



The Aftermath of World War One - What the papers said

Local papers give a snapshot of what local life was like during the years after WWI.

After the Armistice in 1918 businesses were quick to take advantage of the end of the war with advertisements encouraging people to get their homes ready for “when the boys come home,” with advertisements to replace brooms, brushes and crockery; to get your curtains cleaned and to renovate your furniture.

Employment was a high priority, especially for returning soldiers. The local papers carried classified advertisements for discharged soldiers seeking a situation. An advertisement for Dunlop tyres asked the reader “Are YOU employing a disabled man?”

The Board of Education and Ministry of Pensions sent out circulars promoting disabled men to be given preference for administrative, technical and manual jobs. In February 1919 Godstone RDC received a letter from Ministry of Labour enquiring whether there were any vacancies on the council’s staff which might be considered suitable for discharged officers or educated private soldiers. By 1920 there was still a problem finding work for ex-officers who needed business or professional work, ‘not ordinary industry.’

Each week the papers carried advertisements for farm workers wanted in Canada. Henry Joseph Hardy, who owned a shop in Godstone Road, promoting himself as a “Canadian Pacific Railway agent”, advertised farms for sale in the Colonies. “Free passage vouchers” for ex- soldiers could be exchanged.

Many men returned from WWI with no job and no prospect of one. They often slept rough but sometimes in ‘casual wards’ attached to workhouses. In essence they became tramps, also known as ‘padders’, sometimes walking around 10 miles a day.

Housing also proved a big headache for the local council.

By the end of 1918 the Godstone Rural Council, realising that housing was important, especially so because of de-mobilisation, searched for sites where new housing could be built. Sites were suggested for four houses in Lingfield, four in Dormansland, eight in Blindley Heath (Anchor Cottages) and six at the junction of the A22 and Tilburstow Hill.

In March 1919 Lingfield Parish Council wrote to the Rural District Council asking to erect twenty houses at Lingfield and six at Dormans Land for 'the working classes'.

Two landowners (Mr Bateman at the old Brick Yard in Edenbridge Road and Mr White with 1½ acres of land between Godstone Road and Edenbridge Road) had intimated their willingness to sell land at 30 shillings per foot but the council decided that the price asked was too prohibitive and was not worth considering. It was therefore resolved to put advertisements in the local press to the effect that "The Council are prepared to consider offers of land in the Rural District from half an acre to four acres in extent suitable for the building of Working Class Dwellings within reach of schools and if possible near main drainage. Prices must be reasonable".

Letters were received from various people willing to sell their land for housing. However, most were not taken up by council as costs were thought to be too high. Mr Sidney Betchley sent a letter to the council stating his willingness to sell the whole of a field at Quakers Platt, Dormansland at £300 per acre.

By December a site of about 2½ acres at the corner of Saxby's Road and Station Road had been secured for housing at a cost of £400.

John Webb, manager of the Brick Works at Crowhurst and Messrs Easter Bros wrote a letter to the council regarding the re-opening of their brick works. The Committee proposed writing to the Ministry of Munitions requesting that the War Office be pressed to vacate at an early date the brick fields at Crowhurst belonging to the Fletton Crown and Crowhurst Brick Company which had been in use for the storage of Munitions. This was in order that the manufacture of bricks could be proceeded with without delay as this was urgently required for the Council's housing programme. It was also pointed out that the recommencement of brick making at these works would prove employment for a considerable number of men in this district.

Six houses at Crowhurst 'St George's Cottages, were built by the Rural District Council for the brickworks employees.

At a public meeting held under the old oak tree in Lingfield. The housing question was raised. It was suggested that if local builders were allowed to build the houses for the district instead of being built by local authorities it would cost less and give local builders work to do.

Food production was also of great concern. Basic food was still rationed which stopped queuing and meant prices were fixed. Great efforts were made to increase production of home-grown food.

The price of bread was a matter of real anxiety. A 4lb loaf that used to be 9d was now 1s 2d. (a large baker's loaf in today's prices is £1.90p, the equivalent of £1.18s.) The local paper thought that the majority of people were more concerned with the price of bread and butter politics than foreign affairs.

The increased production of home grown wheat was a priority and by 1920 the Government was encouraging farmers to plant spring wheat and increase the acreage as wheat prices had increased.

Private land was also sought for returning soldiers to grow fruit, vegetables, keep poultry and pigs. Surrey County Council held a meeting in January 1919 regarding the

availability of land for ex-servicemen. The Small Holdings and Allotments Committee reported that in response to a circular letter issued to more than 1,700 soldiers working at farms in Surrey, applications had been received for 173 men, of whom 102 required small holdings in Surrey and 10 were uncertain where to settle. At a Parish Council meeting it was stated that more land was required at Baldwins Hill allotments as more men were being demobbed.

