

Middlewich Chronicle

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1914

ONE PENNY

GROWING TENSION IN EUROPE

During the first months of 1914, the local papers made reference to statements by the German government and the British government that aggression by one side or the other would be counter-productive. Neither side were intending to provoke the other into military action. But behind those weekly statements both sides were preparing for war 'just in case'.

The townspeople of Middlewich were aware at the beginning of the year that the Territorial Army and the various other military camps were stepping up exercises. The Middlewich detachment of the Territorials met in the new council schools for drill every Tuesday evening at 7.30pm.

This air of unease was further compounded by **THE ASSASSINATION OF ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND** and his wife Sophie by a teenage terrorist named Gavrilo Princip. The Archduke and his wife, against strong advice, had travelled to Bosnia and Herzegovina from Austria to the region in the Balkans that his country Austria had annexed 8 years earlier. This was a region that was deeply resentful and the couples visit to Sarajevo therefore was always going to be very dangerous.

The Austrian army almost immediately invaded Serbia, the government scarcely hesitating to exploit the assassination. This act lit the torch paper, an armed response was almost inevitable from Russia who took Serbia's side and therefore Germany took Austria's. The wider conflict was now difficult to contain.

Whilst the Austrian Army was busy in Serbia, Germany in turn invaded Austria in July, in spite of the fact that they agreed with Austria's reasons for invading Serbia. During this period of tension in Western Europe, Britain had regarded the assassination as an Austrian and Serbian matter, but the invasion of Austria by Germany and the Russian involvement with Serbia began to put a different light on the situation. Germany began to move some of its troops to the Belgian Border, this prompted Britain to declare Belgium a neutral country. The news in British Newspapers both local and national from June to the end of July produced a great deal of anxiety, compounded by the fact that the regular army had their leave cancelled. It was obvious to the people living in Southern England that the presence of troops and equipment swelling the army camps only meant one thing, conflict.

On August 4th 1914 Germany invaded Belgium; this news was posted round the town by John Sutton the Superintendent of police in Middlewich. The poster announced that Britain was at war with Germany from 11am that day. The following day posters appeared round the town ordering the mobilization of all territorial units. It became clear that the regular army some 120,000 strong had been mobilized in Southern England on Aug 2nd and 3rd and were already on their way to France. The speed of events took many people by surprise.

The news of a naval engagement in the North Sea was announced, the German navy had sunk 3 old armoured cruisers HMS Aboukir, HMS Hogue and HMS Cressy with the loss of 1,500 men, the engagement had taken place just days before the declaration of war. The British navy now consisted of some 180 warships in total.

TREASURY NEWS

Immediately after the outbreak of war, all gold sovereigns and half sovereigns were withdrawn and replaced with paper money, which were £1.00 and 10/- notes, the population called them Bradburies; John Fredrick Bradbury was then the permanent secretary to the treasury. He was born in Winsford and when he became a peer he called himself Lord Bradbury of Winsford.

WITH THE CONSIDERABLE NUMBER OF MEN NOW LEAVING WIVES AND

families to enlist, 7,163 in one week at Chester Castle, the Prime Minister made a statement to the House of Commons setting out the separation allowances to be awarded to the dependants at home

- Wife with one child rec'd 15/- against 12/10d under the old scheme
- Wife with 2 children rec'd 17/6d against 14/1d under the old scheme
- Wife with 3 children rec'd 20/- against 16/9d under the old scheme
- Wife with 4 children rec'd 22/- against 17/6d under the old scheme

MIDDLEWICH MEN ASSEMBLE

On August 6th the Middlewich Detachment of the Territorials under the leadership of Lt Haddon assembled in Victoria Square at 7.30pm to march to Winsford to collect their kit. The small band of 30 men were the forerunners of many hundreds from Middlewich and District. The sight of local men in civilian dress marching "to war" as it were, must have been seen by many local people. It would have brought back memories of the Boer war just a few years before.

Between August 4th and August 22nd the Town Council responded very quickly to the circumstances and a series of meetings took place to organise a war relief fund with Mr O B Whitehead, then chairman of the Middlewich Urban District Council, (MUDC) becoming the new fund chairman and Mr C F Lawrence as clerk. The wealthier people in the district gave generously to start the fund, Colonel France-Hayhurst of Bostock Hall donated £250 and Mr and Mrs Harlock £25 amongst others.

Many organisations in the town followed the advice of the war relief committee and commenced fundraising in their own way. One of the first persons to add to the fund was Mr A F Sutcliffe of the Picture Palace (The Salvation Army Building) in Wheelock Street, who held a Saturday afternoon matinee and raised £6.00, seats in those days cost from 1 penny to 6 pence. All the local firms both large and small held weekly collections at their premises for the relief fund and at the end of September 1914 it stood at £600.

