



frontline.



The newsletter of the MK WFA,
December 2023.



A Merry Christmas to MK WFA

A very happy Christmas to all our members, families, and friends. The picture above is entitled 'Christmas at the Front' and has been pinched from Paul Salver's excellent and topical article later in the newsletter. Sorry Paul, it's so apt - just couldn't stop myself!

On December 2nd, instead of our usual December talk, we had a trip to the 'Soldiers of Oxfordshire' Museum, followed by a lunch at 'The King's Arms'. The 'Soldiers of Oxfordshire' Museum was created to honour soldiers from Oxfordshire regiments and present their history. As well as the permanent museum exhibition, we saw a new display, which told the history of British war comics such as *War Picture Library* and *Battle Action*, which featured original comic artwork on public display for the first time, enabling the discovery of the story of war comics decade by decade. All in all, it was

a first-class visit, and we will include some photos and further information in the next 'Frontline'.

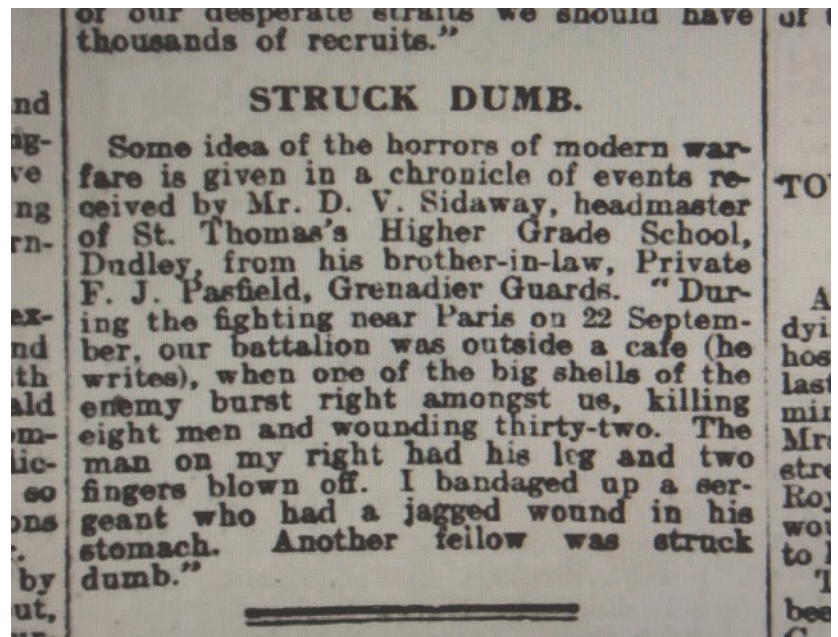
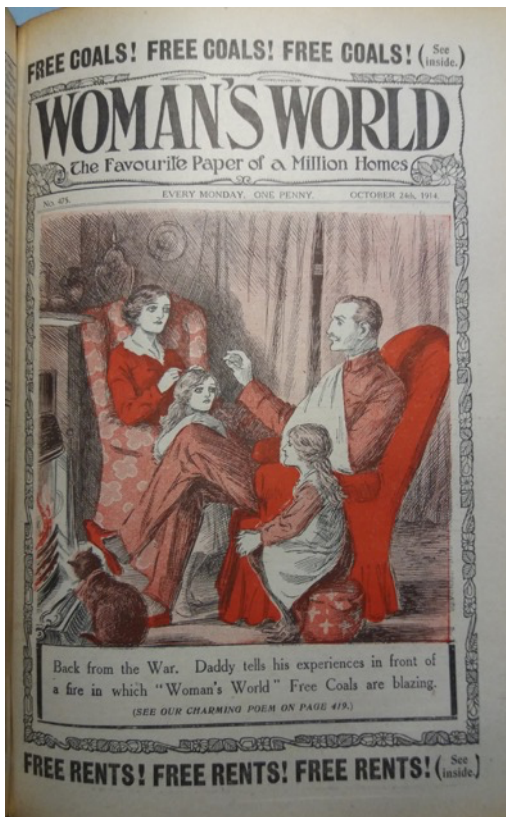
On the 11th November Jim and I travelled down to London to attend the WFA Commemorations at the Cenotaph, where we laid a wreath on behalf of our branch. As usual it was a splendid and evocative occasion, with the pipe band, a large turnout from the WFA and the Armed Forces, and an ever bigger and very appreciative crowd. which we rounded off with the service at the Guard's Chapel, main speaker being John Nichol of 'Tornado Down' fame, and a visit to the Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey, where we saw Jane's 'Old Contemptible's plot. I am hoping to squeeze a couple of photos into next month's 'Frontline', but the event is available to view on YouTube if you haven't already seen it.

