



Life at home: October to December 1916

By late autumn 1916, rising food costs were beginning to affect everybody, particularly the cost of bread, with wheat supplies running very short. Elderly parishioners were probably pleased with Government's decision to raise the Old Age Pension in cases of hardship – to the princely sum of £1 for married couples, and 13 shillings [63p] for single people.

The endless appeals for donations continued, but perhaps local people had reached the end of their capability to give: Buriton's donations for a Red Cross appeal were the lowest in the district. Local schoolgirls were, however, kept busy knitting socks – one wonders how many lumps were in these beginners' efforts!

Although there had been little news of the Somme, the desperate appeals to raise the number of eggs donated for the wounded in France, an appeal that asked people to remember what the soldiers were going through, and give up eating eggs themselves, must have given a hint of the casualties involved.

The dreaded telegrams kept arriving: to the widowed mother of Thomas Lovell in Weston (he had finally managed to enlist after being turned down several times), and in Bones Lane, Buriton, to the father of Victor Welch. There was, however,

no news for the family of Caleb Chitty at Cowhouse Farm about their 'missing' son.

Even though she was not well-known in Buriton, people turned out to watch the funeral of Sibella Bonham Carter, 79, who had died on an extended visit to Buriton House. On 11th October the village was full of the good and the great, including her son, Maurice Bonham Carter, Principal Private Secretary to Prime Minister Asquith, whose daughter he had married in 1915. Sibella was buried in St Mary's churchyard where her impressive memorial still stands.

There was also a sight to see when a plane got lost in the mist and landed in a field near Rushes Road and was grounded for a week because of bad weather.

In December the newspapers reported Asquith's resignation and his replacement by Lloyd George before another rather subdued wartime Christmas arrived. There was a temporary suspension of the 'Closing of Shops Order' (shops could stay open for a little longer than dusk) but special details appeared in local papers so people could see exactly what time they had to have blackouts up at home.

Christmas was slightly enlivened in Buriton by a spell of good weather, the Primitive Methodist choir and the Salvation Army band.

Fighting during October, November and December 1916

October on the Somme found many men still fighting on the same ground as in July. Near Beaumont Hamel, William Fisher of the 14th Hampshires, a limeworker from South Lane, was reported missing, presumed dead, but was later



confirmed as a Prisoner of War.

Amidst heavy rain, both sides aimed for high ground or strategic trench lines and on 18th October at least three Buriton men were amongst the 1st Hampshires trying to drive Germans from the north edge of Lesbouefs only to be pushed back by hidden machine guns.

Movement became almost impossible, with flooded trenches and craters from broken waterways – and yet more rain. Conditions put paid to most plans but, around Beaumont Hamel, it was still hoped that the Ancre Heights could be attacked to obtain a valuable observation position. Although raids took place, the main attack was repeatedly postponed due to weather.

At 5am on November 13th the rain stopped, mist reduced visibility to 30 yards and the British attacked, taking initial objectives amidst hard fighting. Buriton's Algernon Bonham Carter, 1st Kings Royal Rifles, was new in the area.

At 9:30am the next day he was ordered to move up from reserves and then, during the night, he led his men across what had been no man's land, attacking into a series of German trenches before sunrise.

Unfamiliar with the area and taking friendly fire, Bonham Carter and his men lost direction but, realising their error, progressed along a communication trench to their objective, again finding themselves under friendly shell fire. Eventually they withdrew, with 50 prisoners, to take up defensive positions.

On the same day, men of 14th Hampshires (including Herbert Francis, Victor Windebank and Albert Strugnell from Buriton), went over the top at Athuille Wood to remove the enemy from a newly dug line. They took it and repelled a counter-attack but Victor Windebank was wounded in the thigh by shrapnel and came back to Norfolk for treatment.

The following day, in the same location,



the 7th South Lancashires also attacked and it is possible that Godfrey Harfield was with them. They met renewed uncut wire and retired, but later went over again at Grandcourt village. On 18th November they repelled an attack and took some prisoners.

Snow fell, ending activity in the area for most. The 15th Hampshires had been fighting beyond Flers with Horace and Wilfred Gamblen, Fred Rattley and Cyril Fullick likely to be amongst them. After several weeks the fight here concluded on November 18th as the Germans launched a highly co-ordinated attack and retook the lines to the rear of Flers.

British Generals called off the Somme offensive on 18th November. In 141 days the British had advanced just seven miles and failed to break the German defence. For the rest of the year and early January 1917, military operations by both sides were mostly restricted to surviving the rain, snow, fog, mud fields, waterlogged trenches and shell-holes. Routine trench life involved three days in the firing line, three in support lines and three out at rest.

The 2nd Hampshires were in the firing line at Bernafay Wood and sadly Percy Strugnell from Bones Lane (aged 21) was killed here on 21st November but has no known grave.



In all, the British suffered about half a million casualties on the Somme with seven from Buriton killed, four seriously wounded and one a wounded POW. Over twenty others had survived the ordeal.

Other local men were still enlisting including, in October, at his third or fourth attempt, 5' 3" Harry Legg. Previously rejected due to his height and medical tests, Harry finally joined up following the introduction of conscription and lowered physical standards. He would go on to be awarded the Military Medal and a Bar for brave conduct in actions in 1918.

Also in this period, Samuel Francis left Britain to serve in Yemen, leaving his wife, Maud and four children in Weston. He was fighting around the Port of Aden by 5th December. And Lionel Hughes, son of Buriton's Rector, was transferred from the western front to the Balkans (Salonika) and would subsequently travel on to Egypt, Cyprus, Palestine and Syria during the remainder of his service.

Help from above: a Pilot's role over the Somme

Royal Flying Corps pilot Francis Cave, 19, from Ditcham House was helping troops below him but flying was still in its early days: it is only thirteen years since the Wright brothers' first powered flight.

Cave's diaries suggest that most of his flights in this period were in conjunction with RGA Siege Batteries, helping direct fire onto enemy targets.

Siege Batteries were based behind the front line, trying to destroy enemy artillery, supply routes, railways and stores. The Batteries generally had heavy Howitzer guns, firing large shells over five miles.

The RFC had developed a wireless system for pilots to help gunners hit targets and Batteries had RFC wireless operators based with them. Aircraft carried a wireless set and 'squared' maps and, after identifying the location of a target, the airmen would transmit details (eg. A5, B3, etc) in morse code.

Aircraft were, however, only able to transmit and could not receive signals. Messages from the ground to the pilot depended on strips of cloth being laid on the ground in the form of letters. A "K" referred to in Cave's diary was a signal saying his wireless signals were being received OK.

Once firing started, the airmen reported the accuracy using a clock code, the battery adjusted their firing and tried again, repeating the process until the pilot reported shots on target. Results were mixed as observing artillery fire, even from



above, required significant skill and there may have been some 'optimism bias' – reporting on-target rounds that weren't. On occasions Cave visited some of the Siege Batteries. On 10th October he met 33rd Siege in Poziers, a place that was "absolutely flattened – hardly even a cellar left in it." Later he visited 80th Siege and "had a look at the mine crater south of La Boisselle": the huge Lochnagar crater which still remains today: one of the 17 British mines exploded on 1st July to start the battle.

On 23rd October Cave saw some tanks whilst visiting Ovillers: "looked inside but not allowed inside", and on November 6th: "just as I was going to bed I saw the sky all red and heard a terrific explosion. There were Zepps over and they hit a French ammunition dump which is still going off." The next day he was given 10 days leave and spent some time back in Buriton but he was back in France for the rest of the year, often grounded by bad weather.