked all night, carrying bombs, and then assumed front line positions at sunrise. Shells poured down all day and that evening enemy bombing parties attacked. Shelling continued all night and at 6am it intensified before relentless bombing parties repeatedly attacked, killing George and 29 others.

Out in India

Instead of being in France or Flanders, a number of Buriton Boys found themselves 6,000 miles from home in the distinctly different climate of India.

In 1914 India was in a state of political unrest, with other worries about hostilities from Afghanistan along the North-West Frontier. A British presence was felt to be vital with regular soldiers already based there for some time.

However, with regular troops being recalled to fight in Europe, a number of Territorial units were sent to India to replace them. One such unit was the 1/9th Hampshire (Cyclists) Battalion containing local men such as Frederick Smith, a stockman and hop field manager on the Bonham Carter's Manor Farm.

Mobilised in August 1914, the Battalion had spent some months protecting the coasts of Lincolnshire and Sussex against possible German invasions. Whilst in Lincolnshire Fred Smith appears to have met his wife-to-be, Margaret Allison, to whom he would send regular letters and

photographs from his travels.

In November 1915 Fred's unit was converted into ordinary infantry and was told they would be going to East Africa; then, instead, that it would be Egypt; then that it would be France; before finally sailing off to India on 4th February 1916.

Amongst early recollections was the march from the railway station to the barracks in Bangalore: "With the thermometer in the shade being about 95 degrees we were inclined to discount the wisdom of the order which caused us to march three miles clad in the same serge which had served us well through a Blighty winter. Perhaps the idea of the powers-that-be was to conduct the process of 'acclimatisation' in one fell swoop. The natural Turkish bath process certainly had the quality of economy, though its other recommendations were hard to perceive."

Monsoon rains also surprised the troops: "Those in tents pitched in lowly places awoke in the darkness of the small hours to find themselves invaded





by raging torrents. Anxious moments were spent saving kit before it was washed away, until the only candle also disappeared in the flood.”

Fred’s unit spent nine months in Bangalore, training for a range of conditions with rumours raging as to where they might go: perhaps up to the North-West Frontier, or maybe out to Mesopotamia to help British troops fighting there.

Early in December 1916 the Battalion eventually left Bangalore for Burhan and the North-West Frontier: a six-day train journey of 2,300 miles. “We could all have named more acceptable places to spend the festive season but a Christmas round the home fires had to be put off again – for the last time we hope. The good old custom of consuming more fayre than is strictly necessary for the maintenance of life was religiously observed and, considering the temporary nature of the cook-house accommodation, the cooks did their duty right well.”

Fred Smith’s photographs illustrate the Battalion’s activities during 1917 and 1918, including strenuous training in mountain warfare and duties in a range of challenging locations. It was noted that “By the time our training is concluded,

there will hardly be any branch of infantry tactics with which we are not acquainted. Before leaving England we trained for trench warfare in France and Flanders. Then we practiced warfare of the type to be expected in country like German East Africa. Then, on arrival in India, for normal types of operation in open country, such as might be employed in Mesopotamia, and now in methods of frontier warfare in broken country. We can certainly claim to have almost unique qualifications for being held in readiness for despatch to any theatre of war at short notice.”

The Battalion spent Christmas 1917 in Ferozepore but in March 1918 they were ordered up to 7,000 feet in the Himalayas, a four-day march from Rawal Pindi. They were snow-bound on arrival and stayed three weeks before being ordered down again to the plains.

The Battalion’s final adventures were among the most remarkable of the war. In October 1918, they began to mobilise for more service on the Frontier but were suddenly told that they were to assist anti-Bolshevik forces in Siberia: a change in temperature from 116 degrees in the shade to 58 degrees below zero. But that is another story ...