



## WAR WIDOWS

A catastrophic War was over and now the consequences had to be faced.

First there was the irony that the society for which the country had fought in a sense no longer existed but the adjustments which would have to be made would have to be undertaken under the rules of the old attitudes which remained in place. The pre-war certainties had gone, replaced by rootlessness and confusion and the loss of the stable progression of family life which was now badly ruptured. Major problems lay ahead, such as those listed below.

**Women:** War widows, the ‘surplus women’, training, employment, access to Universities, returning to domesticity after war work, re-establishing a family home with injured/traumatised men, having to face the fact that society still had rigid views regarding how women should act and the roles they should fill.

**Men:** Returning to home life, trying to settle whilst dealing with trauma, finding employment, returning to Universities and for a small and overlooked group, the grief of having lost a wife killed in the War, or lost a family member, or in some cases a whole family, in an air raid or from influenza.

Below we look at a small selection of widows in our villages and the various experiences they had before a pension was awarded to them but first here is a little of the background generally regarding pensions, some of it showing the more unpleasant aspects of human nature, unforgivable in the circumstances.

**The sequence of events:** First there was the telegram, maybe a letter, followed by the request for marriage certificate then birth certificates after which there would be the exchange of letters which could last for a considerable period particularly in the absence of a body.

In view of the death rate the husband may have had the advantage of rapid promotion but if this had not yet been gazetted then the widow’s pension would be based on the lower rank.

The husband’s effects would be returned and although the widow may welcome these the

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affect of the delivery needs little imagination, but worse was to follow – the return of his uniform, muddy and blood stained. Vera Brittain describes the horror felt when the family received that of her brother. It is difficult to understand the need for this cruelty – surely it could have been disposed of? Both deliveries had to be acknowledged.

Next there would be confirmation of the pension she would or would not receive. It was not guaranteed. Widows were carefully scrutinised, particularly if it was seen that the birth of the first born preceded the marriage date. Widows were expected to be of ‘good behaviour’ and ‘respectable’ and were classed as either ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’ and careful, even covert, enquiries were made if a woman was at all suspect. A local case illustrates the methods used. Every effort was made to ensure that the widow’s husband was the father of the illegitimate child. The vicar, doctor and magistrate were contacted, even a member of the Lingfield Emergency Committee, all were asked to make enquiries. In some cases the people contacted protested angrily that they did not act as detectives regarding conduct.

Checks were also made on widows to ensure her ‘worthiness’ as a mother and whether the upbringing ‘of the future of the nation’ was safe in her hands. If it was deemed not to be so then her children could be taken from her without notice and placed in an orphanage. It was public money she would receive and there were some people who argued that it was inconceivable that upright Christian citizens should spend money on a woman who may be ‘loose’ and thereby encourage ungodliness! Better by far that she and her children went into the Workhouse.

There are two important points to mention regarding the above paragraph. One was that men recruited who were either out of work or performed all those really menial tasks were referred to openly as ‘the dregs of society’. By ‘dying for his country’ the husband had lifted himself from this trough but his unfortunate wife, being still alive, had not.

There is a little of Kipling in this:

“It’s Tommy this and Tommy that and throw the brute out  
But it’s saviour of ‘is country when the guns begins to shout.”

(There is a letter written to the Imperial War Graves Commission from an officer’s wife regarding the policy of having no distinction of rank with burials – she is horrified that her husband should be buried among ‘the dregs of society’ so it would seem to be an opinion more widely held than realised).

In the early 1920s the widow would start receiving her husband’s medals. Depending on the length of service he could have earned three. They had to be acknowledged.

Next came the letter and form regarding the memorial and scroll. On the form every member of the family had to be listed in differing sections – i.e. ‘full blood’, ‘half-blood’ etc. The form then had to be taken to a Minister or Magistrate and validated. It had to be certified by the widow and returned. Eventually the memorial and then, later, the scroll would be sent and both had to be acknowledged. Bearing in mind that education for women had been very poor some would have found all this very confusing. After that the widow was left to manage her life but some would have experienced the full force of the appalling old Poor Law attitude.

