



Life at home: July to September 1917

Food shortages had led the Government to try to ensure that as much land as possible was ploughed up to grow crops. Captain Percy Seward of Weston Farm sat on the County Councils 'War Agricultural Committee', trying to decide which land should be ploughed, and also co-ordinating the co-operative use of horses and ploughs.

Among many other imported goods, there was a shortage of wool, and local children began to collect it from hedgerows – perhaps giving some respite to local sparrows!

Stormy weather in August caused some damage to hop blossoms, but when picking began at the start of September, the weather was glorious. There was, however, a big difference from previous years: with less acreage now given to hops, few outside hop-pickers were required and there was not the normal lively atmosphere when people came up on trains from Portsmouth.

Increased activity on the Western Front meant even more eggs needed to be sent for the wounded. Children took eggs to Buriton school, and local collectors made sure that they reached distribution centres. Such was the organisation that all the eggs collected would normally arrive at the hospitals in France within two to three days.

The latest military activity also brought more grim news to the parish: William and Harriet Silver in the High Street learnt that their son, George, had been killed. A few weeks later, over the course of two days at the beginning of the Passchendaele offensive, Rowland Marriner and Godfrey Harfield were also killed. And after a wait of a year, the Chittys learnt that their son, Caleb, had been declared dead, despite his sister's best efforts to find him alive.

Some happier news included the arrival of Kitty, a little daughter for Henry Stevens (in the Somerset Light Infantry) and his wife Alice. And, although she now lived down in Dorset, there was also joy at the engagement of Mary Ann, the daughter of Frederick Tussler, a blacksmith and engineer at the lime works, to Quartermaster-Sergeant Charles Downton, holder of a Meritorious Service Medal for conspicuous bravery.

In July St Mary's welcomed Bishop Mercer and his wife, so recently Harriet Bennion, when he preached during a visit to Nursted House.

And, as if flour, sugar and potato shortages weren't enough, paper shortages had driven the Hants & Sussex News, affectionately known as 'The Squeaker', to cut its number of pages by half.

The Western Front: July to September 1917

After success at Messines Ridge, General Haig planned a 'push' on Passchendaele and onwards to take Belgian ports and German U-boat bases to reduce shipping losses affecting Britain.

It became one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

For ten days from 18th July, Allied artillery fired about 4.5 million shells from 3,000 guns onto German lines prior to an infantry assault at the end of the month.

The flat terrain made stealth impossible, the enemy realised an attack was coming and conducted air-raids and shelling.

George Silver, aged 20, of Bolinge Hill was killed on 2nd July. He had taken cover in a dug-out with nine colleagues from 70th Brigade, RFA, when a shell came through and burst inside killing him instantly. None of the others were scratched.

The 14th Hampshires were nearby but Albert Strugnell of Bones Lane was listed as sick in mid-July. With poisonous mustard gas used here for the first time, it is possible that he was affected. But

influenza, tuberculosis, trench foot and other ailments caused by ever-present lice were rife. Herbert Francis was also here with 14th Hants.

Albert Durrant was promoted to NCO in 178th Labour Corps – often working, unarmed, within range of enemy guns, doing tasks essential for the war effort.

The pressure to move supplies and provide transport facilities grew as the attack loomed. Lorries drove closer to the front and engineers worked amidst falling shells.

Sadly, Rowland Marriner, 27, of 112th Railway Company, was killed by a shell on 30th July whilst working near Kemmelbeek bridge.

As the last shells of the bombardment before the attack fell, Godfrey Harfield and the 7th South Lancshires moved into position near Hollebeke. Zero hour was confirmed for 3.50am, 31st July.

With a creeping barrage in front of them, the first wave advanced with the South Lancashire's close behind. Initial objectives were taken and 100 prisoners captured by 5.30am.

But patrols were delayed by snipers and machine gun fire prevented the achievement of other objectives. The Company remained in position for about 27 hours until relieved around 11pm on the night of 1st / 2nd August.

It is not known at what point in this attack Godfrey Harfield was killed, but his death is recorded as 31st July.





