

1916

In 1916, after general call-up began, the number of full length letters printed in the newspapers declined. Casualties mounted and more families must have known what the War was like as they heard from, and worried about, their own menfolk. The number of newspaper articles "From our own correspondent" increased, and where a letter was quoted it was often only in part. Below are the letters of some Ely and Prickwillow men from the Ely Standard.

Trooper Reginald A Edwards of the 9th Lancers wrote home to Prickwillow about Christmas behind the lines – 14th January 1916

"We had a very good time, as good as anyone could want. Being so far back we feared the order coming "Turn out at once." We all set to and decorated the place fine. There are tons of holly and mistletoe growing around here. We had turkey, and boiled bacon making it like ham, plum pudding and jelly. What more could one want than that? We had a barrel of beer in the room too, so you bet there wasn't a row at all. We had a very enjoyable time. Then some of the officers brought us cigars, nuts and oranges. One would never have thought it possible to have got such stuff and make it as much like home as we did. It was different from last year, when we had nothing to eat at all. We were lucky to get such a fine time, as I think there were some out here who had a poor Xmas. It rained hard all day, but we were in the dry, and altogether had a very good time. This is Monday morning and I would like to be off to the coursing (*referring to hare coursing at Quanea*)."

Reginald was nineteen and the son of Prickwillow's grocer and baker Albert Edwards. His parents received another letter shortly after this one to say he was back in the lines once more.

Lance Corporal G W Webster of the 7th Battalion of the Buffs thanks his brother for his gift of cigarettes – 21st January 1916

"I shall not require anything now, as we have a Y.M.C.A. hut in our rest camp, where I can buy what I want. It is jolly handy."

An Ely man who had emigrated, and was consequently fighting with the Australian Forces, wrote to his sister. He had survived the Gallipoli Campaign and was in the Sinai. (This may be the same author whose letter appears on the 1915 page whom we are suggesting *may* be Horace Taylor.) The Ely Standard printed two of his letters – 5th February and 25th February 1916

(Written 15th January) “There has been a great set to here today. It seems that we are to be received by General Munro, and our battalion is on divisional duties at the same time...(which) means we have to find main guards, picquets, escorts and fatigues for the whole Division. That leaves us with only a few duty men in the camp. Colonel was very anxious that we should make a turn-out, and consequently all my chaps are on parade today.... The 9th have managed to scrap up two small scratch companies for the march past....it was a real good sight, and the movements were splendid. You must understand that we have been reinforced a lot lately, and have a fine army of well-drilled chaps. I pity “Abdul” next time – that is if he tries to attack us....you know that before we were at a great disadvantage.”

(Written 28th January) “At present we are out somewhere in the Sinai Desert – I believe that is the name of this barren land. We are still waiting for “Abdul”, a dry job too, very little water, something like it was on the peninsula. Of course up to the present everything is very quiet and peaceful. I hope it will remain so. We are going over the same ground the Turks covered when they attacked the canal last year – in fact we crossed where the canal battle was fought. It is very cold here at night time, also when the sun is hidden by clouds, as it has been lately, which means we have had a good deal of rain... There is no fear of any fighting at present, and I will let you know if we get into any scrap.”

Private John Thomas Collins of the 1st Battalion of the Suffolks wrote as a Prisoner of War from Gefangenenlager Dulman to give thanks for his New Year gifts – 19th March 1916

“...The winter so far has been very mild here, we have had only a little frost and some rain, but I believe the next two months are the ones in which to expect bad weather. We have plenty of occupations to pass our time away, and with the various pastimes we have the time passes without becoming too dull. We have a fine band, and excellent concerts are given weekly by a concert party. During the dark nights we make our own amusement inside our barrack rooms. Perhaps the pleasantest time is when we are talking of old times at home, and then it is we enjoy our pipes etc. sent out from our friends. Of course the great thing is to make the best of everything and hope for the best. I think from the above you will see we do so to the best of our ability.”

See a second letter from John Collins below.

Rifleman J W Garnham of the 7th Battalion of the Rifle Brigade – 17th April 1916

“We have just returned from the trenches for a rest. The Germans have done some dirty work, but we have paid them back for it. A March soldier who is in the Suffolk Regiment says how he is so well clothed and fed, but I wish he was in the 7th Rifle Brigade, he would feel the difference. We are having some awful weather out here. ...I have had two pals killed by my side. There are not many chaps from the Isle of Ely, but there are three or four of us together.”

