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SPECIAL ISSUE

PLUS  The fighting member back to ‘The House’  •  Leicestershire’s contribution to saving the nation and much more
Welcome back to East Midlands History and Heritage. This special issue focuses on the First World War and its aftermath, and we would like to thank particularly all those local historians and groups who’ve shared with us their research and the details of their activities.

We’d like to take this further by creating a permanent record via an online regional archive for your Great War research, stories, photos, memorability, letters, diaries, events, etc. (see page 30). We’re equally interested in what happened next, so what were the immediate and longer-term consequences of the war for local people and communities. For further details and advice contact us on emhist@virginmedia.com.

Dr Nick Hayes
Editor East Midlands History and Heritage
Dr Katie Bridger, Dr Helen Drew, Hannah Nicholson
Assistant editors

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The fighting member back to ‘The House’:

Oliver Locker-Lampson, the Conservative Party and the 1918 Coupon Election in Huntingdonshire.

By Prof Barry Doyle

On 14 December 1918, just one month after the end of the First World War and with many civilians struggling with the latter stages of the Spanish Flu epidemic, the United Kingdom went to the polls for the first general election in eight years.

The result was a resounding victory for the Coalition parties led by Lloyd George, the Conservatives performing particularly well, securing 382 of the Coalition’s 523 seats. Yet this performance by the Tories was not necessarily expected based on their pre-war record when they had lost three elections in a row and had become uncomfortably embroiled in support for radical Ulster Unionists threatening mutiny and armed insurrection.

How did the Conservatives turn things around so impressively? Historians assign their success to four factors: the Conservatives’ whole-hearted support for the war effort and the war record of many of their MPs; better organisation and preparation than the other main parties; crisis and division in both the independent Liberals and the Labour Party; and reform of the parliamentary system which, while tripling the electorate, including 7 million women, also saw a major redistribution that created hundreds of single member urban and suburban seats. Looking at the general election in the newly created Huntingdonshire constituency offers an opportunity to explore these ideas and test the theses that Conservatives had all the advantages.

The central character in this story is the successful Conservative candidate at the 1918 Huntingdonshire election, Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson DSO. Locker-Lampson, the son of the poet, Frederick Locker, was educated at Eton and Cambridge. He made his money as a journalist before securing election to Parliament in January 1910 as the representative for the Ramsey division of Huntingdon. During the Edwardian period he was associated with the right wing of the Conservative party, in particular promoting the interest of working-class conservatism. During the First World War he raised his own armoured car squadron over which he retained control for the whole of the conflict. His squadron went to Russia in 1916 spending much of the war on the Russian and Bulgarian fronts. He built strong connections with the Russian military and was awarded CMG and DSO.

Locker-Lampson offers a good case study for understanding the Conservative victory in 1918 because of the survival of his business, constituency and military correspondence for the period 1912-20 in the Norfolk Records Office. The archive includes substantial evidence of how the constituency was managed, the effects of the electoral reforms, the confusion caused by divisions within the Liberal party and the importance of war service for candidates at the 1918 election.

Victory in 1918 was not a foregone conclusion as the Liberals had won both Huntingdon seats in the 1906 landslide and there was clearly a solid Liberal vote to draw on. Locker-Lampson’s win, therefore, owed much to the way he and his team maintained their pre-war constituency work. Such activities included the members’ subscription payments to hundreds of local associations and activities, especially working-class groups like Helping Hand Clubs, football teams and village charities. This had initially ended with the outbreak of the First World War but he maintained a campaigning team in his constituency – treasurer George Knights and agent Wallis Simpson – who gradually reinstated some of the payments and acted in other ways to keep the MP in the public consciousness. They maintained infrastructure and organization including keeping up registration and ensuring the smooth merger of Huntingdon and Ramsey (Locker-Lampson’s seat) in 1917-18. They also worked hard to build the finances of the local party and sustain the membership. In the run-up to the election they were able to mobilise activists across most of the constituency as well as liaising with Central Office to secure speakers and advice.


As with most British towns and cities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Nottingham benefited from the philanthropy of local families, and especially those involved in successful businesses.

Two such families were the Birkins, who were major local lace manufacturers, and the Bayleys, manufacturers and colliery owners.

In 1899 Sir Thomas Isaac Birkin donated Forest House and 3½ acres of land in the city to the Nottingham Children’s Hospital, whereas brother and sister, Thomas and Catherine (Kate) Bayley, were instrumental in founding in June 1917 the Nottingham Day Nursery on High Pavement for the benefit of working families. Two years later they added another orphanage on the same site. With the coming of war in 1914 it was unsurprising that once again these two families were at the forefront in providing support for those about to be engaged in the fighting.

