

## Section 396

### The Home Front

# The Armistice and Beyond

*The war came to an end with the signing of the Armistice and its coming into effect at 11:00 on the 11th of November 1918. Continued from section 395.*

## Anticipation

The Reading papers of November 8th 1918 give no hint whatsoever that the war is nearing its end. The fighting had ceased in Italy and on the Salonica front and Germany was in a state of near mutiny and by the 9th November a republic in all but name with the Kaiser removed from the scene having abdicated on the 28th November and departing for exile in Holland on the 10th November.

The National papers had been reporting the negotiations for an armistice for several days but no one was sure it was actually going to happen. By Sunday the 10th however it seemed that the end had come - but would the armistice actually be signed and would it take effect?

The Chief Constable was aware that Monday was likely to be rather special:-

Monday was the first time for many years that the police orders at the Reading Borough Station were not issued in their entirety. But Captain Henderson anticipating that the all-important declaration would be made in the course of the morning left the late orders for compilation until the news arrived. He then had special orders drawn up and the ordinary and special police were immediately notified of their duties for the evening.

## The Armistice

The news of the armistice spread like wildfire mostly through the national papers but it was greeted with a mixture of exaltation and apprehension by most people. There was a feeling of relief that it was all over - but was it. It was after all only an armistice, the guns had stopped but was it the end of the war, no one knew. However everyone assumed it was.

In actual fact the official news of the armistice and the signing of the Peace Treaty did not reach Reading until about five o'clock on the Monday but that did not stop everyone assuming that it was going to happen and rejoicing anyway.

The Berkshire Chronicle of the 15th November reported how the news came to Reading:-

Reading in common with the rest of the country has spent a week of rejoicing consequent upon the signing of the Armistice on Monday.

The first intimation that the armistice was signed was conveyed by the blowing of prolonged blasts on the GWR hooter at 11 o'clock followed in quick response by the other hooters in the neighbourhood. There was no mistaking the meaning of the welcome sound and soon people were pouring out of offices and shops on their way to the Market Place to await the official announcement at the Reading Mercury. The hoisting of Messrs Suttons flag was the sign of the confirmation of the good tidings and the delight displayed by all the inhabitants showed how great was the relief that the four years of terrible strain was over.

In Reading on Monday the 11th a crowd gathered around a soldier who had just returned from the front. The Berkshire Chronicle reported:-

One of the heartiest cheers given during the whole of Monday was accorded to a soldier by the crowd outside the Reading Mercury Offices. The gallant lad in khaki had evidently just returned from the front on short leave, there was evidence of this on his every appearance and the people assembled realising this gave vent to their feelings in a whole hearted manner. The soldier was perceptibly touched by the ovation accorded him.

There was an unofficial ceremony at the statue of Queen Victoria outside the Town hall attended by the band of the Royal Berkshire Regiment and a contingent of 'colonial' troops, presumably Canadians.. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor made short speeches and many of the crowd came up to shake their hands. The Chronicle reported:-

Soon after 11.30 the Mayor and Deputy Mayor accompanied by Councillor Winter, the Town Clerk (Mr W B Clutterbuck) and Mr John Simonds, proceeded to the Queens statue where a large and enthusiastic crowd had assembled.

Three cheers were given for peace followed by the singing of the National Anthem.

The Mayor's unofficial announcement of the signing of the armistice was received with great cheering and waving of flags.

The Deputy Mayor said they had passed through a time which he hoped they would never pass through again. They had now the peace which they had been longing for. Now let them see in connection with peace what they could do to solve the great problems before them. Let them set to work and make the England they all admired the place they so greatly desired it to be (Great cheering)

Rule Britannia was lustily sung and the proceedings terminated.

At the end one of the soldiers called for three cheers for the lads in France. Someone produced an effigy of the Kaiser which was held in great derision:-

We saw but one effigy of the Kaiser on which was the wording "The German madman run amok" There was hooting for it wherever it was seen. It was burnt in St Mary Butts.

For much of the time it was pouring with rain but this did not dampen the general enthusiasm. The trams continued to run although with great difficulty and finally they gave up at 4.30 pm leaving the streets clear for the public.

A number of detonators soon found their way on to the tram lines in Broad Street and at first the people weren't a little startled by their reports, to which however they became accustomed as the day wore on.

The street lights which had been masked were uncovered and the many lamps that had remained unlit were restored to life. A team of six men from the Highways Department were sent out on Monday to clean the lamps in the town centre and in the outskirts of town on Tuesday. The restrictions on lamps in houses were also removed. The increased illumination in the streets added to the general feeling of euphoria.

