

10. Another week of Neston at war: Neston and the Wirral Battalion, September 7th 1914

A train pulled into Chester Station on Sunday of this week (7th September 2014) bearing a contingent of 700 men from Port Sunlight, just as it had done one hundred years ago to the day (Monday a century ago). These Lever Brothers employees (many women this time!) were en route to Chester Castle to sign up for the brand new 13th Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment, often unofficially called the Wirral Battalion.

On that very same day in 1914, forty men from Neston boarded a train at Neston North Station to meet up with the Port Sunlight men in Chester, along with others who had travelled from Ellesmere Port and Wallasey to join Lord Kitchener's new army. The so-called Wirral Battalion was the idea of Gershom Stewart, MP for Wirral, with much encouragement from Sir William H. Lever.

Lists of casualties at Mons were just getting through and there had been something of a lull in the Neston recruiting rate, so a 'Patriotic Meeting' had been held on Saturday night (5th) in the Institute to rally volunteers for the proposed battalion, with some impressive speakers: Sir Norman Hill, an expert in shipping law who lived at Leighton House at the bottom of The Runnell, Charles Maciver, ship owner from Heswall, Henry Gladstone from Burton Manor, Sir Percy Bates of the Cunard Line from Hinderton Hall, Sir William Lever, and of course the vicar, the chairman of the council and the Birkenhead recruiting officer. Gershom Stewart was in London seeing Lord Kitchener to make arrangements for the new battalion.

Some forty men from the town had already listed into other units in the previous weeks, and the result of this meeting was another thirty or so volunteers. On Sunday night a group including Mrs Brook-Gwynne, (the vicar's wife), Miss Lacy from Springvale down Moorside Lane, and Mrs Grant (the doctor's wife) opened the Red Cross depot in the Town Hall and organised a shirt, and a pair of socks, for each man. They also got cigarettes and what was then known as a 'housewife' – a little packet of sewing materials, buttons, wool and Vaseline.

Meanwhile in Little Neston a mission preacher called Dempsey, based in the Workingmen's Institute on the Green, was causing some aggravation on the Sunday afternoon and evening by challenging several of the men who were due to leave the next day. He was expressing what were taken to be pro-German views, and a gang of around twenty Little Neston men gathered around him, some with sticks and stones. P.C. Leigh wisely took the preacher into custody, partly for his own safety.

Monday morning dawned, and around fifty recruits boarded the train, which steamed out of the station to cheers and the National Anthem. Meeting up with the other recruits in Chester they set off for the Castle, headed by the Port Sunlight Silver Band, Lever, and Gershom Stewart. As it happens, some had to come home again for a while, as the temporary accommodation in Chester was at bursting point.

The Little Neston preacher appeared in court in Birkenhead on that same day, and evidence was given by John Oxton, a painter from Hope Cottages, and miner Frederick Abel; Dempsey apologised and managed to avoid a charge of seditiously inciting the people and was let off with a warning.