It was really realised that the very likely conflict of war casualties would create a great strain on the existing medical facilities and that the effort of those involved in successful businesses would be required to provide as quickly as possible a hospital for the benefit of the population. As a result, in 1917 the Red Cross offered the Red Cross the use of one of its properties as an auxiliary hospital for the duration of the war and, along with its matron, Edith Read-Beatty, the son of her deceased brother, Thomas, she also financed the equipping of the hospital. The hospital was opened on 21st October 1914. The first patients were a group of 20 French soldiers sent from Leuven Hospital as “evacuees”. The German invasion of “neutral” Belgium provoked national outrage, as did the destruction andatrocity stories that accompanied this. Not surprisingly therefore, the arriving soldiers were met by enthusiastic crowds at Nottingham Station, amongst them being 20 men of Prince’s (2nd) Battalion of the Red Cross Society who transported them to the hospital.

One of their number was a soldier named Vanderstappen. His wife had been “red prissie” in Brussels along with her 18-month-old child. However, “she did lose her heart and occupied the inebriate...”

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The involvement of the Birkin family came through the wealthy daughter of Sir Thomas, Ethel Lilian Birkin of Biddenden Grange, Nottingham. Despite being from the wealthiest family in the county, Ethel was well educated and had a strong desire to aid her country. Having joined the British Red Cross Society, taking a leading role in the organization of the local branch. As Secretary when she was appointed to the job, she became responsible for all arrangements for starting and equipping the War Hospitals in Nottinghamshire. In this she was aided by her Joint Secretary, Montague Williams, a Nottingham solicitor, who would later be killed in action whilst serving with the 17th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters. Lilian was invited to become the Commandant and Matron of the Bayley (Red Cross) Auxiliary Hospital, a position she gladly accepted and where she remained until the hospital closed in 1919.

Clement Terrace was one of the first steps of the War Park Estate, built by the Nottingham Castle by the Dukes of Newcastle. The terrace comprised seven townhouses and was designed by the architect, T. Thomas Chambers Hine in 1855. It is located on a site on Derby Road overlooking The Park. According to Whitty’s Directory of Nottingham and Neighbourhood 1891/92 Clement Terrace was the home of the professional classes including bankers, architects and solicitors. In 1919 the floor listed as Bayley Red Cross Hospital (Miss Lilian Birkin, over the first four storeys with a basement and garden to the rear. There was accommodation for 24 patients.)

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In the first two years from opening, some 500 patients had been treated and around 70 operations had been carried out.

One of the men who had to be rescued from the Nottingham Canal at nearby Trowell, whilst attempting to rescue their horses from the water, was Harry Michie, the official organ for Belgians in exile, who was staying with his family in Trowell. Michie was fortunate to escape from danger and later underwent medical treatment for a gunshot wound to the leg he received during the rescue.

By Christmas 1918, there were only eight patients remaining.

‘On Christmas Eve … the eight decorated their hospital. Their staircase and the Rolls of Honour were draped with flags and bunting, whilst gaily coloured streamers trailed across the walls and ceilings. On Christmas Day, there was a dinner with plum pudding and turkey and dessert, port wine and cigars. Then at tea there was a wonderful Blighty cake – with a little house on top and in the distance soldiers and miniature tanks coming home from war. Roses were round the door, and mother outside it to welcome the soldiers. “There was a Christmas tree, and relatives and friends of soldiers came in and there was a present for everyone.”’

Patients continued to be admitted and treated at the hospital until early 1919. By the time the hospital closed on 2nd March 1919 over 1600 patients had been cared for with many operations carried out by Harry Michie. Incredibly not a single patient died. One patient Corporal Charles Catlin, Royal Army Medical Corps, was a noted cartoonist and impromptu entertainer of his fellow patients and would later marry Lilian Birkin.

Honours were bestowed on Lilian Birkin for her service by the British Government with the award of the Order of the British Empire and by the Belgian Government with the presentation of the Medaille de la Reine, Elisabeth.

To continue the treatment of recuperating wounded and invalided soldiers following the closure of the Bayley Hospital, the Birkin family funded the Birkin Red Cross Clinic, which was located on Upper College Street, Nottingham. Lilian Birkin was appointed in charge of the nursing care.

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A maroon rocket was then fired into the air to give the signal to the whole town that “The Battle of The Flowers” was about to commence.

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When “The Battle of Flowers” reached its peaceful end, ex-servicemen marched to the county cricket ground where a carnival of festivities was held.

During the Great War the small south-Leicester neighbourhood of Clarendon Park lost over 100 of its young men. On some streets one could walk for two minutes among the densely-packed Victorian terraces and pass the houses of up to thirteen men killed. Records show that only three of the suburb’s thirty-three streets avoided losing residents, although the imperfect state of the surviving documents suggest that even these may have their hidden casualties.

