

Chapter 1

The Outbreak of War 1914

On August the 4th, 1914, Britain declared war on Germany.

To anyone following international events this came as no great surprise. Since before the start of the new century tensions between the super-powers and those who aspired to that role had been growing.

Germany had ambitions to build an empire and a navy to compete with that of Britain. France had long nursed a grievance against Germany since its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 and welcomed any chance to humiliate its rival. Russia was concerned by the Austro-Hungarian Empire's persecution of ethnic minorities who expected the help and support of Czar Nicholas. These tensions had led to a series of alliances with France, Britain and Russia opposed to Germany and Austria-Hungary.

The spark that 'lit the fuse' occurred in the city of Sarajevo, Bosnia, on the 28th of June 1914. Serbian nationalists assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, whilst he was on a state visit. In order to salvage some national pride and without any evidence that the Serbian government was involved, Austria declared war on Serbia on the 28th of July.

On July 30th the Russian army started to mobilise, more as a show of force against Austria than with any real intention of launching an attack. Germany demanded that Russian mobilisation stop. It did not and on August 1st Germany declared war, followed by a declaration against France on August 3rd. German plans for an attack on France involved entering neutral Belgium. The Belgians refused to allow them to cross their borders. Britain had a long-standing agreement with Belgium to project the latter's neutrality and as a result declared war on Germany on August 4th.

Whilst these events were happening in far away Europe, in West Calder the last weekend of peace was a memorable one. The annual Cauther Games, held at Burngrange Park to the west of the village, had attracted a record entry. "The Games act as a rallying point for friends from a wide area, and no matter where West Calder people may be an effort is made to get back to the old home on the games day", reported the local press.

The morning trains brought a lively and enthusiastic crowd into the village to participate in or watch events that included relay and cycling races, highland dancing, 'hop, step and leap', and, so no-one would feel left out, the 'old mans race'. The racing caused some excitement, attracting entries from as far afield as Edinburgh, although it was a local man from Addiewell, J Simpson, who led the way in the half-mile and one-mile handicaps. The closing stages of the games were spoiled by a sudden and prolonged thunderstorm, an omen of what was about to come.

Far from the Front

By the Tuesday of that week Scotland was at war, a war that was greeted with enthusiasm.

Naval and army reservists were called up and left the village in some haste. 'As one of them laughingly put it he "had not got time to shave". They left in the best of spirits however and were keenly anticipating being sent to the Continent to meet the Germans.' In nearby Broxburn a large crowd gathered to wave the reservists on their way, as they left by train or motorbus to join their respective regiments.

The urgency of the situation was brought home when a party of soldiers were reported to have set up camp at the Addiewell Oil Works. They had been sent to guard the Navy Tank, no doubt fearing that in the event of an invasion this supply of oil for the navy would be a target. And there were rumours of a possible invasion, although the newspaper minimised the risk and reported that if an invasion occurred, it would be the east coast that would be the most likely landing place, far enough away to cause little in the way of panic.

At this early stage, the war claimed its first victim. A motorcar driven by a Captain Johnston, who was delivering dispatches to his men to mobilise, killed a Tarbrax man.

A West Calder woman who had been holidaying there at the outbreak of war graphically described events in far away Germany.

"Once in Berlin, where the streets were always crowded with light-hearted townspeople, one felt the tension and dreadful meaning of war; soldiers everywhere; clusters of earnest faces; huge flourishing warehouses closed; sad farewells; and the cafes crowded and brilliant with a kind of hysterical levity. And the stations; immense impenetrable crowds pressed against the barriers and wept and waved farewell to the trains of soldiers that left for the boundaries."

On the train to the coast "passengers who had booked seats had to give them up to the German officers who were travelling eastwards. The excitement and war lust had passed, and the men seemed limp and downcast, in spite of their martial rig-out and shining helmets and glistening bayonets."

"In Berlin it had been impossible to procure a good meal; it was forbidden to sell beer or alcohol, so that the soldiers might be fresh and ready for work. On the train there was indeed a dining car, but the provision stock was exhausted within an hour of leaving the capital; so it was a case of tightening our belts and waiting."

Arriving at the Dutch border, the writer had an anxious wait to find out if she would be allowed to enter Holland and complete her journey. Whilst waiting, she noted how well the British and German passengers seemed to get on with each other.

Far from the Front

“It was hard to think that man to man we were so friendly with those Germans, whilst nation to nation we should shoot each other down.”

