

This contribution by Ernie Taberner describes the difficulties of life, and especially for ex-Servicemen, in the years soon after World War I.

I remember when . . .

IN the early part of this century now approaching the Millennium, most adult males were ex-Servicemen. Grandads (having fought in the Boer War) constantly regaled us with tales of how they (with the help of their mates of course) had relieved sieges of Ladysmith or Mafeking. Older brothers, fathers and uncles relived past experiences of the latest war against Germany 1914/18 when names like Ypres, Mons and Passchendale became quite familiar in daily conversation. The early volunteers never failed to remind others of their membership of "The Old Contemptibles". (That "contemptible little army" was so christened by the Kaiser Wilhelm himself,

Dear Alastair,
 With the approach of the Millennium I thought it fitting to recall the earlier part of the century, prior to the 1939-45 war which is well documented elsewhere.
 I would like to take this opportunity to thank "Past Forward", yourself and all your capable assistants for

helping me maintain my links with "Ye Ancient and Loyal Borough."

Best wishes to all
 Sincerely

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when he was advised that a British contingent was being sent to Belgium to help her to stem the German invasion).

It was 1921 when mass demobilisation took place and most ex-Servicemen had a gratuity of a few hundred pound with which to resume normal life. As most Wigan ex-servicemen were former miners, the initial euphoria of being reunited with families after long weary years of uncertainty soon

wore thin, when they returned to a coal strike in the local coalfields. All school-children knew of the 1926 General Strike in which all organised workers in transport, engineering, and railways participated and was well documented, but surprisingly the 1921 coal strike was less well known, except locally.

Jam butties

One of my earliest recollections was going with

the local schoolchildren to school yards where trestle tables had been set up and local ladies were slicing up loaves of bread, donated by local bakers, whilst others were spreading jam, donated by Deakins of Princess Street to make jam butties for the children. Then on returning home to collect jugs and cans we would join the queue at improvised soup-kitchens for allocations of pea soup.

Ours was part of Jack Lowe's Temperance Bar in Chapel Lane, and after our lunch of jam butties and pea soup we children would curl up on the warm pavements and sleep it off. Thus became the daily pattern until the end of the strike when the horrible truth had to be faced that there were more ex-miners in the local coalfields than there were jobs for them.

Continued on page 20

I remember when . . .

Continued from page 19

This economic fact of life caused many of them to consider how best to use their capital to "buy themselves out of the pits for all time". Many of them took the gamble of becoming businessmen by opening shops, buying ex-service vehicles and becoming hauliers, buying ponies and cars for light hauling, becoming greengrocers or coal dealers, buying, bagging and selling coal in 1 cwt. bags. The more adventurous having had

We fought the German, the Austrian, and the Turk

That's why we're all walking 'round and out of work

But what is it for?

We won the war!

It was becoming popular in the Twenties to produce as entertainment anything anti-German and another ditty I can recall was:-

On the day those Germans pay

On the day those Germans pay

Hair will grow on wooden legs

being truthful when they related their tales of hardship.

Doorstep callers

However to many it became a blessing in disguise, since the decision to get out of the pits and create a job for themselves "on top", especially since they now for the first time in their lives had capital, was made for them. So former miners, now ex-Servicemen, became businessmen in a variety of ways. Milkmen, butchers, grocery vendors, hardware dealers, odd job men, became regular doorstep callers whilst others would rent premises to sell their skills in many diverse ways

In an earlier *Past Forward* contribution I wrote of one man who was one of the homesteaders in my feature - Mr. Simmonds who farmed at Springfield behind the old running track. (See issue 10) I knew Mr. Simmonds but I didn't know his background until a *Past Forward* reader advised me that as a teenager he had walked from Cornwall to Yorkshire then to Crawford Village on his way to Wigan to work as first a miner then a farmsteader. (For this information I am grateful to an ex-Wiganer from Springfield Mr. Frank Brown now of Droitwich, Worcs. Another one of us!)

The customer was

adventurous, having had experience of driving trucks and buses in war time, became pioneers of long distance passenger transport, eg. James Smith of Standishgate, and Webster Bros. of Darlington Street readily come to mind among the bigger ones, whilst Wilf Garvin of Frog Lane and Harold Fairhurst of Jolly Mill were two of the smaller ones.

Time of doom and gloom

The early '20's, although causing a trade revival, was for many Wiganers a time of doom and gloom, and many sought an outlet by a visit to the old Hippodrome in King Street. Here the variety produced was for the most part uplifting although I remember (even though only a boy) one artist with his own version of the aftermath of war presenting his own creation of "hitting back" by his own song which went as follows:-

*We won the war, we won
the war
You can ask Lloyd
George or Bonar Law*

20

*Elephants will be laying
eggs
And your children's
children's children
Will be all old and grey
And the Shakespeare
Hotel will be packed like
h—
On the day those
German's pay!*

Here I would apologise for the digression but whilst many old Hippodrome customers would easily recall Florrie Ford or George Formby (old) and young George (of 'Leaning on a Lamp' fame) I suspect very few will remember the ditties produced here.

(The Shakespeare Hotel was next door to the old Hippodrome and was popular with the artists appearing there).

I commenced this resume of the early part of this century to remind older readers of *Past Forward* of their trials and tribulations of the period, and to reassure younger readers also that their parents and grandparents were in fact

“aj”. Disabled ex-Servicemen aided by the British Legion became boot and shoe repairers and cloggers. There were travelling coopers who would make a steel hoop and fit it on the dolly tubs. The owner of the small grocery shop would call and take the housewife's order during the morning, and deliver it the same afternoon.

If a plumber was needed it only needed a knock on his door and he would be around in the hour or as soon as he had finished the job he was already doing. So it was the beginning of a service era where the customer was always right and the customer was the beneficiary. Unlike nowadays when a tradesman will keep a housewife waiting all day indoors then still not turn up nor even apologise for a missed appointment!

Money was a very rare commodity indeed in the early part of the century. So no-one would miss out from choice on making a shilling or two (5p or 10p) if the opportunity presented itself, and would work all day and into the night if necessary to give customer satisfaction!

The customer was always right

I include this story for present *Past Forward* readers to illustrate the lengths their grandfathers were prepared to encounter to get their hands on a few shillings, and to illustrate why, when they did set up in business themselves, “the customer was always right”.

To conclude this feature and since I have mentioned Springfield I was an old Wigan Borough supporter (sorry you rugby supporters, although I did know of Jim Sullivan and Bert Jenkins and Morley on the wing), and the Boro team in my day were Preedy, Moran and Dennis Humpish Wilson and Robb, Welsby, Welch, Smith, Harris and Hughes. I also vividly remember seeing the incident when Frank Barson was sent off for a foul and never played again as his case was adjourned “sine die” by the adjudicators. Ah well, perhaps I should now say

I REMEMBER WELL!

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