OLDHAM HISTORIES FESTIVAL

SEPTEMBER 2020

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PART 1

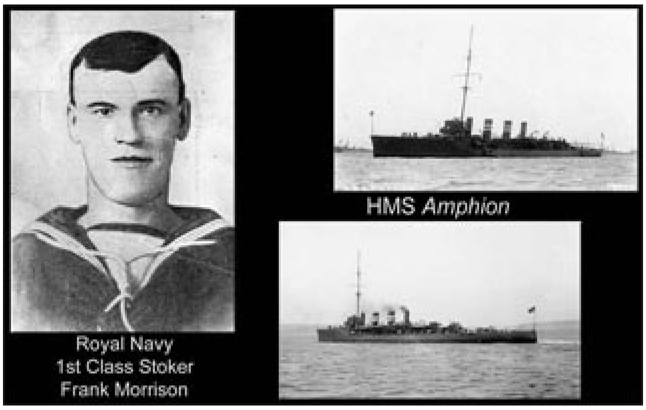
Sometimes, the emphasis might seem to be on the army ... almost ignoring the contribution of the Royal Navy, the merchant navy and the Royal Flying Corps.

This isn't intentional, or in any way suggesting that their sacrifices weren't as important or as great .

From the beginning of 2014 we have been reminded constantly ... through the media... that 2014 is the centenary of the 'War to End War' beginning.

This map shows us the main Theatres of War ... but doesn't reach far south enough to include North Africa, Suez and Colonial German East Africa, which also saw fighting throughout those years.

In this short narrative, we're only going to scratch the surface of lives touched by the conflict ... what to leave out became more of a problem than what to include ... so the following is just a few examples ... looking back ... to try and help us understand just what it meant to live through those times.



For one 27 year old Oldham man, the war began and ended, for him, in the first couple of days.
His name was Frank Morrison and he wasn't a soldier - he was in the Royal Navy.
On the 5th of August he should have been at home on leave ... but all leave had been cancelled, so he was still on board his ship, the HMS *Amphion.*
The *Amphion* was a cruiser and Leader of the 3rd Destroyer Flotilla. It was returning to Harwich with survivors from a German minelayer which had been sunk by the flotilla.

Early the following morning, on the 6th, the *Amphion* hit one of the German mines ....
Over 150 crewmen died along with 18 of the German survivors.
Frank, a married man who lived in Werneth, had been born in Chadderton in 1887. He and his wife Elizabeth had a son, James aged 4, and baby daughter Julia, aged just 7 weeks.

So ... who were these local men who served in the regular army or navy? ...

and what had made them join-up in the first place?

The Oldham townships at the turn of the century were, like probably all industrial towns, a mix of the grindingly poor through to the seriously affluent.

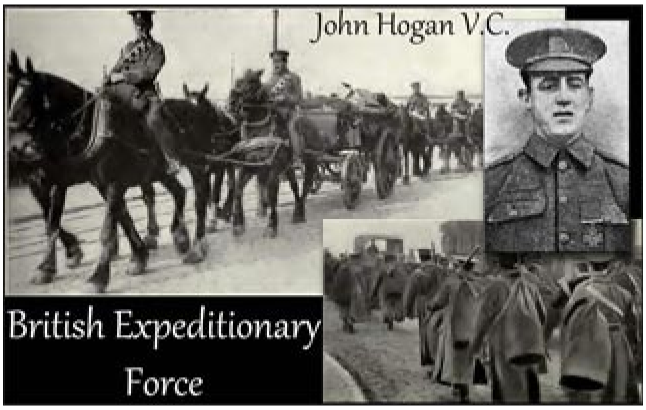
Life for many had been worse ... but it had sometimes been better ... and some local firms were struggling. financially.

France, Germany, Austro-Hungary and Russia all had large, regular armies of conscripted and trained servicemen.

Britain had no system of conscription, and her regular army, of about 250,000 volunteers, was a fraction of those of the other great powers .... even when the numbers in the Teritorial Force and the Regular Reserves were included.

On the plus side, Britain's navy was by far the most powerful.

At 11pm on Tuesday the 4th of August, Britain declared war on Germany after the Kaiser refused to recognise Belgian neutrality and invaded Belgium.



As a result, 120,000 regular soldiers, were re-deployed as the British Expeditionary Force and sent to the defence of Belgium.

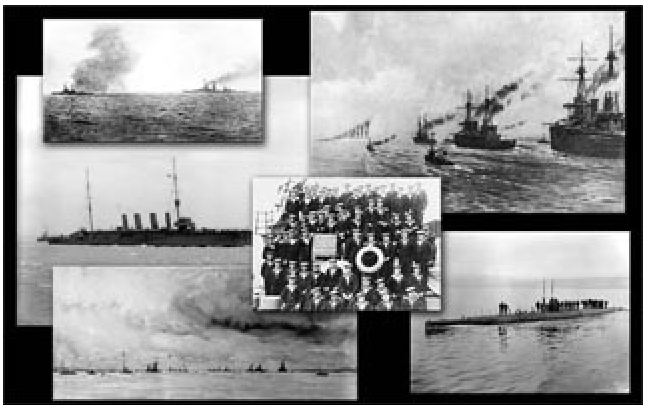
One of those first battalions was the 2nd Manchesters, which had been stationed in Ireland, and in which a number of our local men were serving.

It was this battalion that Oldhamer, Sergeant John Hogan, in the Army Reserve, would re-join when it reached France.

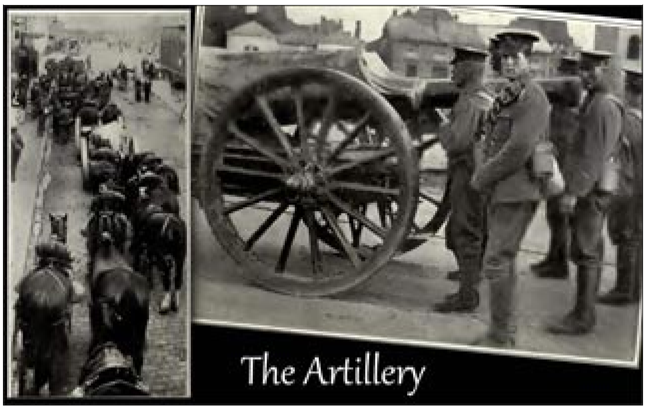
He would later be awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery.

The battalion sailed from Dublin on the '*Buteshire*' in a convoy of about 10 ships, transporting 10,000 soldiers, animals, kit and armaments.

The '*Buteshire*' itself safely transported the 2,500 men of the 2nd Manchesters and the Yorkshire Light Infantry ... along with 300 horses, guns and other equipment to the port of Le Havre.



The troopships had left Dublin on the 13th of August in a raging storm, with torrential rain, thunder and lightning, which followed them all the way to Le Havre where they disembarked ...
according to a New Zealand newspaper report, even this hadn't been enough to dampen the spirits of the soldiers on board.



The soldiers, in the first wave of the British Expeditionary Force, would become known as the 'Old Contemptibles'.

It was the Kaiser's own description of the British army he believed - so wrongly - that his own army would easily defeat.
It became a 'tag' that was worn with pride ... and there would be a special medal, known as the 1914 Star, for those soldiers who saw action, in this theatre of war, between the 5th August and 22nd of November 1914.

Few could have imagined what was still to come.

Amongst those from Oldham, in the 2nd Manchesters, who were killed in those first months of the war, was Lance/Cpl Charles William Bailey, a bugler, who died on the 9th December 1914 aged 24.

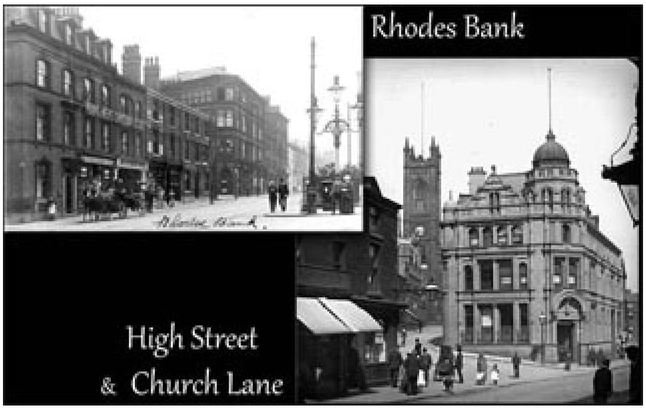
and also ...

A/Cpl. Jervis McGovern

L/Cpls. James Robert Jinks, Charles William Bailey and John Wolstencroft.

