

A Timely War?

by

Mike Royden

Ellesmere Port was suffering both socially and economically even before the outbreak of war. In the unsettling months before August 1914, the community was devastated when due to tensions in Europe and a consequent drop-off in orders, the Merseyside Iron Works was reduced to short time and most men laid off. By the time war broke out, the town seemed to be on its knees. *'Distress inevitable at the Port'* reported the local press within days of the outbreak of hostilities;

'The war is having a disastrous effect upon Ellesmere Port, a town which will be directly hit much harder than most centres in the country. A Local Government Board official who has visited three counties since hostilities broke out has testified to this and the prospect is nothing less than alarming. The majority of the populace are dependent upon the Ironworks, and it is idleness here that will be responsible for the distress'.

Birkenhead Advertiser & Wallasey Guardian 9 September 1914



In the same week Mr Winn, publican of the Knot Hotel and Mr Wright, a pork butcher on Whitby Road, commenced giving away bread and soup to the starving children. As conditions began to get worse, an emergency meeting was called by the local council 'for the purpose of considering how best to meet the urgencies of the situation caused through the war'. Held at the Free Trade Hall in the Port, the Chairman reported that they had about 3,000 men walking about in Ellesmere Port without work. The Council had,

meanwhile, commenced work on the construction of a bowling green, on which about thirty or forty men were working. They proposed to give the work in turns, so that many might benefit in some way. It was a pitiful and a tragically pathetic set of circumstances. In a futile appeal, they also proposed to press the Local Government Board to grant them money at once (each locality contributed to a national central fund which then allocated money to each Local Board) so they could proceed with the making of roads and the widening of existing roads

under the Town Planning Scheme. Inevitably, many of those present couldn't see the point of contributing to the central fund when it was *they* who needed immediate help. As one of the councillors declared, "we want the money now, the people are starving". Mr Boulton JP, meanwhile announced that his Ironworks had obtained a supply of spelter, which would enable the works to go on for three weeks or maybe a month, giving some insight into the short term future of the local workforce. Unfortunately, their regular supply was from Belgium, which was now cut off.

When the Charity Organisation Committee (comprising of representatives from the church, local council and industrialists) met on 20 August 1914 in the church institute, they were expecting the blackest period in the history of the town. The outlook could not be more serious, for Ellesmere Port they declared, was the hardest hit in Cheshire. Burnell's Ironworks and the Merseyside Iron Works could remain open for little more than two weeks and neither were working to capacity, many already having been laid off. Two weeks' notice had already been issued to remaining staff. There would be almost 2,000 married men, most with large families, without wages. Two hundred appeals for relief had been received in two days. The iron companies owned over 300 houses and collecting rent from its workers would be impossible, in addition to those owned by private landlords who could not expect rent either. They decided to appeal to the Local Government Board for funds to erect cheap affordable housing, while using local labour. Another member of the board revealed he was feeding 20-30 poor children a day at his home, and it was decided to open two more soup kitchens, at the Heathfield Road Mission and the Church Institute. It was also suggested that the local magistrates should be encouraged to meet with local publicans to reduce opening hours during the war. In fact, this would soon be dealt with on a national basis when the government announced in October 1915 several measures they believed would reduce alcohol consumption. Before the law was changed, public houses could open from 5 am in the morning to 12.30 pm at night. Opening hours would now be reduced to 12.00 noon to 2.30 pm and 6.30 to 9.30 pm – and beer watered down.



Days later, several boys were in court for stealing turnips from the fields of local farmers. This was becoming an increasing problem for the farmers who reminded the court that they were already donating food to the numerous soup kitchens – a sure indication of the growing poverty. In fact, times were so hard that the court decided to look upon the youngsters sympathetically and would not make an example of them to other wayward boys of Ellesmere Port. The court understood they were so poor and quite desperate that their punishment was to just pay costs at a time when the punishment for theft was usually quite severe.