Mentioned in Despatches



Julian Walker talk.

On November 17th Julian Walker gave us a fascinating talk entitled 'They Didn't Talk About It - Explaining Veteran's Silence.' In his talk Julian explained how people, and especially those who were in the frontline in WW1, used language, and how not speaking is in itself an act of communication. So was this silence passive or active? In 1914 Belgian refugees who came to England refused to talk to journalists about their experiences. For soldiers, did the act of killing shock men into silence? Did soldiers feel these things were better left unsaid? A *Women's World* magazine advert shows father returned and telling stories in front of the fire, but would he have? Part of the reluctance to talk was a failure of language, that people did not have the linguistic power to describe what they experienced. In reports and letters and descriptions, words like 'indescribable' and 'inexpressible' crop up all the time. 'Indescribable' is a code for 'really very nasty.'



However, some did describe very graphically what they saw, so a deliberate choice was being made. Journalists set up a 'language' of atrocity when they attempted to energise the public about the German atrocities in Belgium, with great emphasis on the mutilation of women and children. Millions of people, French, Germans and British, read *Le Feu: Journal d'une Escouade* (Under Fire: The Story of a Squad) by Frenchman Henri Barbusse. Published in December 1916, it was one of the first novels about World War One to be published. Although it is fiction, the novel was based on Barbusse's

experiences as a French soldier on the Western Front and had a major impact on later writers such as Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque. Barbusse wrote 'Le feu' while he was a serving soldier. He claimed to have taken notes for the novel while still in the trenches; after being injured and reassigned from the front, he wrote and published the novel while working at the War Office in 1916, and his language is graphic and powerful, so much so that pacifists wrote to Siegfried Sassoon urging him to be a 'Barbusse'.

Julian then turned to the effect of censorship. Soldiers themselves imposed self-censorship in their slang expressions, 'Somewhere in France', (soon humorously adapted to 'Sommewhere in France') was common, slang like 'napoo' - French for nothing left, i.e. eggs, beer, cigarettes, was soon extended to include men killed, showing self-protection - much better to say 'napoo' than 'killed' or 'blown to bits.' As well as the soldier's own censorship, there was the military censorship of letters, and the home censorship of news, and the overwhelming culture of 'It's not cricket'. Language makes things real, so avoid it to suppress reality. Julian showed us a field service postcard, which enabled language as well as suppressing it, basically all it reported was 'At the time I wrote this I was alive'. Then there was the Defence of the Realm Act (remember Kevin's talk?) and the effects of shell shock, which often rendered people dumb, changed accents or caused stammers. At first shell shock victims were placed in nice environments and were not allowed to talk about it, this approach was later changed.

The newspapers used to publish glossaries of war slang, and adverts started using it, but the soldiers didn't like their private language being used by civilians. And their language could be very coarse. It was a prison offence to print the F word, but in the frontline it was used very liberally indeed. And when the war was over, what were soldiers going to tell their wives? Their job was to protect women from the horrors of war. And what on earth could they tell their children? So is it true that soldiers did not talk about their experiences? Many wanted to forget, some didn't. In the years following the War there were at least sixty titles soon published, causing many veterans to complain that they were not really about the war but just concentrating on the horrors, and they had already had more than enough of those! Also, so many people, soldiers and civilians, had lost friends and relatives and didn't want to be constantly reminded, and as time passed many felt that people were no longer interested anyway. Many thanks to Julian for a very different and enlightening talk, which was much appreciated.