Perhaps the worst affected house in the neighbourhood belonged to Henry and Eliza Bree of 252 Avenue Road Extension. The first loss came in August 1917, when their 21-year-old son Arthur was killed. Only eight days later his 19-year-old Oliver (also killed) fell, and within nine months Harold had died of wounds in a London hospital, aged only 26. The Bree household met the only fatality in the area to suffer multiple casualties, but the loss of three sons halved their pre-war household family of six.

The effects of such losses as these were not confined to individual households, but rippled through the wider community. This can be seen in the log books kept by Mr Scattergood, headmaster of local school St John’s. Many entries show that former pupils now in the army sent letters to their old headmaster, head of local school St John’s.

When the school suffered its first casualties, Scattergood’s affection for his former charges – perhaps even visited the school when they could. Many entries show that former pupils now in the army sent letters to their old headmaster, head of local school St John’s.

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Often those at home would never know the details of their loved ones’ final moments, but occasionally letters would be sent back to grieving families by those who had been present at the end.

One such letter concerns Ernest Read, formerly of 75 Montague Road. Ernest enrolled with the Leicestershire Regiment in 1915, and fought through much of the war. He was reported missing sometime during the large German offensive which began on March 21st, 1918, and on the 28th he arrived at a hospital in Ellecamps having suffered gunshot wounds to the abdomen. With Ernest close to death, a Maori chaplain from the New Zealand Expeditionary Force named Hoani Parata stopped to minister to him. In a letter Parata later sent to Ernest’s parents, we learn that Ernest had crawled 700 or 800 yards after being wounded. He was also in a “great deal of pain”, but we are aware that Parata was with him, and even managed to repeat the Lord’s Prayer. His last words were also recorded by Parata: “Tell my mother that I loved her to the end and everything that belongs to me is for her... tell her I did my duty and fighting for my Country.” The letter then takes a personal tsk to Parata offers his own condolences to Ernest’s mother. “My heart goes out to sympathy to you. Being a married man myself with a family, I know how much mothers have to go through in bringing sons into the world and caring for them until they reach the stage of manhood. I often think and say that the women who lost their home at home have a much harder time than we men out on Active Service.”

Ernest Read was 23 when he died. Those killed are often described as men, but many were in fact only on the cusp of manhood. Twenty-six of those killed from Clarendon Park were aged just 20 or under, including the 18-year-old Jon Everett of 112 S.L. Stead Road who died fighting with bayonet and trench club to take German positions at Goyenby in April 1918.

When peace finally came Clarendon Park’s residents, like those in every neighbourhood across the country, turned their thoughts to remembering the fallen. While those few who had died of wounds back in England had their families could easily visit, most were not so accessible. Many were buried across France and Belgium, some were further abroad, and a significant number of families had to cope with their loved ones having no known grave at all. William and Emily Jarvis of 10 Montague Road exemplify the pitiful situation in which this could place

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families. On January 16th 1916 their son Frederick died of wounds received during the Battle of Sheikh Sa’ad in Mesopotamia, and was buried at Basra. In May of the next year they lost another son, Charles, at the Battle of Arras in France. Charles’ body was never recovered, and as such he had no known grave. Two sons to mourn, one commemorated on a cold stone memorial in France, and one bereave of the sand 2,600 miles from home.

In 1921, the vacated military hospital adjacent to Clarendon Park opened its doors as University College Leicester. It was founded as a long memorial to those local men who had lost their lives in the Great War, in the hope that future generations would achieve the potential they could not. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that so many students have today made Clarendon Park their home, attending lectures on the campus above which flies a flag emblazoned with the motto: Ut vitam habeant – “that they may have life.”

Joe Hall
Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society

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For many years Mountsorrel in Leicestershire has been famous for its pink granite, reflected in its use for the village’s war memorial. This exceptionally hard stone has been used throughout the country, one of the most notable examples being on the forecourt of Buckingham Palace. Mountsorrel has been involved historically with quarrying for many centuries, but the industry was developed on a much larger scale in the late eighteenth century. Once it was discovered how to work the stone into more regular shapes and sizes, it became ideal for buildings such as churches, bridges and schools. With better management and working methods, the industry was developed on a much greater scale.

The Mountsorrel Granite Company’s (MGC) association with the armed forces – and in particular the Territorial Army – began well before the outbreak of war. In October 1913 the Company agreed to sell a piece of land to the county Territorial Association for the erection of a Drill Hall, the previous one having burnt down, near the Company cottages on Longthorpe Road. The conveyance of this land to the Leicestershire and Rutland Territorial Association took place in the same month.