The remainder of the journey passed without incident, although safely back in London she listened to tales of others less fortunate in their travels.

“An Austrian making his way to England from Russia told how he and a party had walked three days without food along the border between Russia and Austria among the firing of the enemies; how one woman of the party had gone mad; he vividly depicted the poverty and sordid misery of the peasants, and the unwillingness of the soldiers to fight.”

All of this was a far cry from West Calder, where members of the village were preparing to do their bit. It soon became clear that this would be a war like no other war in the expectations that would be placed upon the civilian population.

Members of the golf club formed a Golf Corps for home defence. The government made an appeal for ambulance workers and the village Ambulance Corps promptly answered the call. In Addiewell the Parish Church Women’s Guild agreed each to knit a pair of socks for soldiers and sailors. Not to be outdone in this matter, the women of West Calder held a public meeting one week later and set up a committee to oversee this kind of war work.

The newly refurbished Picture House declared that it would keep people informed of events and photographs of mobilisation and the drama unfolding abroad became a regular part of its weekly programme.

Local business complained at the shortage of horses due to the pressure of demand from the army and certain foodstuffs leapt in price.

Local people were on guard against anything suspicious, including German spies. “A rather amusing incident happened locally on Wednesday, which showed how keenly we are on the lookout for German spies. An Edinburgh gentleman who is well known locally had travelled by train to Cobinshaw. He is of a dark complexion, and an old man who joined the train at Harburn eyed him suspiciously. At Cobinshaw both got out, and the Edinburgh gentleman proceeded to Tarbrax.”

“On his return to Cobinshaw Station he was taken aback by the kind enquiries made as to whether he had got wet. Later he realised that the enquiries were doubtless made to hear him speak, and to ascertain whether he had a foreign accent. On reaching Harburn he left the train, meaning to walk to West Calder. He had not proceeded far when he heard people evidently making reference to him, and two policemen quickly made up on him, and made enquiries. Fortunately he was able to satisfy them of his identity and he was allowed to proceed to the village.”

Far from the Front

Those villagers who wanted a distraction from international events visited Bitstock and Wombell's Royal Menagerie, which one week after war was declared could be found setting up in the village and displaying such wonders as 'the Great Sacred Baboon from Central Africa' and a host of 'Tasmanian devils'.

Very early in the war the government and the war office sought to firmly control the flow of information from abroad.

"The public are warned against placing the slightest reliance on the many rumours that are current daily regarding alleged victories or defeats and the arrival of wounded or disabled ships in this country. These are without exception baseless. The public may be confident that any news of success or reverses to the British arms will be communicated without delay."

All information concerning front-line fighting came from the government Press Bureau and fell short of giving a true account of events. In Belgium the German army passed easily and quickly through the country with little opposition. By August 22nd the British Expeditionary Force was in position in the mining town of Mons. The Germans blundered into it and both armies, surprising each other, fought the first major battle of the war.

The British army was forced into a planned retreat as it became clear that it had no protection on its right and left flanks, was outnumbered and faced the very real possibility of being encircled and overwhelmed. On August 26th the British stood and fought once again at Le Cateau and then retreated again. There was no fighting for a further ten days as the Germans swept towards Paris. Starved of information, the local newspaper relied upon the letters that combat soldiers sent home. Although these would have been censored and allowing for the fact that soldiers at the front would not want to worry relatives at home too much, their letters still give a good impression of the conditions of battle.

In the fighting that took place in the retreat from Mons, a West Calder soldier, Private Charles Gillespie, of the 2nd Royal Scots, whose home was at 19 Annan Street, West Calder, was injured and sent back to a hospital in London. His 'adventures' were recounted in a letter home to his wife and retold in the local newspaper.

"Gillespie, writing home to his wife, tells of the terrible engagement he was in at the battle of Mons, and says it resembled hell. The guns got so hot, men could not hold them. One of his chums was killed, but although the British losses were heavy, he was certain the losses of the Germans must have been six times heavier from the way they were mowed down."

The Times newspaper had published a headline on August 30th "Broken British Regiments Battling Against The Odds." The article told of the huge losses sustained by the BEF on its retreat from Mons. It was a report that was

Far from the Front

totally at odds with the official one put out by the government Press Bureau. Kitchener at once published a rebuttal through the Press Bureau and questions were asked in the House of Commons about the right of the press to endanger the war effort in their reports. Whatever the Times may have reported, any inhabitant of West Calder, reading the letters of men like Gillespie, would still have remained ignorant of the impact of the opening stages of the war on the British army.

