

1918

More Ely related letters and stories:

“An Ely Soldier” writes to his parents about his arrival in Italy (this may possibly be the same soldier, Arthur, whose letter is included below) – 4th January 1918

“I expect you will be anxious to hear what little news I have to give you. In the first place it was a five days’ train journey from France, not a very enjoyable one as far as material comfort was concerned, but a very interesting one, particularly just previous to and crossing the Franco-Italian frontier. The country is beautiful....There are vines everywhere. Every house is decorated with them, in fact, wherever there is a corner of space available they will find the inevitable vine.....The climate is very extraordinary, glorious warm and sunny days alternating with terribly cold and foggy ones. The nights are very cold and snow has commenced..... We are not far from the line now and can see the shrapnel bursting in the distance. Our battalion had a fine reception at the town they dis-entrained. We played the Italian national anthem and the populace went mad. Our band was literally smothered in flowers thrown from the balconies of the houses. Every decent sized house possesses a balcony. We did not half feel pleased with ourselves. We spent an enjoyable week there. The town was very picturesque and possessed some artistic buildings.”

A letter to the Ely Standard from a wounded soldier recuperating in Ely’s V.A.D. Hospital in the Theological College on the corner of Barton Square and Back Hill (now part of King’s School) – 11th January 1918

“Sir – in this peaceful city of Ely it is hard for some folks to realise the realities of war until the “Blue Boys” from the local V.A.D. make an appearance.....two of our boys...walked through a certain yard and as they proceeded were met by the proprietor of _____ who, in stentorian tones, asked “What the _____ are you doing here.....clear out,” and then.....flutters a cheque their faces with the remark “It’s the likes of you I’ve got to keep.” Don’t you think this is a gross insult to us boys? Trusting you have a small space in your paper to enlighten the citizens of such treatment we received from certain individuals.”

Although this does not reflect well on one Ely citizen, it is only fair to note that every week of the War, after the hospital was set up, the newspaper carried a list of gifts of consumables and supplies donated by other citizens to the wounded men. The “Blue Boys” refers to the hospital uniform worn by the soldiers.

Archdeacon George Hodges of Ely Cathedral shared the story of his 22 year old youngest son, Reginald Sanders Hodges, with the local Prisoner of War Fund Committee – 19th April 1918

Reginald Hodges has been in Ceylon for four and a half years working as a tea planter. In November 1917 a notice came that he had been lost at sea on his way home.....

“The Ven. Archdeacon G. Hodges, of the College, received a telegram from Denmark last week, conveying the news that his son, Mr Reg. Sanders Hodges, was a prisoner and was quite well. It may be remembered that he left Colombo some months ago on a Japanese steamboat (*SS Hitachu Maru*), intending to return to England to join the Flying Corps, but the vessel never reached the next port of call. The Steamship Company, after waiting several weeks, posted the ship as missing, the belief being entertained that she must have foundered in a cyclone with all hands. Exactly what occurred was related by the Archdeacon at a meeting held last weekend in connection with the local Prisoners of War Fund.

“When about two days out from Colombo – the vessel was bound for Deloga Bay – a seaplane appeared overhead and dropped a bomb, and not long afterwards an innocent looking cargo ship hove in sight. The crew and passengers of the Japanese boat were not kept long in doubt as to what would happen next. The cargo ship dropped its side and disclosed its guns. The Japanese captain gave battle, but after losing his gunners and several sailors, surrendered to the pirate. The Japanese boat was carrying a valuable cargo of rubber, which the Germans were anxious to get into a port, but after sailing about for several days they ran short of coal, and had to blow their prize up, the crew and passengers being taken prisoners.”

Arthur – a soldier from Ely – wrote home of his experiences on the Italian Front – 19th July 1918

