

August the Fourth 1914

HALF A CENTURY AGO the World War jolted the little town of Berkhamsted into four years of astonishing activity. Never in our long history—not even in the second World War, when we were hosts to British, Dutch and American troops, as well as to thousands of evacuees—was Berkhamsted so markedly a military town as it was from 1914–18.

Billeting officers inspected every house and chalked the number of vacancies on the front door. Almost every householder found room, and a welcome, for one, two, three or more soldiers. Some friendships made all those years ago are maintained to this day.

Thousands upon thousands of men trained on the Common, over the Ivinghoe hills, and in the Park, where we still speak of Kitchener's Field. Recruits had a foretaste of the mud if not the horrors of France and Flanders in the miles of trenches dug on the Common. Those trenches were filled in long ago, but a familiar war memorial reminds the old and informs the young that 2,000 of the 12,000 men of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps who trained at Berkhamsted never returned from the battlefields.

LOST GENERATION

Names familiar and some no longer familiar record Berkhamsted's lost generation inside and outside St. Peter's Church. Even now, so many years later, one does not like to count the names; the lists are so tragically long. But future historians, studying census figures showing 7,302 inhabitants in 1911 and 7,295 in 1921, will know why there was just one decade when the population of Berkhamsted decreased.

Even before the war broke out there were hundreds of soldiers in the district. The Territorials camped in front of Ashridge House, and on 30th July, 1914, notices were served on special service men to proceed to various destinations. These men were on parade within an hour and left Ashridge to the strains of 'Auld Lang Syne.' A few days later the rest of the Territorials were ordered to strike camp and return home to await further instructions. A quarter of a ton of cake not consumed at the camp was afterwards distributed in Berkhamsted.

Rumours of war did not disrupt local activities. Here, during the last weekend of the Great Peace, the talk was of the Cricket Club's heavy defeat by Sir Arthur Cory-Wright's side. Another topic was the electricity cable from Chesham, which had just reached Ashley Green and would soon bring the 'new illuminant' to a town where most of the houses were lit by gas or paraffin lamps.

BEFORE THE STORM

The pound was still worth a gold sovereign, landlords advertised vacant cottages at 4s. a week, coal was 17s. a ton, and there were jobs for boys leaving school at 7s. a week. Everything was going on much the same as before. The isolation hospital, not the threat of war, was the subject of the leading article in the *Berkhamsted Gazette*. A Member of Parliament, at a local fete, had more to say about the risk of civil war in Ireland than the war clouds over Europe.

The day before war broke out was August Bank Holiday, and large crowds attended the annual sports in the Castle grounds. It was a rainy day, and at night the Picture Playhouse (now the King's Hall) kept the audience amused with Seymour Hicks' latest film, 'Always Tell Your Wife'. For good measure there were two stage turns as well.

Berkhamsted was back at work on Tuesday, the first of 1,561 days of war. Notices were posted up ordering the Territorials to report to headquarters, and a huge crowd cheered the Berkhamsted, Ashridge and Little Gaddesden contingents as they boarded the 9.8 p.m. train.

SPY SCARE

These surprising events, reported the *Gazette*, were taken coolly, and beyond the departure of Territorials and Reservists little of note occurred. Business proceeded very much as usual.

Major James Parsons, chairman of the Urban District Council, called a public meeting at the Town Hall. Addressing 'an absolutely united people,' he appealed to employers not to discharge men hastily, warned against panic purchases of food, and started a register of voluntary workers.

Like the rest of the country, Berkham-

sted soon fell victim to spy mania. A middle-aged schoolmaster who had served in the German Army as a youth was brought before the magistrates. Senior scouts wasted hours trying to discover a German spy somewhere between Berkhamsted and Chesham. Then came the sensation of the year: two foreigners were said to have attacked the signalman at Dudswell. The signal-box was in darkness and the signalman was found unconscious. But he was ill, not the victim of secret agents.

WHITE FEATHERS

By 22nd August it was reported that 36 local men had answered the call to serve their country. At a meeting outside the Town Hall, Berkhamsted was accused of failing to contribute its proper quota to Lord Kitchener's New Army. People started distributing white feathers, and a nonchalant young man wrote to the *Gazette* saying he would accept all that were sent to him, as the feathers made good pipe-cleaners.

Recruiting drives were made at local factories, and at the chemical works Sir Richard Cooper told employees that the war would be a long one—a rare forecast at that time. Twelve young volunteers were interviewed by General Foot, and next morning they were taken in a shooting brake to Bedford, where nine were enlisted and three were not accepted on medical grounds. Two of the three rejected men joined up later on, and all of the eleven volunteers of 1914 returned home four or five years later.

BELGIAN REFUGEES

From time to time heavy field guns rumbled through the town. Numerous troop trains disrupted the local service. Mysterious squads of engineers were seen in our countryside. Then, in September, four of the first Kitchener battalions burst into the town.

The Northumberland Fusiliers were here by the thousand, and these sturdy young volunteers will be recalled in next month's article. While the troops were arriving, Berkhamsted also gave shelter to many Belgian refugees. A local committee was formed to care for them, and by the end of October eight houses had been taken over and furnished for the refugees. Few could speak English, and the *Gazette* came to their aid by publishing a column of news and advice in Flemish.

'BEORCHAM'

(To be continued.)

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