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There were other anomalies. At the beginning of the war pensions were only paid if the husband died of wounds or was killed in action. If he died of disease then no pension was due even if it was obvious that the disease was caused by his war service. This was raised in Parliament and amended. With regard to women in the Services, an enquiry put to Parliament regarding why they received no gratuities met with the bald statement – “They are not entitled to any”.

The difficulties faced by widows could be regarded as a betrayal of the men who had died. It was found that the foremost concern of a man on enlistment was that in the event of death his wife and family would be cared for. In that period between the first flush of enthusiasm, until reality struck, and the start of conscription recruiting officers were warning the Government that men coming forward would turn away if they could not be properly reassured on this point.

Here is a small selection of widows of our village, chosen as examples of the various complexities.

**Lucy Morshead** - (She seems to have always used the single worded name). She and Rupert Anderson-Morshead were married on the 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1914 at St John's Church, Dormansland. He was a professional soldier and commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment. He died on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 1918, at the age of 32, at the Battle of Bois des Buttes, classed as one of the top three heroic confrontations of the War as outnumbered men held off an overwhelming German advance until the last few men were wounded and/or taken prisoner.

Lucy was on the Emergency Committee and was involved particularly with the care of Belgian Refugees. She also nursed at the American Hospital at Ford Manor.

There is a file at the National Archives containing all the correspondence connected with this case and so we have more information than with the others. On the other hand, it also sheds some light on other cases where the body was missing.

The correspondence starts on the 27<sup>th</sup> May, 1918. On the 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1919, Lucy's pension rights are still being discussed. One complication is that Rupert's true rank is Captain. He then became an acting major but this was not gazetted before he was sent to France as an acting Lieutenant-Colonel. It seems that the decision had been made that the pension should be set at the Captain rate but then the Regiment took action and gazetted the promotions so the pension for the higher rank was agreed. One would have thought this could have been done earlier. However, written confirmation had to be obtained from the Regiment's archives.

The main problem was the absence of the body. Without this a pension could not be paid and probate granted.

The correspondence covers so many things, with Lucy getting more desperate. She is endlessly writing letters, all on black edged paper. There are so many disparate things she has to deal with – the remission of death duties, the payment of a mess bill, sending papers of Administration, acknowledging the Croix de Guerre. She sends papers as

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requested, asks for their return, this is not done but then she gets another request for them to be sent. This irritating, time-wasting inefficiency is repeated.

Financially she was due to receive some money which two months later still had not been received and in December 1918 a death certificate still could not be issued. There is also another allowance she should have had about which she received no details. She learned of it from an article in the Times.

Lucy formed a group with the Battalion's other next-of-kin and all agreed to search for information and pool anything they discovered. Also the Red Cross were beginning to trace the wounded and prisoners of war. Letters started to arrive confirming that the death of their Commanding Officer was witnessed but the Army Council questioned this and so it continued. It seems Lucy's father-in-law was being difficult. He was a QC and had been trying to find his son by consulting MPs. He sent one demanding letter asking for any information to be sent to him and there is a solicitor's reply that Lucy is the named next-of-kin and will be the first to know.

As wounded men were moved from hospital to prison camp so more details emerged and finally the Army Council accepted the evidence – but they still had a suspicion it was contrived.

Finally there is correspondence between the Regiment and Ministry of Pensions to the effect that “this officer was paid for 3 months beyond the date of death and the Regiment assumes that in accordance with usual practice the widow's pension is not antedated and the 3 month's pay and allowances beyond the date of death are admissible”. The answer is “Yes” and the Regiment send a Memo to Base, BEF, France, asking for the matter to be treated urgently because the solicitors are pressing for payment. However on the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1919 Lucy writes to the War Office regarding the gratuity due “It is over a year since my husband was killed and I do think you might let me have the money. It is two months since you told me it was due to me”.

Finally the matter is settled but all this does show the trauma to which grieving next-of-kin were subjected. At least Lucy Morshead was an educated woman, with help at hand and her husband was a senior officer, a professional soldier and a regimental hero. It can be seen what a quagmire awaited other women, without these advantages.