Describing a fight between French and German aeroplanes, Gillespie says:

“The two machines were right over our heads. We could almost have brought the German down by rifle fire, but waited first to see whether the French aeroplane was able to manage by itself ... when it was almost level the French pilot started to fire at the German with a revolver and the German replied. For nearly a minute was heard the faint crack, crack, crack of the revolvers away up in the blue.... the German plane began to drift away downwards. A minute or two afterwards one of our chaps came running up to say the German aeroplane had fallen and its pilot was dead.”

Gillespie comments that he and his friends were ready for the fight but ‘were tricked away from the front line’, being ordered to march for 7 days and nights with never more than two hours sleep at a time, covering over 200 miles in the retreat.

Soldier and newspaper editor did not realise that the planned retreat at Mons saved the BEF from destruction, allowing it to fight another day.

“Passing through Paris on the way home, Gillespie said the French people hardly knew what to do with them. They were treated like heroes.”

To the local reader, this must have seemed a stirring account of events in France and despite the retreat, proved that the British soldier was more than superior to the German.

At the outset of the conflict the most obvious need was for men. Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, had told the British cabinet that the war would last for four years and that victory would need an army of millions of men. Members of the regular army had been mobilised at once and the national reserve had been put on alert. The territorial's were being used to guard key areas such as bridges, railway lines and the coast. Kitchener had little confidence in these measures and set about appealing for volunteers, since the cabinet did not favour conscription, to join what became known as Kitchener's Army. Up and down the country, men were encouraged to enlist.

No doubt the image of Kitchener, telling men that their country needed them, soon appeared on the streets of West Calder. A recruiting office was set up in the Drill Hall in Young Street, manned by one Sergeant Andrew Anderson, the local recruiter.

Far from the Front



By September 11th the newspaper could report that, "Almost every day during the past week men have been leaving the district to join Lord Kitchener's army. Up to Thursday Sergeant Anderson had sent away 62 recruits, a fair proportion of whom were married."

"The new recruits are being engaged for four years, or, if desired, they may retire at the close of the war. After joining they are entitled to a pay of 3 shillings a day until they are called up."

In the Parish Church, the minister, the Reverend Dr Anderson, devoted much of his time to telling villagers that the cause they fought for was just and that men should be encouraged to enlist.

"Preaching to a large congregation at the forenoon service in the Parish Church on Sunday last, the Rev Dr Anderson devoted his discourse to the European crisis. The preacher dealt with the origin of the war, and held that we were engaged in a righteous cause. Our weakness and our strength formed two interesting passages in this sermon. At the close, Dr Anderson expressed keen disappointment with those who were responsible for carrying on the game of football at a time when the nation was involved in a life or death struggle."

The righteousness of the war was a theme that the minister returned to again and again. Later in October he said:

"The history of our country showed the guiding hand of God at every turn. ... God had some great purpose, which he wished to work out for the good of the world through the British people. ... The preacher proceeded to deal with the origin of the war and to show the justice of our cause."

The editor of the local column in the newspaper also seemed to have a particular cause to support and that was the game of football, the young men involved in it and the reasons why they should be fighting at the front. In early December the football league seemed to agree with him.

Far from the Front

“The West Calder and District Football League have stopped all League games in the meantime. There are seven clubs in the league, and the stoppage of the games for a time may lead some of the strong young fellows to give their services to their King and country.”

“On making enquiry we find that very few of the local football players have joined Kitchener’s Army. We are at a loss to understand why this should be, as the training, which a player undergoes, ought to fit him specially for the ranks. Although we have got a recruiting sergeant in the village again, practically nothing is being done. There are still hundreds of strong, well set up young fellows in the parish. Where there are no home ties which form a barrier to them serving, and where their absence would not cripple the industry in which they are engaged, we think they ought to give the matter their serious consideration.”

“We frankly admit it would be a sacrifice to many of our young men, who are making excellent wages, but we cannot yet believe that selfishness has got such a hold that they will turn a deaf ear to the call of duty at such a time as this.”

One week later the wishes of the editor were granted.

“Eight young men (all football players) from Mossend village have enlisted within the past few days ... This is a fine lead to the other juvenile clubs in the League and we expect to see many others step forward to do their part in the defence of the country.”

