



## Life in Buriton: January to March 1918

The very cold, snowy weather of December persisted into January 1918. Getting about was difficult, but at least there were further opportunities for skating on the pond!

Food shortages were still a problem - butchers could now only get meat from local markets, and the hospitals in Petersfield took much of that supply. Butter and margarine were also in short supply, leading to recipes such as 'Potato Butter': a very small amount of butter mashed into a large amount of potato and then used as a spread. By the end of March, rationing for these products was announced, overseen by the Local Food Control Committee.

Buriton's Headmaster Mr Patrick noted, on 1st March: "Attendance has been lower owing to food shortages. Youngsters are sent into Petersfield to try to get provisions."

But the school continued to help the war effort. Mr Patrick recorded: "The children have sent 660 eggs to the depot during the past year for wounded soldiers and sailors and a sum of nearly £8 for purchase of eggs."

People were being warned of impending daytime air-raids: if they heard

the hooter at the Borough Brewery sound continuously, they must seek shelter!

There was also a problem with the water supply in Buriton. There were no main water pipes into the parish, and people drew their water from wells. After an outbreak of diphtheria, the source was said to be five polluted wells in the High Street. These were immediately closed and, while the Rural District Council discussed options, the people in the eight affected houses had to get all their water from a standpipe.

As well as news about medals for Harry Legg and Basil Treagus, there was sadness with the deaths of Charles Shepherd and William Beagley. And, on 19th March, Albert Powell was killed in a horrific accident at sea. He was serving, off Ireland, on HMS Motagua which was joining the American destroyer, USS Manley, as part of her escort. But the two ships came too close to each other and collided causing a depth charge and fuel barrels to explode, killing 62 men. Albert was buried at sea, leaving behind his grieving parents in Bones Lane (who were soon to lose two more sons) and a widow with three young sons in Petersfield. He had been home on leave just five weeks before the accident.

# The Western Front: January to March 1918

The first couple of months of 1918 saw no significant attacks on the Western Front by either side, but men had to endure the usual shelling and occasional raids. Germany, however, was planning a major offensive which, with the availability of troops from the Eastern Front after the end of the war with Russia, brought some desperate times for Britain and her allies.

A number of Buriton men spent time in and out of the front lines during this period. The 1st Hampshires (including James Hills) spent much of January in the front lines just north of Arras. Conditions here were very bad due to the weather: heavy rain after a thaw made waders essential and hot soup and cocoa were issued at night. They were able to spend February and the first half of March in camps near Fosseux and Warlus 'in reserve' and in training but they would be involved in some frantic action in March.

Similarly the 2nd Hampshires (including James Powell and Frank Newman) spent periods of time in January

and February in camps, providing support and in training (with short spells in the front line) although they were about 50 miles further north in the Arras and Passchendaele area.

Charles Shepherd, serving with the 3/4th The Queens (Royal West Surreys), was about 35 miles south of Arras, in the front lines around Gouzeaucourt. On 14th January they rotated out into the reserve lines, encountered some enemy machine gun fire on 15th and suffered from more hostile artillery on 16th before returning to huts at Heudecourt for baths and a rest. Unfortunately, two men were killed by the shelling on this day and Charles was one of them. He was 25 years old, unmarried and from Weston. His parents had two other sons serving in the forces.

Within a few weeks another young man from Weston, William Beagley, had also died, aged only 18. He had completed his training with the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry at Lark Hill camp, Wiltshire, and was awaiting his deployment to the front



when he fell ill with pneumonia and died on 9th February. He had been an under-carter for the Seward brothers at Weston Farm and was brought home to be buried in St Mary's churchyard.

By this time, Harry Legg (7th Royal Fusiliers) had travelled by rail and march to Beulencourt (south of Arras) for training, an inspection by their Brigade General and some relaxation playing football and visiting Amiens. Baths were allotted to them but soon they were back into the lines for three days in and out as usual, around Ribecourt in the Cambrai area. They faced some shelling and enemy raids and at the end of February a heavy 30-minute barrage fell on them although the enemy did not follow this up with an attack. They experienced similar tactics in early March and on 12th nearby Trescault was hit with 8,000 shells, including gas, causing heavy casualties. The German's "Spring offensive" was about to begin.

On 20th March, whilst in the front line, Harry and his colleagues were attacked several times but the attempts on their position were repelled. The next day a tremendous artillery barrage came down along the whole of the Somme lines. It was very foggy and the enemy attacked. Fast-moving enemy storm troopers armed with light machine guns and flamethrowers, advanced towards the British behind a creeping barrage and a heavy smoke screen.

After 48 hours of confusing fighting,



Harry Legg's unit withdrew to billets but, after being shelled there too, they were sent out again to hold high ground until morning. They then withdrew across the Somme via Flers, High Wood and Courcelette to Thiepval ridge. After dark, they crossed the River Ancre, destroying the bridge to slow their pursuers.

By 26th March only half the battalion was left and brave patrols fought rear-guard actions whilst others marched to Forceville and dug new trenches to defend the approaches. During these chaotic times, Runners like Harry Legg were invaluable and their task never more perilous. Harry was again recognised for bravery, receiving a Bar to his Military Medal.

Harry Legg's experience was typical of those hit by the German's Spring offensive. The Buriton men in the 1st Hampshires were ordered to evacuate the front line on 23rd March and withdraw. Back in the front line a few days later they were attacked by Stormtroopers east of Arras on 28th but beat off three determined attacks, each one of which had entered their trenches. The nearby Essex Battalion was beaten

and so the Hampshires had to fall back before withdrawing further in the evening. The 2nd Hampshires, still in positions further north, near to Ypres, also moved back during the last few days of March.

Cyril Fullick, Horace Gamblen and others in 15th Hampshires had been fighting in Italy until 1st March but had then returned to France and spent two weeks training near Bapaume before digging in on the road to Sapignies on 22nd, just as the German offensive took hold. Bapaume was unceasingly shelled until evacuated by the British. The Battalion withdrew but encountered terrific fighting over the next couple of days. Their flanks were pushed back and the situation was very serious until they were saved by the arrival of three tanks. On 27th March they were ordered to withdraw, fighting a brilliant rear-guard action as they went.

Artillerymen Lindsay Harfield (12th Heavy Royal Garrison Artillery) and Wilfred Aldred (72nd Royal Field Artillery) were also probably serving in the area, with Wilfred's division becoming almost surrounded at times.

Douglas Harfield's 1st Dorsets had been north of Ypres but were relieved by Belgian troops for some rest before moving south on 29th March to positions south of Arras.

This German offensive (Operation Michael) had been comprehensive and meticulously planned. Many men died on 21st March and within the next few days the Germans advanced up to 40 miles across a front 50 miles wide, almost cutting the link between the British and French positions and threatening the vital rail junction of Amiens. They took 90,000 British prisoners and got to within 62 miles of Paris, putting the city within range of their Big Bertha Howitzer artillery.

In his diary on March 27th, Buriton's RFC Pilot Francis Cave noted: "we have retired a long way. We are practically in the same positions as when we started the Somme offensive in 1916."

The German offensive was so successful that a jubilant Kaiser Wilhelm declared 24th March a national holiday. The trench warfare, which had been set in for over three years, was not to be the norm any more. It appeared that a German victory was within reach.



*Many allied troops became prisoners of war*