When war was declared in August 1914, several of the directors of the MGC who were already serving members of the Territorial Forces became rapidly involved in active service. These directors were from the Martin family; William Martin had taken over Mountsorrel’s quarries in 1844. The Mountsorrel Granite Company was incorporated in 1876, with all shares being held by the family. Major Robert Edmund Martin, the Managing Director, was Second in Command, 5th Battalion, Leicestershire Regiment and his brother, Major William Hamilton Martin and Lt Col Sir Robert Edmund Martin, both of whom had returned to their roles in the Company having been invalided out of the Army following injuries at the Battle of Froesburg and the Hohenlinden respectively in 1915.

In the absence of these key men, who between them had a reduction in their annual salary from the MGC. For the length of their army service, they each received a reduction in their annual salary from the MGC. For the length of their army service, they each received a reduction in their annual salary from the MGC.

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As the First World War developed into static trench warfare, and the size and complexity of the armies on the Western Front grew, so did the need for military road and rail construction. The demand came for raw materials and the men to obtain them from quarries. The first two companies, 198th and 206th Quarry Companies Royal Engineers (RE), were formed in the summer of 1915, and the men were gathered at the RE Tunnelling Depot at Clifton in Nottinghamshire. After the companies were moved to France in August 1916, they came under the control of the Director of Works there.

By August 1917, a much greater demand for manpower saw men with little military training being rushed to the Front. Along with the new recruits, professional quarrymen who were already serving in the Army were transferred so that their trade skills could best be used. Men of the 2nd 19th and 3rd 35th Battalions, Leicestershire Regiment, serving in the Army were transferred so that their trade skills could best be used. Men of the 1st/4th Battalion, Leicestershire Regiment (1st /5th Battalions, Leicestershire Regiment) were moved to France in August 1916, they came under the control of the Director of Works there.

The granite company considered addressing this problem by obtaining former army huts for accommodation, together with a cantonment and baths. Nevertheless, quarrying in Mountsorrel carried on, and indeed continues to this day. There is no doubt, however, that the war had a substantial effect on the quarry industry, not least in respect of the 24 employees who gave their lives in defence of their country.

Linda Tyman
Mountsorrel Heritage Group

The Sherwood Forester and the surgeon who changed the face of plastic surgery

In January 1917, during the 3rd Battle of Ypres, Second Lieutenant William M. Spreckley of the 16th Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment) suffered a gunshot wound to the face and lost his entire nose. The eldest son of a Nottingham lace-maker, by 1918 Spreckley had become a defining figure in the pioneering developments in plastic surgery instigated by the First World War.

Around 60,500 British men suffered facial injuries during the Great War, including gunshot wounds, severe burns and shrapnel lacerations from exploding shells. Before 1914, an injury like Spreckley’s would have been considered a death sentence, but as weaponry advanced, so too did medical care at the front. Men with whole sections of their faces blown away or burned beyond recognition were surviving and being transported back home for specialised medical care, and by 1915 a ward at Cambridge Military Hospital, Aldershot, had been dedicated solely to the treatment of facial injuries. This was where Spreckley was admitted on 30th January 1917, under the care of New Zealand surgeon Harold Gillies.

In 1915, the Battle of the Somme had sent an unprecedented number of servicemen back to England with severe head wounds, rendering the 200 beds at Aldershot hospital inadequate. As a result, surgeons had appealed for a specialised hospital to be established for facial injuries on an Imperial basis, and, as a consequence, Queen’s Hospital was founded in Sidcup in July 1917. It became known as W.H.S’s major centre for maxillo-facial and plastic surgery, and Spreckley, along with hundreds of other facially injured servicemen, was transferred there.

Gillies, who had been instrumental in the hospital’s conception, was appointed lead surgeon, and conducted thirteen of the fifteen surgeries that Spreckley underwent during his reconstructive treatment. Gillies noted in his 1920 book Plastic Surgery of the Face that Spreckley’s appearance on admission was “that of a large crater in the middle of the face which normally was filled by the nose.” After multiple surgeries, Gillies described the aesthetic results of Spreckley’s “plastic operations” as “truly remarkable,” asserting that Spreckley’s treatment “by skin-grafting the intranasal aspect of the new nose marks a definite stage in the advancement of rhinoplasty.”

Due to the high number of facial casualties during the First World War, the team of surgeons at Queen’s were afforded the opportunity to experiment on an unprecedented number of patients, and almost every area of reconstructive surgery saw significant advancements. One of the most constraining of these developing methods produced during this period was the “tubed pedicle flap procedure”, developed by Gillies to dramatically reduce the chances of infection during skin grafts by forming a tube of living tissue that remained attached at both ends, thereby retaining a strong blood supply. Able Seaman Willie Vicarage, admitted to Queen’s on 24th August 1917 with corneal burns, was the first patient to undergo this experimental procedure.