By the next meeting of the newly formed War Relief Committee on 7 September 1914, it was reported that the new soup kitchens in Heathfield Road and the Church Institute were giving away 6,000 dinners a week – over 800 a day – and, not unexpectedly, it became apparent that hundreds of tenants were not paying their rent. The major landlord was Mr E J

Peter Jones JP, (owner of the Mersey Iron Works) who owned a considerable amount of property. While he said he had no intention of turning out his tenants, especially as many had worked in his factory, or were victims of recent factory closures, he appealed to the local Poor Law Union to intervene, and alleviate the situation. At a later meeting he promised that his workers could live rent free for the duration of the war and no arrears would be accumulated.

The local newspapers were less impressed however;

‘It has been freely stated that there is work enough and to spare in the Ellesmere Port district for any man who is not too particular as to what he turns his hand to. It is understood that only the other day, some sixty men resolutely refused to start work at road making, at which occupation many are now engaged, and where there are opportunities to work at standard wages for many more men. The men, it appears, objected to start on the grounds that they were unaccustomed to such toll and that the “pay” was nothing like so much as they had always received at their ordinary jobs. This regrettable discrimination was the subject of much comment on the part of one or two members of the Committee. “If they won’t do an honest day’s work when it is offered to them at home, why don’t those who are eligible join the colours and serve their country,” said a well-known member of the Committee. This view was taken by others and one of them considered that in the circumstances, in some cases, the landlords would be justified in taking extreme measures to get their rents’.

Birkenhead News and Wirral General Advertiser 29 August 1914

In fact, such news and the stirring of the rumour mill was way off the mark. One of the Committee replied vociferously, suggesting such information was being circulated to ‘check the voluntary assistance now forthcoming in this district during the present period of distress’. Far from there being a surplus of work, the Committee had tried to find work the previous week for 400 men. The reality was quite different. On Friday 21st August, sixty men had turned up at Backford, a mile or so towards Chester, where they were under the impression there was work available on the construction of the new high road. Only one man was taken on. Word spread over the weekend that work was available and a desperate 200 men turned up on Monday morning, only to see just seven men engaged. Mr Munro was the secretary of the Ellesmere Port War Relief Committee. He was also incensed at the flippant remarks made about how ‘shirkers should join the Colours’. According to Munro, the proportion of recruits obtained from Ellesmere Port is far in excess of that obtained in Birkenhead (the dominant town in the Wirral), and that the military authorities were delighted at the numbers recruited thus far. Those accusing the desperate poor of being ‘rent resisters’ also came in for flak – Mr Jones the landlord had publicly stated twice that those of his workforce in difficulties could live rent free in his properties for the duration of the war and while the present distress prevailed. Claiming there were scores of people in dire distress, he went further and suggested that none of the landlords would attempt to evict their tenants while the present conditions continued. Munro claimed that Ellesmere Port was more badly hit by the war than anywhere in England. The town was going through the most critical period in its history. The two iron works, employing between them nearly 3,000 men were simply opening intermittently to allay the distress by producing corrugated sheets for stock. He declared that this kind of consideration is greatly appreciated in the district as it is well known that corrugated iron deteriorates rapidly if kept in stock for a long period. Munro also appealed to the rest of an ‘affluent Wirral’ who should help their near neighbour out instead of sending their money into the National Fund.

The situation was becoming more desperate by the day, highlighted by the fact that the War Relief Committee was continuing to feed over 800 starving children daily, plus distributing provision tickets to needy families. The Committee declared,

‘The food given to the children is of the best and large quantities of vegetables are given by the farmers in the district, who have responded nobly to the call for help. The three flour mills have promised to give 700lbs of flour weekly during the war and this is baked into bread by several tradesmen. So although a grant from the National Relief Fund has been applied for, nothing is forthcoming and the people are driven to help each other’.

(The local war fund, opened during August 1914, had raised £817-11s-9d by September, much of the money coming from the upper echelons of local Ellesmere Port society, such as the proprietors of the mills. There was also a fund for the Belgian refugees – this had raised £74 13s 6d).

