

## **THE FIRST WORLD WAR, 1914 TO 1918**

*By Alan Howells*

This has been written to mark the centenary of this awful war in Europe with its high loss of life; a war that resulted in major changes to all aspects of British society throughout the country.

### **THE LAST OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR SOLDIERS – HIS CONNECTION WITH SUTTON COLDFIELD**

The last remaining soldier to serve in Belgium during the war died aged 111 in 2009; his name was Harry Patch. In his autobiography, *The Last Fighting Tommy*, he mentions being sent to Sutton Coldfield convalescent camp to recover from wounds he received on the battlefield in Belgium in 1917.

Sutton Park at the start of the war in 1914 was used as a training base for recruits to the Birmingham City Battalions of the Warwickshire Regiment, known as “The Pals”. Huts and encampments were built in several areas of the Park, near the Main Gate and the Crystal Palace and elsewhere, with tents in the Longmoor Valley (see *Pals in the Park* by Mike Hinson, *Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group volume 10*, 2012)

Patriotic fervour had led to the recruitment of over one million men throughout the country in 1914, to fight the war in France and Belgium, and five million fought during the course of the war. Many thousands of men were killed each year in the trench warfare. In 1917 a major battle on the western front at Passchendale near Ypres resulted in heavy losses; there were 759,615 casualties in 1917.

Harry Patch, born in 1898 near Bath in Somerset, joined the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry in 1917. On September 22<sup>nd</sup> he was wounded by an enemy shell which killed some of his colleagues – he was hit in the stomach by shrapnel. He was operated on at a nearby casualty clearing station where the shrapnel was removed, and then returned to England with other wounded men. He was treated at a hospital in Liverpool and discharged in time to be sent home for Christmas.

He was soon well enough to be transferred to a convalescent camp – No. 2 Convalescent Camp at Sutton Coldfield, which comprised former training accommodation in the Park and a few large houses which had been taken over for the duration of the war. Here the wounded stayed until they had recovered sufficiently to return to their regiment. Harry Patch continued to receive treatment, but most of his time was spent sitting, sleeping and playing cards.

As they got better, the soldiers were given leave once a month to go into the town, and they would have been a familiar sight in Sutton. They would go to Birmingham to the cinemas and other entertainments, wearing a green badge on the epaulettes of their khaki uniforms to show that they were convalescent soldiers. One such weekend, early in 1918, Harry met a girl who lived in Erdington, and visited her again on his next leave. She was the daughter of a wire-drawer who worked at Sankey’s, the steel company. There were many skilled wire workers living in the Wylde Green, Erdington and Walmley district in the early nineteenth century working at Penns Mill; the wire mill closed in 1859 and the site is now occupied by a hotel.

Early in August 1918 Harry was sufficiently recovered to return to his regimental depot at Bodmin; however he suffered a relapse and was sent back to the Midlands and Handsworth Hospital. Here he was able to renew his friendship with Ada Billington, his Erdington girlfriend, who was working as an inspector of gas masks at Dunlop's, working day shifts and night shifts on alternate weeks. After a few weeks he was well enough to rejoin his regiment in Belgium, but the war ended on November 11<sup>th</sup>, so he saw no more fighting.

Five months later Harry Patch was demobilised, returning to Bath and resumed his career as a plumber. Then on September 13<sup>th</sup> 1919 he married Ada Billington his girl from Erdington, and went on to raise a family of two boys. Returning servicemen faced a housing shortage after the war which led to Lloyd George's programme of "Homes fit for Heroes"; the City of Birmingham responded by setting out smallholdings on the Canwell Estate, and a number of these dwellings can still be seen in the north-east of Sutton.

In his autobiography *The Last Fighting Tommy* by Harry Patch and R. van Emden, 2007, Harry wrote "It was the men in the trenches who won the war. What they put up with, no one will ever know. I've seen them come out of line, poor devils, in a terrible state, plastered in mud. They were like hermit crabs with all their equipment on and they'd plonk down in the middle of the road before somebody helped them up. How did they manage? They were at the end of their tether. They were worn out, absolutely done up. They could hardly put one foot in front of the other, they were gone, depleted, finished; all they wanted to do was sleep, sleep, sleep."

#### THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND MY OWN FAMILY

Writing the brief account of a small piece of history involving Sutton Coldfield during the First World War has brought back memories to me of my own family's involvement in that terrible war 100 years ago.

I have a photograph of my father and his older brother, pictured in their First World War British and Canadian uniforms, taken in about 1917. My father had served an apprenticeship and trained as an engineer in the Midlands; he was called up to serve in the Royal Engineers Corps. Fortunately, because he was so young, 17 or just 18, and had been called up so late in the war, he was posted to the British Army's armaments depot at Woolwich in London, where he completed his training. This was the "Woolwich Arsenal", which gave its name to the famous football team.

There he worked on the guns of various types that did so much damage, with their exploding shells, to the soldiers on both sides. The war soon ended, so he was never sent to Belgium or France. He was demobilised and returned to civilian life as an engineer in the Midlands.

My father's older brother was a farm worker on a large Midlands farm before the war in the Edwardian period, but because of poor employment prospects and a low income he decided to try his luck abroad. Several of the growing Commonwealth countries were offering jobs and a new future to British immigrants, and he chose Canada. He moved there as a single male farm worker in the first decade of the century, travelling by steam ship across the Atlantic with many others seeking a new life, a week's journey across the ocean.

The Canadian Government, as part of the Commonwealth, became involved in the First World War and raised a supporting army, the Canadian Expeditionary Force, to be sent to fight in

Belgium and France. My uncle volunteered in 1917, joining the Canadian army in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and was posted to England preparatory to going into battle.

He was sent to France with the Canadians, and, probably because of his knowledge of land and his fitness, he became a dispatch runner. He had to carry messages to and from the front line along the trenches and over the ravaged terrain, covered in deep shell craters, water and mud. This was a very dangerous and risky task, with German snipers everywhere; it was on one of these runs that he was hit by enemy machine-gun fire, receiving many bullet wounds.

[Alan's photographs are unfortunately too indistinct to copy; the one he inserted here shows mud-covered Canadian soldiers surrounded by shell craters.]

Taken to the treatment centre, he narrowly survived, and was sent to England to recover and convalesce. Most of the bullets had been removed, but one was too near his spine to be removed safely, and he lived with this bullet inside him for the rest of his life.

After the war he returned to Canada, where he used his farming experience and his knowledge of the countryside to embark on a career as a trapper in the far north, catching the animals and trading the furs to the famous Hudson Bay Company. He lived for periods with the native Indians of northern Canada in their tent-like accommodation, learning about their way of life. They taught him how to survive extreme winter weather, and showed him how they caught animals and fish.

He made several visits to England in the 1920s and 1930s, on one occasion bringing a valuable mink fur hat as a present for his sister-in-law, my mother – the hat is still retained by the family. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 it became too dangerous for passenger liners to cross the Atlantic for fear of German submarine torpedo attacks, and he never came to England again. On retirement he received a Canadian Army veteran's pension, living the rest of his life in Canada. He died aged 76 in Vancouver, British Columbia.

His First World War diary and an old black-and-white photo album were among his belongings returned to his brother, my father, in England. They are a treasured possession, the record of an adventurous early twentieth century life.