Frederick Ernest Carpenter was both the village schoolmaster at Prickwillow and the Ely Standard’s Prickwillow correspondent and must have taught many of the soldiers from the village. His only son, Frederick George Carpenter had a narrow escape from death (see 1915 Letters) and was discharged as no longer fit to fight. His ensuing treatment by some local young women encouraged his father to re-tell the story in his “Prickwillow Notes” of 26th May 1916.

“...a little anecdote bearing on Gunner Carpenter’s return home from Cambridge Eastern Hospital pending his discharge.

“Enough has already been said in this journal about the lad’s (he is now only just 19) terrible experiences on the wrecked hospital ship Anglia in the waters of the Channel six months ago, so none of this needs repetition.

“Well, when he entered the station at Cambridge (in “civilians”) a friend was waiting for him on the platform and saw him as far as Ely. Just as the train was about to start two young ladies, sisters (yes, my son happens to know them quite well by sight) entered the same carriage. They sat together on the opposite side to my son and his friend.

“No sooner had the train started and they had all settled down than one of the sisters opened a book with a title on the front cover something like this “The Man Who Would Not Go” or otherwise intimating that my son was suffering from “cold feet”. Both the sisters appeared to be digesting the contents with, of course, the title well in view of their travelling companions.

“My son coolly started talking to his friend about his experiences at the front, so that all could hear what he said. Loos, Armentieres, the lively times they had under bombardment, being plugged with a bullet (all true and which his friend knew every word about). Of course he was really talking to the sisters, and he says you ought to have seen their faces change colour; the book with the “loud” title suddenly vanished, and the sisters kept their faces averted until they had reached Ely, where they all got out.

“Who felt the fool? Guess! Of course the point of the story is obvious. And yet such silly girls are still heckling our young men with “white feathers”, “cold feet”, when they would be much better employed in war work of some kind under some responsible person.....

“...doubtless many of our young and patriotic boys have been fearfully abused in like manner. My son told me that after he was discharged from the Lancers on account of illhealth it was a perfect misery for him to walk the streets of Cambridge owing to this idiotic practice, and once again I emphasise the point that the Government, at once, ought to issue some little distinctive badge to those thousands of “Tommys” who have been placed hors de combat or discharged for any reason through no fault of their own.”

For this very reason, the Government did actually start to issue “Silver War Badges” with an accompanying certificate of entitlement a couple of months later, in September 1916. Gunner Frederick Carpenter was awarded badge 86112.

With the advent of conscription, Rural and Urban Tribunals were set up at Ely at which men, or their employers, could appeal against call-up. The system was often perceived as unfair as one correspondent who called himself “The Man In The Street” wrote to the Editor of the Ely Standard – 2nd June 1916

“Sir, I shall be very glad of a little space in your journal to vent what seems to me a most unfair method of procedure or inconsistency of judgement.

“As an illustration, I note there are several butchers’ shops in Ely, some of the owners of which have applied for the exemption of their assistants. In one case we find a sound single assistant has obtained total exemption; in another a widow’s sole help only gets six months; in another a married assistant obtains three months; and in the last case one reads that a married assistant serving 300 customers a week is refused. Surely butchers should be a starred trade, quite as much as that of a fruit grower, and if not, why should there be such disparity in the exemptions? Either they should all get off, or they should all go, and the single one first.

“These anomalies, as a member of the Tribunal observed last week, are occupying the attention of the public, and in the faint hope of obtaining some public explanation I venture to make these remarks.”

