

The First World War

“through the eyes of an eight year old”

I remember the declaration (1914) a lady with 4 or 5 children came out of her back yard gate calling “Phyllis, Ethel, Doris, Hilda, Walter, come here. There’s going to be a war and you must go some errands for flour and sugar”. Her man had a good job - he was a Spinning Master and of course was not “called up” [1]

My friends at school would tell of their Dad’s “papers” had arrived and then the red armlets, which had to be worn above the elbow to show they were “called up”.

Then the day when the beige envelope would come with instructions where to go and where to travel to. Of course, I knew they would not want my Dad, he was too old for at 38; quite old, so were happy enough until bad news kept being reported and the military field cards and War Office telegrams started coming into the Street.

One lady (a Mrs. Ainsworth) lost four sons in one battle – Eli, Johnnie, Joe and Henry [2]. Another lost her only son, Harry. They were “Chorley Pals” Regiment [3] and Mons when soldiers swore they saw an Angel [4].

My Uncle, 20 years old, [5] was brought back from France in a spinal cage with shrapnel in his spine; he was lucky, he had arms and legs - many boys with him had none. But all his life the shrapnel worked its way to the surface causing many operations in a Liverpool Military Hospital.

Then the dreaded day came Dad’s papers arrived, then the armlet and railway ticket and instructions. And Mum’s tears - poor Mum, poor Dad, and poor us; us being my brother and myself – it changed our lives completely. We went to the Station all together to see him off. The Station [6] was crowded with soldiers, wives and children all on one mission – to wave goodbye to a loved Dad, Son, Brother. We waved until the train was out of sight; now there really was a War on, when we were robbed our of Dad – a clean clean-shaven, handsome dark-haired man who came home three years later wounded, full of rheumatism through living in water filled trenches, very irritable – a changed man with a heavy moustache; I couldn’t believe he was my Dad. We went to meet him on the same Station where we waved goodbye. As he came to us I hid behind my Mum and was told “It’s your Dad, love – give him a kiss” but no-way would I kiss this man – so drastic was the change.

During his time in the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment my Mum had to work in the Mill to keep and clothe us. My brother [7] was 11 and I was 8 years old, and now he was the man of the family – also shopping, mopping the floor and washing up. Mum said it was a sin for a little boy to be doing such things. But she worked from 6 am to 5.30 pm and 6 am to 12 noon on Saturday, so not much leisure time. 8.30 to 9 am for breakfast – in that time she would run home just to see we were ready for school; also at 12 noon to make sure we had something to eat which she would have prepared the night before, and at 5.30 pm she would bring something home for us.

We had to be rationed for food. The Ration Books had pages of stamps for meat, margarine, sugar, and we had to register and if accepted we could only use the one shop. Of course my brother and I had to deal with this and on Mum’s “say so” we had to go to Catarall’s Butchers ten minutes walk from home, and The Maypole for the rest. In the Black-out we would go hand in hand to queue up to be served our allowance – two frightened children.

I remember one day learning that Mr. Sharples, a Grocer, had got hold of a barrel of treacle but you had to take a jar (and we both scrounged one). Mr. Sharples knew who we were (we lived near his shop), but he didn't turn one of us away not even when my brother said we had no money but would bring it when Mum came home; he said "That's all right, lad". We were delighted and felt very clever. Mum made some Parkin – she was a good Mum and a good Cook, and must have been tired. Yet on Sundays, she didn't lie in – she had us up for Sunday School at 9.30 am, then to Church at 10.30 am and had a nice hot dinner when we got home - then back to Sunday School at 2 pm. She would buy a 10 inch rabbit on a Saturday and put a bit of meat with it and roast some potatoes (lovely). She would make us cow heel pie and a favourite cakes was 'Chorley Cake' or currant cake which was short pastry, top and bottom with currants, sugar and knobs of margarine in between; of course there were no currants so Mum would stone some prunes and cut them into small pieces – it was nice.

We always had a Simnel Cake [8] on mid-Lent Sunday and she would decorate the top with Dolly Mixtures bought with our sweet coupons.

