

## ***Recruitment to the Army in the War 1914-1918***

Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, there were several recruitment meetings in Amersham to encourage men to sign up. On 7 September 1914 a meeting was arranged by Dr Gardner and Mr R. Grist, a local bank manager,<sup>1</sup> who was also the honorary recruiting officer for the district. The meeting recruited for the King's Royal Rifle Corps and was led by a parade of the National Reserve, special constables and Boy Scouts, headed by Scottish pipers from London. They started from the railway station, moved along Hill Avenue, to the junction of the Sycamore and Chesham Roads, down Station Road to the town, and with the Fire Brigade and engine joining in, they proceeded to 'Little Shardeloes' to be met by the Amersham band, who played patriotic music. The parade then returned along the High Street and headed up Whielden Street before returning to the meeting place, where a temporary platform had been constructed. The Earl of Buckingham spoke, explaining why Britain was at war and encouraging young men to join up to "defend freedom and fight for justice, mercy and the civilisation of the British Isles." (report in the *Bucks Herald* 11 September 1914).



(Photograph courtesy of the Amersham Museum)

Dr Gardner listed 55 existing volunteers, headed by the young squire, Jack Drake.<sup>2</sup> Among the list were possibly some of our soldiers: A Dover, F Birch, C Atkins. Many of the surnames listed were the same as those of our 98 names on the memorials, but were probably siblings. A similar recruitment meeting was held a year later and reported in the *Bucks Herald* in September 1915. Over 500 people attended. The arrangements for the meeting were again made by Dr Gardner and Lieutenant R. Grist (who was himself now a serving officer). More than 50 men volunteered. (**Lt Roland Grist**, 18<sup>th</sup> Btn Royal Rifles, died in Rangoon, Burma and is listed on the Memorial).

The soldiers of the King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC) were no strangers to Amersham. Two years prior to the war, the Regular Army came to Amersham on manoeuvres; troops camped at Bury Farm, Gore Hill and Cowhouse Meadow, Shardeloes. In the autumn of 1914 they returned. The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, KRRC ('A' Company) paraded in the Broadway before taking up billets listed by the Shardeloes Estate Agent. The following men enlisted into the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion KRRC in Amersham: **Albert George Lane, William George Cox, Raymond Bowler** (16<sup>th</sup> Btn) and the following enlisted

<sup>1</sup> See pp 174-176 for more information on Ronald Grist.

<sup>2</sup> See entry for H W Tyrwhitt-Drake pp 296-298.

into other regiments: **Frederick Percy Caudery** (8<sup>th</sup> Btn Berkshire Regiment), **Charles Dyer** (5<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI), **George Stephenson Podbury** (6<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI) and **John Redding** (8<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI).

The British Army was traditionally a volunteer army, but in 1914 it was much smaller than the armies of France and Germany. When Field Marshall Earl Kitchener took over as Secretary of State for War in August 1914 he was quick to understand that this war would be costly in manpower. Not confident that the territorial battalions could be sufficiently flexible to allow rapid expansion, Kitchener made a direct appeal to the public – his sight set on expanding the army by 500,000 men – with separate appeals in 100,000 tranches, to be numbered K1, K2 and so on. The 'First Hundred Thousand' (K1) was recruited within days of the appeal. The final 100,000 (K5) was sanctioned by the government in October 1914. In the days before wireless and mass media, the appeal for manpower was made through newspapers, and, most effectively, through the use of posters seen in

every public space. An all-party group (The Parliamentary Recruiting Committee) was to approve and distribute such posters. Most famous is the image by Alfred Leete of the head and pointing finger of Lord Kitchener, first used as a cover on the *London Opinion* of September 1914 and used subsequently on a variety of posters with the slogan "Your Country Needs You".



Recruiting Offices sprang up across the country as the demand for men increased. Local municipal buildings were taken over and mobile offices were also used. Recruiting sergeants and other military personnel would be available to give an impression of military efficiency and to provide the necessary degree of persuasion. On arrival recruits would be asked their age – nineteen being the minimum. It is well-known that there were to be many under-age soldiers – some may have lied about their age, but with the recruiting officer being given the incentive of earning an extra 2s 6d for every recruit, it is likely that some officers turned a blind eye. Three of our Amersham soldiers: **George Percy Lane**, **Robert Wall** and **Harold John Robert White** were only 18 years old when they died, so it is likely that they were under age when they enlisted.

Would-be soldiers were given a brief medical examination, based around their height (at first, above 5ft 3 ins) and chest measurement (34 inch minimum), the condition of their teeth (to bite the almost unbreakable ration biscuit) and their eyesight (to be able to sight a rifle correctly). One of our Amersham soldiers **Walter Charles Scott**, although initially passed fit for the army in 1914, did not serve abroad as his health was so poor. He was discharged later as unfit for service and died at home in 1918.

Found fit (A1), recruits would 'attest', swearing an oath of allegiance to the King; signing their forms they would receive the 'King's Shilling', the symbolic issue of the first day's pay of what was to be a long stint in the army – for three years or 'for the duration of the war'. The oath was sworn in front of a magistrate and in the presence of a recruiting officer.<sup>3</sup>


Below is a handbill distributed by the Buckinghamshire Advertiser which indicates that the Buckinghamshire Territorial Association was attempting to fill the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion OBLI of the 'New

<sup>3</sup> Peter Doyle, *The British Soldier of the First World War*, Shire Library 2011



Army', the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire Battalion (Reserve) and the Royal Buckinghamshire Hussars (Reserve). The latter were looking for 'riding men'. The age range is stated as 19 to 38 years. The OBLI recruits could enlist at any army Recruiting Centre and be sent to the depot at Oxford (which was at Cowley Barracks). **William Lawrence** and **Frank Rogers** both enlisted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion OBLI in Oxford.