Indeed, it was revealed that the problem of feeding adults would also have to be considered before long. Several heart-rending cases were brought to the attention of the Committee, such as a man who had been out of work for ten weeks and did not wish to become a burden upon his family, enlisted and left behind a wife and eight children. The children were being fed by the soup kitchen and the only food the mother had was the dregs of soup from the children’s cups which she watered down so as to enable it to “spin out”. Once the Committee heard of her case she was afforded relief.

Substantial sums of money were being contributed each week by the various local works, but they were still far short of what was required to maintain those left behind by Reservists and Volunteers, and sufferers through unemployment. It was estimated that £1,000 would be needed every week and the Committee continued to make strong appeals to the wealthy districts of the Wirral to support Ellesmere Port, which was undoubtedly the hardest hit town in the country.

There were still hopes that Burnell’s and the Mersey Ironworks would soon re-open their iron and steel mills to enable employees to at least work half time, to relieve some of the distress. One of the councillors had the smart idea of obtaining employment for around 300 Ellesmere Port men at the Port Sunlight works to replace the men who had enlisted. However, despite verbal agreements with a senior official at Port Sunlight, they gave the bulk of the jobs to men of Birkenhead, and only 50 Port men were taken on. In fact, William Lever, owner of Lever Brothers and Port Sunlight, was actively recruiting women to replace the men who enlisted. He may have had philanthropic motives to help the women pay their rent and feed their children, but it is likely he was drastically cutting his wage bill in the process.

Recruiting posters and information displayed at the entrance to the Castle, Chester

Meanwhile, on 7 September 1914, a steam train from north Wirral pulled into Chester Northgate Station, and the latest battalion of the Cheshire Regiment disembarked to



march to their regimental home of Chester Castle. This was the Birkenhead and Wallasey contingent, and at the Castle they met their comrades from Port Sunlight and Ellesmere Port to complete the 1,280 strong Wirral Battalion. The whole battalion, headed by the Port Sunlight Silver Prize Band, with the band of the Chester Church Lads' Brigade in the rear, marched throughout the city, receiving ovations from the cheering crowds all the way. As they swung into the Castle Square headed by Sir William Lever, Mr Gershom Stewart MP, and several other men prominent in the recruitment drive, they were welcomed by a huge cheer from the large body of recruits positioned opposite the officers quarters, plus General Mackinnon, Lord Arthur Grosvenor, and the Mayor of Chester. Gershom Stewart presented the new battalion to their General, who declared, 'I am very proud to see you all here in such large numbers, all coming as you do from one district of Cheshire. We want every man of you that we can get and I am glad to think that you have turned up in such large numbers'. He then informed them they would be sent to Tidworth Camp for training (Salisbury Plain). Seven hundred of the men had come from Sir William Lever's Port Sunlight Works – half of his workforce.

For those at home, any sense of excitement and euphoria must have soon dissipated as life carried on into the Autumn of 1914. Children would wake up to find fathers had left for distant battlefields while they slept, and many would never see them again. The arrival of the telegram was a dreaded moment experienced by so many wives waiting for news from the front. Local men were soon in action as this graphic account in a letter home from Private Alfred Lloyd of the 2nd Worcester Regiment reveals. Alfred was writing to his mother, Mrs Lloyd of Penn Gardens, Ellesmere Port, from a hospital bed in a Sheffield hospital,