Privates: James Bradbury, Walter Thomas Brown, Alfred Chadderton, Thomas Comer, John Graham, Frank Hirst, John William Hopson, Arthur Kanes, Edward Kirwan, Sylvester Lord, James McKeown, George Ogden, George Scott, Samuel Smith,

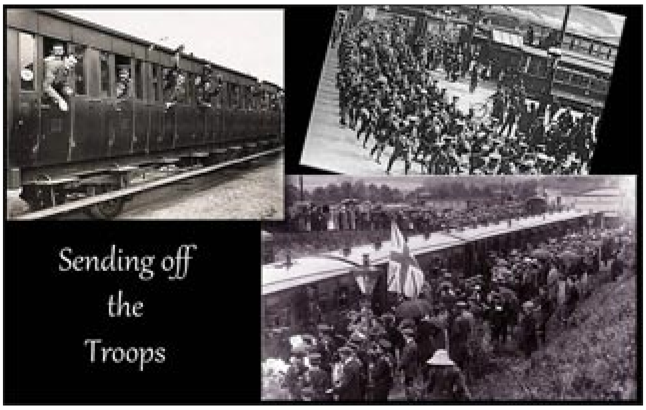
MOBILISATION & RECRUITMENT



On that first day of uncertainty, Tuesday the 4th of August, crowds gathered in the town around the Town Hall and the Post Office and tension grew, as they waited to hear if war would be declared.

The naval reserve had already been mobilised. Earlier in the day, 14 members of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade had left en route for duty in a naval hospital or on a warship ... and now the crowds were waiting for the expected mobilisation of the Army Reserves, and the embodiment of the Territorials

When the declaration of War came, at 11 o'clock, that night, the 10th Manchesters, the Oldham Territorials, immediately reported to the Drill Hall for their instructions, and the Army Reservists went home to prepare for departure the following morning.
Amongst the TerrItorials, waiting to see what would happen, was Private Walter Mills, married with a baby daughter.
In December 1917 he would be killed in action, at Givenchy, on the Western Front. For his actions that day he would receive the the Victoria Cross, posthumously.
Back to 1914 and, at 6am on the morning of 5th August, the Territorials presented themselves at the Drill Hall for a medical inspection and, according to the newspaper, were '*in full marching order and ready for anywhere*'.
2 hours later and the 40 or so members of 'The Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry' also met at the Drill Hall, quote, in '*drill parade dress, ready for the field*'
Outside, and in the streets around the Town Hall, excited crowds gathered from early morning, awaiting any fresh developments.



By 8am, that same Wednesday morning, the Reservists were at the railway stations , packed and ready to depart and re-join their various regiments.

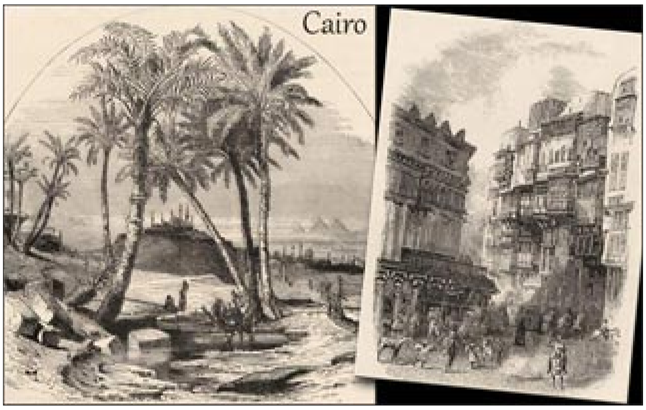
Families of weeping women and children waved them off, as the crowds thronging the platforms cheered them on their patriotic way, to fight for King and Country.

Whilst they waited for further orders, the Territorials reported to the Drill Hall every day, and were marched and drilled around the town.

Would their orders never come?

A couple of weeks later and, at 6am on the 20th August, the Territorials and Yeomary at last marched off to camp, at Chesham Fold, in Bury, as part of the East Lancashire Division. They would be alongside troops from Ashton, and other nearby Lancashire towns. Altogether there would be 5,000 Territorials in camp.

As Territorials, they were not obliged (at that time) to serve overseas but, it became 'Decision time', a few days later, when they were asked to decide whether or not they were willing to serve overseas. Those not volunteering to do so would be trained separately from those agreeing to 'go anywhere'. This situation appears to have put emotional pressure on the men because, by the following day, many had changed their minds and re-joined their friends, as volunteers for 'anywhere'.
Apparently, the days spent in camp, supposedly in training, were a misery of constant rain, leaking tents, drilling, and marching round the endless streets of Bury.

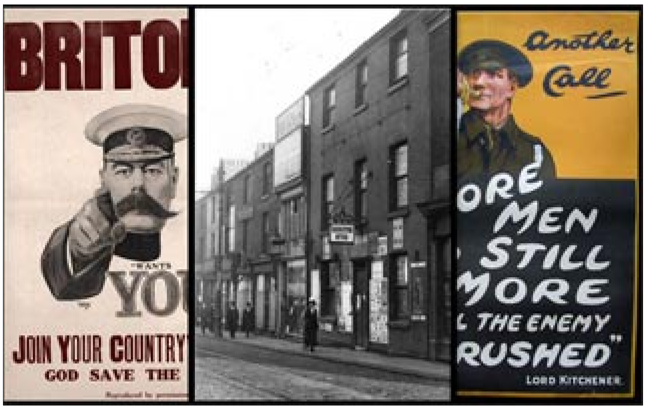


Rumours of departure flew about but, on Wednesday 9th of September the 10th Manchester and other units of the East Lancashire division, set off for war 'proper'. Although the men didn't know it at the time, they were the first complete Territorial Force Division to leave for overseas service.
They embarked at Southampton for the journey to Alexandria and then by on rail to Cairo.
There they would complete their training whilst on defensive duties.
By March they still hadn't seen any 'action' but rumours were contantly flying round again and, on the 28th March the divisions were on parade in front of General Sir Ian Hamilton in Cairo.

Dardanelles ..... April 1915
Allied Bombardment of Gallipoli

On May 2nd they received orders that the East Lancashire Division would soon be on its way to the Dardanelles, apparently, at the specific request of General Hamilton.

In the early hours of May 6th, the 31 officers and 850 men of the battalion, embarked on 2 boats, the '*Ansonia*' and the '*Haverford*' ... and were on their way to take part in the ill fated invasion of Gallipoli.



In those early days of the war the country was swept with patriotic euphoria and excitement, a desire and need, 'to be there, and do their bit for 'king and country'.
The recruiting Office in Oldham had opened on the 7th August in the old Swan Inn, on High Street, and on that first day, 274 men signed up. Some were ex-soldiers signing up for the National Reserve.
Some signed on with the Territorial Force, prepared to serve abroad, and 14 joined the army and navy as regular servicemen.

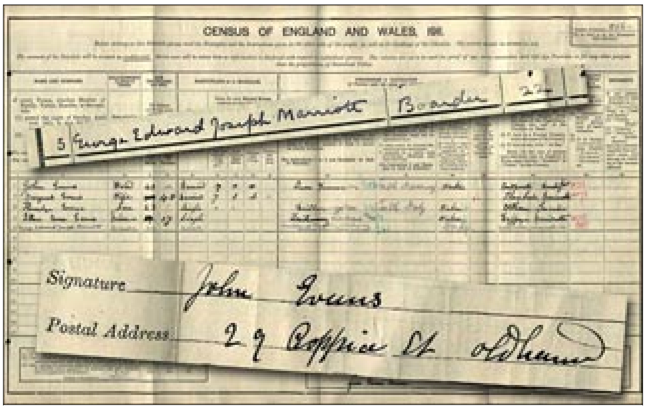
Less than a week later, Oldham had an 'attesting officer', Major Shiers, in charge of enlisting volunteers, either with or <u>without</u> army training. This was in line with Parliament's decision to sanction an increase in the army of up to 500,000 new recruits ... who would become known as Kitchener's New Army.
Volunteers would sign up for 3 years or the duration of the war, whichever was longer, and agree to serve wherever necessary.
In a letter to the newspaper, urging men to enlist, Major Shiers ended it with an appeal for men to, quote :

".... prove their loyalty to King and Country. The more trained men we have the worse for our enemies. The sooner the war will be over and the sooner trade will improve and we shall all be able to get back to work and regular wages."

Young men rushed to enlist, not wanting to miss out on what many saw as this great adventure, which would probably be over in a few short months. They would come back as conquering heroes! They would enjoy status and respect! The reality would be totally different.

But who were these volunteers ... and where would THEY be coming from?
They were the millworkers, labourers, shop and office workers, teachers and musicians, artisans and tradesmen, and the sons of the bosses.

They were from the mean back streets of Oldham, the small townships like Crompton, the leafier lanes around Chadderton, and from the big houses of the wealthy.
In fact ... from every walk and condition of life.



Let's take a look at just one eager Territorial.

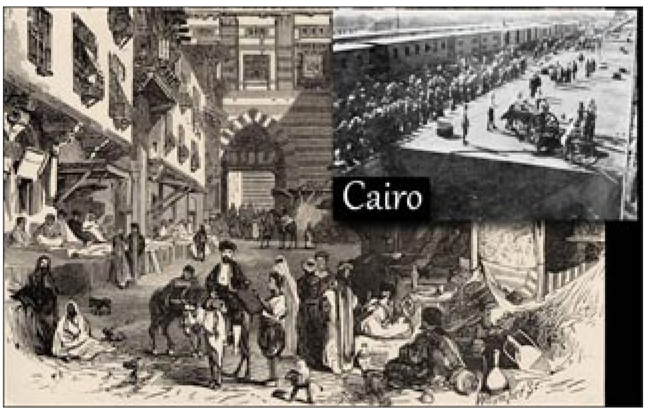
In Oldham there was a young 26 year old Classics teacher, at Hulme Grammar School, called George Edward Joseph Marriott, who boarded with the Evans family at 29, Coppice Street.