I remember saving up for Dad's Christmas parcel – a pair of socks, a pair of gloves, a scarf (all khaki), some cigarettes, some sweets and of course a cake cooked with love. A suitable box had to be found so that the cake fitted firmly and safely – the lid fastened down with strips of gummed paper. Second stage was to double sheet of good brown paper, also gummed together, then the third stage was a sheet of thick white linen in which was laid the result of weeks of love, time and coupons. It was packed like any parcel with envelope ends which had to be stitched with strong thread, then tied with string and sealed with red sealing wax. Only then could it be addressed in purple ink and I remember, 75 years later, my Dad's address – 25410 Private J. Bowling, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment "somewhere in France". Then it had to be weighed at the Post Office and thick blue stripes put over the string when it would go on its way on a wing and a prayer, hoping Dad would get it and enjoy the contents.

We never knew until he came home for good - dressed in a bright blue flannel suit with white lapels and a brilliant red tie. This was the wounded soldier's uniform [9] and we were so proud of him. But he just wanted to forget which I don't think he ever did.

The 1914 - 1918 War ruined my Dad's health. He died at 57 years of age.

Alice Smith (nee Bowling), Chorley c1988

Transcribed by Steve Williams of Chorley Remembers project, 7th September 2014 from the original eight pages of handwritten notes. Originals given to the project by a former neighbour of the author.



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Notes:

This account was written around 1988 by Elizabeth Alice Smith (nee Bowling), born 1907 in Chorley to John and Margaret Ellen Bowling (nee Markland) [married 8th August 1903 in St. Laurences's Church, Chorley]. The 1911 Census had them living at 5 Wellington Street, Chorley.

Private 25410 John Bowling served in the 7th Battalion of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, being "called up" on the 24th July 1916, going to France on the 23rd November 1916. He was wounded in the right leg on the 25th September 1917, arriving back in the UK on the 30th September. He was transferred to the 3rd (Depot) Battalion of the Loyal North Lancs. at Felixstowe and then to the Labour Corps on the 31st August 1918 for "light duties". He was discharged from the Army on the 14th March 1919, having suffered from rheumatism and sciatica from the 23rd September 1918; he was given a pension of 5 shillings and six pence for 88 weeks from the 19th March 1919.

John Bowling was born in Chorley on the 24th October 1877 and died in the town in December 1935. His daughter Elizabeth Alice married Arthur Smith at St. Laurence's Church in Chorley in 1931 and they had a daughter, Mary, born in 1935; she is believed to have married a Keith Fishwick in 1957.

Notes (in text)....

[1] It was only the Army Reserve (ex-regular soldiers) and Territorial Force (part-time soldiers) who were "called up" in August 1914. Conscription was not introduced in WWI until January 1916 and then for men between the ages of 18 and 41, with married men being exempt; this changed in May 1916 when any man (single or married) up to the age of 41 could be called up.

[2] [3] One was Corporal 15156 Eli Ainsworth of Y Company, 11th (Service) Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment – "The Chorley Pals" killed in 1917. His brothers were Henry (killed on Gallipoli in 1915 with the Connaught Rangers), Joseph (killed at Festubert in France in 1915 with the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment) and Jonathan (no record of him serving in the First World War). The 1911 Census had the Ainsworth family living at number 4 Wellington Street in Chorley.

[4] 'The Angel of Mons' refers to the alleged sighting of an Angel by British troops in 1914 in the Belgium town of Mons. None of the Ainsworth brothers nor Private Bowling were ever near there.

[5] This is probably Private 2076 (later 200508) James Bowling of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment who went to France on the 4th May 1915, possibly with the 'Chorley Terriers' (1st / 4th Battalion and wounded at Festubert in June that year). The second number indicates that he was serving in the Army in 1917 when the numbers for Territorial Soldiers (previously four digits) changed to six digits, starting with a 2. The 1911 Census had a James Bowling, aged 17, living at 7 Wellington Street (next door to his cousin, John).

[6] Probably Chorley railway station.

[7] Arnold Bowling, born 6th September 1907 and died in 1956.

[8] "Simnel Cake" is a light fruit cake with two layers of almond paste or marzipan, one in the middle and one on top, that is toasted; it is traditionally eaten during the Easter period.

[9] Traditionally called "Hospital Blue", the uniform carried no rank or insignia.

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