On the Monday evening Broad Street was the setting for an impromptu firework display. Several hundred were lit and to many of the soldiers and ex-soldiers who had suffered from shell shock the sound of explosions from thunder flashes brought back terrible memories.

It is many years since Broad Street witnessed such scenes as were enacted on Monday evening for for several hours it was the venue of an impromptu but none the less effective firework display. It was amazing where all the squibs and rockets came from. The premises of Messrs Farrer and other firms who cater for this class of goods were besieged all the afternoon and as soon as the streets were sufficiently dark the fun began..

Some hundreds of fireworks must have been discharged in all varieties. There were detonators which threatened hardened warriors with shell shock when they exploded in close proximity to their heels, rockets which sailed gracefully into the sky, thunder flashes which created quite a furore, squibs, crackers and coloured lights all added to the general display while the side door of the Oatsheaf and other places of vantage were utilised for the discharge of Catherine wheels. Broad Street was crowded with people and there were the usual impromptu processions of soldiers, youths and young women. The utmost good humour prevailed and it speaks well for the whole population that there was not the slightest attempt at disorder. Indeed the police and special constables (who were out in considerable numbers) were able to take quite an amused interest in the efforts of the youthful population to exercise their lungs. There was certainly a great comparison in the harmlessness of the exuberance on Monday evening with the wildness of the Mafeking manifestations.

Thankfully no one was seriously injured by the fireworks even though they were being thrown all over the street and hitting people's heads. One girl's shoes and stockings caught fire and she had to be given medical treatment and one girl had her dress badly scorched.

At about 10.30 pm a jazz band appeared from Syd's in London Street - they got split up with one part playing in Duke Street and the other in the Butts. Eventually they joined up again and marched around the town followed by hundreds of merry makers.

## General Rejoicing

The news spread rapidly around the town and flags and bunting appeared everywhere as if by magic. People came out into the streets and an odd assortment of musical instruments was used to add to the general noise. Many shopkeepers and traders decorated their premises and many companies declared the day a holiday.

The marvellous thing was the rapidity with which the flags made their appearance alike on business premises and private dwellings and in the possession of the drivers of vehicles and pedestrians. They seemed to emerge as if by magic and very quickly it seemed as if it were the exception for a person not to be carrying a flag. A string of flags made their appearance across Broad Street and in several instances the grouping was extremely effective. The tradesmen's carts were profusely and effectively decorated. All sorts of discordant musical instruments were soon brought into requisition and the streets resounded with the din of whistles and trumpets and rattles and indeed of any and every old thing which could add to the general expression.

Impromptu processions were speedily organised and in these exhilarating touring parties soldiers, wounded and otherwise, appeared to take a conspicuous share. It was not surprising that those who had realised the horrors of war should be so demonstrative now that the terrible nightmare was at an end and they certainly gave themselves up to uncontrolled enthusiasm. Officers were quite as eager to show their delight as the men and there were some novel impromptu methods adopted of displaying pleasure. One officer was wearing a Uhlan's helmet and other trophies from the front were brought out to show satisfaction that the Boche was finally discomfited.

As the morning wore on the streets presented a very animated appearance and some of the cadets with their bugles assisted

to give a more orderly character to one of the processions. The female population were particularly demonstrative and it was apparent that they had left work almost en masse.

It was evident that several shops had had the foresight to anticipate the demand for flags, fireworks and decorations and had stocked up.

Children appeared to spring up in their hundreds from nowhere and hardly a youngster was met with who had not a flag to wave or a horn to blow. A news vendor in Chain Street who had had the foresight to lay in a large stock of button hole Union Jacks had an excellent trade in them and must have sold several gross within an hour.

It was not the time to worry about day to day matters

As a Prudential collector presented himself at a house in Coley the woman he had called to see was just in the act of embracing her aged mother and this was the remark she made

"Thank God the war is over and my boy will soon be home, I am going out for now mother - dont mind about the rent that can stand over until another day."

## The Soldiers in Town

It was perhaps the soldiers who felt most keenly the end of hostilities and this was not just on the British side:-

The crowd in Broad Street on Monday morning were highly amused at the conduct of several very enthusiastic military officers who commandeered an empty coal lorry and regardless of coal dust took up their stand upon it and called for cheers for the King which were heartily given, They then drove off cheering and being cheered as they went.

A company of soldiers - mostly non-coms - passing down Russell Street shortly after eleven o'clock met with a remarkable demonstration. Men cheered them and they cheered back whilst several ladies rushed from their houses and supplied the boys in khaki with miniature Union Jacks and other flags.

A remarkable scene was witnessed in Flint Street where a gang of German prisoners were engaged on brick loading hauling. When the news came to them they cheered as frantically as the guard did who had charge of them and all the people came out of their houses and participated in the voicing of their happiness.