**Elizabeth Scott:** However, for Elizabeth everything was quick and straight-forward. Her husband, Richard, was in the Navy and died when his ship, HMS Begonia, sank with the loss of all hands. The Navy supplied wives with leaflets giving the information they needed regarding procedure, who they should contact for help and for temporary financial support. Again there was no body but after time had been allowed for a possible survivor to be found the process of awarding a pension proceeded quickly and was completed within weeks.

Richard was 42. He served on the Q Ships, a volunteer section of the Navy, working on decoy ships fighting the U-boat menace. His Grave Registration Report records “ Killed in action with submarine in the Atlantic”.

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**Annie Stokes:** Before detailing her experiences a correction is needed regarding her husband Charles Stokes. He appeared on the Mesopotamia boards in our 2014 Exhibition. We had little information about him and said we hoped to find more – this we have been able to do and must correct our earlier comments in which we said he was in the besieged town of Kut and died as a prisoner of war. He actually served first on the Western Front, was wounded in the scalp and went back to England by hospital ship. On recovery he was posted to Mesopotamia and contracted sand fly fever on arrival at Basra. He spent five days in hospital and was then discharged. Sand fly fever was very common. Most new arrivals developed it and military hospital records show there were hundreds of cases a year. Recovery is usually quick and there are no after effects. However, some people are unlucky. One complication is abscess on the liver. This happened to Charles Stokes. He returned to hospital, deteriorated quickly and was sent to Bombay. He died on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1917 and was buried in the military cemetery at Kirkee, Bombay.

The difficulties regarding service records is that most of them were burnt in a Second World War air raid. More fragments have been restored and released – the black “smudges” are not ink blots. They are charred holes exposed as the document is laid on its black background for recording. The increasing amount of ‘scraps’ now being recorded help to correct anomalies.

Like Lucy Morshead, Annie Stokes had problems with correspondence, apologising first for a delay in replying to a request for her marriage certificate, saying she had to write to East Grinstead. In the next letter she confirms she has sent both her marriage certificate and her son’s birth certificate. She receives another letter asking for both and replies they have not been returned to her – “So, you have them” she writes. There is a further complication when she returns to her parents’ home in Peterborough. She certainly advises the Ministry of Pensions that she has moved but they do not appear to have recorded it.

Interestingly, her son Clive joined the same regiment as his father, the Queen’s Own West Kent, in the last War and was taken prisoner in North Africa in 1943

**Violet Hodge:** Her husband, Albert, was in Royal Engineers and died of enteric fever on the 30<sup>th</sup> October 1917.

She faced the same procedure to obtain her pension but what is different is the survival of a wide range of documents. Included is the letter regarding the scroll, and the form accompanying it, on which Violet has to list all living relations, a list of returned effects, a letter from Surrey County Council regarding Albert’s request to enlist in Road Construction Corps, the receipts Violet has to return regarding Albert’s British War Medal and the Victory Medal, details of his illness and death, caused by enteric fever/typhoid and details of the pension finally awarded – 27/9d a week for herself and three children.

**Alice Oliver:** Her husband, George, was wounded in leg, arm and neck in 1918. He had also had influenza. 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1919 he was transferred from active service and then discharged with pulmonary tuberculosis. He was classed as 80% disabled and awarded a pension of 22/- from 29<sup>th</sup> February 1919, plus allowances for his two children.

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He died on the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1920 and Alice was awarded a pension of 26/8d for herself and 17/6d for each of the children. There does not seem to have been any problems in Alice receiving her pension, perhaps because the details were already established when her husband was awarded his. He is buried in the churchyard of St John, Blindley Heath.

Some widows could boost their pensions if their husbands had insured with a Friendly Society. Unfortunately only the larger Societies had survived. The death rate was so high the smaller societies had vanished, having lost all their members and thus the donations. Fortunately George was insured with the local branch of one of the largest – the Oddfellows, The Earl of Cottenham Lodge, Lingfield.

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