In Belgium the German forces had crossed the River Marne but were met with stiff resistance by the Belgian Army. The British Army had now travelled through France and joined the Belgian and French forces to engage the enemy. At home the local weekly papers played their part in posting maps of the regions in Belgium where the enemy and allied forces were situated.

National appeal

The Government were issuing directives on an almost weekly basis, for example, asking everyone to preserve their seeds and seedling vegetables for autumn planting, and any surplus to be passed on.

The army also appealed for horses from landowners and farms throughout the country. The Landowners responded well, many of them getting together and sending their horses to Hartford Station where special trains took them to assembly points before being shipped across the channel. Mr Roylance Court from the Manor sent several.

Both sides were engaged in trench warfare in many cases the opposing trenches were only 200 yards apart, the casualties were increasing (It was to be 20,000 killed by Christmas)

ALLIED FORCES RETREAT

The news was not good from across the channel, the allied forces were in retreat back to France, the German Imperial Army consisted of 2 million men under arms, and the allies were extremely outnumbered and taking casualties as they retreated day after day. This bad news hit home when towards the end of September the Red Cross Society appealed to the local population for funds for Belgian Refugees. Many Belgian citizens had fled their homes and travelled to France as best they could in front of an advancing German army. A large number expressed the wish to come to Britain for the duration, they, like the majority of the people in Britain thought that the war would be over by Christmas.

The Red Cross had set up a shop in Hightown devoted to rising funds, they were now asking for accommodation for the Belgian refugees as well. The response was excellent and many in Middlewich and district offered their homes. The first refugees arrived at Middlewich Station on the following Saturday night by the 5.42 train from Crewe. They were met in a considerable down pour of rain by Mrs Kay, Miss Kay and Mr C F Lawrence and a large crowd of people who gave the three hearty cheers. The 6 refugees were driven by car to the Red Cross Shop in Hightown, on arrival they were met by Mrs Roylance Court and other members of the Red Cross. Through the interpreter the visitors thanked the Middlewich people and the Red Cross for their warm welcome.

In the first months of the war the Middlewich Urban District Council (MUDC) had a large amount of work and organisation to do. They had to establish the various fundraising efforts without overlapping the workload of everyone concerned. In response to one of the many directives from the various ministers the MUDC appealed for blankets, socks and comforts for the troops at the front. Winter was fast approaching and the government realised that they could not supply all the troops with winter extras. The Middlewich ladies at the Red Cross HQ in Hightown responded immediately and with speed. From the middle of September to the middle of November the teams of 'knitters' had sent 443 pairs of socks, 81 shirts, 125 comforts, 61 pairs of cuffs and 79 cholera belts. As a further fund-raiser the Red Cross branch held a Chrysanthemum Exhibition in the Town Hall followed by a café chantant.

As the local papers began to report lists of the battles in Belgium and the subsequent loss of men and materials, Messrs Brunner Mond decided to offer their new clubhouse in Brooks Lane for the Red Cross Society to use as a hospital. The billiard room was reorganised to hold 10 to 12 beds (at first) and ancillary rooms were to be used as store or treatment rooms. At the same time Dr Murphy was called up for the Royal Army Medical Corps, to be posted almost immediately to the front, but before he left, he and Dr Hislop, together with the Red Cross, arranged for free medical treatment and medicines to be given to the dependants of the serving men away from home, should they require it.

BRITAIN UNDER ATTACK

On December 16th 1914 at 8am on a misty morning 3 German cruisers suddenly appeared off the north east coast of England, a few miles out at sea from Hartlepool. They opened fire and shells began to fall on the houses, shops and public buildings of the town, the devastation resulted in over 100 people being killed and twice that number wounded, in Hartlepool alone. Some 300 houses were damaged with public buildings and hotels suffering the same fate. The cruisers also attacked West Hartlepool, Whitby and Scarborough on the same day. The shock of civilians being killed and property being destroyed brought the war suddenly from France to the Towns and Cities of England.

WE BELONG



100%
STRONG

The Belgian refugees had given first hand descriptions of the destruction of their home land, this type of news created apprehension and worry. The arrival home on 3 weeks leave of Pte George Wilkinson of A Company 1st Battalion Cheshire Regiment, gave the first glimpse into the war. He had sailed from Southampton to Boulogne to reinforce the 1st Battalion after the retreat at Mons. He was in the neighbourhood of Lille when the Germans sent a man with a white flag indicating that the force of men behind wished to surrender. A company went out to take them but as they walked towards the trenches they met a withering hail of fire and only 20 out of the 90 men got back. The Germans began to shell the forward field hospital and Pte. Wilkinson had to spend two days in the trenches, keeping a sharp lookout for snipers. Describing to the reporter how he came to be wounded he said that the Germans attacked them in large numbers and he and his comrades were ordered to fall back across an open field. A hail of bullets cut them down and he was shot in the left hand and was the only one to survive. Another bullet smashed his rifle, so he crawled 300 yards to the trenches. He was sent to a field hospital and then to Boulogne casino, which had been converted to a permanent hospital, from where he was transferred to York.