We've no picture of him but we do know that ...

George Edward Joseph Marriott was born in Lancaster, the son of a clergyman, educated at Lancaster Grammar School, and graduated with a BA from St. Peter's College, Cambridge.

He took up his post at Hulme in September 1910.

He was a member of the Territorial Force, a 2nd Lieutenant in the 1st/6th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers.



On the 9th of September, after initial training at Bury, and alongside the 10th Manchester (the Oldham Territorials) he was on his way to the war.

Their first destination was Egypt, some further training and guard duties in that country.

We know from the war diaries that George Edward was in Egypt until May 1915.

Back in Egypt, after the evacuation, he would remain there, with his battalion, except for a spell in hospital with sunstroke, until February 1917 and their transfer to France.

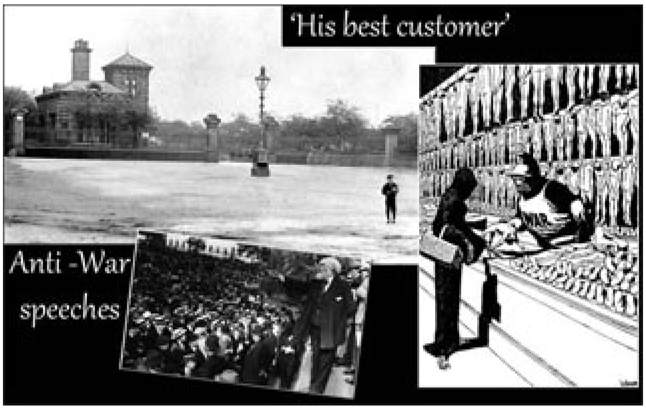
Over his time in the army, he had earned promotion twice; first to full Lieutenant and then to Temporary Captain.

It was March, and now George Edward Joseph Marriott was on the Western Front and ....

unknown to him, he had just over 4 months left to live.

On May 2nd, George would have celebrated his 29th birthday, in the trenches, at Lempire, near Cambrai, as the Battle of Arras was raging just a dozen miles to the north.

Two months later, on the 6th July, in the trenches at Ytres, on the front-line near Havrincourt, he was shot and killed, just days after his promotion to full Captain had been confirmed.



Even in those early, patriotism infused days, there were anti war speeches, meetings and propaganda.

Their meetings were frequently disrupted by violent and angy protesters, and the speakers accused of treachery, and worse.

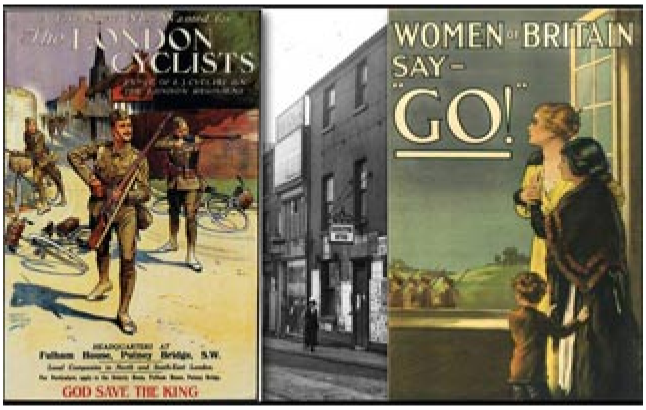
In Oldham there were a number of public anti-war meetings, at Alexandra Park Gates, which provoked angry debate in both local newspapers and were discussed in Council Committee meetings, in defence of the right of free speech. The eventual decision was to take no action against the anti-war speakers.

In those same early days, when men had flocked to enlist in their thousands, after the initial rush, and casualty figures were ominously high, numbers started to fall.

Newspapers reported incessantly on the enthusiasm for enlistment ... or the lack of it.

By the end of October, 1914, almost 1900 local men had enlisted or registered. But still the army needed more men ... and more local Offices were opened in Shaw, Hollinwood and Royton.

Recruitment at all costs became a priority ... and any tactics, that could be used to persuade, bully or trick men into enlisting, were employed.



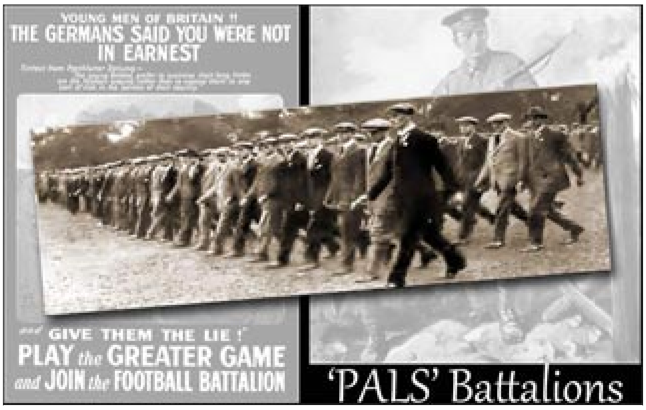
The brutality of the enemy, and the need to protect the poor and weak, was hammered home.
And posters showed mothers and girl friends wanting to be proud - not ashamed - of their men, encouraging them to join up. No 'angle' was too trivial to be exploited.
The Government was desperate to fill the gaps in the army, at all costs, and moral blackmail became the order of the day.
Men not in unifrom ran the risk of being presented with the dreaded white feather - a symbol of their supposed cowardice.
As early as August, 1914, Lord Derby had come up with the idea of creating whole new battalions of soldiers ... for Kitchener's new army.

The recruits would be men who already worked, socialised together or lived in the same town.

These friends would sign up together, train together and fight together.The fact that they would most likely die together, was probably brushed aside.
So successful was this scheme, that they became known as the 'Pals Battalions'.

In Oldham, confidence was high that such a battalion could be created in the town; and Civic Pride was on the line.
The necessary permissions were sought of the War Office and, eventually, almost grudgingly, granted.
Subscription pledges, for the 'Guarantee Fund', to cover the expenses, ... were asked for, and received.
Farmland on which to train, at Chadderton, was identified and secured.
And so recruitment finally started, in late October, for the 'Oldham Comrades' often referred to as the 'Pals'.

OLDHAM COMRADES



In the first flush of enthusiasm, it was hoped that the necessary number of 1150 volunteers would be reached in days, but that wasn't to be.
Recruitment was slowing down; the first rush of Oldham men had already enlisted in the Territorials (2 battalions by the autumn), or had enlisted in other regiments. As well, there was now a note of caution in the air ... this could be a long war.

Women worried about the dangers to their menfolk; the men worried about how their wives and families would cope without their wages.
And it was still only late autumn of 1914.
There was a note of anxiety in the press, and accusations that Oldham would be 'shamed' if, after all the boasting, the town couldn't raise the men for their own Battalion of 'Comrades'.

On the 22nd of November the Council launched its 'Recruitment Week'
There were recruiting drives with decorated trams and vehicles, Public meetings at the mills and foundries that on one day exhorted the audience to 'do their bit', 'feel proud', and join their 'Pals' and on the next day day emphasised the shame and humiliation that all would feel if the required numbers didn't join up.
As a bonus, those already enlisted, were offered cash incentives, for any recruits they introduced; and there were cash prizes for those who recruited the most men.

FINALLY, in January 1915, the necessary 1150 men had enlisted.

The next task was to get this mixed bag of recruits trained in the art of warfare.

Not the easiest job when there was still a grave shortage, nationally, of uniforms, equipment, and most basic necessities.

Notwithstanding, the battalion marched off and started training in their Chadderton Camp, of 36 wooden huts - and a sea of mud - just off Burnley Lane.

With sparse, but apparently adequate facilities, the men settled down to their new life of drilling and training, although at first without much equipment.

There were also lectures and concerts arranged by the YMCA in their newly erected Pavilion.
At other times this tent was used as a 'communal space' for letter writing, board games etc.

In early March, and led by the Chadderton Band, who had enlisted almost en masse, the 'Comrades' marched out of camp en route for Clegg Street station ... destination Llanfairfechan, and more training in Wales.