It was agreed that if land was urgently required by ex-servicemen financial aid from the State must be on a more generous scale especially having regard to the high price of materials and labour for equipment. However, by the end of 1919 the Surrey Mirror reported slow progress had been made in placing ex-servicemen on the land.

In November 1918 1530 soldiers were employed on the land in Surrey with 330 prisoners of war working on the land at depots in Redhill, Dorking and Lingfield

A Tractor School for women on the land was started in Oxted. It was a one month course of practical training, passing out 30 pupils each month.

In March 1919 an annual ploughing match was held at Lingfield. As well as prizes for ploughing there were prizes for: hedging and ditching; thatching and stacking plus a prize to the carter in the employ of a tenant farm for the best kept harness. There were prizes for the carter who has served the longest period without a break and not been known to have been intoxicated while with his team.

Bizarrely there was also a prize to the labourer who had been in employ for not less than 12 months bringing up the largest family – the oldest children at home of not more than 12 years of age with the least assistance from the poor rate.

In May a meeting of farmers in Lingfield highlighted many frustrations that the farmers were feeling. On the orders of the War Agricultural Committee many farmers had ploughed up grassland, but they could not grow anything on the land. They were out of pocket on milk productions and the increased cost of labour was hitting them hard.

The weekly minimum agricultural wages for males 20-21 years had risen from 3/6 a week to 5/-.

Male 20-21 yrs ages rose to 5 shillings a week from 3/6 a week .

Females 18 and over saw their wages rise by 7d per hour

The Government stated that “Our duty is to see that agricultural workers have greater incentives which will bring the land to full productivity”.

The East Grinstead Courier observed that women thought wistfully of 1914 when housekeeping money was counted in shillings not pounds. In spite of many increases in wages the worker was no better off and shopping has lost its charm. “Sorry madam we haven’t been able to get any in” or “the price has advanced by 3d owing to the increased price of production” was the usual response from shopkeepers. Scarcity meant panic and high prices and there was a plea to buy only what was necessary.

Godstone Rural District Council reported a great increase in preserving sugar from 50 tons to 73 tons in 1920. An extra 1lb of sugar for each 8lbs of sugar grown would be allowed.

It was not just the increase in food prices that were causing concern. In 1922 the Parish Council protested about the quality and exorbitant price of gas provided by the Godstone Gas Company.

The after effects of the war still carried on.

In January 1919 the Lingfield Parish Council promoted an amnesty for all surplus war trophies – old rifles, machine guns and trench mortars etc. to be conveniently placed in the drill hall headquarters of company 4th Queens Regiment.

J.W. Goss of Redhill asked readers of the Surrey Mirror to save their fat and bones from which the Government needed to extract glycerine.

In February 1919 the East Grinstead Courier advertised an auction of surplus army horses. Fifty of these horses, many of the Shire type, had been specially selected to meet the requirements of brewers, coal merchants and contractors and would be found much stronger than most army horses.

The Dormansland War Hospital Supply Depot closed in March 1919, having been open since January 1916. During that time, although only open two days a week 30,318 articles had been despatched for the sick and wounded. The balance of funds of £36.15s were given to the Lingfield & Dormansland Nursing Association.

In 1919 a new fund was started called 'The King's Fund for the Disabled' which aimed to supplement the Government pension by giving grants of 'not more than £20' to help start disabled men in their new trade (buying a shop, tools, etc.). The king started the fund off with £81,000 saying "it is everyone's duty to remember the men who have given their limbs or sight for our sakes and put by a small sum every week in aid of this fund."

Lingfield's annual meeting in aid of the Church of England Waifs & Strays Society was held at New Place. In 1921 there were 60 attendees including the Vicar of Lingfield. The Society, which had started 40 years previously, now had 4,300 children in its care, 300 of whom were the children of soldiers and sailors killed in the war. A collection raised £25. In 1922 seven children from Lingfield had been 'received into its hands.'

In August 1919 a dedication of inner doors to western entrance of the church was held by Mrs Walker of Waterside in memory of her son and the men who fell in Great War and in October a memorial service was held dedicating the carved oak memorial on the south wall of the Sanctuary in memory of Major Harry Anstell Lang who died at Gallipoli and of all others who died.

The local newspaper asked what the military was going to do with Kenley Common which had been appropriated during the war for an aerodrome. Later that year the newspaper reported a debate in the House of Commons as to whether to restore the aerodrome back to Kenley Common. Winston Churchill replied that the situation of the aerodrome rendered it of great importance in connection with the air defence of London and that it should be retained as a permanent site of the Royal Air Force. (This showed great foresight by Mr Churchill given the role the aerodrome played in WWII).