Vicarage had received severe burns to the face and hands while onboard H.M.S. Malaya during the Battle of Jutland. During the first tubed pedicle flap procedure, Gillies had attached the pedicle directly from a healthy area of skin on Vicarage’s chest to a damaged area on his nose, and though the reconstructive results were highly successful, the experience for Vicarage was less than comfortable. The tube, attaching Vicarage’s face to his chest, severely consticted his movements, meaning that he was unable to turn or raise his head for weeks until the next stage of the process could commence. For some...
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Facial patient Harold Twin's granddaughter described how, when her grandfather and his wife had a child, “people crowded around the pram, expecting the baby to have inherited his father's deformities,” and there were also occasions of “people cutting out unspeakable noes as they walked down the street.” In another case, Walter Ashworth's granddaughter told how her grandfather's employer had promised that his position as a tailor would be waiting for him when he returned from service, but his facial scars were so pronounced that he was relegated to simple jobs. It upset him so much that he gave his notice.

Aversion to facial disfigurement was not a universal issue in post-war Britain, and when Ashworth's fiancée called off their engagement due to his wounds, his granddaughter later explained that “One of the lady's friends happened to be my grandmother and she was so disgusted about the lady's actions that she started to write to my grandfather in hospital and went to see him. They became engaged and later married in Halifax.”

Spreckley's scars certainly did not hinder him from building a family life. He married in Nottingham in 1921, had eight children, and lived to the age of 80. After being wounded in Belgium Spreckley had been granted the rank of honorary Lieutenant, and was discharged from Queen's for the final time on 13th October 1920, two and a half years after first receiving his injury. He remained indebted to the surgeon who had treated him, and named his firstborn son Michael Gillies after the man who had reconstructed his face.

Harold Gillies himself was knighted in 1930 for his war services and continued with his reconstructive work throughout World War Two and until his death in 1960. He made many significant contributions to the development of surgical techniques throughout his lifetime, but it was his work during, and in the years following, the First World War, that solidified his enduring legacy as 'the father of plastic surgery'.

Spreckley's treatment is described by Gillies as a defining turning point in the advancement of rhinoplasty, but he was just one of seventy servicemen from East Midlands regiments who were treated at Queen's for severe facial injuries during WWI. Admitted between the ages of eighteen and forty-one, each of these men underwent plastic operations in order to reconstruct some semblance of their original appearance before injury, and in doing so played an important part in the long journey of development that has led to modern day capabilities in plastic surgery.
Leicestershire’s contribution to saving the nation from starvation

The food shortages and ensuing crisis which occurred in 1917-8 changed not only the course of the war but also world history. In the case of Russia, food shortages were a key underlying factor in precipitating the 1917 Revolution and the rise of the Soviet Union.

In Germany food shortages led to the so-called ‘turnip winter’ of 1917, which effectively helped to undermine commitment to the war effort and contributed to the country’s defeat. Yet rather surprisingly, despite Britain’s precarious dependence on imported food, the country managed to avoid the worst consequences of the shortages. Britain pursued a two-pronged approach to deal with the wartime food shortages. On the one hand, the government attempted to increase domestic food production by encouraging, and later directing, farmers via a ploughing up campaign, to increase their arable acreage. On the other hand, the Ministry of Food implemented a series of measures, eventually culminating in a programme of food rationing, ensuring a more equitable distribution of available food supplies.

Nonetheless, an overarching judgement of this kind takes little consideration of the plethora of local initiatives which were implemented prior to the introduction of compulsory food rationing in 1918. Surprisingly, despite the fact that Leicestershire was transformed more than any other county by both the wartime food production campaign and locally based initiatives to improve the distribution of food, its contribution to saving the nation from starvation has attracted scant attention.

Prior to the outbreak of the first world war more than 60 per cent of the country’s food originated from overseas. In the case of bread, more than 80 per cent of the wheat used was imported, consisting of hard grained wheat from Canada, the US and Australia, which were an essential requisite in baking the type of white bread the population preferred. Heat imported, either chilled or refrigerated, accounted for more than 50 per cent of total consumption, and came from Argentina, Australia and New Zealand. It was this dependence on imported food, coupled with the long distances involved, that meant Britain’s food supplies were vulnerable to disruption, the consequences of which could have been devastating for the country’s ability to continue with the war.

There were marked regional variations in the type of farming which prevailed in Leicestershire. While all the county was dominated by pastoral farming, in the western areas dairy and sheep farming were complemented with arable cropping, whereas in the eastern parts of the county beef farming dominated, and in particular the fattening of beef cattle on the high-quality pastures which prevailed in the area. This mixture of enterprises ensured that the county was better served in terms of local food supply that many areas that were dominated by either livestock or arable farming.