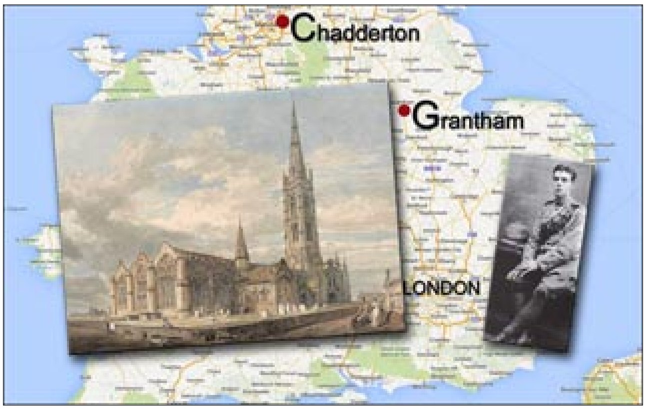
This made it the third full battalion to be raised in the borough in the first 8 months of war. A total of almost 6,000 local men had now enlisted.
Although at first unknown to the men, another blow was delivered when it was learned that, under new army regulations, the batallion now had to enlist another 250 men, for a reserve company, before they could be deployed overseas.

Ominously, these men were needed in order to fill the gaps when men of the battalion were killed!

Eventually, after yet another recruitment drive in the town, the new target was reached in April 1915.

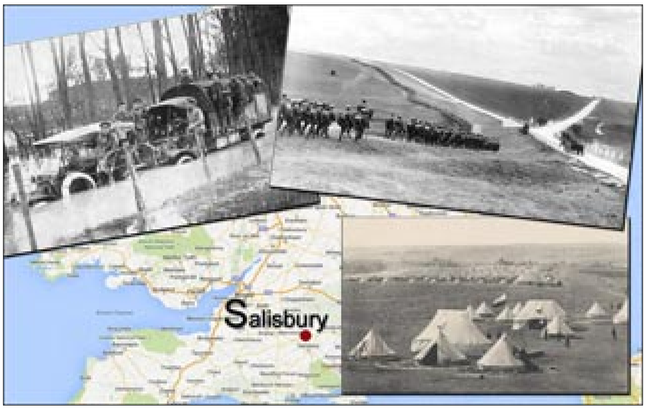
The 24th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, the 'Oldham Comrades' was now official!

It was at this desperate time, that 23 year old Edmund Leach, from Victoria Street, Chadderton, enlisted in the 'Comrades'.
He would remain with the battalion until his demob at the end of the war.



Edmund had joined the Battalion in May, by which time they were training at Grantham.

His previous employment had been as a carter which eventually meant that he would be given the job of a transport driver, with responsibility for the care of 2 horses in his team



In September, the Comrades moved to Larkhill Camp on Salisbury Plain.
It was here that the battalion was attached to the newly formed 30th Division which was mainly made up of King's Liverpool, and Manchester Regiments.

6 weeks later came the long awaited order to mobilise ... and, in November 1915, they embarked on board the the Isle of Man Packet, '*Mona's Queen*' ; their destination, France.

Being a soldier at war usually meant a lot of marching, drilling, moving from place to place, digging and yet more digging, setting up temporary quarters ... and then some fighting.

Much was boring ... much was dangerous. Artillery bombardment was always to be endured and they were in and out of the front-line trenches, fighting.

However, wherever they found themselves, and in between all the on-going training, they set about improving any bath-houses, toilets, pathways, incinerators and the living accommodation in which they found themselves.

Little did they know that, as they did all this so VERY efficiently, in a matter of weeks they would become one of the newly conceived Pioneer batallions.

These would be expected to provide support, for front line battalions, by constructing assembly areas and camps, by adapting existing buildings for new purposes, laying and repairing roads and railways, digging and repairing trenches, constructing dug-outs and machine gun posts, wiring parties and so on, in an endless list.

In the meantime, though, so far, so good. The battallion had, as yet, suffered no fatalities.

Things were about to change though as, on Feburary 5th, they found themselves sent to Fricourt and placed with the 7th Division. It was one rarely out of the Front line.

Artillery Bombardment

It was then that the first blow fell. Lt. Murdoch, Sgt. Major Gartside, C.S.M. Coop and Privates Ogden, Brownhill, Thorpe, O'Neill and Thompson were all killed in artillery bombardment.

In the next couple of days more Comrades would be killed and wounded. In all 17 died and at least 15 were wounded.

In May 1916, the unforeseen, and possibly unwelcome news came, that the 24th would no longer be a front-line infantry batallion but would become a new Pioneer Battalion.

It was a mixed blessing ...

It meant that they didn't always have to be in the trenches, ready to 'go over the top' into a murdersous hail of machine gun fire but they had other, equally dangerous jobs, which were often in the darkness of night and frequently in the line of enemy snipers and artillery bombardment.
One of the major down-sides for the men was that the companies could be separated for different objectives.

This decision was objected to, by their commanding officers, on the grounds that they had enlisted as a unit of Comrades that would stay together for the Duration.

Their objections were ignored.

Did they feel under-valued? Very probably

For some reason, there were some letters, printed in the local papers, that suggested that the Comrades were having it 'easy' and not 'pulling their weight'.

A few incensed letters followed, dispelling any local doubts.
One pointed out (without naming places) that they were on the Somme at the time of the July 'Push' and close enough to the front-line, for a couple of their companies to answer an appeal for immediate help by downing tools and reaching for their guns.

By October 1917, and after 2 years in France, in which the last few months had been spent in the area around Ypres, many men had been killed, wounded, gassed or died through illness. It was then the Battalion received a blow which had it reeling ...

Since their inception, ALL the Pals Battalions had suffered grievous losses and it had become difficult to bring them back to strength with men from the same locality or occupation. However, the 24th had been lucky in that their replacements were mainly men from home ... and the battalion's ethos had largely remained unchanged.

Now, despite their commanding officer's heartfelt, strongly worded and urgent arguments, they were to expect a draft of Royal Engineers ...

BUT, in return, they had to send an equal number of men from their own Battalion, to other Manchester Battalions.

How soul destorying must this have been, both for the men leaving and for those remaining?

Only days later the Battalion, along with the rest of the 7th Division, was on its way to Italy, where they would remain until the end of the war, although constantly moving from place to place.
Sometimes they were in the mountains, sometimes on the plains, frequently along the front line.

Work here was in many ways much the same as that in France. ALWAYS, there was a need for trenches and a road to repair!

A year later, in mid October, 1918, there was an oubreak of influenza, with some men being sick enough to need sending to a Casualty Clearing Station.

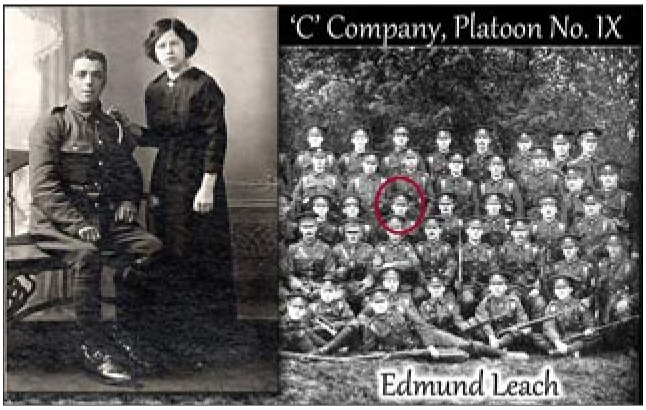
At the same time, an attack against the Austrian line was being planned, across the River Piave, from the area of Treviso.
This was accomplished successfully, although not without some problems ... and a substantial number of the Comrades was still out of action suffering from influenza.
However, the remainder of the 24th were employed in constructing one of the bridges that would get allied attacking troops and support vehicles across the river. they would also be kep busy repairing those bridges blown up by the Austrians.

But the end came with Austria asking for an armistice on the 4th of November, just a week before the general armistice on November 11th.

During their year in Italy, only 14 members of the 24th Battalion had died or been killed, 3 of whom were lost in this last offensive against the Austrians.

Now they couldn't wait for their demob and the chance to get home.

In total, the Battalion lost 171 men in the 3 years they were on active service



Edmund Leach, had been home on leave in August of 1918, to visit his sick mother and, at the same time was able to marry his sweetheart, Agnes.

He returned to Italy but, in February 1919, and still in Italy, he is recorded as being ill with the influenza that raged across Europe that year, killing millions.

However, he survived; returned home to England and, after a spell in hospital, returned to his wife and home in Oldham.

TRAINING

Volunteers might have enlisted in a rush of enthusiasm but then came the seemingly endless tedium and boredom of training, initially without proper uniforms, equipment or accommodation.

They wanted to go and fight ...
get it over with ...
and here they were ....
endlessly marching and digging!

In February 1915, Private Frank Ramsbottom, of the 4th Platoon of the 19th Manchesters, 'A 'company, wrote to a family friend from a training camp in Heaton Park.
He describes the training, quote :

> "At present reveille is sounded at 6am when we rise, make our beds,
> dress, clean our rifles, clean up our hut and prepare for breakfast at 7:45
> after which we have the first parade at 8:30.
> We then drill and field manoeuvre until 12:30.
> Dinner is served at 12:45 and we fall in again at 1:30.
> We are in the field again until 4 o'clock when we go into the hall for Swedish drill 'til 5.
> We then have tea and at 6 o'clock we have a lecture on the work of the day and on the use and care of the rifle until 7 o'clock.
> The next hour is free.
> Four nights a week we fall in at 8 o'clock and go trenching ... or patrolling ... until 9:30 when we retire to the huts.
> Lights out is sounded at 10:15.
> Rain interferes with the programme sometimes ... and we then have lectures on musketry, sentry duty and rope knotting in the huts."

