

.....FOR THESE WHO DIE AS CATTLE.....

All over Britain local history societies and other like-minded organisations are making plans for the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the ending of the First World War, Armistice Day 1918, "the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month." In the Holme Valley a number of exhibitions will be held at various village locations, remembering in particular those who went to war, never to return. More than 400 soldiers from Holmfirth, Brockholes, New Mill and Honley made this ultimate sacrifice, the slaughter of local men (147) being at its worst in the closing months of the war.

Members of the Holmfirth Local History Group have been collating material from various sources for the exhibitions. My particular contribution has been the transcribing of the many obituaries of local soldiers published in the "Holmfirth Express", the then weekly newspaper in the Valley. After I had done several of these I began to notice a striking similarity in the contents and the language used in these accounts, the same words and the same references occurring again and again. It soon became clear that local readers were being offered a sanitised, euphemistic and distorted version of the truth of what actually happened in the trenches. This was probably done for the best of motives, - to soften the blow of bereavement and to help ease the pain of grief - but the cynic in me suspects also that "officialdom" believed that presenting families with a "decent" death would lessen the likelihood of provoking widespread anger at the mounting, gruesome slaughter at the front. Therefore telegrams and letters sent to the bereaved families all seemed to follow a certain formula, the main elements of which were these:-

1. Death was always "instantaneous".
2. Death was always "painless".
3. A "proper" burial of the dead soldier was held "behind the lines".
4. The dead soldier was noted for his "constant cheerfulness."
5. He was a "very popular" member of the platoon, both with men and officers.
6. His death has left a "void" difficult to fill.
7. His conscientious and dutiful army career reflected the qualities noted in his civilian life.
8. There was nearly always a link to his involvement with church or chapel.
9. His attendance at "Sunday School" was usually referred to.
10. He had "sacrificed" his life "willingly" for "King and Country".

I suspect that this final reason was the clincher in controlling how people reacted to the constant news of death at the front. Given the forelock-tugging, rigid social structure of the day, dying for the King was an "honour" which dare not be questioned. What the King himself, George V, thought of the thousands of deaths laid at his door, we do not know but his well-known preoccupation with his stamp collection was perhaps one of his coping strategies.

With hindsight, the almost total lack of any display of anger in the "Express" at the scale of the slaughter, or any questioning of the competence of those running the War, seems astonishing. The "Lions led by Donkeys" controversy would come much later and indeed is still ongoing today.

And one final irony. Nature, seemingly mocking man's own feeble attempts at self-slaughter, introduced in 1918 the flu virus into the equation of death, killing some 20 million people world-wide. The age group that was fighting in France was the most vulnerable. You could be fine at breakfast and dead by supper time. American troops were particularly susceptible, 62 000 died from flu, more than were killed in battle.

David Cockman HDAS, HLHG August 2018.

Footnote: This obituary from the "Express" for a fallen Holme Valley Soldier is typical of the many:

Private N. V. BRUCE

The claims of the battlefield, we regret to announce, has made another gap in the circle of the well-known Holmfirth family, Mr and Mrs Robert Bruce, of Newtown, having lost their youngest son, Norman Victor, a fine young man of 25 years who had before him in the ordinary course of events what appeared to be a career full of promise. His young wife has received the sad tidings that Private Bruce was killed in action on March 27th. According to a letter which has been received from the companion in the R.F.A. with which branch of the service Private Bruce was identified, a shell burst quite close to him and he was killed instantly by a piece of shrapnel. Norman joined the forces 12 months ago. He was then married at the Holmfirth Parish Church to a daughter of Mr N Marshall, South Lane, and became a soldier of the King on the following Monday. Subsequently it was heard that his brother Robert had fallen on the same day Norman was married. Such are the uncertainties of life. Private N.V. Bruce came to Holmfirth in his boyhood and on reaching school age went to the National School weekday and Sunday, becoming an official of the Sunday school. He was also a member of Mr Fletcher's Bible class. Indeed in all respects he was a valuable church member. The youth was no less vigilant and industrious in his business life. After working at Rock Mills for some time he joined the West Riding Constabulary and occupied a responsible position as clerk at the depot at Wakefield. The training at Holmfirth Technical School, which institution he attended some years, served him in good stead. By all who know him Private Bruce is spoken of in terms of the highest esteem and the sympathies of a wide circle are with the young widow and the bereaved parents.