Fred Rattley and Joseph Hall, 15th Hampshires, attacked nearby Pilckern Ridge and the 14th Hants, with their Buriton men, reached their objectives taking many prisoners.

The story was similar for many on the first day with good communications, preliminary shelling and the creeping barrage working well.

But then the rain came: the heaviest in more than 30 years.

Shells bombarding German lines had destroyed drainage systems that kept the reclaimed marshland dry: the battlefields were soon transformed into waist-deep bogs.

Even tanks made little headway, and uniforms and rifles became caked in mud. In places men and horses drowned in the quagmire.

For two weeks both sides struggled until British troops were reorganised and a second phase launched on 16th August.

Attackers spent two rainy nights in shell holes before zero hour. The 11th Hampshires, including John Harfield, had a terrible time: spread out in weak positions, facing strong enemy pillboxes. They were riddled with bullets as they left



their trenches, cut to a third strength in less than a minute. But John survived.

Troops elsewhere had slightly more success. The 2nd Hampshires, including Albert Marriner and James Powell, advanced 1,500 yards near Broenbeek. White tapes marked their route and a creeping barrage overhead led the way. They attacked machine guns and silenced them within an hour.

The 14th Hampshires were also fighting in this attack on Langemarck but made few gains.

In August, Horace Silver, a Gunner in the Royal Horse Artillery whose brother had been killed in July, was gassed and sent to hospital in Eastbourne.

Another fresh offensive started on 20th September and Fred Rattley and Joseph Hall of 15th Hampshires took part in an attack with some close quarter fighting, but gained little.

The next week Arthur Watts, Basil Treagus and James Hills of 1st Hampshires attacked nearby at Polygon Wood. Another dreadful, wet, muddy massacre resulted with no gains for either side, but all the Buriton men survived.

Haig's 'push' had been foiled by the weather. Passchendaele had not been taken, let alone the ports. It would be November before Allied forces took control of the village.

How railways changed the war

With thousands of men in trenches for months on end, huge quantities of supplies were needed every day.

In 1914, realising that the war would not be over by Christmas, the British Army made plans to expand the rail network to move men and supplies from the Channel ports to Divisional railheads.

With insufficient railway engineers in the forces, more construction units were organised, recruiting employees of British railway companies, with training at Longmoor.

The aim was to take standard railways as close to the front as possible and, for the sappers, work could be around the clock, especially where lines had been cut by shellfire. Their work was always a potential target for enemy artillery and aeroplanes; casualties were inevitable.

At first the army relied mainly on horse transport and manual effort to move everything from the railheads, but some battles exposed problems: inadequate roads and poor weather meant supplies were delayed and the shortages – including ammunition – hampered the chances of successes. Horses and lorries simply could not cope.

By 1917 new light rail systems were introduced, reducing the numbers of men and horses required for transport and also reducing damage to roads and the men needed to repair them.

The British adopted a French 600mm narrow gauge and developed light



One of the locomotives that came to Buriton after the war

prefabricated tracks in 5 metre lengths that could be carried easily, laid quickly by unskilled labourers and that spread the weight so that the railways could almost 'float' on mud.

As the battle fronts moved, so did the rail network; narrow gauge lines were laid as required.

As well as innovation in the track system, a variety of locomotive power was used with early diesel, petrol and petrol-electric engines as well as traditional steam power (which was relatively easy for the enemy to spot).

After the war, scores of popular 'Simplex' petrol-engined machines were available back in Britain – and two came to Buriton to tow trucks in the chalk pits and limeworks.

At least two Buriton men served in Royal Engineers Railway Companies:

Cyril Harfield was in 10th Railway Company and Rowland Marriner was in 112th Railway Operating Company having joined up at the outbreak of war and travelled to France in February 1915 on the day before his 25th birthday.

Whilst Cyril Harfield survived to be discharged in 1919, Rowland Marriner was killed by a shell near Kemmelbeek Bridge, north of Ypres, on 30th July 1917 in the run-up to Passchendaele.