Life at home: January to March 1915

At home, the winter was wet – with so much rain that the water in local wells rose to levels that no-one could ever remember before.

There were more visible reminders of the war: soldiers were training on War Down and aeroplanes were regularly seen (usually a rare sight in those days).

Buriton was placed under lighting restrictions with no lights to be shown between 5 pm and 7am. Villagers were also told that they should take shelter in cellars if enemy aircraft were coming – not so comforting for those without cellars!

When the rain eventually stopped, in February, there was a considerable snowfall – reported as making the hills look 'very beautiful'. There were, of course, no trees on the hilltops in those days.

Although the weather had also been bad on the Western Front, a well-oiled propaganda machine saw that mostly positive material appeared in local newspapers. Villagers would have been heartened to hear that men in France had a relatively good time at Christmas, with special trains taking extra food supplies and presents to the front line. There was some indication that trench warfare was unpleasant, but emphasis was placed on how good the quarters were to which front-line soldiers returned, and the moral uplift that was achieved by dry socks and warm food.

This news encouraged local Women's Institutes to increase the number of socks and shirts being sent to the troops. The Buriton Estate was also making a contribution by sending supplies of rabbits to hospitals for the wounded.

Issues of wider national importance, such as food security, were also being discussed. In January, Captain Percy Seward of Weston Farm, chaired a meeting to try to encourage growing sugar beet locally. In the past, Britain had imported large supplies from Germany and Austria, but clearly this was no longer possible. Local farmers seemed reluctant to experiment, but Captain Seward said he would plant a trial crop.

More and more men were leaving the parish and, in January, Alice Evans (née Pretty), sent a poem she had written, 'Our Brave Boys of Buriton,' to the local newspaper. The next week the paper praised Buriton for its response, giving details of the number of men who had already gone to war, or were only awaiting their call-up. This was considered an

outstanding contribution from such a small village – leading to a bit of a debate in the area, with other parishes claiming that they had also sent above average numbers of men to the war.

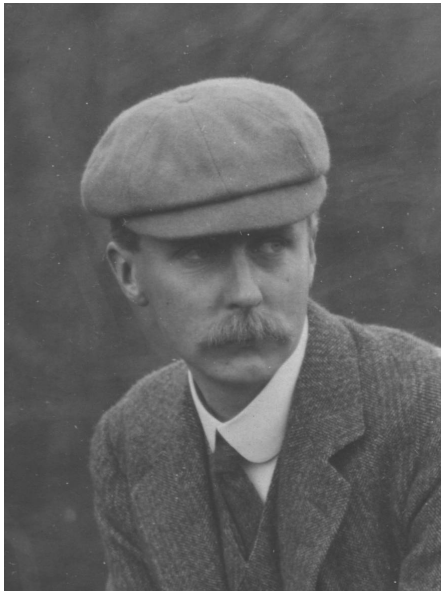
As well as men leaving for the front, others (including Percy and Harry Smith, sons of the farm bailiff, and men from the Pretty and Powell family) were declared fit for enlistment. George Watts and Walter Pretty enlisted but fortunately Alfred Cook had not yet done so when his father, George, from Nursed Rocks, was buried in January. News arrived of William Langrish becoming a prisoner of war.

Happy events were few and far between, but on 10 February, Ellen Watts (known as Nellie), married Frank Whye. Although her brother, Arthur, had already joined up, he was able to be at the wedding. Henry Marriner was also home for a couple of days' leave, but another member of the Pretty family, Walter, had gone to enlist and one of the Powell's six sons, Frederick, had been sent to the Mesopotamian theatre of war.

People were always anxious for news about the war – spread by word of mouth, letters and the local newspaper. The fact that Algernon Bonham Carter had been promoted to Captain when he returned to the Front would have been speedily passed around.

Charles Cave of Ditcham House gave a first-hand account of the situation in France to the Petersfield WI in March. He had volunteered himself, his chauffeur and his Rolls Royce for service with the Motor Ambulance Corps and had been away for several months. He seemed to focus his talk on French casualties – perhaps because this had been his experience, or perhaps because he felt it better not to raise alarm about British casualties.

There was a veiled word of warning towards the end of his talk, when he said that the French were confident of winning, but would prefer a lasting peace to an early one. People were preparing for a longer war than first anticipated.