Book donation

LT Colonel Ken Roberts has been a member of MK WFA for several years, but due to ill health has not been able to attend any meetings. He and his wife have just moved down to Suffolk but before he left, he very kindly donated a set of 'War Illustrated' to the branch. I went down to collect them and had a really interesting time talking about his experiences in the army, his time with the Army Medical Corps, and his attachment to the Gurkas. He and a friend produced an impressive book on the men of Padbury in WW1 for the centenary. Ken also donated a book on the Medical Corps to our library. (More about 'War Illustrated' in the next newsletter.) We wish Ken and his wife every happiness in Suffolk.

Help! Albert French required.

Chris Roberts has contacted me to say that there will be a celebration of the 10th birthday of the MK Rose on 7th July. As "Albert French" has been an annual event since the start, The Friends of the Rose would like to see him commemorated on the day. Chris is asking if we have or know a re-enactor who could play the part of Albert on that day? I replied, and he rapidly agreed, that although I have a period uniform, I am far too old to represent Albert. If anyone can think of someone who looks more 17 than 70 to play the part, or knows any re-enactors, please email me. Many thanks.

'Home before the leaves fall'

Aspects of Christmas at War 1914 - 1918

By Paul Salver.



Any mention of a First World War Christmas evokes the emotional memories in the public imagination of a snowy Christmas Eve truce, football matches in No Man's Land and Princess Mary tins and a hope that it would all be over by Christmas, has been created in books, films, art and literature. This continues to play a central role in the collective memory and culture of the British nation.' 1 [Britain and the Cultural History of the First World War: The Uses of Historiography Ross Aldridge] This process started even in the war itself as shown by the illustration Christmas Eve on the Western Front - a lithograph by Frederic Villiers [January 1915]



Source 1 www.meisterdrucke.com- From Illustrated London News 9th January 1915.



Source 2 Princess Mary Tin - Paul Salver Private collection.



Source 3 and

Source 4 <https://collection.nam.ac.uk>

However, Christmas in World War One is much more complex and poignant than this 'cosy' impression. The war had a profound impact on soldiers fighting in the trenches but also on families and communities at home and Christmas was marked by a mix of patriotism, sacrifice, and the challenges of war on daily lives.

A widely held view in the national memory is the idea that the war would be 'over by Christmas' expressing a common belief, including political leaders and soldiers, that the war would be a short-lived and decisive conflict. This probably originates from the Chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, who is said to have commented, "We shall be home before the leaves fall," expressing his belief that the war would be over quickly and that German forces would be victorious.



Source 5 www.mediastorehouse.com/mary-evans-prints-online/ww1-aim-victory-french-optimism-1914-general-14376569.html

Another possible origin is the optimism in France believing in a short, victorious war as shown in the contemporary print " Aim for Victory - French optimism in 1914" which expressed hopes for victory before the end of the year.

'Over by Christmas' has, therefore, become a symbol of the initial enthusiasm and overconfidence that characterized the early stages of the war, which dissipated rapidly with the rapidly rising casualty figures, the stalemate of the trenches and the subsequent harsh reality of a long and brutal conflict.

However recent historical research has challenged this narrative with regards to Britain by such writers as Adrian Gregory in his book *The Last Great War*. It is expressed very clearly by Professor Stephen Badsey in his lecture 'Remembrance and Fake memory- What we 'know' about the War'. He states 'If the British had expected the war to be over in five months why should Kitchener call for a million volunteers' that couldn't be trained and equipped till mid 1915 at the earliest' 2 [Fake Memory - Stephen Badsey. You tube video lecture.] He concludes that 'although British generals hoped that the war would be shorter and less costly than it was the phrase over by Christmas was never used in 1914 by anyone in a position of responsibility and rarely afterwards except with satirical intent' 3
IBID



Source 6 Waterlogged trenches at Bois Grenier in January 1915. © IWM

Winter in the trenches was often appalling. The trenches were often wet, muddy, and cold. Trenches were often dug in low-lying areas, leading to flooding during rain or melting snow creating deep and impassable mud. The cold, wet conditions could lead to trench foot and as Winter temperatures could

drop significantly the freezing conditions contributed to frostbite and hypothermia. British private Henry Williamson remembered:

'When the frosts came our boots froze while we were sleeping - it was painful. So, some of us would walk about at night and swing the arms to keep warm. And the overcoats, the greatcoats, of course were frozen and the yellow clay that was on them was frozen too, very hard to get it off, it was a great weight. Being stiff as boards, we just hacked the skirt off about two feet up the skirt with bayonets and walked about in short coats.'