'I lost my hat in the scrap on Monday 14th September 1914, and had to wear one of those monkey caps - you know, a brown woollen one, odd boots and clothes covered with German blood, and a little of my own. On the Monday night, 14th September after the day's battle, our regiment went round the fields patrolling, and I should think there was a German lying down every square yard. They lay about killed and wounded like rotten sheep, and every now and again as we passed them they would snipe at us. Of course it was dark and we could not see them, and the way I got smothered with blood was this: We were halted on the roadside for a rest and I was that dead beat I fell asleep standing up, and of course, went headlong in the ditch on top of a heap of dead Germans, and the ditch was nothing else but blood. I was helping to bury Germans, and had been digging a small grave for one big German. When I came to drag him into it he was a bit too long for his bed, so I had to jump on his legs and feet to make him fit, but in the end I had to leave his toes about three inches under. But all the same, the Germans are a splendid target, they come up in great batches, and if you miss them it is time you went on the retired list. A sergeant of ours, who had been a third class shot all his soldiering, saw a crowd of them altogether, he fetched ten down, and the other two threw down their rifles and held up their hands and he went up to them and captured them. Their infantry can't shoot for nuts. At Mons there was one at a bedroom window popping at me for three hours, and I didn't know where he was until afterwards, when a fellow of ours told me he saw him, and put two shots at him and he dropped with his body hanging out of the window. I did not get my lot until the 16th September. I was with the General Staff taking messages from the wireless operators, and we were behind a bank under cover, as we thought, and it was the second shell that came over from the big siege guns, the ones that have done all the damage, it killed the two telephone operators, killed a horse, hit me and the General, besides digging a hole in the earth about three feet deep. They are terrible things, I can tell you. They bowled us out alright – leg before wicket, but never mind, I bowled a few out before they caught me'.

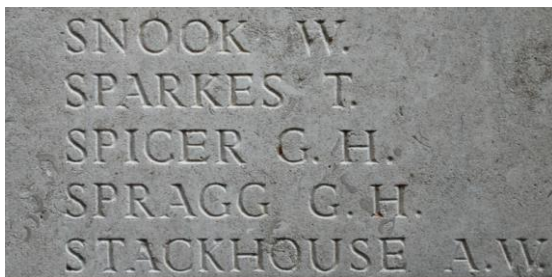
(It is likely that the 'General' was actually Captain Gerald Ernest Lea of the 2nd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment who died aged 37 on 16th September 1914.

'He was the son of a judge, His Honour Harris Lea; husband of Brenda Baily (formerly Lea), of Breinton Court, Hereford. He was buried in Vendresse British Cemetery. At dawn on September 15th 1914, the 2nd Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment took up a position on the Tilleul Heights to support the Highland Light Infantry. All day long the British positions were heavily shelled and there were many casualties. Captain G.E. Lea, one of the best officers of the Regiment, was wounded and died later in the day. The loss of Captain Lea was deeply felt. A man of very charming personality, a fine soldier and a graduate of the staff college, he would have gone far had he survived'.

From, *The Worcestershire Regiment in the Great War* by Captain H. FitzM. Stacke of the Regiment 1928. In August 1914 the 2nd Battalion was in Aldershot. They were part of 5th Brigade in 2nd Division and landed at Boulogne on 14th August 1914.)



Also with Alfred Lloyd in the 2nd Worcestershire Regiment was another Ellesmere Port man, George Spicer of 83 Church Street (*left*). His brief experience was one that soon become all too common to many young men going away to fight. He had been in France since August, taking part in the Battle of Mons, and the consequent retreat. In the short time he was there, he also fought at the Marne and the Aisne. Before his death his proud wife Amy had sent his photograph to the local paper who reported that she had given birth to a 'bonny little baby boy', named George French Spicer. Less than a month later George senior was dead, killed in action in Belgium on 21 October 1914. He never saw his new born son. George's body was never found, and he is commemorated on the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium (Panel 34).



Meanwhile the hardships at home continued, with so many unemployed and many wives refusing or unable to pay rent until the household was back receiving full wages. Such problems were regularly discussed at council level, and the local relief committee were giving much time and thought to try to alleviate the situation. A further issue for the relief

committee was to find accommodation for recently arrived Belgian refugees. As well as appealing for local people to help out, it was also decided to acquire a large house in the district for the purpose. A sub-committee had been formed to organise the receiving of the Belgian refugees, and a house had been requisitioned at a reasonable rental as a hostel. Heathfield House, described by the committee as 'a country residence on Whitby Heath standing in the middle of spacious grounds' on the road to Chester, had been secured for the purpose and that the appeal for gifts and loans of furniture had been well responded to. (*This building would later become the Ellesmere Port Cottage Hospital*).