He goes on to write that, quote:

> "One morning a week we have a route march of twelve to eighteen miles ... and so far have visited such places as Heywood, Worsley, Kearsley and Walkden.
> On a march we are allowed a 5 minute interval per hour for resting.
> The distance for route marches will be gradually increased until we shall remain out the whole day ...
> and take our field kitchens with us as the 1st Battalion has done."

By August 1915 he was at the training camp at Grantham, and writes that the training is essentially the same but more strenuous.
At Grantham he writes :

> "We are engaged at present on an extension scheme of entrenching at a place called Willowby Park ... about seven miles from here.
>
> We marched there on Friday night, leaving camp at 6:30, and arriving there at about 8:15.
>
> Until 12:30 am we were digging ... had cocoa and biscuits and then returned to camp, arriving

back at at 3:20am.
It was a little difficult to proceed as the night wore on as a pitch blackness descended over the field...."

A further letter arrived in January 1916 saying that Frank had finished his training ....

was in the Reserve Machine Gun Section of the 19th Manchesters....

and had been posted to France.

In the first days of July 1916, on the Somme, both Frank then aged 25, and his brother Walter age 23, who was in the same Battalion were killed in action within days of each other.

Their bodies were unidentified and they are both remembered, next to each other, on the Thiepval Memorial, on the Somme.

Another soldier who passed through the training camp at Grantham was Albert Bentley who had enlisted in the Oldham Comrades, the 24th Manchesters.

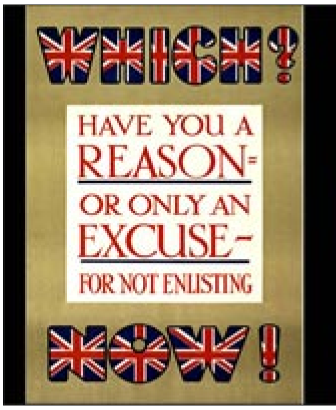
Albert was gassed in 1916 but survived, recuperated and returned to service in the ASC - the Army Service Corps.

At the time Albert was in training, at Grantham, in July 1915, he sent this postcard and photograph to his mother, who was living on Kelverlow Street in Oldham

On the front of the card is written :
'*Church Parade' ... 22nd and 24th Manchesters at Grantham*'

and on the back, It reads :
'*Dear Mother, I hope you like this.*
I am on it somewhere but where I can't say.
This will give you some idea of what it's like every Sunday.
I hope you are all in the pink as I am, Albert xxxxxx'

NATIONAL REGISTRATION & CONSCRIPTION

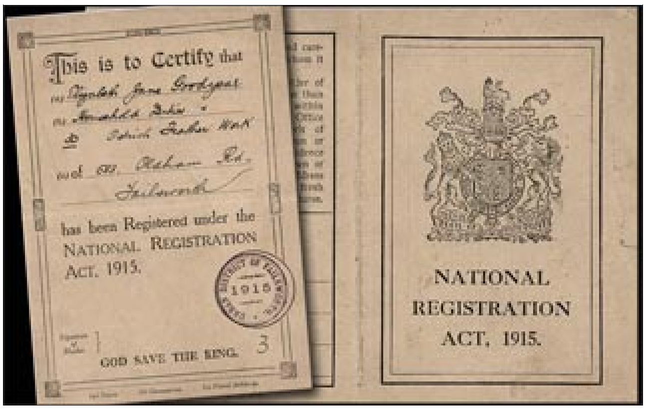


Not everyone wanted to enlist ...
and there were any number of reasons :
domestic responsibilities, a business to run, religious convictions, poor health, reserved occupations etc.

By mid 1915 it was becoming increasingly obvious that the number of volunteers for enlistment was falling far short of those numbers needed to fill the void left by the horrifying casualty numbers.

The public had seen the casualty lists in their newspapers, and were aware of the full horrors of the battlefield even though there was rigorous censorship.
The official emphasis was always on glorious sacrifice, patriotic duty, a sure and successful outcome and the return of heroes to an appreciative welcome home.

The British Army had always been made up of volunteers, (although, in the past, 'volunteered' could sometimes be a euphemism for 'pressganged!). There had never been conscription, and it was a notion that was strongly resisted in many quarters.
However, the government had to find ways of forcing the fit and able men into uniform. To do this, they needed information ...



In July 1915 the National Registration Act was brought in ...

it compelled everyone, including women, between the ages of 15 and 65 to register with their names and occupations.

This data provided :

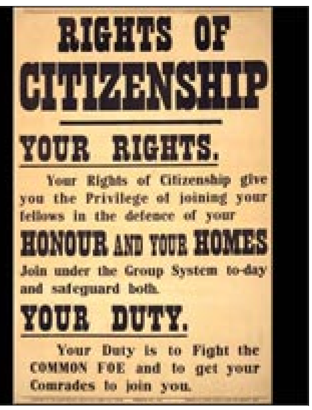
- the number of men eligible to serve in the forces
- the number of men in reserved occupations.
- the number of men with important skills not being used.
- the number of women able to fill job vacancies in the workplace

From this data it was realised that there were 5 million men of military age who had not volunteered to enlist.

Of these, only approximately one and a half million were employed in work vital to the war effort and therefore not eligible for enlistment.

If the rest wouldn't enlist voluntarily, then they would have to be pushed.

Subsequent to this, and still trying to avoid the necessity for conscription, the Group (or Derby Scheme) was introduced in October 1915 and would run until mid December.



Under this scheme **:**

- Men could enlist for immediate service
- or attest agreeing to mobilise when required
- they still had the choice of regiment

Just over 200,000 volunteered for immediate service and just over 2,000,000 attested.

Those attesting were sent back to their homes and jobs until called upon.

Those attested men were then classifed in groups, based firstly on marital staus, then by age ie., from 18 to 40

Single men were Groups 1-23

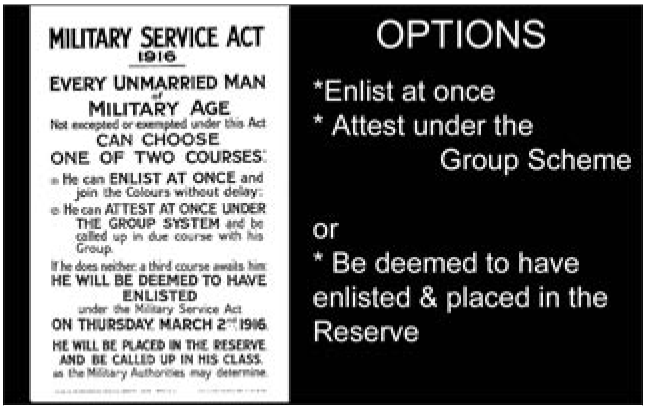
married men Groups 24 to 46.

The Groups would be called in numerical order, and given a month's notice of mobilisation.

Deferment didn't turn out to be lengthy!
The first groups to be mobilised, in January 1916, were numbers 2, 3, 4 & 5, ie., those men who were single and born between 1893 and 1898

The scheme didn't attract the numbers hoped for and, although the scheme was re-opened in January 1916 for another 2 months, most of the men in the groups were mobilised by June 1916.

The scheme ran alongside conscription when that was finally introduced in the January of 1916, under the Military Service Act. It would become effective in the March of 1916.



At first the 'Military Service Act' only applied to British subjects who were unmarried men or widowers without dependants and aged between 18 and 41.

There would be no choice of unit in which to serve.

Men would be categorised by age, marital status and fitness then placed in priority groups to be mobilised in their turn.

Men in reserved occupations were exempt.
The Act was ammended to include married men after May 1916.

The next job was to deal with those men who appealed against conscription and, for this purpose, Local Tribunals were set up to hear the appeals and judge their validity.

The list of exemptions and reserved occupations ran into dozens of pages.

Some appeals were allowed - some rejected.
Those appealing on grounds of conscience were usually the most difficult and led to the more controversial decisions.

Sometimes, in extreme circumstances, there was a sentence of execution but, more usually, this was commuted to long terms of hard labour or service in battle zones as stretcher bearers etc.

OLDHAM SOLDIERS AWARDED VICTORIA CROSS

Oldham can lay claim to 3 soldiers who were awarded the Victoria Cross between 1914 and 1918.

The first was won by John Hogan in October 1914... he survived to come home.

The second by Thomas Steele in February 1917 - he also survived to come home.
And the the third, awarded posthumously, was to Walter Mills in December 1917. He was killed in action.

