

The Impact of WW1 on the local community

Bill Brookman was brought up in Woodhouse – so he told the Local History Group last month. He had come to the Methodist Church to tell us all about his research into the First World War and its impact on the local community.

You may have seen Bill performing locally or on television as a puppeteer, a street artist, or as a one-man-band (which he performed on stilts in Britain's Got Talent three years ago). But Bill has also worked for the United Nations in places like Somalia, Nepal, Uganda and Haiti, and played a leading part in the Charnwood Great War Centenary Project.

In 1914 Britain was not prepared for a land war. The Navy was considered key to the defence of both country and empire, and dreadnought building was taking the lion's share of War Office resources. As a result the regular army was small compared with those of France and Germany, so a major recruitment and training programme was launched.

In 1914 the Leicestershire regiment had two battalions of regular soldiers (one of which was stationed in India) and two of part-time territorials. The regulars were sent to France as quickly as possible, with the 2nd battalion travelling via Suez and Marseille. The 4th (territorials recruited in Leicester city) and the 5th (territorials recruited in Leicestershire county) were given six months intensive training before being sent to France in early 1915.

The Leicestershire Yeomanry were also mobilising. They were a volunteer force who had not expected to be sent overseas, but most of them wanted to fight. So the battalion was split into two, and the volunteers crossed the Channel with their horses in November. But the war soon turned static and the horses were of limited use, so the Yeomanry found themselves fighting in the trenches alongside the infantry.

In May 1915 they were in the trenches east of Ypres, on Frezenburg ridge. A German attack was launched and eventually repulsed, but at huge cost. 94 men were killed, including Major WF Martin of Woodhouse Eaves. The battalion had been decimated: two-thirds of those in the trench at the start of the battle were either killed or wounded. See Roundabout July/Aug 2015 (on the parish council website) for a full account of the battle.

Meanwhile volunteers were still signing up in large numbers: by the end of 1915 the infantry regiment had grown to nine battalions, all based in France except the 2nd who had been sent to the Middle East. And after conscription was introduced in 1916 the regiment continued to grow, eventually fourteen

battalions, all of whom came from the towns and villages of Leicestershire. They participated in several actions but mostly in support roles.

The Yeomanry were never the same after Frezenburg. They re-formed, and in 1918 saw action in the decisive Battle of Amiens and the pursuit to Mons which followed and led to the end of the war.

Roger Berkeley



Bill at the Methodist Church