'Charles Cave'

Local Action - Hundreds of miles away, a hundred years ago

In January 1915 Lionel Hughes, the Rector's son, and Levi Hiscock of Faggs Farm travelled to Flanders where the coming weeks were to be relatively quiet.

Other Buriton men remained in trenches around Ypres, often overlooked by the enemy on higher, better-drained positions. Bus driver, Arthur Ellis, was now moving munitions more often than food or wounded.

William Tribe was a few miles south of others, on the edge of Ploegsteert Wood, scene of the Christmas truce. Here, although shell-fire and snipers were rife, it was the rain and bitter winds that dominated trench life. His experience in 1st Hants Battalion was typical of most during winter operations. They strengthened their waterlogged positions, rotating between front line and support duties every six days. In the dreadful January weather, they had 150 men sick in hospital, compared to six killed and seven seriously wounded.

Reinforcements began to arrive during this quiet period with many, such as James Powell, returning from tropical postings into the teeth of a European winter.

As January ended the enemy made moves: detonating mines under Allied trenches prior to attacking. Ground was lost then retaken by men up to their knees in mud.

During a frosty February, eighteen times more shells fell than in September – with 3,000 firms now involved in their production. The British forces blew their first deep mine this month, under Hill 60, south of Ypres where artillery man, Arthur Strugnell, was fighting. The hill was not held for long.

Closer to home a naval ship and four merchant vessels were sunk by U-boats in the Channel and German airships dropped bombs on east coast towns.

March saw Fred Powell leave Buriton for India whilst in France, a carefully planned British offensive aimed to pierce the German lines at Neuve Chappelle. In a 35 minute artillery bombardment, more shells were fired than in the entire Boer War – all falling only 200m in front of our own trenches, from positions 5km away. On the whistles 40,000 men attacked, still taking four hours to capture the village. Each side suffered over 10,000 casualties – but the tactics for 1915 were now set.

Thankfully no Buriton men were directly involved in this action although some were nearby. Small attacks by both sides continued to cost lives all winter, just trying to gain slightly better positions. Although Buriton did not lose any men during these months, a busy year was ahead for them all.

So what did War Horse actually do?

In the recent Boer War, much of the fighting had involved the cavalry and, initially, people thought that this would happen again. But, as the armies became deadlocked in trenches, both sides realised that men on horses could not win the war. They were easily hit by machine guns or stopped by shell holes, muddy ground and barbed wire.

Nevertheless the humble horse continued to provide the backbone of the vast logistical operations of both armies. Mechanised vehicles were relatively new inventions and prone to problems. Horses and mules were reliable forms of transport – and, compared to a lorry, needed relatively little upkeep.

Horses pulled artillery guns, supply trucks and ambulance wagons – sometimes belly-deep in mud over horrific terrain. The movement of munitions, men, equipment, supplies, field kitchens and fuel relied on raw horse-power, mainly moving at night so they wouldn't be seen or shelled.

Each 1,000-man infantry battalion had 20 men and 56 horses to carry everything needed: food, medical supplies, tools, guns and equipment. Big sturdy horses worked in teams to pull heavy artillery guns, weighing more than today's London taxi cab! These horses could eat for five hours each day – so lots of oats and hay were required.

It was soon realised that huge numbers of horses would be needed. A call for an additional 25,000 was made in the first six months of the war – but it became clear that five times that number would be required.

In August 1914 horse owners in Buriton were summoned to Petersfield Police Station with their horses for inspection and requisition into war-service. Later on in the war the Army sent men round to the farms to look for suitable horses and take them away. There are some local stories about how some of the farms hid their best horses away in out-buildings elsewhere in the parish so that the Army men did not find them.

There simply weren't enough horses in Britain, so over 1,000 were shipped from America each week, from the plentiful supplies of half-wild animals on the open plains. The Army's "Remounts Service" was responsible for this massive task and one of their three main depots was in Hampshire, at Romsey. It is likely that horses from Buriton went there.

Many thousands of animals were killed during the war – but, perhaps surprisingly, only a quarter of deaths were caused by enemy action. The biggest killer was 'debility', caused by exposure to the elements, exhaustion, hunger and illness.