A very enthusiastic Canadian officer delighted with the news and who was accompanied by several similarly light hearted and gay friends, went up to the police constable on point duty at the top of Broad Street, relieved the officer of the law of his helmet, replaced it with his cap and proceeded down St Mary Butts amidst considerable amusement. The policemen took the joke in excellent spirit and calling a boy gave him the officers cap with the instructions to get his helmet in return - which he did.

A scene was enacted in the yard at Messrs H and G Simmonds' brewery which caused no little amusement. A party of soldiers who had previously presented themselves at the firm's offices and had expressed a wish - which was not gratified - to purchase a barrel made straightaway to the premises opposite and acting on the principle of French Leave took possession of two small casks of beer which they triumphantly rolled to the adjoining lane. Bunges were forced, the beer poured into a bucket and then handed round to the many customers who quickly made their appearance, the beer vanishing like lightning.

## At the War Hospitals

The inhabitants of the war hospitals had a particular reason to rejoice as it was fairly evident that they would not have to go back to the front.

At the main War Hospital (Battle) a concert was speedily arranged for the Monday evening at the West Reading Library and a number of civilians were able to join the walking wounded.

At the hospitals at Battle School, Grovelands School and Wilson School they quickly put up banners across the street and nurses and their patients danced in the wards to the cheers of those who were immobile.

St Lukes Hospital rang their dinner bells when the news came in and a special meal was laid on that evening. The men came in punctually at 6 pm for a fish and chip supper followed by a Marlborough pudding and oranges supplied by Col Poulton. This was followed by a game of musical chairs and an ad hoc concert. Unfortunately several of the sisters were suffering from influenza and the wife of the commandant and those of several doctors came in to help.

Sutherlands too laid on a special meal followed by a whist drive. Cigars had been ordered but they did not arrive on time but were greatly enjoyed the next day.

## Human Interest

The reporters of the local papers were having a field day recording all the incidents and human stories they

witnessed. Here are some more of their reports:-

That loyal inhabitant, Mr Billett, bird and rabbit specialist of the covered market was the first in that place of business to exhibit the Union Jack. Others speedily followed.

Many peals were rung on the bells, one of the ringers at St Laurence's being Mr James West (83) who was a ringer there in the sixties who had not touched a bell for fifty years.

One lady in a business house in Oxford Street having neither dog nor cat to decorate, gaily bedecked a tame rabbit with streamers of the national colours which she proudly exhibited to her customers.

Almost the first to form up in line after the signing became known were the boys of Reading School who cheered lustily as they marched through the streets of the town. Students from the University College were also in evidence.

Mr T H Blake of East Street Reading ran the German flag at half mast.

The landlord of the Dukes Head Hotel in Broad Street, Mr Morgan, greatly amused the crowd by posting dummy telegrams and messages in his front window - some samples:-

A telegram to everyone - Me and Little Willie are busy repairing the mailed fist, William the War Lord

A wire to President Wilson - I have repented my evil ways. Please dear president propose me for membership of the league of Nations - Your dejected Wilhelm

A General Notice - What Germany was going to do with England. Charge her a two hundred thousand million indemnity - What will they get - A small NOUGHT

A second general notice - A good investment I don't think!!! - Two hundred thousand million indemnity with occupation of London Liverpool Glasgow Portsmouth and Plymouth until paid - all offers for shares to be addressed to Kaiser Bill, Berlin

## Effect on Industry

It was pointless for most factories and offices to try to stay working so in almost all cases they simply declared it to be a holiday and joined in the celebrations.

The general outburst of rejoicing at the good news put out of the question all desire for work in a great many factories and business houses and many firms closed early in the day.

At Messrs Huntley Boorne and Stevens' tin works the employees with few exceptions did not return on Monday afternoon.

At the Reading Biscuit Factory on the contrary work continued, the firm impressing on their employees the sorrow as well as the gladness which such an occasion must bring to the bereaved, but many of the female employees ceased work for the day at 1 o'clock.

The first tidings of the good news reached the firm of Messrs G R Jackson Lt of Oxford Road at 10:57 and three minutes later the whole of the employees were to be seen streaming out of the yard, happy not only in the knowledge that the armistice had been signed but also in the fact that Mr J Warburton representing the firm at once gave the people a holiday together with the assurance that they would receive their wages for the day.

The several Civil Service offices in the London Road closed down as soon as the news came through.

His Majesty's Office of Works at Bramley Hants where so many Reading people are employed closed down immediately the news reached there and shortly after midday workmen and others reached Reading to mingle with the glad throng.