Your kind assistance is desired.

Q.  R.

**County of Buckingham**  
**Territorial Force Association.**

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**RECRUITING FOR THE REGULAR ARMY**  
**AND TERRITORIAL UNITS.**

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**500 MEN ARE REQUIRED**

From BUCKINGHAMSHIRE to complete the  
**8th Battalion of the**  
**Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire**  
**Regiment.**

**Standard Height 5ft. 4ins.      Chest 34ins.**  
**Age 19 to 38 years.**

Recruits can be enlisted at any Recruiting Centre and sent to the Depot at Oxford.

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RECRUITS also Required, Riding Men, for the  
**Royal Bucks Hussars**  
**Reserve Regiment,**  
Apply to their Headquarters at Buckingham, or their Depot, Watton Street, Aylesbury.

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THE  
**Bucks Reserve Battalion**  
Require RECRUITS    Apply to the Headquarters, Temple Square, Aylesbury.

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**GOD SAVE THE KING.**

"Bucks Advertiser" Co., Ltd., Aylesbury.

There was an army Recruiting Office in Temple Square, Aylesbury where several of our Amersham soldiers enlisted including **John Brill** (latterly of the Royal Berkshires), **George Castle** (2/1<sup>st</sup> OBLI), **Arthur Darvell MM** (5<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI), **George Cooper** (5<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI), **Charles John Holmes** (6<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI), **Reginald Fortnam** (joined OBLI but was transferred later to the Worcestershires), **Harry Mitchell** (6<sup>th</sup> Btn OBLI), **William Thomas Lake** (12<sup>th</sup> Btn Rifle Brigade).

High Wycombe was another town which had a Recruiting Office. Some of our men who fought with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the OBLI as regular soldiers enlisted in High Wycombe: **Harry Grace**, **Thomas Irons**, **Frederick George Parslow** and **William John Slade**. Our men also enlisted at High Wycombe into other battalions of the OBLI: **Alfred James Lee** (2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion), **Edward Bolton** (5<sup>th</sup> Battalion). **Ernest Wingrove** and **Frank Wingrove** also enlisted in High Wycombe, but were posted to different regiments.

Many of our Amersham soldiers volunteered for the army and enlisted in London, in the London Fusiliers and London Regiment. The London

Regiment raised over 40 battalions to fight in the war. To distinguish them, the battalions were given additional names, such as "The Prince of Wales's Own Civil Service Rifles", which was the choice of **Edgar Richard Chandler**, or the Royal Fusiliers (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion City of London Regiment) chosen by **Harry Beeson**. **Percy Featherstone** enlisted in the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion London Regiment (London Scottish) and was probably surprised to find himself going to war in a kilt. **Stanley Robert Cox** signed up for the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers in St Paul's Churchyard. Other Recruitment Offices within easy reach of Amersham and where some of our soldiers enlisted were: Chesham, Uxbridge, Watford, Kensal Rise, Harrow and Hounslow. Most of the early volunteers had a choice of which regiment they signed for, but later recruits and conscripts usually did not.

Despite the efforts of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, the flow of volunteers decreased steadily month on month in 1914-15, and the War Cabinet became concerned that the British Army would not be able to withstand its losses at the front. In July 1915 the National Registration Act was passed, which required every citizen between the ages of 15 and 65 to register their name, place of residence, nature of work and other details. By October 1915 over 5 million men of military age had been identified with at least 3.4 million technically able to join the forces but who had not volunteered. The Military Service Act of 27 January 1916 followed, announcing the introduction of conscription for all fit single men between the ages of 19 and 41, the first of five such acts through the war. Later, on 25 May 1916, the act was extended to married men and the lower age dropped to 18. The majority of the army which marched to victory in 1918 was made up of conscripts.

Conscripted men were no longer given a choice of which service, regiment or unit they joined, although if a man preferred the navy it got priority to take him. The evidence that a man was conscripted into the army is found on the attestation papers that he signed. One example is given in

the biography of **William Charles Dumbarton**, a married man with a child. The attestation form of conscripts had a section for conscientious objectors. A system of appeals tribunals was established to hear cases of men who believed they were disqualified on the grounds of conscientious objection, but also of ill-health, or in occupations vital for the war economy.

**William Charles Dumbarton** was assigned to the Army Service Corps, 66<sup>th</sup> Auxiliary Petrol Corps, and enlisted in Retford, not far from his home in Edwinstowe, Nottinghamshire. **Fred Dover**, also conscripted, was assigned to the Royal Field Artillery, 11<sup>th</sup> Division Ammunition Column. Strangely he was posted as a driver, in charge of a General Service Wagon, drawn by horses. As a gas-worker before the war it is unlikely that he was an experienced horseman. He enlisted in Hull and lived in Scunthorpe at the time.

As well as the Infantry battalions, our Amersham soldiers were represented in other branches of the Army including: the Royal Field Artillery, The Garrison Artillery, The Army Service Corps, The Machine Gun Corps and The Corps of Royal Engineers (RE). The RE were able to attract members who had skills specific to the type of work they would be doing e.g. **Guy Godfrey Glyn** was an Associate member of the Institution of Civil Engineers and had a background in railway engineering. **Leonard Gibbs** had been a blacksmith before the war; **George Henry Willis** was a platelayer on the railways and **Edward George Grace** (RE Base Signal Depot) worked for the GPO.

*(Thanks to the Amersham Museum for their help in researching and writing this section.)*

#### **Sources:**

Articles from *The Buckinghamshire Herald* were used and a handbill distributed by *The Buckinghamshire Advertiser*. Peter Doyle: *"The British Soldier of the First World War"*, Shire Library 2011.