

DORNEY AND THE ARMISTICE

November 2018 sees the 100th anniversary of the armistice which brought to a close the First World War. What did this mean for the people of Dorney?

In Maidenhead, the signing of the armistice was proclaimed at midday on 11 November, by the Mayor from the steps of the town hall in front of a large crowd. The news was welcomed enthusiastically, flags were hung outside buildings, thanksgiving services were held in the churches, and in the evening there was a torchlit cavalcade around the town. Similar rejoicing took place in Slough, where church bells were rung, and £10 was given to pay for extra comforts for the inmates of the workhouse in honour of the occasion. No doubt Dorney also celebrated, though we don't have any details.

Relief at the end of hostilities would have been tempered by grieving for those who had been killed. Four Dorney families had lost loved ones in the conflict.

James Eustace, a shepherd, had moved to the Slough area before 1901, and by 1915 was living in Dorney, later at Court Farm Cottages. He was widowed, and had lost 3 of his 6 children in infancy. His son Robert, born in 1887, emigrated to Canada to farm, and enlisted there on 30 November 1915, joining the Saskatchewan Regiment of the Canadian Infantry. Robert died from wounds in hospital in Warrington on 28 September 1917, and was buried in Dorney. His father suffered a further loss when one of his two remaining daughters died the following year.

William and Mary Poolman had moved to Dorney about 1888, and William worked at Pigeon House Farm as a shepherd. They had 11 sons (two of whom had died before the war) and 2 daughters. One of the younger sons, Percy, born in Dorney in 1891, had served 2 years as a driver in the Army Service Corps from 1909 to 1911, and was immediately recalled at the outbreak of war; he was in France by 19 August 1914. He remained on the Western front throughout the war, with only 3 short periods of home leave, the last in December 1917. In May 1918 he was transferred to the Royal Irish Fusiliers, and he was killed in action in Belgium on 30 September 1918.

Percy's older brother Albert was a shepherd in Dorney like his father, and was married with young children when the war started. He enlisted at Slough in the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, and was later transferred to the Royal Berkshire Regiment. At some point, he was wounded and captured, becoming a prisoner of war in Germany. He died on 5 June 1918 and was buried in Kassel.

Another of Percy and Albert's brothers, William, had married Daisy Belcher, whose younger brother Bertie was another casualty. Their father Isaac Belcher was a carter working on farms, who had moved to South Bucks around 1896, eventually settling at Manor Farm in Dorney. Bertie, born in 1890, became a farm labourer. Like Albert Poolman, he enlisted at Slough in the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry. His regiment fought against the Turks in what was then called Mesopotamia, and he died there of wounds on 14 July 1917.

Finally, the earliest Dorney casualty had been Jack Moriarty, only son of the rector of Dorney. Born in 1893, he trained at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich and was commissioned in 1912. He served as a lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery in France from September 1914. Wounded later that year, he had recovered at home in Dorney, and then returned to the front, where he was accidentally killed on 12 October 1915.

These men have a special place in Dorney's history. Their sacrifice is commemorated in Dorney church, and you can read more about them on the Dorney history group website. But in November 1918, Dorney residents might also have remembered another young serviceman who had lost his life. Alfred Boag had been born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1884, and later emigrated to South Africa, where he and his father set up business as coachbuilders. Like many colonials, he answered the call to fight for the Allies, and joined the British Army. In April 1916, he was attached to the Royal Flying Corps, based at Ruislip, and began training as a pilot. Two weeks later, his fourth flight took him over Windsor Castle towards Monkey Island, when a problem with the engine caused his biplane to nose dive, and he fell in a field near Pigeon House Farm, sustaining fatal head injuries.

One of Bertie Belcher's younger brothers, Horace, born in 1896, worked as a cowman and occasional ploughman on Manor Farm. His callup in 1918 was postponed by the local military tribunal until a suitable replacement farm worker could be found. The tribunal heard that the 60 cows on the farm produced 120 to 130 gallons of milk for Eton, but two men were needed to handle the herd. Horace was eventually mobilised on 22 August, as a private in the same regiment as his brother but serving on the Eastern front.

Keeping enough farm workers was a real problem for Dorney during the war. Frank Rumbold of Lake End Farm managed 3 farms with his two sons. The elder, Douglas, had been in the Territorials since 1908, and was mobilised for active service on 5 August 1914, but was discharged as medically unfit in December. In December 1916, Frank sought to retain his younger son, Cyril, who he said managed one part of the farm, looking after and milking 50 cows. The appeal was dismissed, but Cyril was not to be called up until a substitute was available. Frank got a similar outcome in January 1917, when he tried to exempt a specialist farm worker who was a machinery expert and had drilled all the corn for 11 years.

When another Dorney farmer, William Dickens of Pigeon House Farm, applied to keep the only man still working for him, he explained to the tribunal how much work on the farm was already carried out by his two daughters. Nineteen year-old Lillian milked nine cows, took the milk morning and night to Eton Wick, and looked after the pony which conveyed the milk. Sixteen year-old Gladys did the ploughing with two horses, and both girls helped out on the binder and mowing machine. William was congratulated on having two such excellent daughters!

The armistice meant that servicemen could gradually return to employment, but it took time for them to be demobilised. Horace Belcher was not released from the Army until March 1919. The newspapers in November 1918 were full of reminders that life would not

immediately return to normal. Rationing continued; there were collections for various war charities, and encouragement to invest in war savings; and it was noted that long term care would be needed for the injured. And it was not until May 1920 that William Poolman was invited to apply for the memorial plaque – nicknamed the “death penny” – and scroll to commemorate his son Percy, who *“died for freedom and honour”*.

Virginia Silvester