John Hogan was born in Royton in April 1884.
He had been a regular soldier, serving with the 2nd Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, from 1903 until 1912, and had seen action in South Africa and in India

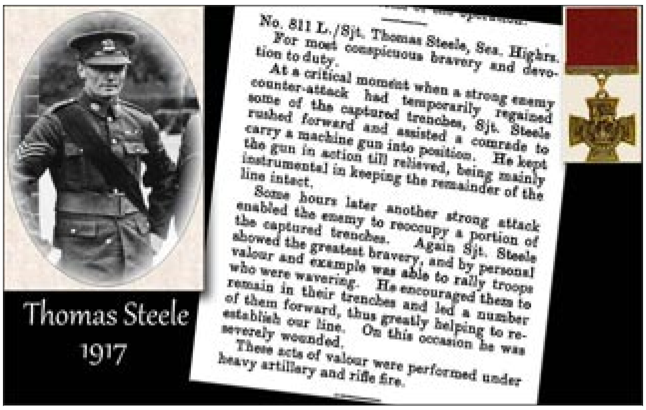
In 1912, at the end of his 9 year term, he was transferred to the Army Reserve.

When war was declared, he was mobilised, with the rank of sergeant. On August 15th he sailed for France, to rejoin the 2nd Manchesters, as they arrived from Ireland.
The battalion was in action at the Battles of the Marne, the Aisne and the 1st Ypres.

Hogan would earn his Victoria Cross in October 1914.
In that month they were in trenches near Festubert and it was here that Hogan and an officer, with 10 other men, re-took a trench recently taken by the Germans. They rescued 2 British soldiers, killed 8 Germans, wounded 2 more and took 16 prisoners.
He was also mentioned in Dispatches in February 1915.

John Hogan would survive the war, returning to Oldham and his wife Margaret, whom he had married in January 1915.
His Victoria Cross was presented to him at Buckingham Palace, by King George V, in February 1915 and is now displayed in the Civic Centre.

One of the 'Old Contemptibles', he died in October 1943 and is buried in Chadderton cemetery.



Thomas Steele was born in Springhead in 1891.

One of the 'Old Contemptibles' he too was a regular soldier, a sergeant, serving with the 1st Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders.

His battalion arrived in France in early October, from India.
In December 1915 they were transferred to Mesopotamia, (in modern day Iraq) where the battalion suffered heavy casualites.

He would earn his medal when he was age 26, in February 1917, near Kut-el-Amara, His citation reads:

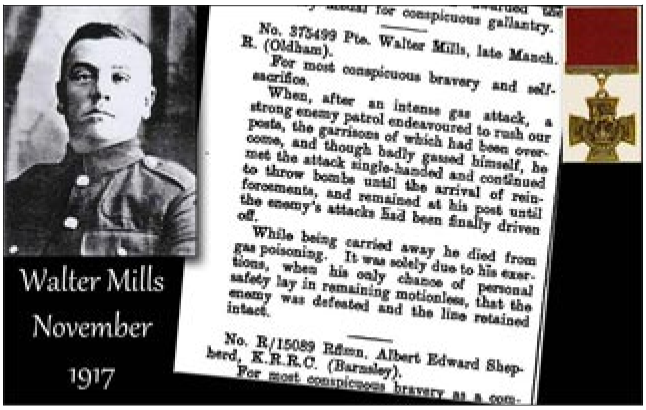
"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty.

At a critical moment, when a strong enemy counter-attack had temporarily regained some of the captured trenches, Sergeant Steele helped a comrade to carry a machine-gun into position. He kept this gun in action until relieved and was mainly instrumental in keeping the rest of the line intact.

Some hours later another counter-attack enabled the enemy to re-occupy a portion of the captured trenches and Sergeant Steele rallied the troops, encouraging them to remain in their trenches and, leading a number of them forward, helped to re-establish our line.

On this occasion he was severely wounded."

Thomas would also survive the war and return home.
He died in Springhead in 1978.



Private Walter Mills was not a regular soldier but he WAS in the Territorials - the 1st /10th Battalion (Oldham) of the Manchesters and he volunteered to serve overseas ...
He was born in June 1894 in Oldham and had married Ellen Britt in 1913.
They had a daughter, also called Ellen, born in 1914.

His battalion, part of the East Lancashire Brigade, had started training at Bury in August and went out to Egypt in September 1914, with the other Territorials.
His battalion first saw action in May 1915, in the Gallipoli landings.
In December 1915 they were evacuated from Gallipoli.
Three months later, in March 1916, and they were fighting in France.
Almost 2 years later, in December 1917, at the age of 23, Walter would earn his Victoria Cross, at Givenchy.
His citation reads:

"A strong enemy patrol endeavoured to rush our posts after a gas attack, which had caused the garrison to be overcome.

In spite of being badly gassed himself he met the attack single-handed, continuously throwing bombs until reinforcements arrived, remaining at his post until the enemy attack had been driven off.

Whilst being carried away he died from gas poisoning.

It was solely due to his exertions when his only chance of personal safey lay in remaining motionless, that the enemy was defeated and the line retained intact."

WAR AT SEA : '*LUSITANIA*' & '*ARABIC*'

In 1914 Britain enjoyed supremacy on the seas but Germany was intent on challenging that.
However, neither side was prepared to risk taking their fleet to sea, for a pitched battle; a single battle in which the whole war could be won or lost.

Germany kept most of her fleet in port protected by the string of Heligoland islands.
Britain kept most of her fleet at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys.
Both countries, however, kept a number of ships at sea which harried and sank millions of tons of shipping

over the course of the war.
Britain's priorities were the safe transport of men, women, supplies, armaments and equipment across the channel to France and, of course, the return of hospital ships with the wounded.
Also, the safe transport of necessary goods and materials from across the atlantic.

In early 1915 Britain, seeing the opportunity to crush Germany by cutting off her supplies, claimed the right to intercept any ships suspected of carrying goods to Germany.
In retaliation, Germany, turned to a new strategy of her own ... the use of submarines.

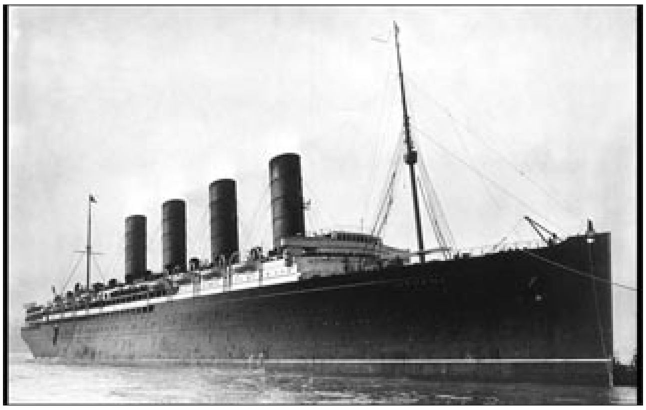

Allied Ships .... Patrolling the North Sea

Although both countries numbered submarines in their fleets, Germany was the first to utilise the concept of, 'seek and destroy'.

Germany proclaimed that the waters around Britain were to be considered a war zone; merchant ships, even those of neutral countries, would be considered to be aiding the allies and therefore a legitimate target for u-boats.

A significant difference was that, in earlier times, when a ship was sunk, or taken as a prize, it was expected that as many crew and passengers as possible would be saved from drowning. A submarine had no way of effecting such a rescue.

The success rate, for the German u-boats, was startling. Thousands of tons of allied shipping began to be lost every month. By the end of the war, Britain had lost a staggering total of 6 million tons of shipping.



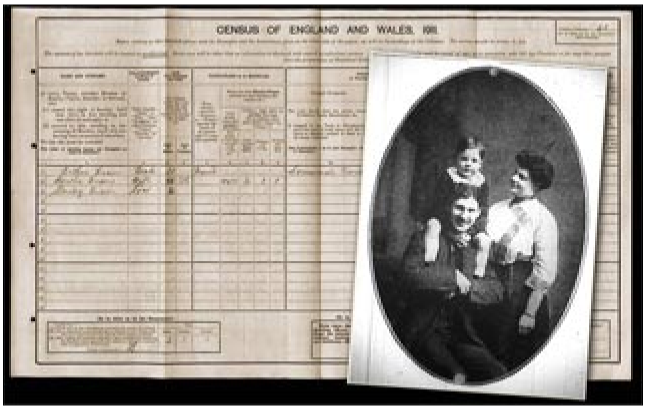
In May 1915 a German U-boat sank the passenger liner *Lusitania*', which was returning to Liverpool from New York, and just off the southern coast of Ireland.

There was no warning given for passengers and crew to take to the lifeboats.
The total number on board was 1,959 and, of these, only 761, just over a third, survived.

Most of the passengers were British citizens and amongst them would be businessmen, often with their families, those visiting family 'back home' in Britain, or those returning from their own trip to America.
The sinking of the '*Lusitania*', a passenger liner flying a neutral flag, created an international storm and the shockwaves reached Oldham.

