

Volume 1 Section 382

The Home Front 1914-1916

The Press

Introduction

It is through the newspapers of the time that we can get a picture of how ordinary people viewed the war and gain some idea as to the pressures that were exerted on the young men to get them to join up. In Reading we had the Reading Mercury, Berkshire Chronicle and the Reading Standard. The former tended to report the news in great detail using a small typeface difficult to read. The Standard on the other hand used lots of pictures and much fewer words. It did however publish, after the war, a useful series of Booklets entitled '*Berkshire and the War*' in which it gave details and photographs of men from Berkshire who had lost their lives, often together with their brothers in family groups. It also gave a lot of miscellaneous information about other activities in Berkshire.

By contrast the Newbury Weekly News hardly mentions the war throughout. They were far more interested in corn and beef prices at Newbury market and in many editions one would be hard put to it to realise there was a war on at all.

The North Berkshire Herald based at Abingdon tended to be somewhat parochial in that coverage was reserved mainly for men coming from north Berkshire. However their coverage was good with always a page of photographs.

The Maidenhead Advertiser produced great lists of men serving and generally gave good coverage to the Royal Berkshires.

The Reading Mercury

The Mercury started off hostile to the war. On August 1st in its editorial we read *The air is full of war and rumours of war. it is unthinkable that this country should be dragged into a war in which she has not a vestige of interest.*" A week later it changed its tune after war had been declared *At Last! the quarrel is not of our seeking Gird thee with ancient might, Forth and God defend the right*" It also published a large map of Europe so that its readers could follow the news. Within a few weeks it began publishing a village by village list entitled 'Roll of Honour' in which it gave the names and regiment of all the men from the villages in Berkshire who were serving with the armed forces. Later on they published the casualty and hospital lists and when these began to get too large they switched to publishing only the names of those who had been killed. They also published extracts from letters from men at the front and detailed reports of patriotic meetings to raise money or recruits.

From April 1916 an abrupt change can be observed. No longer are individual battalions given or sites of engagements noted. There was an obvious attempt to censor the press and no doubt following some representations some relaxation was given as from 27th May 1916 the casualty lists which had formerly given battalion, now gave home town or village.

Attitudes in 1914

The immediate reaction to the outbreak of war was to stop everything and stock up with food. On 8th August the GWR and the other railways in Reading announced that all cheap fares and excursions were cancelled. By the 22nd August it was back to normal. The International Stores announced in the 15th August edition of the Mercury that every day in the previous week they had sold more good than in an average week before and apologised to their customers for the shortages. They declared that they were not raising their prices other than by government order.

By the 29th August there were complaints about press censorship by the Government and on the 26th September protests about the speed and reckless way military motor cars were being driven around the town. On November 7th A H Bull, a clothier of Reading was advertising a sale of goods for people to buy and sent to the troops at the front. It included Flannel shirts at 3/8, Army shirts (Khaki or grey) at 4/6, worsted socks at 1/3 a pair, rain proof coats at 21/-, army boots at 10/6, 12/6 and 14/6 a pair, knitted sleeping caps at 1/6 and 1/11 and woollen sleeping bags at 29/6 It the same edition there was an appeal for people to donate body belts for the 4th battalion and saddlery equipment for the cavalry.

An interesting snippet in the 8th August edition of the Mercury was a report on a talk given by experimental scientists at Sutton Seeds to experts from all over the country about how the use of radioactivity can enhance the

growth of plants. Pigeon fanciers were told on 5th September that they had to get a licence for their birds. Two weeks later the list of aliens who had registered in Berkshire was published.

On the 26th December a notice appeared to the effect that the Crown Prince of Saxony had taken a day off to visit Wiesbaden to take the cure but that he had now returned to the front.

One reaction we do not read about was the xenophobic and anti-German reactions of most of the population. Lurid stories were circulating about babies being bayoneted and there were reports of people kicking daschunds in revenge. The most we found was a letter headlined '*German barbarism*'? which turned out to be a report from a Private W Abery that the Germans abandoned their sick and dying and that he had personally seen a German cut the finger off a woman's hand to steal her ring. Quite what Private Abery was doing at the time and why he was in a position to witness the incident was left to the imagination.

On the whole however the people of Reading continued to go about their everyday affairs. The papers carried reports of Horticultural shows, meetings of the Borough Council, marriages, births and deaths and all the other oddments of news very much as before. It was obvious that newspapers were reaching the men at the front and on November 28th there was a furious letter from an unnamed officer, bitterly complaining about the horrid conditions and going on to say *It is terrible to read in the Daily Mail of 200,000 people watching football matches*

At the end of 1914 the Mercury published a 'retrospective of 1914' in which they noted that:-

Social functions had been curtailed or abandoned

There were no political parties or rallies

Recruiting in the area was very satisfactory

Rifle ranges had opened all around and people were very keen to learn and practise.

Two Berkshire motor ambulances had been bought and sent to the front. One subscribed by the Wellington Club had been sent to the 2nd Royal Berks.

Suttons have given up the Corn Exchange for use by the troops

The Blue Cross Fund for helping wounded horses had been established