A food crisis, precipitated in 1916 by an impending poor wheat harvest in Britain and North America, together with the growing threat of unrestricted submarine warfare, forced the government finally to intervene in a more coordinated way. Cold wet weather during the summer of 1916, compounded by a general deterioration in the condition of the land caused by a reduction in the area of fertility enhancing root crops, suggested that crop yields in Britain would be considerably lower than usual. The outlook for wheat crops in America was also particularly poor. It was the overwhelming need to increase the production of arable crops in particular which prompted the government to implement a ploughing up campaign, converting pasture land to arable cropping.

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complemented by the Corn Production Act 1917 which provided high guaranteed prices for wheat and oats. By 1918 the area of arable land in Leicestershire had increased by some 30 per cent from pre-war levels, or twice the national average. The Women’s Land Army, particularly, played a key role in enabling this to take place. As local records reveal, members of the WLA proved more than capable of undertaking tasks such as ploughing, activities which had been regarded as the exclusive preserve of men. Demonstrations of women ploughing helped to convince farmers of the vitally important contribution they make to the wartime food production campaign. Not only was the mobilization of the Women’s Land Army much more effective in Leicestershire but the labour supply was further facilitated by the employment of large numbers of village women, the employment of school children during the extended school holidays, and the use of POWs to work on the land. The Leicestershire WLA also played an important role in persuading people to change their eating habits, encouraging consumers to eat locally produced food as opposed to relying on imported food (Figure 1). Poster campaigns stressed the need to consume less bread and encouraged the eating of bread produced from flour which had been diluted by a variety of other cereals, including potato flour. The editor of the post in Leicestershire received from the Ministry of Food a sample loaf containing 10 per cent potato flour. Outwardly the loaf was attractive, the crust crisp and brown, and when cut was of good colour. The taste was reported as excellent and the editor successfully appealed to the public to trial wheat substitutes. The Municipal Domestic Subjects Training College provided a variety of recipes to encourage the use of a variety of substitutes as well as organizing cookery demonstrations and tasting sessions to facilitate this (Figure 2). These provided a popular way of persuading local people to bake their own bread using barley, rye, rice, oats and maize. According to William Beveridge, later to become famous as the architect of the welfare state, it was the introduction of compulsory food rationing that alleviated the food crisis. In particular, Beveridge eulogised the achievements of the second Food Controller, Lord Rhondda, arguing that “his thirteen months as Food Controller heralded the “heroic age” of food control. Yet food rationing was only introduced in 1914, and by then a multitude of local initiatives had been taken to ensure a more equitable distribution of food in order to prevent malnutrition. Leicestershire authorities were proactive in this respect. The county, for example, was one of the first areas to introduce butter and margarine rationing. In addition, it sought to encourage consumers to change their eating habits. For example, in order to reduce meat consumption, the local authorities introduced and popularised the idea of two meatless days a week when no meat, poultry or game could be served or consumed in any public eating place. In 1917 the events of the Russian revolution became a matter of concern for the British establishment. A number of commentators both in the press and government highlighted what was regarded as the “evil of the queue”. The Herald noted with alarm that “almost all revolutions start because people wait in crowds for food”, as well as concerns that munitions workers who were unable to queue due to their work commitments would be unable to secure supplies. By mid-December, reports from London described instances of as many as 3,000 people, including mothers with their children, waiting in thick fog and intense cold for margarine. In Lichfield flocks of people came out of outlying areas to stand in queues, often two hundred yards long, and as soon as they were being forced to go away empty handed. For many this appeared to be the period when the war on the home front reached its nadir. Such experiences led to social unrest which spilled over into strikes and walkouts among industrial workers. While queues were evident in Leicester, they were less severe than in many other urban areas. This was at least in part due to the pioneering efforts of the local authorities, in conjunction with retailers to address the shortages, prior to the introduction of compulsory food rationing. The county also benefited from being located in a mixed arable and livestock agricultural area. Local cattle markets were still very active with a good supply of livestock for sale. It was well served by a multitude of smaller livestock markets including Ullenhope, Hinckley, Loughborough and Melton Mowbray, where farmers remained committed to ensuring that livestock marketing continued in a more regular and orderly way. Efforts were made to complement the supply of beef, sheep and pork with not only wild rabbits which were readily available but also horsemeat.

Despite the country’s dependence on imported food, Britain successfully avoided the worst effects of the food shortages which played a key role in changing the course of history. While it is tempting to attribute this to the introduction of rationing during Lord Rhondda’s “heroic age of food control”, this interpretation fails to take into account the multitude of local initiatives which were implemented. In Leicestershire this was evident not only in terms of the wartime increase in the arable acreage but also by the efforts of the WLA, but also through efforts to ensure a more equitable distribution of the available food supplies. This took the form of a variety of locally based initiatives to encourage the population to amend their diets. Prof John Martin
University of Leicester

The support and assistance provided by the Century of Stories project in being able to undertake this investigation are gratefully acknowledged.
I started work for the CWGC some seven months ago, initially as a Centenary Intern and then as the Public Engagement Coordinator for the East Central region of the Commission. The best part of the job was exploring the sites and engaging with the public: talking about the work of the CWGC in the United Kingdom and raising awareness of the work that goes on in other regions and countries.