Some of those on board were from our own locality :

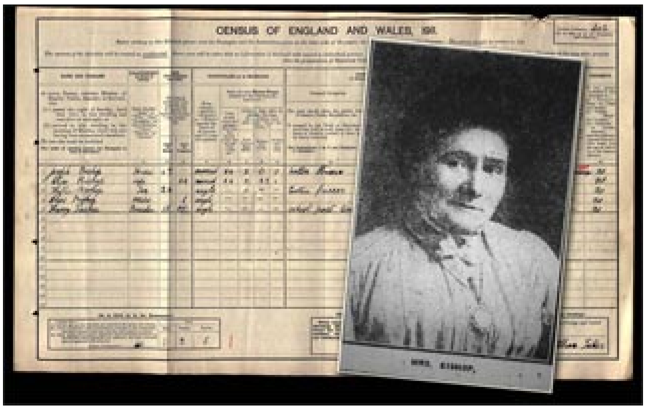
One of them was 25 year old Handel Hawkins, a cello player with the ship's band.
He was one of the few lucky ones who, along with 2 other members of the 5 piece band, survived.



Included amongst those on board was a young, locally-born family, the Dixons.
We know from the 1911 census that Arthur Dixon was a 35 year old commerical traveller in the jewellery business.
With him, on this trip, was his 32 year old wife Bertha, and their young son, 6 year old Stanley.

Father and son both perished but Bertha was saved.

Bertha was the sister of Mrs. Winterbottom, of the Market Hotel, on Oldham's Curzon Street.



49 year old Alice Bishop and her husband, 50 year old Joseph, both workers in the cotton industry, also perished.

Born in Kidderminster, they had come to live in Royton in the 1890s and, on the 1911 census, are found living on Turf Lane in Royton, with their family.

Sarah Emma Woodcock, a young, 31 year old Mossley-born woman also perished.

In 1911 she was living with her parents on Oldham Road, Longsight, not far from present day Boundary Park.

Her father was recorded as a 'draper' and she as his 'draper's' assistant.

American outrage, and the threat of her entering the war on the side of the Allies, didn't stop the u-boat sinking of another passenger liner, the '*Arabic*', just 3 months later and in the same waters.

The '*Arabic*' was outward bound from Liverpool en route to New York.
There was an optimistic assumption that u-boats were hunting ships coming **into** Britain, with supplies, not passenger ships **leaving** Liverpool to cross the Atlantic.
They were wrong.
On board the 'Arabic' was a crew of 243 but only 181 passengers, although there was accommodation for 1400.
She was torpedoed at breakfast time on the 19th of August.
In a later interview, the captain stated that there was no warning of attack from the u-boat and his ship sank within 10 minutes.

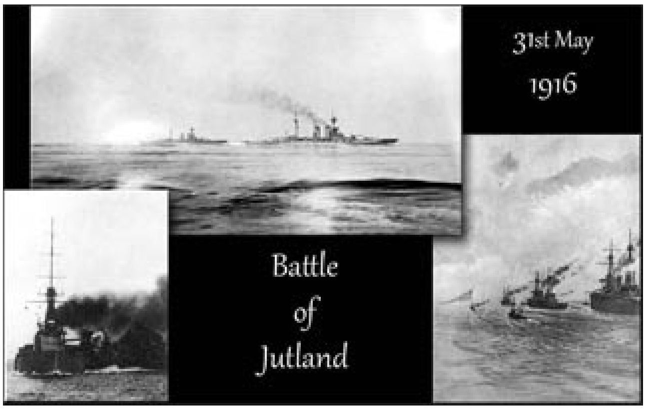
Passengers on deck, had been alarmed to see the sinking of a cargo ship, the 'Dunsley', in the distance then, to their horror, a torpedo was seen approaching their own ship.
There was just time to raise the alarm, before the ship was hit, and then get a few lifeboats into the water before she went down.
Those in the lifeboats managed to rescue many of those who were flung into the water as the ship sank.
However, 6 Passengers and 38 crew members still lost their lives.
.

On board the '*Arabic*' was a young family from Ashton under Lyne.
Frank Tattersall was a 37 year old professor of music. In August 1915 he was en route to Canada via New York.

With him was his wife, Rhoda Annie and their 3 children, Gladys 9, Bertha 8 and Irene 5.

Rhoda Annie and her youngest daughter, Irene, were two of those to lose their lives.

Another passenger on the ill fated liner, but one who survived, was 21 year old Ellen Melia who lived on Canterbury Street, Heyside.



It would be May 1916 before the two fleets engaged in a pitched battle and that was at Jutland, the only major sea-battle of the War.

Both England and Germany tried to claim it as a victory but both suffered terrible losses.

Germany sank more ships than did the British and Britain lost more seamen
but ... the German fleet broke off and, in the mist, ran for the safety of port, and so, almost by default, lost the battle.

PRISONERS OF WAR & INTERNEES

In today's world we expect to know what's happening, globally, almost within minutes of the event.
In 1914 news travelled more slowly; rumours flew about but facts were in short supply.

When war was declared with Germany, on August 4th, there were thousands of men and women who were on German soil or on ships in German waters.
They had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time ... and found themselves rounded up and interned for the duration of the war.
Some Internment Camps were better than others, much depending on the character of the German officers in command.

,One group of tourists, which had the good luck to escape being stranded on the continent and interned, was with 53 year old Felix Mills.
Described as an excursion agent, he lived on Lee Street.
On Friday July 31st when it became known that Germany was at war with Russia, the group was in Lucerne and the next stop on their itinerary was Paris where they had intended to stay for a few days.

The railway station at Lucerne was chaotic, and getting worse but they managed to reach Basle by early Saturday morning and - almost unblievably - decided they wanted to cross the Rhine just to be able to say they had 'set foot' in Germany.
Having achieved that aim, and seen the ominous sight of German soldiers massing, they set off once again to try and get back to Paris.
Having reached Paris, after numerous difficulties and passing trainloads of French soldiers, going in the opposite direction, they then found themselves struggling amongst the crowds trying to get money at the banks, then fighting to buy tickets and get onto the already massively overcrowded trains. They managed, somehow, to get to Boulogne and find a boat to take them home across the Channel.
All in all, it must have been an exctiting trip!!

Not so lucky, were the thousands who were rounded up for detention in internment camps.

These were not prisoner of war or labour camps; the function of the camp was to detain those men who, if allowed to go home, would swell the ranks of the enemy army.

Other than that, in theory at least, as long as order was maintained, they were left pretty much to their to their own devices.

One such was at Ruhleben, on the Berlin Race Course, near Spandau in Germany.
Some background reading seems to indicate that this might have been one of the 'better' camps.
It housed between 4,000 and 5,500 internees, at any given time, in the various racecourse buildings and stable blocks.

The internees were from all walks of life and possessed a great number of different skills and trades. Over the years of the war, they created for themselves a way of life that enabled them to meet each day, regardless of the hardships.

Amongst other activites, they organised an internal postal system and a 'police' force, formed interest groups, including flower and vegetable growing, chess and art, staged plays and concerts, published a newspaper and magazine, had sports leagues and ran courses teaching others their own skills.

L to R :
Back row :
W. Lowe,
J. Gresty,
H.E. Travers
R.G.Williams
F. Lowe

Middle row :
George Mellor
F. Watson
J. Hewitt
F.Sterndale

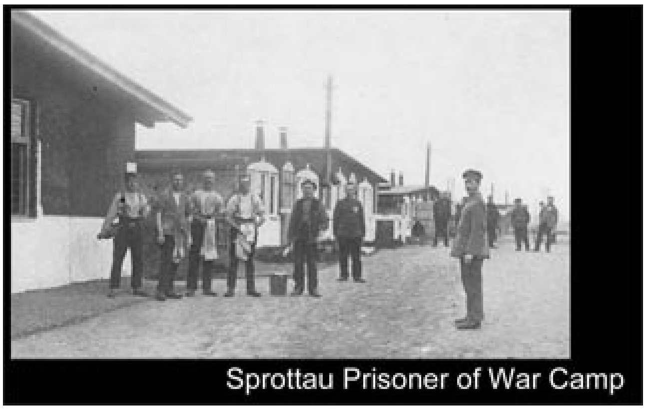
Front row :
F. Holland,
W. Hewitt,
H. Holland

Local Men in Ruhleben

One of the Groups in Ruhleben called themselves '*The Lancastrians*' and, amongst them, were a number of men from Oldham, most of whom had been employed by Platt Brothers and working in Germany at the outreak of war.

This photograph of local men was sent by Fred Sterndale, a member of the '*Lancastrians*', and published in the local newspaper in September 1916.

Prior to this, in December 1914, the Mayor of Oldham had received a postcard with '*Christmas Greetings*' from the Oldhamers. That card had included the names of Ernest Woodcock, Frank Eckersley and Edwin Wallwork who are not seen on this photo.



Sprottau Prisoner of War Camp

When posted missing, or even reported killed in action, there was always the hope that the missing serviceman would be found as a prisoner, terrible though the conditions were.