4 [www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-war-in-winter]

Photographs sometimes depicted the harsh realities of life in the trenches. However, they were intended to evoke sympathy, support, and a sense of solidarity among the civilian population. Artists and illustrators often portrayed soldiers enduring difficult conditions, showcasing their resilience and commitment to the cause.

In an article 'Death and material culture: the case of pictures during the First World War' Joelle Beurier observes the growing prevalence of these type of Frontline photographs after 1915 'First, there develops an atmosphere that I call 'peace at war time' then, particularly in the German and British magazines, the heroic drawings disappear and are replaced by photographs of daily life in the trenches' 5[articles from Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War ed Nicholas Saunders 2004 page 109]



Source 7 <https://wwitrenchwarfares.weebly.com/trench-basics.html>



Source 8 <https://www.theguardian.com/>

Beurier continues 'the soldiers pose, perfectly lined up at the front line and in firing position, or behind the lines with rifles on shoulders These insights show a healthy and active civilisation during wartime.it is all about informing the readership of the new conditions of a new kind of war.....showing [for example] the adaptation of the soldiers to life in the snow..... but excludes any idea of danger' 6[IBID]



Source 9 Troops coming out of a communication trench in the snow outside Arras February 1917.
iwm.org.uk



Source 10 Official photograph - How Tommies are fed. <https://flickr.com/photos>

The experience of Christmas for soldiers on the Western Front varied from time to time and place to place. The British newspapers presented an official, positive view of war, with photographs and illustrations of cheerful soldiers opening parcels from home or preparing their Christmas meal.



Source 11 An illustration 'Christmas at the Front - Unpacking the Parcels from Home' by British official war artist Fortunino Matania. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/a-first-world-war-christmas>



Source 12 A group of officers having lunch in the snow, Beaumont Hamel, December 1916. IWM

Source 13 Christmas on the Front <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/See> photo, front page.



Source 14 www.mprnews.org IWM

Newspapers such as The Illustrated London News and magazines like Blighty, which was aimed at soldiers at the Front, produced their annual Christmas covers. They presented a cheerful image of wartime Christmas for the readers.



Source 15 www.iln.org.uk

Source 16 www.pinterest.co.uk

The soldiers experience of Christmas Eve and Day varied. Those lucky enough to be out of the front line had at least a basic Christmas dinner in the reserve areas. However, the war was not far away. The War Diaries for Royal Sussex Regiments show how they spent their Christmas. The Christmas Day for the men of 2nd Battalion the Royal Sussex Regiment was 'spent in peace, the brigade, however being prepared to move at an hour's notice'.

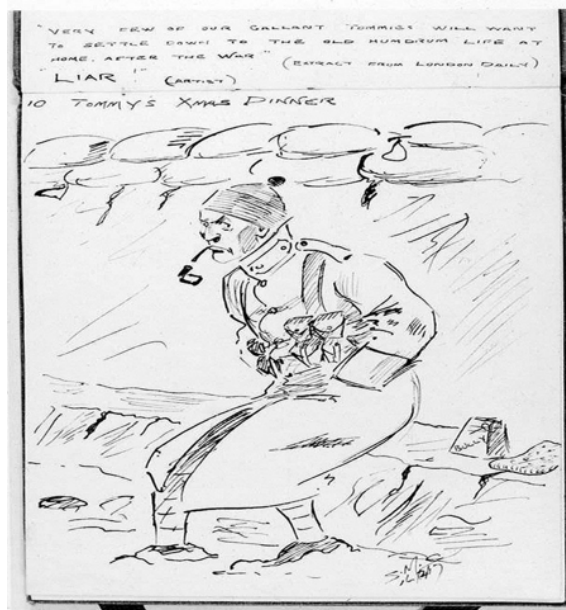
7 www.eastsussexww1.org.uk/christmas-first-world-war/index.html

Those in the Front had the staple army rations - bully beef, hard biscuits and Maconochie's beef and vegetable stew. If they were lucky this was supplemented by food items sent from home. British officer William Richards said:

'Christmas 1916 was an awful winter. My Christmas dinner was a tin of bully beef which I'd dug out of the snow, because it had been discarded by the previous occupants of the gun pit. - the ration lorry couldn't come because the roads were in such a state on account of ice and snow. And so, my Christmas was a tin of bully beef' 8 [www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war]

Christmas was a day like all the others. Walter Hare of the West Yorkshire Regiment recollected: 'They used to say that the fighting stopped for Christmas, well not where we were it didn't. So there were no celebrations. I think it was a bit quiet; there wasn't quite so much shelling going on and that kind of thing. But there wasn't a stop; there wasn't a halt or anything like that. The shelling went on occasionally and the occasional machine-gun and rifle fire. But it was a bit what we would call quiet.'