A continual subject running through the pages of the newspaper at this time is the need for more men and the fact that all appeals for such were falling on deaf ears. By late October rumours of a ‘modified form of conscription’ were being talked about and in early November the West Calder Literary Society was debating its merits, carrying the motion, thanks to the casting vote of its Chairman, that compulsory military service should become a reality. Despite the constant complaints about apathy in the village, by the end of December over two hundred local men had joined up. Even those who had left the village for the far corners of Empire responded to the call.

“Last week Mr Steuart, son of Mrs Steuart, Westwood, spent a few days at home. He joined the Canadian contingent at Vancouver, and came across to this country with the first army of the Colonials. Mr Steuart, speaking of the crossing of the Atlantic, said it was a sight never to be forgotten.”

“The troop-ships, consisting of a fine fleet of liners, were in three long columns and extended for miles. Cruisers scouted in front and on either side, while others led the respective columns and some guarded the rear. It was a most imposing display of our great naval strength, and no German raider would have had the slightest chance to do harm. The great columns of ships steamed at a slow but steady pace and at night all lights were extinguished. Those competent to judge

Far from the Front

considered it one of the finest pieces of organisation they had ever seen.”

Whatever the complaints about recruitment, no one could deny that villagers put a lot of energy into organising the war effort on the home front. Within a week of the Prince of Wales launching the National Relief Fund to help those who were in distress as a result of the war, door-to-door collections were taking place around West Calder. Teachers from the Gavieside and West Calder schools agreed to make donations monthly from their salaries into the fund. The Shale Miners Union collected a monthly subscription from its members for the same purpose. Not to be outdone in this, directors of the oil company agreed that rent would not be charged on properties where the householder was engaged on active service with the army. The families of soldiers were also to receive a supply of free coal. Regular collections at the door of the Picture Palace made large sums of money and a number of Flag Days took place to raise funds for the Belgian Relief Fund. Even the children entered into the spirit of things.

“It is surprising in how many ways help can be rendered on behalf of our country at this time. A local girl canvassed for flowers, made them up into small bouquets, and sold them to householders. She was able to hand over £1 to the Ladies Work Party as a result of her efforts.”

At Halloween, “A group of Gavieside children celebrated this old Scottish custom in the usual way by ‘guising’. In the course of their visitation they collected 12 shillings, and very pleasantly surprised their teacher by generously offering it to him for the Belgian Relief Fund.”

“Robina and John Purdie, two children residing at 12 New Hermand, West Calder, have by their own savings been able to send mittens, cuffs, cigarettes, tobacco and matches to a local soldier at the Front. In the light of incidents which have come to be known recently, the children often put us older people to shame.”

This was reported on December 4th, although there is no indication of what the ‘incidents’ were that the editor referred to.

With the coming of the first Christmas of war, Princess Mary launched her own appeal.

“For many weeks we have all been greatly concerned for the welfare of the sailors and soldiers who are so gallantly fighting our battles by sea and land. ...I want you all now to help me to send a Christmas present from the whole nation to every sailor afloat and every soldier at the front... could there be a anything more likely to hearten them in their struggle than a present received straight from home on Christmas day. Please will you help me? Mary.”

Donations were to be sent to Buckingham Palace.

Far from the Front

“The gift it is proposed to send to our soldiers and sailors will take the form of an embossed tobacco or cigarette box, a pipe and a tinder lighter. To the Indian troops sweets will be sent instead of tobacco or cigarettes.”

The ladies War Work Party in the village sent its own consignment of gifts, 185 to local soldiers abroad and 85 sent to territorial's on the east coast. The contents of the gift boxes sent from Broxburn give you some idea of the hard work put into this task, for each soldier received shortbread, chocolate, oxo cubes, soap, bottle of iodine and cotton wool, vaseline, boot laces, small writing tablet and envelopes, and a handkerchief. The local branch of the YMCA appealed for 'games' that it could send to soldiers in the trenches to keep them occupied and a good response was made to an appeal by the government for blankets to keep soldiers warm with the onset of winter.

In France, as the German army swept across the River Marne, German High Command realised that it was over-extending itself. It was becoming difficult to supply the front-line with troops or supplies. French and British attacks pushed the German army back to the River Aisne, where it 'dug in' and prepared to defend what it had conquered. From September onwards the war stagnated. Both sides faced each other in trenches that stretched from the English Channel to the borders of Switzerland. In October the First Battle of Ypres was just one of many attempts by the warring parties to break through this deadlock. It is this period of trench warfare that the First World War is best remembered for and the local newspaper carried grim descriptions of what men had to endure.