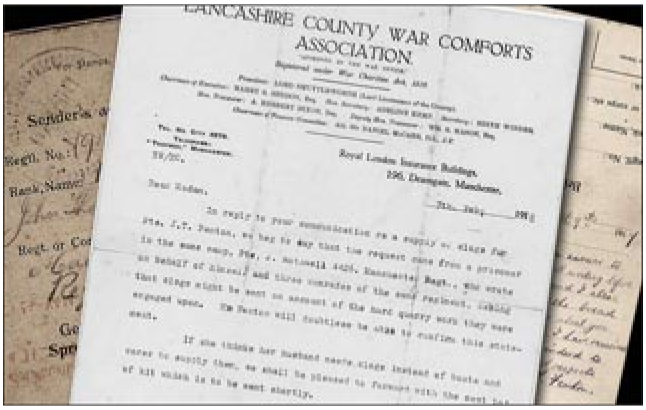
It was never a good thing to be a POW, in Germany but, later in the war, it became even worse.
The German population itself was on the brink of starvation and there was little left over for prisoners.

One of the aims of the British Red Cross and War Comforts Societies was to raise money to provide parcels for Prisoners, which were sent out to the camps.

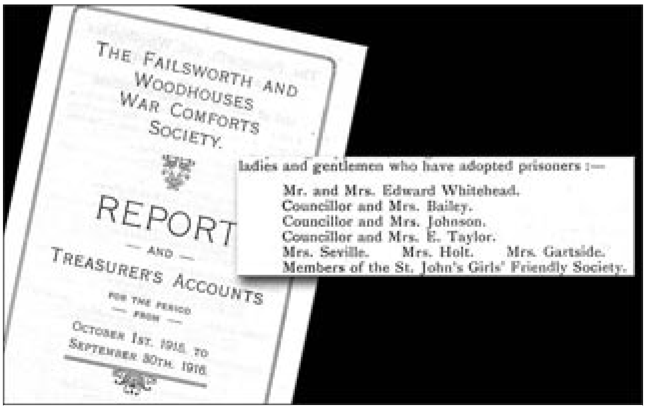
One of the recipients of such a parcel was Private John Thomas Fenton, in the 17th Manchesters.

He was from Failsworth and, in a letter dated April 1917, writes a 'thank-you,' letter for bread and clothing that he had received.

He was in the camp at Sprottau, part of Prussia in 1914.



Private Fenton had also been the subject of another letter that had been written, requesting that he be sent footwear suitable for labouring in a quarry.

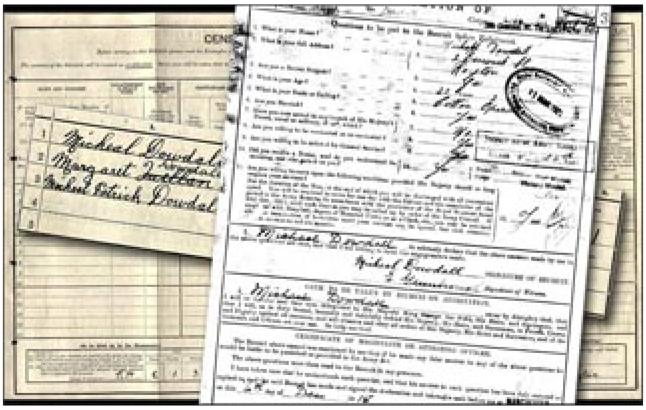


It was possible to 'adopt' a prisoner, if an individual 'at home', was willing to commit to the regular financial contribution covering the expenses.

We know, from this report, that the cost of each parcel was 6 shillings, and that 3 would be sent to each prisoner over the course of a fortnight.

However, a report in 1917 records that this was no longer possible, presumably because the number of prisoners had grown too great.

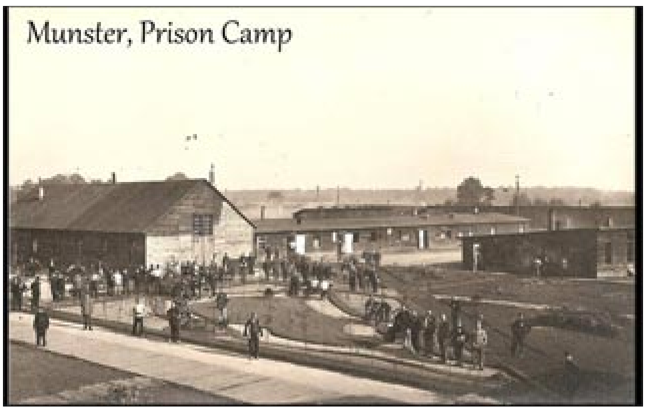
Future monies collected for this purpose would be sent to the 'General Prisoners of War Fund'



After the war, a Royton man, Michael Dowdall, who was taken prisoner on the 30th November 1917, near Cambrai, wrote of his capture and experiences as a POW.

Michael was a 30 year old married man living in Royton, with his wife and infant daughter, when he attested in December 1915, under the Derby Scheme.

He was placed in the Reserves, for the 10th Battalion of the King's Liverpool Regiment. He was mobilised in September 1916 and, after training, went out to France in January 1917.



A year later and he was posted as missing but confirmed as a POW by February 1918.

He writes that :
After their capture, they were on the march for the next 3 days then put on a train for the rest of the journey to a prison camp in Munster.
Their diet, en route, was a cup of watery soup every 24 hours.

In Munster, the rations were hardly any better - one loaf of bread between 12 men and 2 cups of soup each, every 24 hours. There they stayed for 14 days. In mid January 1918, the prisoners were sent to work at Antoing near Tournai and the Belgian border with France. Once there they would labour on the new railway line being constructed.

Their day started at 5am, with a cup of black coffee before an hour's march to the railway where they laboured until 3:30. Afterwards, they were marched back to the camp and given soup, a piece of bread and a cup of coffee.

3 months later they were moved a few miles to Frasnes, where the work, the hours and the diet were all similar.
Reporting sick wasn't an option - no labour meant no bread.

Again he found himself being moved, this time near to Valenciennes, where he would spend his days looking after the horses.

Whilst he was there the prisoners received some Red Cross parcels, at which, so he wrote, their spirits lifted a little.

By now it was June 1918 and allied planes were dropping bombs, almost too close for comfort!

He writes of one occasion when a bomb exploded in a nearby ammunition depot.

It set off a chain of ever greater explosions until dozens of surrounding buildings were also damaged or destroyed.

Many were killed and hundreds more were seriously injured.

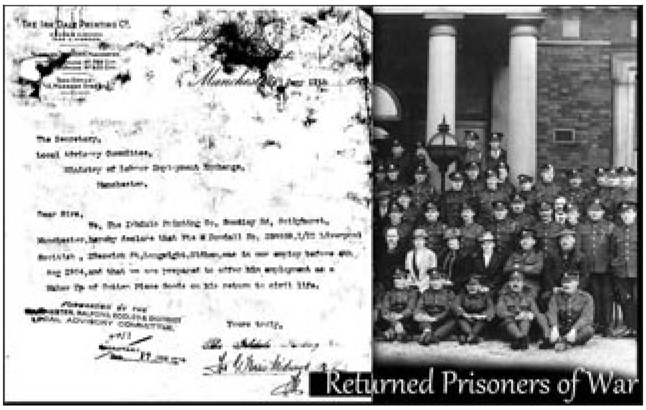
By mid October, the Germans were retreating, taking with them the prisoners, who walked the horses, 5 to each man.

They marched for the next 4 weeks until they reached Liege.

By this time it was the 13th November - and there was an armistice.

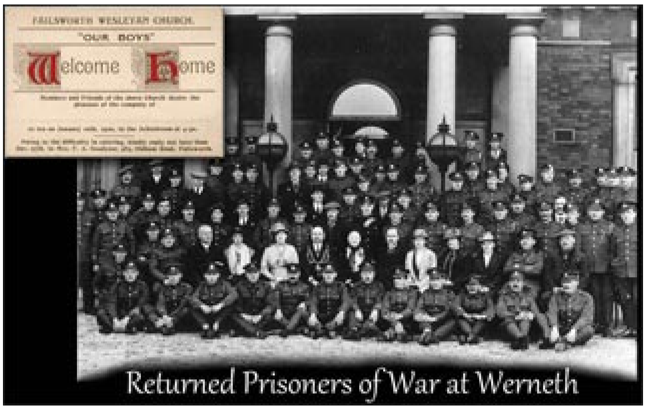
Three weeks later and the prisoners were on their way home.

HOME AGAIN!



Many returning servicemen found that their old jobs had disappeared, or had been filled by others.

However, Michael was one of the lucky ones and was offered his old job back.



Returned Prisoners of War at Werneth

The final report of the Failsworth & Woodhouses War Comforts Society states that " ....

"*after the cessation of hostilities, we were in a position to supply those of our Failsworth men, who returned in need of underclothing, with a full outfit.*

About 400 men were each supplied with shirt, vest, pants and socks.

Then about 200 others were given a portion of the outfit as required.
In addition, all repatriated prisoners of war from this district were given a full outfit of underclothing, supplementing their grant of £5 each from the Prisoners of War Fund"

Everywhere, from the beginning of 1919 through to 1920, there were 'Welcome Home' receptions and parties for the returning men.

Sheila Goodyear, 2020

Transcript of a talk given at Oldham Historical Research Group, August 2014.

Larger copies of the images can be seen on the Oldham HRG website **HERE**