The people of Ely not only supplied their own relatives and friends with comforts and necessities, but worked through many different organisations to send out everything from cigarettes to clothing, especially to the men of the Cambridgeshire Regiment. Miss F. E. Brewster received a letter of thanks from local man Sergeant Harold Harwell – 19th June 1916

"I am writing this on behalf of the Ely boys of the 1st Cambs. Regt. To thank you and all the ladies of the city for the parcel of socks and shirts which I received and distributed on the 28th inst. The receivers, whose names I enclose, thank you very much for packing the parcel etc. Such things as shirts and socks are invaluable to us boys out here. We are always wanting clean clothes, and socks especially, when we go to and from the trenches in the mud and water. I am glad to say that all the Ely boys are well and happy, and we are going to stick out here and do our little bit wherever we are called to do it. With best wishes to you all. And may the Association still keep on with the good work. Again thanking you for all the much needed articles. Shirts; Lance-Corpl J. Lavender, Lance-Corpl V. Seymour, Pte A. B. Pryor, and Pte H. Moden; Socks; Sergt J. Lawrence, Lance-Corpl J. West, Pte W. Tunnell, Pte G. Awbry, and Pte W. Lupson.

Of these "Ely boys" and friends, John West was to die a fortnight later, and Albert Pryor was killed the following year.

Private John Collins of the 1st Suffolk Regiment had been a Prisoner of War since May 1915. He was badly injured and after stays in several hospitals and camps (above) was sent to neutral Switzerland to fully recover – 23rd June 1916

"I am very pleased to write these few lines to let you know that I have arrived in Switzerland. We left Dulmen last Thursday, and arrived at Constance on Friday evening... a railway bridge parts Switzerland from Germany, and as soon as our train crossed the bridge where the German guards stood with fixed bayonets, the Swiss people on the other side gave us a hearty cheer and threw flowers into our carriages. All along the line it was the same....the first stop we had was Zurich. There were thousands of people on the station who gave us some of the most beautiful flowers – carnations, roses and lilies of the valley – the train was strewn with them – cigarettes, chocolates, cherries, oranges, cakes, soaps, handkerchiefs, bottles of Eau de Cologne, cream for the hair, and wine. The next station we stayed at was Berne, where we had refreshments....at all small stations the train slowed down, when the people handed us all kinds of things. We now began to get heavily laden...Montreux...The Swiss, French and English ladies of the Red Cross provided breakfast at the Grand Hotel. Our arms were filled with flowers, and the road leading to the hotel was covered. We could not carry them, so they threw them over us; it was grand.....Arriving at Chateau d'Oex we had lunch. There were hundreds of ladies and gentlemen from all parts of Switzerland here to receive us, bands played, and a Swiss choir sang during lunch. I will try to send you some photos later on. Will you please send me a safety razor, as my razor was smashed with shrapnel on May 8th last year. I do not mind that at all; it saved me from that which would have been a nasty wound in my chest. The Germans pinched my wrist watch; will you please send another along?"

John Collins was well known in Ely as he was one of the local postmen.

News from Reverend Mowbray-Smith appeared several times in the Ely Standard as different correspondents shared his letters. He had been chaplain to Bishop Chase of Ely and was curate of Stuntney, and had been given special permission by the Bishop to become a chaplain with the Forces. He was with the Fusiliers. 7th July 1916

This is a copy of a summary of his letter which was originally printed in the Ely Deanery Magazine.

“What especially struck him were two things one was the fact that when a lull occurred after the roar of the heavy bombardment the ear was greeted with the song of birds. It is man’s harsh din that drowns nature’s harmonies. The other point he noted was that, for instance, in the case of a town of six thousand inhabitants there are now a mere handful of residents left – some half dozen – amid the ruins caused by the devastating shellfire. Towering above the desolation the one object that survived was a “Calvary” or carved figure of the crucified Saviour. Many similar instances are recorded. The pathos of it! We seem to hear the silent appeal of the one who said “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.””

The first day of the Somme, 1st July 1916, was the day on which thousands were killed or injured. The casualty lists in the Ely Standard confirm this was a black day for Ely families with eight dead and high numbers of wounded. The four letters below were printed in the newspaper of 14th July 1916, which is when the awfulness of the battle really began to dawn on Ely residents. They are from four of the local wounded; Private Bertram Lee of the 8th East Surrey Regiment, Private Herbert Sindle of the 7th Buffs and, from Prickwillow, Corporal Robert Lee and Private Reuben Watts of the 11th Suffolks.