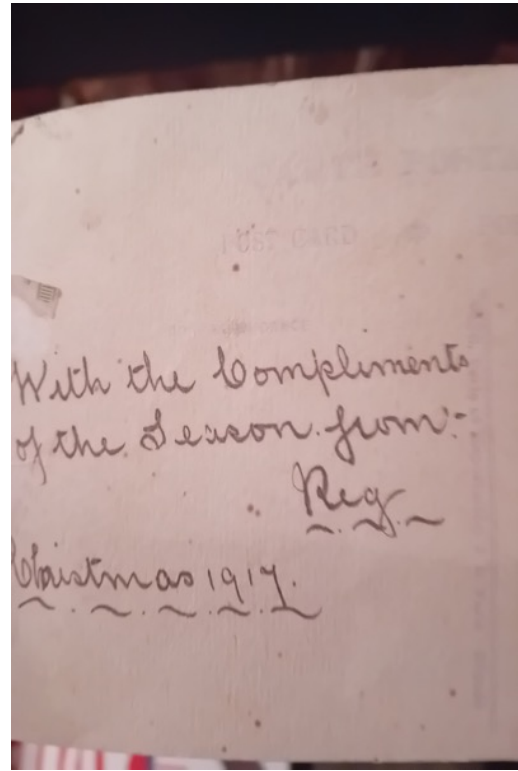
9. www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-christmas-at-war



Source 17 'Tommy's Xmas Dinner', 1917

Pen and ink drawing depicts a soldier stuck in a trench with only bully beef and army biscuit for his Christmas meal <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/>

Cards and postcards received or sent home were an important part of the wartime Christmas- a time when missing loved ones and family was probably most strongly felt. Decorative, embroidered Christmas cards and postcards were extremely popular often with sentimental and patriotic images.

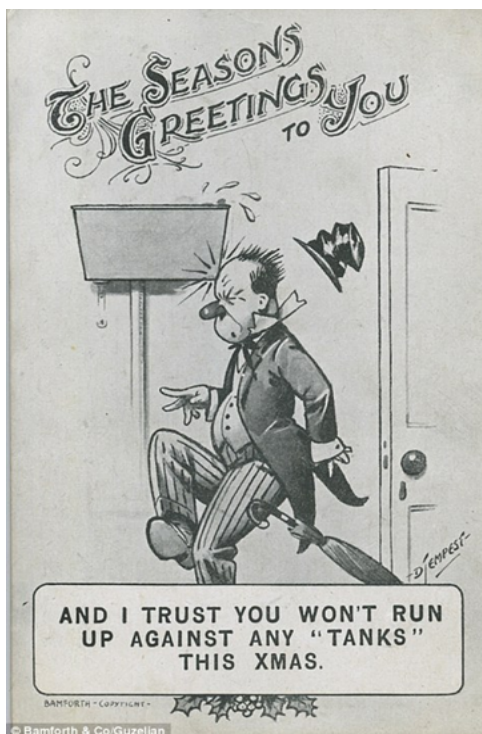


Source 18 Hand made WW1 Silks Paul Salver private collection.

Post cards were also a favourite providing much needed humour and boosted morale through their propaganda - especially popular lampooning the Kaiser at Christmas. Other cards were designed to express patriotism and often Regimental pride. Others used the dark humour of the soldiers about the real horrors of conditions in the trenches. "These cards often portrayed the dark humour and stiff upper lip attitude which were strongly associated with British trench warfare.....[and] portrayed images that ...[they]... wanted to be put into the public domain." 10 [<https://museumcrush.org/first-world-war-christmas-cards-show-stiff-upper-lip-and-dark-humour-of-serving-soldiers/>]

Bamforth and Co, a company that specialised in saucy postcards, produced a series of humorous Christmas cards.





