

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2021

## Reading in World War 1 - Dr Margaret Simons

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Wargrave Local History Society was able to return to meeting 'in person', rather than via the internet, for their October meeting.



Dr Margaret Simons, a much-respected local historian, gave an illustrated presentation on *Reading in World War 1; The Home Front 1914-18*, sharing the results of her research into the effects of the war on the local area.

Reading was described as being 'alive with khaki', over the August Bank Holiday of 1914 (early in the month then, being the weekend of 1st – 3rd August that year) in local newspapers. On 2nd and 3rd, lots of men departed for Portsmouth and Devonport, whilst men of the Royal Berkshire Regiment were recalled early on the 3rd. It had been a super summer that year, but rained heavily on the 4th – the day when the anticipated declaration of war actually took place. Men of the Royal Berkshire Regiment departed on the 5th, accompanied by 24 boxes of Huntley & Palmers biscuits, whilst 2 days later all the suitable horses in the town were commandeered. The following day, Reading became a food base for the army. The prospect of war seemed surreal at the time, with a sense of excitement as people thought it would "be over by Christmas", people thronging the streets to watch the parading soldiers.

Even before the war began, food prices had risen, and this was to be a major impact of hostilities on the population. Some businesses, such as Suttons, sought to reassure the staff that their wives would be cared for, and the jobs of fighting men would be kept open for them. By the 6th, local schools were already being occupied by the army, whilst shopkeepers, apart from jewellers or those supplying food, found trade had slowed down. Reading's telegraphists were working flat out, whilst as postmen who were in the military reserves had joined up, postal deliveries were reduced to 4 per day (previously 5). The major impact though, was the inflation in the price of food. There was a shortage of pigs, sugar was scarce, and the prices for meat and bread rose significantly. Some food had been kept back for use by forces personnel – whilst some farmers held on to their livestock hoping to get a higher price from a later sale.

Because of its road and rail links, Reading became a place where very large numbers of the military passed through, so St Luke's Hall was made into a hospital to cater for their needs. Restrictions on the population were imposed by the Defence of the Realm Act, passed on August 8th, and revised several times during the war. This, for example, required alcoholic drinks to be watered down, and public houses to have restricted

opening hours, with a gap in the afternoon (a law that remained in force until 1988). People were not allowed to buy a 'round of drinks', nor to speak of anything that could give information to the enemy – there was real paranoia that there was “a German around every corner”. People were prosecuted for infringements (often for failing to observe the blackout), rising to over 270 in the town in 1916.



The resultant changes to the economy led to many workers being put on short time, or losing their jobs. When the men volunteered to join the troops, many families were left without an income, and there was a real concern that children would not be able to be fed. A system was introduced whereby a small amount of a soldier's pay would be deducted to provide for family members, but the scheme took some time to come into effect. A means tested scheme of support included an assessment of the wife, who had to be a 'woman of good character'.

By the end of September 1914, meals were having to be provided for 1273 'necessitous children' in Reading. As food prices rose, those 'just above the line' then found themselves below it, so more and more children needed to be fed. Meals were provided every day, except 25th and 26th December, when they were provided with a bag of food (worth 6d) each day for a single meal – the bags being put together by women teachers.

The Royal Berkshire Regiment was based at Brock Barracks, in Reading – a total of 4 battalions in August 1914, and this was to rise to 13 units by the end of the war. There was a strong recruitment drive – the *Berkshire Chronicle* asking “Young men of Reading ... are you willing to see your homes destroyed and your families slaughtered in cold blood ... if not, the only remedy is to join Kitchener's Army”. There was a patriotic fervour in the town. Soldiers would march around in uniform with their rifles, to make it look exciting, so that men would want to join up, those interested following behind the parade. There was a grand recruiting concert, where a popular singer of the time, Miss Phyllis Dare sang “Your King and Country Want You” – with free tickets for those eligible to join the army– and maybe even getting a kiss from Miss Dare as a reward for signing up. Local newspapers had photographs of those who had answered the call – to persuade others to do likewise. Sadly, many such pictures appeared again to record the casualties.



By 1915 it became apparent that enlisting volunteers would not be sufficient, and so in the August the National Registration Act was passed. Blue forms for men, and white for women, recorded the name age and occupation, in order to identify the number of males eligible for military duty, and of females available for work. The men were issued with an identity card – those in reserved occupations being exempt Under the Military Service Act of March 1916, first single men, and later those who were married were conscripted to serve, with the age range being extended as the conflict continued. There were Conscientious Objectors, and tribunals considered their claims. In Reading these were very busy, meeting 3 days a week – although the county tribunals considered the town to be too lenient, and overturned many of their decisions.

Billeting of members of the forces was another impact on the local people, particularly as Reading was a transit hub for the troops. A house occupier was paid 9d per night per man who stayed in their home, over 1500 being accommodated in this way. There was a considerable outcry at the time, as the burden of this fell mainly on the poorer families who were already in crowded homes, and not on the more affluent with bigger houses.

From February 1916, it was decreed that all new officer cadets for the Royal Flying Corps had to pass through the No 1 School of Aeronautics at Reading, which was housed in the university's Wantage Hall, with an aerodrome near the then new Co-op jam factory at Coley. About 33,000 personnel were stationed in the town – the sound of their early morning drill being widely heard. When the RFC became part of the new RAF in April 1918, it was suggested that Reading become the new organisation's base, but the university declined to allow continued use of their property.



Many Reading firms were involved in the war effort – food companies, outfitters, and engineering concerns. Those who worked on engineering tasks were known as ‘munitioneers’ – and the women who did such work at Huntley & Palmers – where 60,000 shells were made - were called ‘munitionettes’. The Royal Berkshire Hospital cared for the war wounded, as well as looking after the civilian population, and fleets of ambulances would meet trains at the station – sightseers having to be kept away. To increase the number of beds available, the workhouse was adapted as Reading War Hospital no 1 (later known as Battle Hospital), whilst auxiliary hospitals were set up to house those convalescing or less seriously injured in surrounding large houses or village halls. The wounded men were issued with ‘Hospital Blues’ to wear, so that when out and about they could be identified as fighting for King and Country, and not avoiding military duty.



Women “did their bit” during the war, working in local factories, on the trams, as post-women, etc, even joining the police (although Reading was slow to enable them to do this), doing the work than the men would have done. In addition, they helped tend those in the auxiliary hospitals, and made ‘comforts’ for those in the forces.

The cost of food, however, remained a difficulty for many. As prices rose to 130% of pre-war levels, those who were prosperous could still get what they wanted, but poorer families often went without, and so

statutory rationing was imposed from 1918. A Communal Kitchen was set up in the town, which helped those who were working and therefore found it difficult to get to the shops when food supplies became available.

When the armistice came, whistles blew, people gathered in the streets – even German prisoners of war working locally cheering that it was over. There had been 4 years of strict controls, with freedoms restricted, and those not part of the fighting force expected to ‘step up to the mark’ and help with the war effort at home.

Margaret hopes to make the results of her research available as a book in due course.

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