

The Saga of Ely's Fishmongers

Ely had two fishmongers serving the community during the War years who between them has some 25,000 customers from Ely and surrounds. Their role in the City became progressively more important to the local economy as meat was rationed and often in very short supply; by 1918 both shops were handling about nine tons of fish a month. The two men were:

- **Fred Tow** (born Ely 13th July 1877) – a single man who had for many years been supporting his invalid mother. Fred had a much older brother, Philip (born March 1853) who had also been a fish merchant, but had retired from business on medical advice. His business was on Ely High Street and later on the Buttermarket.
- **Percy Newstead** (born Ely 19th July 1878) – Percy had six children and his wife Louisa died suddenly early in 1918. He was also landlord of the Dolphin Inn. His family poultry and game business was originally in a small single storey building on the Butter Market and then moved to larger premises on the west side of Market Square. Percy's eldest son Jack was serving with the Grenadier Guards from March 1917. (Before following his father into the business, Percy had been a professional Rackets player living in London, the young Winston Churchill had been one of his pupils!)

With the introduction of conscription, and the medical assessment of men prior to call up, both Fred and Percy were listed as Grade 1. As the groups were called up for service both Fred Tow and Percy Newstead sought to be exempted; Fred first appeared before Ely Urban Tribunal in March 1916 and, after a series of short term exemptions received a conditional exemption in January 1917. Percy received a conditional exemption at the same Tribunal session as Fred, but this began a debate about whether Ely needed two fishmongers and whether one should be taken by the Army – a debate which raged on for the rest of the War.

In March of 1918 Lieutenant Ollard, the Military Representative on Ely Urban Tribunal, following national orders, began challenging all conditional exemptions of service which had been granted over the last two years. Fred Tow and Percy Newstead were particularly in Lieutenant Ollard's sights as he was firmly of the opinion that, as both men were Grade 1, at least one of them should serve. Both men were graded by the Civilian Board as carrying out work of national importance, but in June 1918 Fred was given only three months exemption before being called up, while in September Percy was given six months exemption. It was generally assumed that, if someone had to go, it was Fred Tow who should join the Army because of Percy's domestic circumstances. *At the same time his last exemption was granted Fred married Ada Macdonald (29th June 1918).*

Lieutenant Ollard was of the opinion that either Philip Tow or his daughters could run Fred's business for the rest of the War (in fact Philip was still too seriously ill to take on this role, and his daughters were working at the RAF Park Stores and in a Cambridge bank). It was assumed that Fred's assistant George Sykes (aged 50 and graded B2) would serve in the shop and Percy Newstead would do the ordering for both shops. Fred accordingly agreed to serve as long as George was not taken; George Sykes was given a six months exemption.

It soon became clear that there was in fact no workable way in which Fred Tow's business could keep running after Fred himself joined up on 1st October 1918, following the Tribunal's instructions;

on 21st September he closed his shop for the last time. Percy Newstead was by then in a precarious state of health and was certainly not able to cope with the whole of the fish business for the city.

The majority of the members of Ely Urban Tribunal were horrified at this turn of events as they had not supported Lieutenant Ollard from the beginning, and had always wished to retain both fishmongers in Ely. They accordingly wrote to the Ministry of Food in an attempt to save Fred from being called up. The response from the Divisional Food Commissioner was directed to Ely Urban Food Control Committee and reiterated Lieutenant Ollard's arguments, telling the Committee that they could only support the exemption of Tow **or** Newstead. The Committee responded that **both** men were necessary for the City.

The situation was "saved" by the signing of the Armistice. Fred had officially attested with the RAF on 9th October 1918 (Service Number 305495) and was still in training when the War ended. An advertisement appeared in the Ely Standard of 24th January 1919: *Mr Fred Tow "having been released from the Army, wishes to announce that he will resume his business of fishmonger and game dealer on 30th January."*



Percy Newstead married his wife's sister (Selina) May Ockwell in 1922 and continued to serve as a fishmonger in the family business in Ely with his sons until his death in 1944.



Fred also died in 1944 – in London. He was also still working as a fishmonger and living at 3 Victoria House, Lambeth. His business in Ely had been declared bankrupt in October 1925. The 1939 Register shows that his wife Ada (who is described as "incapacitated") was living apart from her husband at The Nags Head, Well Pond Green, Hertfordshire.

The photograph shows Fred Tow in 1906 with a royal sturgeon caught in the Hundred Foot River and which he had purchased (*photograph from Pam Blakeman's collection*).