Bert Lee: “We went over the top exactly at 7. 29 a.m. on July 1st. I think I managed to get as far as the German first line before I got my first packet. It was a bad machine gun bullet, right in the left calf, going in one side and out further up the other side. The bullets, shells and shrapnel were bursting and flying all around us. My chums on all sides were on their way, but some of them were knocked out for ever. I crawled back to our first line and then down to the dressing station.....(later I was) ordered off to the theatre which meant the operating table.”

Herbert Sindle: “I was shot just in the neck, the bullet passed through my chest and stomach, blew a hole just above my right hip, and then came out. It is no use making any trouble of it. I did my duty. I was “toppled” at 7.30 on July 1st. The German that shot me and my mate was right on top of us and did not give us any chance. It did not look as if anything could live in the open.”

Robert Lee: “I was hit early on Saturday morning, 1st July. After six days bombardment we made a charge, and I managed to reach the German front line trench, when I was struck by a bullet in the

left thigh. Luckily it did not hit any bones, but ploughed its way through the flesh, so I don't think it is very serious, at least, I hope not. After I found I had been hit I crept into a shell hole, and lay there as long as I dare, then I crawled across "No Man's Land" into our front line trench, and then on to our dressing station, where I had it bandaged up. I was afterwards taken by the Red Cross Ambulance to the nearest hospital and had it dressed again, and had some tea and something to eat. I then felt better, and was put in the ambulance again and taken in the Red Cross train, which brought me to where I am now. I daresay you have seen by the papers that there has been some sharp fighting lately. Well nobody knows what it was like except those that went through it. The Germans laid in their trenches in heaps – dead and dying. It was murder, and I thank God I got through as I did. Reuben Preston (Prickwillow) is with me, shot through the arm, and going on all right."

Reuben Watts: "I was hit in the left shoulder and am now in a London Hospital, and a nice one too. I got my lot on Saturday morning (1st). I was in the big attack. We were on the front, and we had a word to charge. Then we went over the top after the Germans, but I did not get very far before I was hit, and fell back into the trench, and waited to be bound up. It feels different sleeping in a bed from what it was in the trenches this last two months, while we were waiting for the order to charge, and were standing in mud and water above our knees, so you can tell how we cuddled down in our little beds when we first got in them."

Bert Lee was thirty-eight and had been a printer back in Ely, he had enlisted at the outbreak of the War. Herbert Sindle wrote from hospital in Birmingham. His brother Harold had been injured at the same time, but far less seriously. Herbert had been in France for almost exactly a year. Robert and Reuben were both farmworkers. Reuben had enlisted at the over-young age of 16 years and 2 months and was still only seventeen; his older brother Sydney was to be killed the following year.

Private John Palmer had been captured at Le Cateau in 1914. On 21st July 1916 part of his letter home was published:

"I have not received a parcel for six weeks and cannot understand why. We are in a very rough part in Russia and it is very wet and cold too so you can guess how we are situated. We are working hard on hardly no food at all – yet always merry and bright."

Driver Thomas Gent of the Royal Engineers wrote home from hospital in Bethnal Green after being blown up on the 26th July 1916.

"About six shells dropped among our horses, killing two and wounding several others. One corporal was killed, another corporal was "shocked" so much that it sent him mad, and five other men were wounded. I was alright at the time and went to bandage one of those young fellows, Crowes, of Stretham." Further explosions occurred and it was then that Driver Gent was blown up.

“When I came round, I found myself in the bottom of a six foot trench.” Besides suffering considerably from shell shock, he was hit in the back with a piece of shell.

Thomas’ brother Jim was one of the Ely casualties the following year.

The most famous action in which the Cambridgeshire Regiment played a prominent part was the attack on the Schwaben Redoubt in October 1916. Corporal Harold Burns of Stuntney, who was injured in the action, wrote home from hospital – 20th October 1916.

“You no doubt wonder what the Cambs have been doing lately. Well I can tell you now. We have been on the Somme Front for some weeks. On Sept. 3rd our division got chewed about, and the day I was knocked out we and the Jocks took the Schwaben Redoubt. It had been taken by the division before and lost again and so Terriers as you see, had to do it. We took it and held it, and about 200 prisoners as well. How is that for Cambs people who think we have not been in the Front line?!”