Source 19 A gallery of humorous Christmas cards <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2885482/Best-wishes-except-Kaiser-Collection-WW1-Christmas-cards-shows-company-known-saucy-seaside-designs-turned-hand-rallying-wartime-spirit>.



Source 20 German Postcard "Weihnachten in Feindesland" (Christmas in Enemy Territory.)
www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/christmas-during-world-war-i

Throughout the war many wounded spent Christmas in military hospitals. The Government and Hospital authorities realized the importance of keeping up the spirits of the injured soldiers. The staff decorated the wards and traditional celebrations took place.¹¹
[www.voicesofwarandpeace.org/portfolio/birminghams-military-hospitals/]



Source 21 Preparations for Christmas - date unknown www.historyextra.com/



Source 22 Christmas in a German military hospital. <https://www.flickrriver.com/photos>

They also entertained the patients with parties and shows.



Source 23 Christmas hampers and party <http://www.eastsussexww1.org.uk/christmas-first-world-war/>

The Manchester Guardian reported on Christmas Eve 1914:

'The soldiers in the Whitworth Street Military Hospital will have pleasant reminders of the Christmas season. Many people have taken timely thought of them, including the highest in the land.

The King and Queen will send each man a Christmas-card bearing their likenesses and autographs, and the Queen has added a gift of tobacco.

There will also be a third individual gift which, if it does not hang on the Christmas tree of the ward, will be placed, by some delegate of Santa Claus, at the bedside.

A proper Christmas dinner will be served, following the modern instead of the old convention, which substitutes turkey for roast beef but clings tenaciously to the plum pudding, decorated with the twig of holly, and mince pies.

There is almost reason to fear a surfeit of the pudding, one would think, because the Daily News will provide each patient with a plateful weighing half a pound; and yet the plentifulness of supplies will be a more positive proof of goodwill.

Messrs Dingley have made the hospital a gift of fruit, and Messrs Cadbury have sent boxes of chocolate.'

12 The Manchester Guardian www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/christmas-war-1914-gifts-injured-soldiers

Mary Dexter, a volunteer British Red Cross nurse wrote letters about her experience. She leaves a powerful and emotional description of the wards at Christmas 1914: 'Such a nice Christmas morning—we night nurses got the first flush of it all, and I would not have missed it for worlds. You should have heard the shouts when I turned the lights on at 6 a.m. and they saw their stockings. They entered gloriously into the spirit of it, and the big ward rang with "Merry Christmases!" They all

feel that they will never forget their Christmas here..... Later in the evening, about thirty choir boys came and sang carols to the men in the wards—lovely carols they were. Our Christmas has been perfect. Everyone, from the patients to the maidservants, declared that they never had so happy a one. The men loved it all and were as jolly as schoolboys.'¹³ [Extract from *In the Soldier's Service: War Experiences of Mary Dexter: England, Belgium, France*. <https://circulatingnow.nlm.nih.gov/>]

Celebrating Christmas on the Home Front varied widely. Families tried to maintain a festive spirit and some kind of normality against the backdrop of the war with its losses and shortages which had increased by the fourth Christmas of the war in 1917. Many continued to put up Christmas trees and decorations, many ornaments were homemade. An increasingly popular Christmas day meal was baked cheese and celery and chestnut desserts. Gifts were mainly for children and carefully prepared packages for family at the Front. 'We are doing practically nothing in the way of Christmas presents, only for the children... No family presents' ¹⁴ White, Jerry - *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014)



Source 24 Food shortages and queue - World War One at Home BBC E Book

In the book '*Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War*' this feeling is described of Christmas 1917, the fourth of the war, quoting a report from the *Observer* newspaper -

'It is the fourth Christmas of the war, and for many it is going to be a very quiet, if not a sad one. For the first time, though we are all making the best of things, Christmas has lost its festive air...'¹⁵ IBID

White, Jerry - *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014)

