

22. Week seventeen of the Great War - and plenty of marching men.

Most of the Cheshire's 4th Battalion, still based in Birkenhead, had the honour of being entertained to a hot-pot lunch, followed by beer, tea, coffee and apples in Neston Town Hall on Thursday. The 700 men included many locals who had joined the battalion three weeks earlier (see the Fourteenth week of War), and were still undergoing the basic drill training in Birkenhead. They set off from the Grange Road West Drill Hall at 9.45am and reached Neston at 12.30. Despite heavy rain, cheering crowds turned out, excitedly pointing out the local men. Mrs Youds from the café on the Cross (Shand) did the catering. The National Anthem and some stirring songs followed, then the journey back to Birkenhead via Parkgate Parade and cheering boys from Mostyn House. The cheering was done by the 4ths themselves when they passed the military hospital further along the Parade, and saw some of the wounded soldier patients at the windows of the Red Cross Hospital.

A lot of the Neston men who had joined this battalion three weeks ago were from the colliery; one of them was a 20-year-old drawer in the mine, Thomas Jones of 9 Eldon Terrace, who was to have a long war; his battalion left England in July '15 for the disastrous Dardanelles campaign, where Thomas suffered frost bite and rheumatism and was hospitalised in Alexandria. From November '16 he went to France for two years, suffered gunshot wounds twice, in head and hand, finally demobilizing in January 1919, unable to hold a pick because of his injury. It was noted that he was a member of the Neston Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds, through whom he would be insured!

The men of the Wirral Battalion (13th), which also included many Nestonians, were looking forward to getting out of tents and into wooden huts at Codford in Wiltshire. Their commanding officer had a letter published in the Chester Courant asking for turkeys (10-12lbs) and plum-puddings to be sent to the camp by 23rd December to provide a cheery Christmas meal.

Many men who were wanting to enlist were under the regulation height of 5ft 3inches, so on the inspiration of Alfred Bigland, Birkenhead's MP, a battalion of these men between 5ft and 5ft 3inches was proposed, providing they reached a certain chest measurement (ie they would be fairly sturdy). The scheme was approved and Monday morning in Birkenhead Town Hall experienced a rush of recruits, in addition to vast numbers of postal application, from much further afield than Birkenhead. They were to be known as Bantams, after the small but tenacious

cockerels. Many of the applicants were miners, and there were some Neston men. Bantams had a particularly tough war when they finally left England, and at least four of the Neston Bantams died in action.

On Saturday the company of Liverpool Pals training at Hooton Park (probably including Neston men) marched to Chester headed by their bugle band and drums and received an impressive civic welcome. After refreshments on the Roodee they marched back via the Walls and gave enthusiastic cheers to the wounded men who were able to watch them from the Royal Infirmary. Herbert Fewtrell, a Kings Liverpool Regiment man who hailed from a Parkgate fishing family was in an Edinburgh hospital with gunshot wounds and Gordon Carr of the Royal Army Medical Corps was also in Edinburgh after lying in a hole for a day and a night whilst being at the Front.

There was plenty on offer for filling the winter evenings in the town; on Wednesday the regular Presbyterian school-room lecture was 'The Near East', a topical subject, telling of the lecturer's journey during the last perilous Balkan War to the Black Sea, with lots of limelight views.

The Church of England Men's Society had a meeting in the Town Hall on Friday, where a paper on 'The War with Germany' was read by R.W. Jones, head of Burton Road council school, with references to military despotism, the doctrine of Nietzsche, and Prussian military ambition.

On a slightly lighter note, Monday evening in the Institute saw a concert performed by the town's Concord Society, all proceeds for the Belgian Relief Fund. Lady Patroness was the ever active Maud Gladstone, and in the chair was Mme de Villiers Grand Champs, whose husband and father were high up in the Belgian Army. A number of the wounded soldiers from Parkgate were brought over, and the evening started with Edith Briscoe's rendering of the National Anthem and many classical numbers followed including the popular 'Let me like a soldier fall' from Bert Batten, 'Tipperary', 'Land of Hope and Glory' and such like.

The important match in the last qualifying round of the Cheshire Senior Cup saw the Nomads outclassed 6-2 at Mill Lane against Wallasey Borough on Saturday, though one of the two Finneys playing for the Nomads scored with the finest shot of the afternoon.