“In a letter to his wife who resides at Byer's Buildings, WC, Pte Bernard Curran of the Royal Scots states that he is well. Pte Curran has been in all the fighting from Mons to Ypres, so that he has had some trying experiences. Some time ago he discovered four Germans hiding in a haystack and promptly took them prisoner. At Ypres he was at one time 36 hours in the trenches at stretch, knee deep in water.”

“Writing home to his wife in Clyde Street, West Calder, John Potter, who was struck by a piece of shrapnel in the head says “We have had an awful time and he had never got time to wash his face for 14 days, until the Sunday he was wounded. He was in the trenches for 7 days without getting out. Private Potter's letters to his wife and brother show the terrible hardships our soldiers are enduring, and that without a grumble. We have good reason to feel proud of such men.”

“Private William Clark of the 18th Hussars, son of Mrs Clark, Learmonth Crescent, WC, has been wounded in the severe fighting that has taken place in Belgium. He was struck by a piece of shell, which entered the side of his face and came out by his mouth, taking nearly all of his teeth with it.”

“Private Clark was at first in the 11th Hussars, but as the regiment was almost annihilated at Mons he was transferred to the 18th Hussars to

Far from the Front

fill up vacancies in it. Writing home to his mother, who is a widow, and has other 2 sons serving their country, Private Clark says he is as well as can be expected, and is now in an English hospital. He is glad he escaped as he did, as four of his chums were killed at his side.”

“He says it is a terrible struggle, and those at home can really form no idea of it. The cavalymen leave their horses in the rear and are in the trenches along with the infantry. Mrs Clark’s other son James is in Kitchener’s Army, and Cameron has joined the Reserve Battalion of the 10th Royal Scots.”

“Private Mungo Dymock, writing home to his brother Mr A Dymock, Muirhousedykes, West Calder, gives an interesting story of the fighting in North France. Pte Dymock had spent several weeks in the trenches at the River Aisne with the Cameron Highlanders, and although the work was hard and often nerve shattering he writes most cheerfully. He says the state of their dress and their unkempt appearance may be inferred from the fact that German prisoners who were brought in asked them if they were Indians.”

“Private Dymock says a night battle presents a wonderful scene with star shells falling all around. Then when the soldiers are located the guns begin to speak, and shells bursting all around light up the darkness. The fields are practically empty, and there is little food for man or beast near the battlefield. Every now and then a ‘Jack Johnson’ makes a hole in the ground about 8 feet in diameter and about 6 feet deep. Of late their ammunition has been bad, and only about 1 in 10 of the big shells have exploded. They are dangerous lying about this countryside unexploded, and he wondered what the farmers would do when they came to plough the ground.”

“The casualties were very heavy, and the lists would make their hair stand on end when they were all known at home. One of the most provoking things of all was the aeroplanes hovering over their heads. At such times they sat tight and did not show themselves.”

“One day they wondered why they were getting so much attention, and then they noticed a reaping machine lying in the field behind the trenches. Evidently the aviators thought it was a gun, because in a short time a ‘Jack Johnson’ sent it into a hundred pieces.”

“Their places at the Aisne were being taken by the French, and the British were to have a 36 hours march to _____ The Germans would be glad when they found this out. The movement was executed as only the British troops could do it. Fortunately a heavy mist hung over everything and the German aviators got severely left. Everything seemed very quiet after they got away from the firing line, but they were quite glad to have a short respite.”

Far from the Front

“Private Andrew Crow, of the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders, resides at 21 West End, West Calder, has been wounded by a shell in the foot. He is in a French hospital. In a letter to his mother he writes that, “The British troops were steadily driving the Germans back. ... The Germans would not face up to the bayonets, although all along they had advantage in numbers.”

He gives an extract from the diary of a German officer that he had helped to capture.

“Aug 25. An English shell burst on a Red Cross wagon today. Full of English! Ha! Ha! Serve the swine right! Still they fight well. I salute the officer who kept on swearing at Germany and her Emperor in his agony, and then asked calmly for a bath! These English! We have hardly time to bury our own dead, so they are being weighted in the river.”

This view of the enemy was only re-enforced by the claim of a Bo’ness soldier, published on October 23rd, that German women were deliberately making poison cigarettes and giving them to British soldiers.