If the situation regarding the local factories

Right: The Dock Street Mills of Frosts, Imperial and Kings.

wasn't bad enough, there was a further setback in October 1914, when there was a disastrous fire at the Imperial Flour Mill causing £20,000 worth of damage. The three huge mills of Frosts, Kings and Imperial sat side by side and dominated the Dock Street area, where many of their employees lived. Any fire would not only threaten lives, but also jobs and the residential area across the street. The fire began in the offices, but soon spread to the warehouse, where 21 year old James Vaughan was trapped on the first floor.



Firemen forced the flames back only to find his charred remains under a heap of debris at the top of the stairs. Fire Brigades attended from the Shropshire Union Canal Company, Burnell's Iron Works and Chester Fire Brigade, but they were too late to save the Mill warehouse from complete destruction. The Mill had only been erected four years earlier at a cost of £10,000 and 4,000 sacks of flour were also destroyed. Life in the Port was becoming increasingly tough.

Then, the dreaded telegrams began to arrive. One of the earliest casualties was John Holder. The local press reported;

News has been received by Mr Tushingam of Egerton Street, Ellesmere Port, one of Messrs Frost and Son's employees, that Private John Holder, a relative of his and who resided with him up to the time of the war, has been killed in action. The deceased was a reservist, and was called up at the commencement of hostilities. He belonged to the 1st Cheshires (D Company) and was killed on 19th October 1914. The messages received by his relatives and signed by Lord Kitchener were as follows; - "*The King commands me to assure you of the true sympathy of His Majesty and the Queen in your sorrow*". The deceased was the adopted son of Mr and Mrs Tushingam. On 5th October he advised them he had been made lance-corporal. He had served nine years with the colours.

Birkenhead News and Wirral General Advertiser 9 December 1914

As the casualties mounted, the recruitment drive continued into the winter, (and would continue until conscription in March 1916). 'The charge of lukewarmness cannot be levelled at Ellesmere Port' declared a 'well known military man' at a Wirral recruitment meeting. 'It is agreed that Ellesmere Port has responded manfully to the nation's call,' he continued, "...for it is no exaggeration to say that 50% of the eligible male population is now under training, while several of the loyal sons are fighting in France and Belgium. Mrs Hill of Shropshire Row has four sons in the fighting line, and a son-in-law also under fire, while she gave one son to die for his country in the Boer War. The example of this patriotic family has certainly stimulated recruiting in at Ellesmere Port, with the result that the town can now claim to have another "fighting family" in the brothers Davies, of whom five have come up to the requirement of the military authorities, while another brother has been rejected for the paltry offence that he has defective teeth. Their brother-in-law also joined with them, so the Davies family can rightly adopt the motto 'We are six'. Ellesmere Port's population is estimated at about 13,000 but the war has made an appreciable inroad upon this, and anybody acquainted with Ellesmere Port can

easily perceive there has been an exodus. The population is now much less – thanks to the idiosyncrasies of Kaiser Bill – and although it has continually been claimed that over 2,000 men have left to fight the ‘baby butcher’ there is good reason to believe that quite that number has gone, though it is extremely difficult to get the correct figures. The decision of the directors of the Mersey Ironworks to close their works against single men has had the effect of causing many to enlist, while others have got heartily sick of the “fickleness” of local trade through the war, and have preferred the prospect of camp life to idling away their time”.

Birkenhead News and Wirral General Advertiser 25 November 1914

There was little doubt that the war presented a way out for many local men, a route to a more exciting life with regular pay. What work that was available at the iron and steel mills, which were working on short time or not at all, was given to married men as a matter of priority, as their need was felt to be greater than young single men. Joining the local colours, therefore, seemed their best hope.



(Left: The canal worker's houses of Shropshire Row situated on the docks behind the mills)

A few days later it was reported that two Ellesmere Port men were promoted to the rank of Sub-Lieutenant for distinguishable service. One was J. Hazlewood, of the South Staffs Regiment, who had 21 years continuous service. At the time of his promotion he was at the Research Hospital, Cambridge, where he was recovering from wounds and hoping to return to service at Litchfield. Writing home he stated that

he had been in the Battle of Mons, the Aisne and Lille, and described the Aisne battle as a dreadful affair. He was injured close to Lille, receiving a shot in the shoulder, which emerged at the centre of his back. The second Ellesmere Port man was Lance-Corporal Hughes of Eleanor Street. Hughes had served for two years with the Grenadier Guards, and was formerly employed at Burnell's Ironworks. He was still in France, but gave no particulars in his letter home as to how he earned his promotion.