When wooden crosses from soldiers graves were replaced with stone memorials next of kin could apply to Imperial War Graves Commission and the wooden cross would be sent to them.

In 1920 a “new voluntary citizen force” to be called the Territorial Army was formed. Men would not be sent abroad unless an Act of Parliament was passed for a specific emergency. While training recruits would get regular army pay. Anyone interested could sign up at the Lingfield drill hall.

By August 1919 thefts of glasses from public houses was becoming so common that landlords were thinking of asking customers to bring their own glasses or put down a one shilling deposit.

By 1920 the papers reported on a worldwide glass bottle famine, especially medicine bottles. What had previously cost five shillings now cost £1.

The Red Cross had established a hospital for shell-shocked soldiers with epilepsy at the Colony (now Young Epilepsy). In March 1920 two patients were summonsed for being drunk and disorderly at the Plough Inn. Because of their illness patients were not allowed alcohol. Police were called and officials from the hospital led them back.

After four years of war people began to look forward to enjoying themselves once again and many social entertainments were advertised and reported on in the local papers. Every week in East Grinstead Courier the Whitehall Palace in East Grinstead advertised the latest films and variety acts, such as Henry Hilton the Humorous Magical Entertainer, Dolly Whiz, the Original Novelty Dancing Girl and Emir The Super Horse. Charlie Chaplin films were also very popular.

Parties and Socials held at Lingfield’s Victoria Memorial Institute were reported on and the Lingfield Debating Society, which had continued throughout the war, went from strength to strength

On 7th May 1920 a Labour Day festival was held attended by 500 members of various trades unions and their families. The Lingfield Band played “tuneful and lively marches” throughout the day. A cricket match between the Carpenters and the Bricklayers was played, finally won by the Bricklayers. Races were held for boys, girls and men, followed by tugs-o’-war between bricklayers, carpenters and painters; the bricklayers once again the victors.

While the May Day cricket match was in progress, a serious accident occurred when a trap passing by was overtaken by another driven by “a Belgian, from Anchor Farm who carried a bell which when sounded made a noise like a gong.” The noise startled the horse in the first trap so that it plunged and the wheels of the two traps became locked causing them to overturn. Both occupants suffered serious injuries and had to be removed to Redhill hospital.

Articles on cycling and motoring with useful notes and hints began to appear in the local papers.

Motor cars were getting more prolific and in July of 1919 the Godstone Rural Council proposed to fix a speed limit for motor vehicles through Lingfield. It was decided that the existing 20mph speed limit should be relaxed.

In a sign of the times the racing driver Woolf Barnato of Ardenrun was fined ten shillings in 1923 for failing to illuminate the number plate of his car.

In 1919 the Parish council thought it highly desirable to inaugurate a 'motor bus service' between Reigate, Redhill, Godstone, Lingfield and East Grinstead. However, in March a crowded meeting was held at the Victoria Institute to protest about the imposition by Surrey County Council of a heavy road tax on the proposed bus service. The tax was described as retrograde and a reversion to the old Turnpike System.

People were also now thinking about travel for leisure. The East Surrey Traction Company of Reigate advertised motor char-a-bancs for private parties, excursions, race meetings and picnics.

The Caterham Motor Company announced their demonstration model of the new Overland Touring Car and would be pleased to give trial runs by arrangement.

In 1922 Thos. Cook were advertising in the Surrey Mirror day trips to Ypres for 3 guineas. Many people wanted to see where their loved ones had fought and died in the war.

In the Houses of Parliament the proposal of a Channel Tunnel between England and France was being debated. The Prime Minister could see no objection and it was thought construction could begin immediately.

In March 1919 the Surrey Mirror reported that minesweepers in the Channel had exploded a mine. Shortly afterwards thousands of stunned herrings came to the surface and good hauls were made, one vessel obtaining 5,000 fish.

In May 1920 the East Grinstead Courier reported that a list of wildflowers was being compiled at the Victoria Institute, Lingfield. So far the list had reached 100 and it was hoped that the number would reach at least 200 by the end of the season. Some of the more unusual flowers listed were the "pretty whin"; twayblade and shepherd's needle. It would be interesting to see how that list compares to the present day.

In 1922 a ceremony took place under the Old Oak Tree by the village cage and pond when a covered seat was presented by an anonymous donor. The seat would be called 'The Haven of Rest' and it was hoped that the older inhabitants would find it a great convenience. The seat had accommodation for six persons and for the ceremony was occupied by the village's oldest inhabitants, whose total ages were 581 years. Tea was provided several ladies who had decorated the tables. One wonders whatever happened to this famous seat?

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Sources:
Surrey Mirror
East Grinstead Courier
Surrey History Centre, Woking

