

Lest We Forget: Bottesford and Muston in the Great War

Bottesford Parish First World War Centenary Project

This fascinating compilation of oral testimony, private letters and public archives which provides memorable glimpses into the way two Leicestershire villages were affected by the war. It successfully weaves together the stories of personal sufferings and tragedies of those who went away with the steadily increasing everyday hardships of those who stayed. Sometimes the two worlds come into contact – as when a Zeppelin is sighted (*a black telegraph pole on its side... this alien object cruising around.. above them was beyond belief*).

The editors of this Heritage Lottery Fund supported book have wisely decided to allow most of the documents to speak for themselves. One result is that many of the reports from the front show the characteristic stiff upper lip of the time, stemming from wish to spare relatives the true horrors. Nevertheless the horrors and the loss comes through clearly enough and culminating in many cases in the dreaded postal delivery with the notification of death.

There are a mass of painstakingly reconstructed individual stories. One example was the experience of Frank Pacey who had already spent nearly a year at the front and suffered shell shock before returning to France. He wrote to his father on 20 November 1915 asking '*How much longer do you think the war will last? I reckon about a month after Christmas will see it over ... I know we shall be just as busy after this rotten job is finished, as we used to be.*' But instead of returning to his work as a plumber he was killed at Vimy five months later. His brother Charles, who like several others in the book had emigrated to Canada and then joined up, described his experience of trench fighting: '*We had to walk over dead men to get to the trenches, dead Germans all over and shells dropping all over (.) gee we lost hundreds of men that 3 days (.) I will never forget the sight as long as I live and our boys won't either... its no use mentioning what we see and do though (.) but I tell you we are all right now and no kick coming at all (.) in fact we are kind of enjoying ourselves a bit.*' Charles maintained the upbeat tone writing later: '*I am writing this in the firing line in a cold dug out. By gee its wonderful how our boys are standing it (.) Well good luck Dad from your affectionate Son Charlie.*' And '*Who says that we will lost? Not a thought! The greatest organisations of warfare, unequalled, are with us today and yet improvements everyday will lead us, before another twelve months, to victory – final at that...*' Charles was also killed.

On the home front, Bottesford was closer to food than some urban centres but - especially after the potato harvest failed in Scotland and parts of England 1916 shortages became acute, while the price of bread doubled.

'Food: buy it with thought, cook it with care' was part of the government's slogan, one part of the steady encroachment of the state; regulations covered everything from the notification of lodgers to bans on carrying cameras in a restricted area. By the final year of the fighting war the War on Waste was in full flow. Lectures were given on *'the various uses of potatoes'* and *'the making of starch and butter substitutes'* (202). An order from the Ministry of Food in 1918 capped blackberries prices at 4 pennies per pound.

Social hierarchies might be challenged for example by the increase number of women working, but overall these sources suggest (including the up-beat patriotism of the *Grantham Journal* suggest that the old order in this part of rural England (with the Duke of Rutland at the top) remained intact. Only in 1917 were there 'faint ripples of change' with trade unions being formed. Appropriately the war ended here not with a ban but a whimper. It left *'people to reflect on the years of hardship and grief they had endured and to wonder how many of the promises for a fairer, brighter future would be fulfilled'*. One answer - and foretaste future suffering - is suggested by the fact that infant classes were now *'told what do in the event of an air raid.'*

After the end of the war commemoration opening up divisions, between church and chapel: Church leaders described the war as the penalty of sin, because people had forgotten God, the terrible calamity *but 'what a lesson had come out of that most awful struggle.'* Some preferred not be reminded by a German Field Gun trophy displayed. Many who returned were silent and probably traumatised thought the word was not used. Harold Hallam called *'it were murder, bloody murder, best forgotten'*.

Frank Pacey, reporting on the changes which deaths and reinforcements had made to the composition of his battalion had reflected *'It is a pity how a man is soon forgotten though. A fellow that we slept with, worked with etc and now just an occasional thought reminds us, or we would forget they ever existed.'*

The last part of Pacey's comment is reprinted on the back cover. It provides a fitting epithet for this project against forgetting.

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