The number of men enlisting from the rural areas as well as the towns was having an effect on the agricultural community. The shortage of Farm labour caused the chairman of the County Council to write to every authority in the county. He drew attention to the Cheshire Association Volunteers, and this could supply the farms, where for example women could be employed milking, and other dairy duties. The MUDC liked the idea and set about forming a committee to investigate what could be done in Middlewich and District.

A poster offensive for recruitment was started by Lord Kitchener, the army alone wanted 20,000 volunteers plus per day. Lord Kitchener sent a 'call to arms' to every authority throughout the country. This brought about a patriotic fever to such an extent, that when Middlewich UDC received a letter from the war office in October it prompted an immediate response and within 14 days two main meetings had been arranged one in the Bullring and the other at Croxton Lane end, 700 men were required to complete the 7th Cheshire (Home Service) Battalion, there were already 380 men for this battalion camping at Macclesfield. Yet another committee was formed with the congregational minister the Rev J W Fortnum as its chairman. He was helped at these two meetings, which attracted large crowds of people, by the presence of a recruiting sergeant from Chester Castle plus other leading members of the community. The speeches were rousing and patriotic, hymns like 'onward Christian soldiers and the National Anthem were sung. As each man stepped forward to give his name to the recruiting sergeant a cheer went up. Cars were organised for the next day lent by Mrs Roylance Court, Mrs Kay and Mrs Haddon to take recruits to Chester. By the beginning of December 1914, 384 men from Middlewich and District had joined the armed forces, each one of these men was to receive a Christmas box from the relief committee, the cost of each box was 4/- and a Christmas box fund was opened to pay for them. This same Christmas box was sent to prisoners of war, via, it is thought the British Consul in Switzerland, the wooden boxes, the timber of which was supplied by the Anglo-Swiss Milk Co. were packed by a team of ladies in one of the town hall rooms. The contents consisted of -

- 2 Khaki Handkerchiefs
- One pipe
- One box of skin ointment
- One pouch
- 4 boxes of safety matches
- 3 tablets of soap
- 1 pair of bootlaces
- 1 packet of postcards (25)
- 1 small mirror
- 1 Christmas card
- ½ lb. toffee De Lux
- 1 packet of cigarettes

LOCALS RALLY TO AID WOUNDED

Just before Christmas the first 12 wounded men arrived at the Brooks Lane Hospital. They were from different regiments and from all parts of the country. The local people once again responded to requests for help and arrived at the hospital with milk and potatoes and Col. France Hayhurst sent rabbits from his estate. The men were cared for by 20 Red Cross nurses working on a rotas system under the direction of Dr Melville. An army officer inspected the Red Cross Hospital in Brooks's lane this month, and expressed himself highly satisfied with the facilities available to care for the sick and wounded soldiers. Saying that there is a very willing capable and efficient staff and the men are extremely well looked after, last week the majority were discharged and 10 more were admitted on Wednesday afternoon.

The Middlewich War Relief Fund held monthly collections through the town, and also received the proceeds from the whist drives, concerts and flag displays. This fund was used for parcels and food sent to the 14 prisoners of war held in Germany.

The Chronicle and the Guardian printed the papers twice a week, on some occasions the Middlewich War news occupied several columns, on the same page there would be a column headed "This weeks Casualties". These words must have caused great anxiety and sorrow, as the relatives of men at the front and at sea scanned the paper, hoping they would not see a loved one. The army did their utmost to inform the relatives as soon as possible if someone had been killed, wounded, missing or sick. In December 1914 one such list dealt with Cheshire Regiment news only and was 127 names long. Alongside the names was a word or two stating their condition - wounded, sickness etc., out of this particular list of names 20 were suffering from frost bite, including No 9936 Pte Jimmy Clewes from Middlewich.

Trench warfare was carried out on a long front, each side gaining a few yards, then losing it, making life in the trenches unbearable. The waiting, water, mud, the cold in the winter plus the dead and wounded on the ground being blown up by shellfire before help could be got to them. The Royal Engineers had various tunnelling companies, these consisted of men who had been mining or sewer laying as a normal job but had the necessary experience to work and live completely underground. They were mostly experienced men in their 40's and 50's chosen for this particular work, they were paid 3 times the normal soldiers pay. A shaft would be sunk 50 or 60 feet deep, timber lined, the shaft had galleries off it for officers and men, plus mess rooms and kitchens all lit by candles, ladders and steps went down to this level and beyond. Other subsidiary tunnels were provided from the main shaft to provide a flow of air, curtains impregnated with chemicals served as a protection against gas attack, the tunnel being dug towards and underneath the enemy trenches, at its termination was filled with a large quantity of High Explosive. In one particular case at Messin Ridge, the explosives were detonated, and the explosion could be heard in London. Many thousands of enemy troops were killed on this occasion. This led to one journalist observing "the purpose of war is killing people."