Today, many of the local schools organise regular shoebox campaigns, where pupils bring in essential small items of kit, such as sanitary products, to be of some use and comfort to local troops serving abroad. This seems to have been a continuous programme in recent years in respect to the first Gulf War, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. The following news report in late 1914 highlights a much earlier campaign;

ELLESMERE PORT TOMMIES' GRATITUDE

War too severe to "Last"

VICTORY AND HOME AGAIN

Some little time ago Miss Williams of the Church of England Schools, Ellesmere Port, organised a collection of one thousand cigarettes, which were soon collected, were sent to the 7th Cavalry Brigade, 3rd Division, Expeditionary Force. The following letter of thanks has just been received by Miss Williams from Corporal E. Perry (R.A.M.C.) – “I now take the pleasure of thanking you, your teachers and scholars, on behalf of the nine soldiers of the R.A.M.C. from Ellesmere Port now serving at the front, for the cigarettes you so kindly collected and sent us. I carefully distributed them amongst my

comrades, and they were all very thankful. They wished me to impress upon you that they will think of you and the little friends of your school as you think of us during this terrible struggle. I can assure you that a smoke in time of need is very acceptable. You will see by the papers that we are doing as well as can be expected. I am very glad to say that we are on the road to victory, and (in our opinions) we shall be home again in the Port, enjoying a well-earned rest, shortly after Christmas, for this is a very fierce conflict, and too severe to last long. We are given to understand that if we can hold the Germans in the present position, the war will soon be over, so we will look on the bright side of it, and we are as happy as the day is long. We are sorry to say that we have had very rough weather, heavy gales of wind and rain, and snow storms. But we still know our duty and we do it, so the weather does not daunt us.”

The cigarettes would be distributed by Corporal Perry amongst Privates H.Thomas, J.Allman, J.Fryer, R.Dodd, J.Lyth, M. Bates, and A. Thomas, who had been home on sick leave, but has returned to the unit.

Birkenhead News and Wirral General Advertiser 12 December 1914

Sergeant Fred Evans, who was fighting with the Scottish Highland Light Infantry, whom he had already served twelve years, had been away at the front from the beginning of the war. He wrote home to his parents and said,

‘we are still gradually going ahead, if very slowly, but there is no doubt that we will pull through victorious in time. It seems this is going to be a long drawn-out struggle. The regiment seems to have been very lucky so far, as the last month we have been under fire practically every day, especially from long-range artillery, but the men have got so used to it now that they have different names for the size of the shells which burst about them.’

However, another letter arrived shortly afterwards where he said,

‘I am still quite well, so far as the conditions will allow, as the strain is beginning to tell on the men through lying in the trenches day and night, with bullets whistling and shells bursting everywhere. Would you really believe it that I am writing this letter only 200 yards from the German trenches and I can hear them talking and shouting plainly when all is quiet at night-time. At the time of writing, we have just had a very unpleasant experience, that of being shelled by our own artillery, who must have got the wrong range, as they put half-a-dozen big shells amongst us, but luckily none of our lot got hit. The regiment has lost heavily during the last fortnight. We had only one officer left out of six when we came out [of the trenches]; in fact it is practically a new regiment, with getting drafts up to fill the gaps made through casualties. Everybody is wondering what it will feel like to have a good bath and a change of clothing. I don’t know how long this will last, but it would be impossible for us to explain in writing the sights this war has caused. In the firing lines, not a single house is standing, there are cattle lying dead or running wild, the country deserted, and all the people having left.’