Mr Billett Genn of Lynn Road, a former regular soldier, wrote to the Ely Standard with news of his godson, Colonel Henry Peers Dimmock – 15th September 1916

“One of the latest appointments is that of Col. H.P. Dimmock, a son of the late Mr Dimmock of Foster’s (now Capital and Counties Bank), Ely, to be Commandant of the Hospital, Mitcham, Surrey, with 800 beds for the poor wounded men from the front. Col. Dimmock was educated at Ely Grammar School, and has since been 30 years in the India Medical Service at Bombay, and did wonders there during the terrible plague which carried off thousands. As a boy he was most fearless, on one occasion thrashing a young blacksmith who had struck a lad. He also won the mile race in record time, and with another boy named Garrett, swam the Ely river with their clothes on (winter time) near Day’s house, two miles from the city. They were doing the hare and hounds sport, and finding the hounds gaining on them, they plunged into the water, took each other’s hands and got home first. Last, but not least, Col. Dimmock was the first baby christened when the font was placed in St Catherine’s Chapel (Ely Cathedral) by one of the great worthies viz. Professor Selwyn, I think in 1858. The Cathedral was crowded, and his sponsors were Miss Elizabeth Harman Fortington and yours very much obliged B. Genn.”

In October 1916 Frederick William Ablett wrote to tell his parents in Hill Lane, Ely, that he was in hospital. The paper also included part of an earlier letter from him (shown first here).



“I have been in some hard fighting these last few days. We were in a big push on the ----- of this month. We marched for twelve months up to the line on the ----- and then went straight over at the enemy. I did not get very far before I lost myself, which is a very easy thing to do out here. I then had to take cover, as the shells were flying all over the place, but thank God I did not get hit. I had one burst close to where I was; it knocked me over, but did not do me any harm. We took a lot of prisoners during the charge, and I must say that the German soldiers are a poor lot. As soon as our chaps get near them they cry for mercy and surrender.”

“I have been wounded, but don’t worry, for I am quite all right. I got a bullet in my left wrist. It went in the top and came out the side. I don’t think it is serious and I live in hopes of getting home with it. We were making a great attack on the German lines when I got my wound. My word, it was an awful time. The fighting was most bitter; the Germans must have had a machine gun every other yard. In fact, it was just like going into a shower of bullets, and what with the noise of the guns and the bursting of the shells it was about enough to make one deaf for life.... I am in a very nice hospital, and being well looked after – in fact, it’s just like being in Heaven after what I have been through.”

Frederick was twenty and had been employed in the International Stores in Ely. In France he had met up with Rev’d Mowbray-Smith, the former curate at Stuntney, who had himself been wounded.

The Bishop of Ely shared part of a letter received from Rev’d Mowbray-Smith

“The Church Army huts are capital places, superior to any others. There is provision, as I have seen, for men’s souls as well as their bodies. They always arrange for a small prayer room to be attached to the hut or tent, and this is a priceless boon, and often about the only place where a man can get alone for quiet thought and prayer.”

The chaplain was wounded in the head in 1916 when administering morphine to a wounded man who died beside him. After the War he became vicar of Wisbech St Mary and his tin helmet was given to the church and can still be seen there.

In November 1916 the Haylocks of Willow Walk heard from their son Private William George Haylock of the Middlesex Regiment, who was in hospital in Oxford with wounds to the right thigh and nose:



“The bullet went right through my thigh, so you can guess what it is like, but I am pleased to say I am going on all right. At 3 a.m. on Oct 28th we got the order to attack, so we took

up our position ready for daybreak. Then our artillery began the barrage – the only artillery that can do it. The French can't, the Germans try it, but can't. That is the order to advance, and on we went. The Germans were as thick as flies. They kept knocking a few of us over with riddle fire and sniping our wounded as they were crawling away, until our boys began to get close to them, then they showed the white flag. Some of our boys got up to take them prisoners, and they shot them down. This infuriated us, and we dashed in with the bayonet and bombs and strafed them. Our boys took the trenches and 300 prisoners, and they made the prisoners carry our wounded, "Good old Die Hards".

William was 25 and one of Ely's basketmakers who lived round the Willow Walk and Babylon area. He married Ella Newman in Birmingham in 1926 and died in Ely in 1958 aged 65. He is shown here in happier times, at work with his brother.