

4. Neston, the end of July 1914

By the Wednesday of this week one hundred years ago, the 29th July, it was clear that trouble was looming in Europe and that Britain may well have to get involved. “*The situation is one of extreme gravity*” said Prime Minister Asquith.

Meanwhile, in Neston, it has to be said that little of interest was happening in the week heading towards the August Bank Holiday – which was then the *first* weekend in August. The schools were on holiday, the council did not meet, there were no notable accidents and no crime bad enough to warrant reporting.

Some fortunate Neston people spent some of their time out of the town that week, courtesy of Sir William Lever of Thornton Manor, quite a local benefactor and a big supporter of non-conformist churches in the town. He was to become Lord Leverhulme in 1917. He provided several of his cars, with chauffeurs, to take the Sunday School scholars, teachers and the mothers’ class from the Congregational Church (where the Legion now stands) on trips around Wirral on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. The children had already been to the Manor and had enjoyed the hobbyhorse rides, a motor-boat trip on the lake and fairground amusements plus a sumptuous tea. The treats had been cancelled the year before owing to the recent death of Lady Lever.

One of the big employers in the district was Wirral Colliery, though its management was being changed and business was faltering. There were still plenty of fishermen at Parkgate, and the shrimps were very popular and sold far afield. Neston Hygienic Steam Laundry along Old Quay Lane employed about eighty people, mainly women. But the building trade was probably the biggest employer in the town just pre-war, and included quarrying. Several building companies flourished, the main two in 1914 being those of Albert Fleming and John Fleming, brothers who had split their business a few years earlier. The latter had built the timber St Michael’s church in 1913, the manse on Parkgate Road and part of Mostyn House School; his yard was where the old quarry had been on Cross Street, a piece of land that has had a useful history as quarry, timber yard, builders yard, oil reclamation business, Neston Tank Cleaners, school field – and now housing.

So Neston looked forward to a few days off for the Bank Holiday weekend, with perhaps a day at the races on Hooton Racecourse, or a train trip direct to Chester for the last couple of days of Brown’s sale

(when Brown's was a really classy store); Mr Asquith the Prime Minister was due to visit Chester on the Friday – but as it happened, a rapidly developing international crisis was to keep him in London.....