

46. Weeks 52 and 53 of the Great War in Neston, and a determined effort to enjoy the Bank Holiday.

The 1914 August Bank Holiday, just as the war started, had been a fine sunny weekend, but 1915's was rather wet, with a thunderstorm on Sunday, and intermittent rain on Monday afternoon. But despite the damp, large crowds had turned out in Hoylake, New Brighton and West Kirby, ambling on the beaches, riding jingling donkeys, building sandcastles and playing cricket. Extra steamers brought people over from Liverpool. Trains were busy ferrying families to Hoylake, Heswall and even Neston. In Chester several thousand men of the Cheshire Volunteer Regiment, including the Neston contingent were parading for a review on the Roodee, in preparation for the day the enemy attacked Cheshire. Foden's band was performing by the river, and the popular Vesta Tilley was in the city on Tuesday. Neston was treated to an extra night of films at 'Maxwell's Premier Pictures' in the Institute on Monday. George Formby was lined up for the Argyle Theatre in Birkenhead from August 9th.

Summer was passing, and the Neston Men's Church Choir had their seasonal Treat last week, as did the Boys' Choir, the Little Neston Choir, the Bell Ringers and the Mothers' Union.

Parks Field in Parkgate had in earlier years been the site of many a Territorial and Volunteer camp, though these had ceased since the war started. But suddenly the field was covered in a vast number of army tents again – said to be for forming units for relief work composed of men who were not fit to return to service on the firing line, and men not fit for foreign service.

Evening classes run by the County Council had been held in the town for twenty years, and twelve subjects were taught this year to seventy-one students, twenty of whom had recently finished their ordinary schooling. Classes included English with Arithmetic, Book-keeping and Correspondence, Woodwork, Practical Drawing, and Dressmaking and covered three years. Horticulture and Sick Nursing had been added in the past year. Unfortunately plans were being hatched by the County to economise and Neston's classes were under consideration.

One of the young men in our photo today is Harry Hitchmough, a surveyor's clerk, whose father, Alfred, was a local painter and decorator of 'The Cottage' in Town Lane, Little Neston, and active in the men's section of the Red Cross ambulance corps helping at Parkgate military hospital.

In early April 1915 Harry managed to enlist at the age of 16, two years short of the minimum age, (though it was 19 to be sent abroad) as a gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery at Lytham. He claimed he was 19, but within five days he was found out and discharged. However he tried again in August, calling himself Henry Cameron and claiming to be 19 years and 7 days old and was sent to Belfast and Dublin to join the Royal Irish Rifles where he served from 8th September to 4th October.

Meanwhile his father had tracked him down and wrote to the Regiment; Dr Lewis Grant, Neston GP, also wrote a letter explaining that Harry had previously suffered from a ruptured kidney, which had been removed, and he was not fit for army service. Alfred Hitchmough explained that his son had joined the army because he had been called a coward for not being in uniform; he was a big lad and looked older than his age. Unfortunately this sort of attitude was becoming increasingly common.

Some news of Neston men dying in Gallipoli was filtering back to the town, see the details in a couple of weeks in AboutMyArea.

This account covers roughly July 29th to August 13th 1915.