Tools were downed at the Great Western Railway Ironworks as soon as the first hooter was sounded. In the words of one of the foremen "There was no such thing as holding the men. Their pleasure at the news made them feel they must be out in the open to give proper vent to their feelings and they were soon out in the open

Messrs Allen and Simmonds, engineers of de Montford Road closed down at mid-day and paid their workmen for the afternoon. On Tuesday morning the men returned to work but again knocked off at mid-day, the company again generously paying them for the whole day. On Wednesday the employees had the whole day at their own expense.

Another engineering firm in Caversham Road - Messrs Brindges and Goodwin - stopped "work for play" when it was definitely known that the armistice had been signed and they too are paying their men for the afternoon.

As soon as the news was known definitely by Messrs Heelas Sons and Co Ltd one of their motor delivery wagons, gaily bedecked with Union Jacks was sent into the neighbouring villages to spread the glad tidings

In commemoration of the cessation of hostilities and as a tribute to the loyalty of the staff during four years of trying work, Messrs McIlroy are giving the whole of their employees at Reading and elsewhere, including the housekeeping staff, an extra weeks salary.

## Return of the Regiments

## The Peace Celebrations - Reading

The official Peace celebrations took place on July 6th 1919 with thanksgiving services taking place at almost all places of worship. Reading's chief service was at St Laurence's and the congregation was so huge it overflowed out of the porch and all the aisles were occupied.

There was an official procession led by the Mayor (Alderman S Hayward) and the MP (Col Leslie Wilson) followed by civic dignitaries and magistrates and a large detachment of troops from the barracks under Lieut Burton.

The service was conducted by the Rural Dean of Reading (Canon Newhouse) using the third of the official orders of service.

Afterwards Col Foley presented medals to a number of men.

On Saturday July 19th there was a Peace Pageant. The day was miserably wet but people festooned their houses and enjoyed the events. There were bands playing and concerts in several venues around town. The band of the 1st East Lancashire Regiment played in Forbury Gardens. The Temperance band played for dancing on the promenade and there were many other parties. The town was lit up with special illuminations and a specially illuminated tram plied the streets.

The highlight of the day was however the procession and Victory march. They started at the Barracks and wound their way to the Town Hall along streets packed with onlookers. All the Mayors and chairmen of Councils across Berkshire were invited and all soldiers or ex-serviceman was asked to take part. The official parade was to include representatives of all the regular and auxiliary forces and they began assembling at the Barracks at 1000 Those that actually took part were:-

Royal Navy

1st Royal Berks

2nd Royal Berks

5th Royal Berks

6th Royal Berks

7th Royal Berks

8th Royal Berks

A composite company of other units

They were led by the band of the 2nd Royal Berks setting off at 1100 going by way of the Oxford Road and Russel Street

At the same time a second procession was forming at Yeomanry House This consisted of

The Band of the 1st Berkshire Volunteers

The 1st/4th Royal Berks

The 2nd/4th Royal Berks

The VADs

13th Berks VADs

The WRAF

The Womens Land Army

The Scouts

The Reading Cadet Battalion

The Church Lads Brigade

The joint procession then proceeded via Castle Street, The Butts and Broad Street and opposite Heelas the band halted while the salute was taken by the Lord Lieutenant. The procession then halted for the band to make its way to the front and they were off again via High Street and Market Place to the Town Hall where the Mayor of Reading took the salute. They went on via Blagrove Street, Station Road and Friar Street and back past the Town Hall to the Corn Exchange where lunch was served. and speeches made including messages from the King.

Five thousand children were taken to Palmer Park and another 5000 to Prospect Park for a grand tea - some schools

however decided they would be better off staying at their schools and had the tea there rather than subject the children to the incessant downpour, After the tea there was entertainment and games with a fancy dress competition and jazz band competition followed by a tug of war. The Band of the 2nd Royal Berks played at Prospect Park. In the end however they decided to hold the prizegivings on another day owing to the weather.

Several thousand more people gathered in the rain for the Reading Water Carnival. This was held on The Thames and in adjoining meadows with spectators gathered on the Promenade to watch the events on the river which included a procession of decorated boats. There were mop fights in canoes and the Temperance Band entertained. In the meadow there were sports events plus a confetti fight.

During the day also two oak trees were planted by the Mayoress - one in Forbury Gardens and one in Prospect Park

While all the celebrations were going on in Reading there was the National celebrations in London and a detachment of the 1st Royal Berks went up to take part with their Colours

## **Peace Celebrations - elsewhere**

### **Return to Civvy Street**

### **Honouring the Dead**

### **Sources**

*The Berkshire Chronicle* 16/11/18

*Berkshire and The War* -