

12. Week seven of life in Neston in 1914 – and Parkgate is keeping busy...

“...Once again, as of yore, England stands with drawn sword to save a small state (Belgium) from the oppressor and Europe from a brutal tyranny”

So wrote the Vicar, Charles Brooke Gwynne in the parish magazine this month. He also fell off his bicycle this week and injured his shoulder whilst peddling along Burton Road, when his lamp fell off. Gwynne, 52, lived in the Parkgate Road vicarage with his wife, daughter, housemaid and cook.

The Belgian refugees in Parkgate were creating a lot of interest and enabling many of the locals (usually the ladies) to be useful and to play their part, as money to support the visitors had to be raised locally. National arrangements were made at Aldwych, refugees were selected, collected from hostels and dispatched by train to various part of the country. Thousands of them were being dealt with every day at this time and a letter to local committees from a harassed government official points out that the refugees were inclined to exchange their labels, or wander off before they could be taken to the London stations. The Parkgate families were from Mechelen near Antwerp and were still wearing their wooden clogs and could be heard clattering around Parkgate. One of the men was a tram-driver, one was a French-polisher and one of the women was adept at chair-caning.

On Saturday 19th, Parkgate was again the centre of attention as the former Chester Royal Infirmary Convalescent Home (later the site of the garage, now Deeside Court) was opened to a public viewing to show the works done by local builder Albert Fleming to fit it out as an Auxiliary Military Hospital. It was under the charge of Mr and Mrs Henry Neville Gladstone of Burton Manor. Gladstone was the son of the late prime-minister and his nephew William G.C.Gladstone was living in Hawarden Castle. Maud Gladstone took a particular keen interest in the day-to-day running of the hospital, and also had a major part in organising a women's workroom in Chester.

Many local Red Cross people were there in uniform, and after refreshments a demonstration was given by the ambulance corps men, with their six stretchers, under direction of Alfred Hitchmough, by profession a house painter from Newtown in Little Neston. It was to be more than three weeks before their expertise would be called on. The Gladstones had financed the work on the Home, and funds would have to be raised for running the auxiliary hospitals as there was no government support.

At this early stage of the war around ninety Neston men were serving the country, or had at least left Neston and were in various army training centres. A few were regular soldiers already in uniform at the start, some were reservists who had actually been in the army, some were Territorials (*'Saturday afternoon soldiers'*) and some had joined a branch of the 'New Army' like the Wirral Battalion or the Liverpool Pals after Lord Kitchener's urgings. Conscription did not come till early 1916.

Many of the clubs in the Cheshire Football Association, including Neston Institute had been disbanded; there were normally sixty clubs, now reduced to twenty-eight as men 'joined the colours'. Discussions were on-going as to whether to proceed with the competition for the cup.