White adds: 'There would be another eleven months before the war was finally over and London, like the rest of the country, could begin to breathe again after four years of conflict For those whose loved ones returned from the battlefield, the joy of having them back was often tempered by the fact that many of these men were never the same again as a result of their experiences. For those whose loved ones never returned, there was very little joy at all. Wartime Christmases were stark Christmases - and for many it took a long time afterwards before they began to echo the delight of the pre-1914 festive season once more.'¹⁶ IBID

The Daily Mirror Christmas message summed up the Home Front experience of the war as it entered its fifth year. The message was important then and so powerful it resonates still in the 21st century:

'Christmas in the age of high explosives

We have the fourth war Christmas with us; but we have not peace with Christmas; and once again, therefore, the festival, for religious people, ought to be purely religious - a season of prayer, and, if not fasting, at any rate not feasting.

For the rest of us, all the usual efforts of eating and present-buying can most patriotically and usefully be diverted into two other channels - into giving the sick and wounded in the hospitals as good a time as they are able to enjoy; and into buying War Bonds as a saving for future and happier Christmases.

The great dearness of the ordinary Christmas goods will, as a matter of fact, impose this course on most of the people. War Bonds are not much dearer than turkeys or chickens! - and they are much less wasteful.

The people have shown strong common sense, in regard to certain aspects of war - its length, for example. They know that, as the King told us some time ago, "the end is not in sight". As they have never believed the short-lived prophets, magicians, mediums and military critics who have told them that it is. Each year "peace before Christmas" - and each year an even more highly explosive Christmas than the last! What probably they ask, if they be still wise, is that "we should get it over this time" - whenever we do get it over. The German leaders ask the same. "Peace by victory." But peace final, when it comes! Otherwise, no thought of the true sense and significance of Christmas will ever again be possible.

You cannot have this feast of brotherhood in the age of high explosives. As each new devastating invention is added to the rest, the danger of humanity increases. Slowly, we have been heading for this gulf since the days of gunpowder; the essence of it all being the humanity's power has increased immeasurably beyond its common sense and its morality.

Power without morality means the death, the suicide, of humanity. The next war, if we have one, will see whole cities and people blown and torn to pieces.

Let us strive, then, this coming year, to save humanity from that. Let this Christmas be spent, by the faithful, in prayer; by the doubtful ever, in hope, that these bad times may end with humanity's peril out of sight.

The men who fight and the men who have fought for us are the only ones with a right to regard this year's Christmas as a time of rejoicing and forgetfulness."

From: Daily Mirror, Christmas Eve 1917 www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/christmas-war-1917-brotherhood-and-bombs-dont-mix

Paul Salver.



'India's Great War'

Dr Adam Prime, lecturer in the Politics and Contemporary History at Salford University talks about his research into the Indian Army during the Great War. He will explain how the Indian Army came about with its origins in the defence of the East India Company from 1757. A hundred years later when the British Army needed to defend the Northwest Frontier against the Russians a more professional army began to emerge. By the time of the outbreak of the First World War the army was made up of 240,000 Indian and 17,000 British soldiers. This talk looks at India's contribution to the First World War in every sense of the word. It takes in the huge recruitment boom and how the diversity of religious and caste differences was met to maintain peace, order and morale. It also looks at the experiences of Indian soldiers, and their British officers, on the Western Front, in Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia and in the Middle East. Finally, it looks at India itself and the actions undertaken there to defend the Northwest Frontier.

December 2nd - Visit to Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum.

January 19th 'India's Great War' - Adam Prime

February 16th 'The Doughboys 1917-18' - Mike Sheil

March 15th 'Robert Keable, utterly immoral WW1 chaplain?' -Simon Keable-Elliott

April 19th The U-Boat Campaign 1914-18' - Dr Graham Kemp

May 17th 'Now the War is Over' - Dr Daniel Weinbren

Meetings are 7.30 - 9.30.at Wolverton Working Men's Social Club, 49 - 50, Stratford Road MK12 5LS

Committee members are...

Stuart Macfarlan - Chairman (macfarlan87@gmail.com)

Anne McIntyre - Secretary/historical events co-ordinator (annefmmcintyre@gmail.com)

Ian Wright - Talks organiser

Caroline Wright - Treasurer

Jim Barrett - Seminar and visits co-ordinator

George Maby - Wolverton Town Council liaison (Twinning and Albert French commemoration)

Gary Short - Social Media co-ordinator.