A letter from John Hughes serving in the Grenadier Guards appeared in the local press on 16 December 1914:

**PROMOTED ON THE BATTLEFIELD
ELLESMERE PORT MAN’S DISTINCTION
GERMANS WORSE THAN CANNIBALS**

“I was missing for two days and got promoted.”

Apparently he had been doing some extra duty which he performed with true British pluck, and thus earned his promotion, for it is the very modest way in which John Hughes, brother of Mrs. T. Howard, of Eleanor Street, Ellesmere Port, tells how he was promoted from Lance-Corporal to Sergeant. He sends a very interesting letter to Mrs

Howard, and he could tell a tale, for he has been serving with the Expeditionary Force since the Battle of Mons.

He writes: "I am quite well. The battalion has been relieved for a rest, which we very much needed. I daresay you will have heard how we covered ourselves in glory, and earned undying glory for the regiment, but of course we are Grenadiers and I know it is expected of us. It has been my regiment that has practically saved the British Army time after time out here, and I can tell you we have been in some tight corners, and you have to get out of them by bayonet work. I don't know if I have told you before, but I have been in every engagement. I started at the Battle of Mons, and that was bad enough, but, My God! Well, it was nothing compared to some of the battles I have been through. As you say in your letter, some Germans are as good as we are, but it is doubtful, for I have been under fire from German rifles whilst taking prisoners, and it is no uncommon thing for them to fire on their own men. I can say with truth that most of them are worse than any cannibal, and it is terrible to witness some of their doings, especially when we take a village or a town off them. They treat our wounded like dogs, and I pity anybody who gets wounded and cannot be got in, but that is not often, thank God.

I have been in the trenches around Ypres, and the London Scottish are attached to us, and it has been a terrible battle [**the First Battle of Ypres, 19 October - 22 November 1914**], but are slowly, but surely driving them back. We have been up against the pride of Germany and Prussia and have defeated them, and although they put up a good fight, we were too good for them. The lot we are or have been fighting have been the Imperial Guards, and by Jove, they are a fine specimen of manhood, and it seems a pity that they cannot play the game a bit more. Of course, some of them get a whole army a bad name, and we give them no quarter now, for they do the same if they get the chance. About a fortnight ago they advanced towards for a bayonet charge, and there we lay in our trenches waiting until they came on and on in swarms. Oh! It was great; we let them get to about 200 or 250 yards, and then, My God! You should have seen us drop them just like mowing corn, poor beggars. I felt sorry for them, although we had to do it, or they would have bayoneted us, for they were driven from behind by their officers, but we made them pay the price, and lost hardly any. They lay in heaps and some of them got set on fire as we hit them. Then it started to snow and freeze, and they were there just the same next morning, all stiff and dead.

Don't think I am telling you this to make you believe I want any sympathy, for I am quite used to this, for it was only one battle of many that it has been God's will for us to be victorious and I know it will be God's will for us to win this war."

Sergeant Hughes is only 22 years of age, and his promotion coming after only one year and nine months' service with the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards is rapid and remarkable. He was formerly employed at Burnell's Ironworks, and is well known in the district.

Birkenhead News and Wirral General Advertiser 16 December 1914

Those at home eager for news from the front were beginning to realise this war was not going to be a swift knock-out blow, and it was not the charging heroic image of battle they had expected. The true horror of the nature of this war was beginning to filter back to a town and its people already crippled even before the war had started. These young men were witnessing unspeakable horrors and relaying their experiences with such matter-of-fact pragmatism that trying to resume a normal life some stage in the future was going to be a very tall order, and difficult for those at home to understand what the men had endured.

So the war wasn't over by Christmas 1914, and as the year drew to a close, the prospects for the town looked pitiful. There was a complete deadlock in trade with little moving through the town. There were already 1,000 homes with very little coming in, and that number would be greatly increased when the Wolverhampton Corrugated Iron Company (the Mersey Iron Works), who employed 2,000 men, closed down, as it was authoritatively stated they would do. Eight hundred children per day were being voluntarily fed by local agencies. No rent or rates were being received from a substantial part of the community, and there would be starvation on a large scale unless help was sent along from somewhere very soon.