The commission was formally established in May 1917, but its real work began after the armistice. Once land for cemeteries and memorials had been guaranteed, the enormous task of exhuming, and where possible identifying, and then reburying the bodies they found. It took the volunteers around seven years to do this. The land in which they were buried was given by the French and Belgian governments ‘in perpetuity’. With some exceptions, none of the British, Imperial or Dominion war dead was returned home.

The CWGC cares for more than 150 countries and territories. Of these, around 1.1 million of those in the CWGC’s care are casualties of the First World War. The founding principles of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (or as it was initially known the Imperial War Graves Commission), as outlined in the 1918 Kynersley Report, are:

- Each of the dead should be commemorated individually by name, either on a headstone or on a memorial.
- Headstones and memorials should be uniform.
- The headstones should be from the small battlefield cemeteries to the large concentration cemeteries, meant that I was able to find out about so many ordinary individuals, some of whom undertook extreme acts of bravery, and to place this within the wider context of the conflict.

My work as the Public Engagement Coordinator means that I’m now actively involved in Community Engagement programmes and projects across the counties of Leicester, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland. Through this, I can continue to deliver information about the work of the CWGC in the United Kingdom and worldwide through giving talks, supporting site visits and supporting research tools. The United Kingdom has so many war graves in the care of the CWGC: ranging from single graves in a local churchyard to major sites where large numbers of war dead were laid to rest.

All talks and site visits are free of charge. These can provide a useful starting point in exploring local histories and the First and Second World Wars more generally. This could be in preparation for a visit to the battlefields or to foster an interest in local or familial history. You may wish to become a supporter of the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation. Thirty pounds per year will enable us to fund education and activities and create our ambassadors of the future. For more information on how to support us, please visit www.cwgc.org/support-us.

For more information, or if you would like to arrange a talk or site visit, please email megan.kelleher@cwgc.org. [1]

Megan Kelleher
Commonwealth War Graves Commission

BY MEGAN KELLEHER

1918: the perspectives of a Lincolnshire Home Front poet.

One hundred years ago, Bernard Samuel Gilbert (1882-1927) published Rebel Verses. It was his third and final collection of poetry produced during the war years. His work gives an impression of the consequences of war for individuals, local communities and society as a whole, and points towards the legacy that would have to be contended with in the conflict’s aftermath.

The Lincolnshire-born Gilbert had started to develop a career as an author just before the First World War. During the war years he published Gone to the War and other Poems in the Lincolnshire Dialect (1915), War Workers and Other Verses (1916) and Rebel Verses (1918). The Rural Scene (1923), containing 28 poems within a section entitled ‘War’, brought together many of the poems from the wartime volumes. Gilbert served in the Ministry of Munitions in London during the war. His poetry frequently mirrors that of the more well-known soldier poetry, expressing hardship, terror, melancholy and homesickness. The more significant and distinctive of his poems focus on the Home Front, particularly as it affected rural communities. The voices of women – farmers’ wives left to work the land, amorous mothers, ‘land girls’, and the widowed – sit as prominently as those of the male farmers and labourers, regularly featuring the sounds and words of the regional dialect.

Gilbert’s Rebel Verses, written at the end of the war, is, perhaps understandably, a darker selection of poems on the rural working class that Bernard Gilbert than he generally gave voice to in his writings, being radical in content and sentiment. ‘There Aint no God’ conveys the theme of grief and loss, on this occasion through the father’s voice:

There aint no God!
Caz if there were –
My boy what’s under foreign sod
Would be alive, and here;
Instead of which young Porter
What never listed when he orter –
Has his farm;
And braungs yonder safe away from harm.

Visit www.eastmidlandshistory.org.uk or email emhist@virginmedia.com

BY ANDREW JACKSON

1918: THE PERSPECTIVES OF A LINCOLNSHIRE HOME FRONT POET
Great Scott! Don’t you see
How we stand on the brink?
Give soldiers a vote?
They would say what they think:
And from power and pay
We should rapidly sink.

So don’t talk about it,
Don’t mention it now;
Let the men go to the war
And the women to plough;
We Statesmen will govern ... The Lord, He knows how!
The Great War and its consequences: Building an archive

The last four years have been particularly busy ones for local history groups, associations, archives and museums. The impact of the Great War continues to hold great sway over our collective memories. That much activity has taken place at a local level is as a testimony to the continuing interest in this important part of the nation’s identity, and the connections between local communities and this past. We would like to give your work as much publicity as possible, and to share what you’ve done with others.