“It will interest you to know that I have recently experienced somewhat of a more strenuous time than usual, and the reason was the late Austrian offensive. About six dozen of the band was left down on the plains to look after the band paraphernalia, and the remainder, myself in charge, came up on the plateau with the battalion. We came up half-way by motor lorry, and what a glorious journey it was. The road twisted, turned and doubled back by itself by reason of the mountainous formation of the country, and from time to time, as we skirted a slope in the hills, a beautiful panorama of the plains could be seen hundreds of feet below. We reached a point at which the lorries halted about mid-day, and marched to a temporary camp, at which place we discarded our packs and had a short rest. From here we made preparations for a stiff uphill journey to the line, leaving a few more of the band to mount guard over the regimental packs and spare gear. We donned steel hats, and started just before twilight, keeping to the road for some little time. We eventually struck off to the mule track which laid over the hills and peaks to the plateau. It was a rough journey; however, we almost forgot the fatigue in contemplation of the grandeur of the

scenery. I have never seen anything like it before. At places the track was only a few feet wide, with a sheer wall of rock on one hand and an actual sheer drop of two or three hundred feet on the other. Again the path led round the edge of huge hollows of enormous depths and diameter (like flies walking round the edge of a basin) and when we halted for rest on one side of a deep ravine half-way through our journey the silence was so intense that one could hear a stone fall at the bottom about 400 feet below us. It was as if you were in another world. The light was still good when we at length reached the edge of the plateau, and one could see on looking down the various minor hillocks we had passed over and the white road apparently playing hide and seek round the slopes and smaller ravines, disappearing every now and again and resembling little strips of white tape, then far away. Still further below there was the plain dotted with villages and here and there a larger town, the intervening spaces filled with the foliage of numerous pine woods and vineyards; and still more gorgeous a couple of small rivers, pursuing a snaky and tortuous path across the plains, glistening and scintillating in the gradually dying sunlight, suggestive of the immortal William's "gilded snakes" in "As you like it". My job at battery headquarters was to detail and take charge of gas alarm guard and S.O.S. guard by night, firing a rocket. On the morning following our arrival near the line I had the privilege of witnessing, through field glasses, ours and the Italians' artillery bombardment of the Austrian positions and supports, embracing certain villages. You should have seen the houses flying into the air. It lasted an hour, and during that time a large extent of Austrian front was one mass of multi-coloured smoke, dust, flying brick and masonry. Later, when things were quiet, I made a little expedition into a portion of "No Man's Land", and brought back with me several souvenirs, one of which I am sending to you. The country in the neighbourhood of the front is very desolate (not a patch on France if course), for all one can see are stretches of scrubby undergrowth, chequered with grey boulders and rocks of various sizes and shapes. I am keeping quite fit and well – the bracing mountain air is largely responsible, I think. The weather up here is naturally a bit different in character to that on the plains, very cold at night and in the early morning, and sometimes in the middle of the day. The mists and clouds just below us and around envelop us in a kind of "Scotch mist". It is a fine thing to watch the mist roll up the valleys, and the little isolated clouds hovering at one's feet, almost like miniature castles in Porphyry."

It almost sounds as if Arthur was on holiday, enjoying a trip abroad!

The following letter was sent by an unnamed night orderly at Ely's VAD Hospital when the Commandant's request for more volunteers to take on night duties at the hospital was met with a rebuff – 20th September 1918

"...there are many young clergy, professional and business men in Ely who have done nothing to help their country during the war. I fully appreciate that most men are more hardly worked owing to the shortages of staff and other causes arising out of the war, but this applies just as much to those who are already doing their bit in the Volunteers, night orderlies, and in other war time duties as it does to those who are doing nothing of this nature."

The Bishop of Ely's letter in the Diocesan Gazette was summarised for the newspaper – 11th October 1918

“...the Bishop of Ely calls attention to the recent resolution passed by the Upper House of the Convocation of Canterbury about the general desire throughout the country to commemorate those who have fallen in the war by some permanent memorial, “and considers that it is of the highest importance alike for moral and artistic reasons that this should as a rule be done (1) at the end of the war, (2) not by a multiplication of individual memorials of varying taste and value, but by some corporate memorial of all parishioners fallen in the war, executed under competent artistic guidance and (3) in connexion with the parish church.”

“This resolution seems to be wise and timely” his Lordship commented. “On two other matters I myself feel strongly. On the one hand a record of the names of those who have given their lives for their country should be carefully kept and permanently preserved in each parish either in connexion with the memorial or otherwise. On the other hand I depreciate costly and elaborate memorials which may justly be called ecclesiastical luxuries. The Church both in its home and in its foreign work – so necessary, so obviously for God’s glory – will need larger supplies of money than ever before. And the country has been bearing and will long have to bear a very heavy financial burden. I believe therefore that we shall best show our love and our grateful veneration towards the dead, if our memorials of them are simple and if we forward by every gift of money we can give those great moral, philanthropic and spiritual works, for which in truth they gave their lives.”