“Corporal Cleghorn of the 1st Scots Guards, who resides at Mossend, West Calder, is at present home wounded. Corporal Cleghorn went to France with the Expeditionary Force, and took part in all the fighting from Mons up to Ypres. He was wounded in the arm and the back by shellfire. Corporal Cleghorn says it would be a great mistake to underestimate the enemy opposed to us and the greatest need of all is for more men. The shooting of the German infantry is not good, but their artillery fire is excellent. ... During the severe weather in the trenches they had to guard against frostbite and quite a number of men had been disabled by it. ... Asked what he thought of the performance of the British in the retreat from Mons, Corporal Cleghorn in his quiet way merely said ‘it was a bit of good marching’. The fighting at Ypres had been very severe and he expressed the highest admiration for the fine leadership of the British officers. Their bravery and their consideration for their men were alike worthy of the highest praise.”

This opinion of the officer class was not one that survived the war for long and is one that modern historians still furiously argue over.

In a village rumour can circulate quickly and have a devastating effect.

“During the week a report was current in the village that Private Williamson of the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders, whose home is at Gavieside, West Calder, had been killed at the front. Later information shows however that this is not the case. Private Williamson was wounded by a bullet in the shoulder.”

It was inevitable that amongst the casualties, the first deaths should occur.

Far from the Front

“We regret to announce the death of Private John McLinden, of the Scots Guards, which took place in France. Private McLinden was a well-known West Calder merchant, and the sad news of his death cast quite a gloom over the village on Saturday night. Mrs McLinden last heard from her husband when he was at Ypres on the 27th Oct. He had been wounded in action after that date, and died as a result of his injuries. ... Private McLinden leaves a wife and two young children ... We hope the public will not forget those whom the gallant soldier has left behind. It is all we can do to show that we appreciate the fact that he has laid down his life in defence of our homes.”

A good barometer of how local people felt about issues relating to the war can be found in the debates of the West Calder Literary Society, which met every Tuesday evening. On the 11th of November the society secured the services of Sir Edward Parrott, a well-known speaker, to talk about the Great European War. This event was widely publicised and a packed hall expected. In the event it was not and in introducing the guest speaker, the Chairman hoped that the lecture would ‘lift people out of their apathy and get them to realise the struggle they were involved in’. “The lecturer in a scathing passage dealt with the ambition of the Kaiser, who fed his mind with military ideas until he could only see the actions of other nations in a distorted light.” He talked about “the heroic struggle of the Belgians against terrible odds, and their gallant stand for their independence” and finally appealed “for young men free of family and industry ties, to join up.”

Exactly one month later the society was debating the probable duration of the war and whether all football and amusements should be stopped. In the Tuesday evening meeting before Christmas the society dealt with an issue that was causing concern up and down the country.

“At the weekly meeting of the Literary Society, Mr Thompson occupied the chair, and a paper was read by Mr J Lee on ‘The Censorship’. In opening he said that this European crisis had brought about many surprises, in weapons of offence and defence, but to him one of the biggest surprises was the rigid censorship that had been imposed upon the press of this country.”

“It was not a new weapon, but hitherto in the country it had always been used sparingly. It was intended as a weapon of defence, to prevent the leakage of information likely to be helpful to the enemy. In so far as it did that, it was fulfilling a very necessary function, but when they suppressed news because they thought it was likely to cause panic, then in his opinion they were doing wrong and altogether misjudging the spirit of the British public.”

“We were a sporting people and the news of a reverse stimulated and helped recruiting instead of causing us to go into a panic. ... He thought a better name for the Press Bureau would be the Suppress Bureau ... a censorship of war news was essential, but the public were tired of being spoon fed.”

Far from the Front

By December the parish was fully behind the war effort. It was true that prices had risen slightly and in the coal industry there was a desperate shortage of men. But the shale oil industry, West Calder's major employer, was undergoing a boom, with the war creating a greater demand for oil products. In anything the war had brought the community closer together, as individuals and groups pulled together to help win the war on the home front.

With the first Christmas of war approaching, it is doubtful if anyone now believed that the war was going to be a short one. The first casualties had started to arrive back home and relate their experiences to friends and relatives. By December four men from the village had given their lives in a struggle that was to consume many more.

In the last weeks of 1914 the Midlothian Advertiser warned that, "We are still a long way from the end of the war and further sacrifices will have to be made by every town and village in the land." With the first units of Kitchener's New Army taking to the battlefields in 1915, West Calder was to realise fully what that 'sacrifice' would involve.