Thus, during 1919 East Midlands History and Heritage plans to curate an online archive to collect and record your family and community memories and histories. To get the project started, we’d like:
- details of what you’ve done and achieved over the past four years in terms of research and commemorative activities.
- histories of your area — how did the Great War affect local families and communities? What happened after the war? How was the war remembered, what (if anything) had changed? Did people expect change?
- We can take short summaries, reports or histories — of say 250-500 words — or something more substantial if you have been engaged in detailed research.
- we’d like pictures too: of artefacts, memorials, events, particular aspects of past.
- Other forms of evidence: letters, diaries, newspaper clippings.

Just email emhist@virginmedia.com for further information, advice or with your material.

Opposite you’ll find some of the information already sent from local groups in Northamptonshire:

Remembering the Great War in Northamptonshire

Burton Latimer Heritage Society’s Great War project: Member Tony Dacre spent 15 months researching the lives of the 104 men whose names are on the War Memorial, producing detailed biographies which are in folders in the Museum. Summaries of these, including photos, were converted into posters by the British Legion for display in the Millennium Gardens. Research has begun on the rest of the 507 men on the Roll of Honour. Using these biographies, year 5/6 children from St Mary’s CE Primary Academy have ‘Adopted a man’ to focus on for their WII project. We staged an exhibition, “Burton Latimer’s Heroes”, in the Heritage Museum 1st Sep – 1st Dec dedicated to local men who fought, using material from our archives and on loan from local families.

Two battles were featured in detail. Trones Wood and Aubers Ridge, in which 10 of these men died.

De Montfort University’s activities for the World War One Centenary: To mark the 100 years since the end of the First World War, Daventry Museum staged an exhibition reflecting on the end of World War One. To commemorate the lives of the 1,144 soldiers from Daventry who died during the war, the museum invited local Daventry schools and community groups to make and decorate a small model chair to represent each individual soldier.

These unique chairs were displayed at the museum and then given to those who wish to remember a soldier by promising to set an empty seat at their table on Remembrance Sunday.

Ithlingborough Historical Society and Methodist Church jointly organised an evening to commemorate the centenary of the ending of World War One. The Historical Society had previously completed an in-depth book, In Memoriam, detailing all those men from Ithlingborough who died during the war, so it was felt equally important to commemorate those men who survived and the women who have been left behind to ‘just get on with it’. The evening was on the theme ‘A Brave New World’, with its emphasis on the men returning home and the community to which they came back. The dinner was based on the one given to soldiers returning in 1919, with the courses as near as possible to the original. Between each course various entertainments, both serious and amusing, were given by members of the Church and Society, detailing historical figures who had been prominent in shaping the town’s development. They then moved forward to 1928 to hear from wives and families about the hardships encountered during the war and what it meant to have their mercifully returned to them. It was a moving experience, both physical and mental, of what they had seen and endured.

They also heard from a ‘factory owner’ who had benefited from, and was reluctant to lose, a cheap female labour force — his contribution was very nicely received!

Rushden Transport Museum commemorative stone. The feature photograph, hung on the wall of St Andrew’s Church as their starting point (www.standrewshastings.org.uk). The Society then examined how the women of the village contributed to the war effort. A distinctive World War One bench has been purchased from Daventry District Council.

SPRATTON REMEMBERS THE GREAT WAR:

The small village of Spratton commemorated all the young men from the village who served in the First World War. One of those who died was the first airman ever to be awarded a Victoria Cross. The Lord Lieutenant for Northamptonshire unveiled a commemorative stone to Lt William Rhodes-Moorhouse VC exactly 100 years after his diving flight over Flanders fields, which formed a large weekend event attended by the Great War Society, which erected a 1915 style army encampment. Vintage vehicles and aircraft were also on display as well as numerous stalls and exhibitions. The event was finished with a flypast of two replica aircraft from Sywell aerodrome. A book about the life of Lt Rhodes-Moorhouse was launched with talks by Vernon Creek of the RAF Museum at Hendon and the author, Enid Jarvis.

Spratton Local History Society spent two years researching all the young men from the village who served in the war using the Roll of Honour in St Andrew’s Church as their starting point (www.sprattonhistory.org). The society then examined how the women of the village contributed to the war effort. A distinctive World War One bench has been purchased from Daventry District Council.

SPRATTON REMEMBERS THE GREAT WAR:

At the University of Northampton we have a vibrant MA History programme. We have specialists in the history of war, crime, gender, politics, medicine and the far right. Come and study with us on a part-time or full-time basis at our new Waterside Campus.

To find out more, visit: https://www.northampton.ac.uk/study/courses/history-ma/

Or email the course leader at: mark.rothery@northampton.ac.uk

Dr Nick Bayne
Editor