

Chapter 4

1917

'Wasteage Must be Avoided'

There was little to celebrate in West Calder at the start of 1917.

'The fact that Hogmanay fell on a Sunday evening tended to make the entry of the year quieter than usual. When the hour of midnight struck, there were a number of people in the streets, and the usual greetings were exchanged. Further west the sound of colliery horns could be heard, but the note of hilarity and merry-making was absent this year.'

'We are passing through strenuous times, and the majority of people took the entry of the New Year quietly and seriously. We hope it may be the year of victory for our brave lads, but we recognise there are big sacrifices to be made yet before we can hope to welcome them home again. It will in all probability be the most testing year through which we have so far passed.'

On the Western Front, the winter of 1916-1917 was one of the coldest experienced so far and undoubtedly had an effect on the morale of the 'lads'. Back home Dr Anderson, in one of his first new year sermons from the parish church, addressed the issue of the righteousness of the Allied cause.

'If our cause be indeed righteous; if we are indeed on God's side; and if we are asking God to give us the victory; why is victory delayed?', was a question he sought to answer.

Dr Anderson re-assured his listeners that the Allied cause was just, that God was on our side and that we should never forget the atrocities carried out by the German army upon the helpless people of Belgium. In March, he was to reveal to his congregation and the parish the real reason behind our lack of military success to date.

'As we take a backward glance over the period of the war, must we not confess that there has been far too much backwardness in seizing every opportunity to press forward to victory; and a singular unreadiness to remove every obstacle that might hinder our operations and impede the chariot of victory. As a people it is surely high time that we cleared the decks for action.'

'The new premier has declared that nothing will be wanting on his part and on the part of those associated with him to bring the war to a victorious issue. They tell us that we must win the war at all costs.'

'They know that the drink is the nation's greatest peril. It is many months since Mr Lloyd George said that 'we were fighting Germany, Austria and the drink trade'; that 'the brewer's dray was impeding the ammunition cart'.

The local minister called for a total prohibition on the sale of alcohol. Throughout the year he returned to this theme again, even organising a petition and involving a local MP in his crusade against the 'demon drink'.

If only the reasons for our lack of military success were that simple.

On the Western Front the Germans had by now realised that their forces were too thinly spread. They decided to shorten their line and built a series of defensive positions behind the main line of trenches, which they called the Siegfried Line and which the Allies referred to as the Hindenburg Line.

Early in the year, the French and British had agreed upon an offensive attack against the Germans. Planned for April and called the Nivelle Offensive, it started badly with the Germans drawing back to their second line of defence in March, before the main offensive got under way.

On April 9th the British attacked the Germans at Arras. The one spectacular success of that campaign saw the Canadians push the Hun from Vimy Ridge. Apart from that, there was little to celebrate.

In May, protesting at their losses and the poor leadership of their generals, parts of the French army mutinied.

In June, in an attempt to draw the Germans away from their attacks upon the French, the British began an attack in Belgium which was to become the Battle of 3rd Ypres. Better known as Passchendaele, the battle of the mud, it was to last until November and it saw some of the worst fighting of the war, with the few gains that were made costing in the region of 10 000 British casualties per square mile.

This lack of success was reflected in the pages of the Advertiser throughout 1917. Hardly a week goes by without a mention of some act of valour, an appeal being made for information on a missing son or a list of casualties appearing.

'It is reported that several local soldiers have been wounded in the big British offensive, but we are waiting confirmation of the new casualty lists before publishing the same. Relatives will greatly oblige if they will kindly notify us of any district casualties.'

In January, Captain William Allan Young, elder son of Dr Young of Burnvale, who was educated at Addiewell and West Calder schools, was awarded the DSO for services at a collecting station in France, dealing with the wounded whilst under fire.

In the same month, Lance Corporal Roden, who had been awarded the military medal for bravery, returned to the village for a short period of leave. A public presentation was made to him in the Lesser Hall in recognition of his award. This was the last time he was to see his home, family and friends. In May he became another figure on the monthly casualty lists.

In June, in a letter to Mr and Mrs McGowan, Sergeant Stocks of the KOSB told them about the death of their son Private Joseph McGowan.

'I am writing to tell you how your son met his death, and I sympathise with you in your sad bereavement. He was in my platoon, and he was a very good soldier. He carried out his duties well, and all the platoon miss him very much. It will comfort you to know that he was killed outright, and suffered no pain. We buried him in a proper grave, and erected a cross beside it with his number, name and regiment, so that it can be found at any time.'

In July, Private Michael Doyle, who prior to enlistment had been a miner at the West Mains colliery, was awarded a medal for conspicuous bravery on the battlefield.

Casualties were not only restricted to the Western Front. Private William Thornton died of wounds received fighting the Germans in East Africa.

'No pen can describe what our lads came through as they herded the German forces through forests, across rivers and through swamps infested with malaria. It is sad to think that the great task had almost been accomplished, and victory was within site when Private Thornton was called to make the supreme sacrifice.'

For obvious reasons those who joined the 'colours' were often given a special send off.

'On the occasion of him leaving the village to join the colours, Mr John Milne Jnr was presented with a beautiful wristlet watch from a number of friends and well wishers.'

In May, another member of the Reverend Anderson's congregation was called up, one who was to be sorely missed for the duration of the war and that was the choirmaster, Mr Archibald Russell.

It should not be forgotten that West Calder was a mining area and casualties in that industry often combined with losses at the Front to make the plight of some families even more poignant.

'Mr Adam Prentice, Mossend, has been officially notified that his son Private Alexander Prentice of the Royal Scots is posted missing. We extend every sympathy to him and his wife. Within the past year they have suffered a severe trial, as their other two sons lost their lives in the local mines.'

In a few cases, as it was here thankfully, the message 'missing in battle' ended on a happy note.

'Mr and Mrs Adam Prentice have received a postcard to say that their son, who had been posted as missing in battle, was alive and a prisoner of the Germans' His communication with them stated that he was 'being treated

fairly well, but that they had not had much sleep, as they were kept in the open, surrounded by barbed wire. The food he was getting was fairly good.'

Another local man shared the same fate.

'Mr and Mrs Wilson, Myrtle Grove, West Calder, received the glad news yesterday that their son, who has been posted missing since the 22nd October, is alive and a prisoner of war in Germany.'

'Private Thomas Wilson had a splendid scholastic career, and is a young man of much promise. He joined the Glasgow Highlanders to do his bit, but on going into action he was transferred to the Royal Scots. It appears he was severely wounded, and no trace of him could be got from October 22nd.'

'His commander wrote home stating that he had been posted missing in action. Naturally his parents were anxious about his fate, as none of his comrades could throw any light on what had happened to him. A postcard was received from him yesterday, from a German Camp, in which he states that after having been severely wounded he had almost given up hope of being rescued. A young German soldier found him, bandaged his wounds, and had him taken to a dressing station in the German lines, from which he was afterwards taken to hospital. He says he is well cared for, and asks his parents not to worry about him as he is getting on alright.'

In some cases relatives were quickly notified of a husband or sons medical condition.

'We regret to announce the death of Private Archibald Sneddon, Dickson Street, West Calder, in France. Private Sneddon contracted a bad attack of bronchitis and was brought to No 37 Clearing Station where he succumbed. One of the nurses telegraphed Mrs Sneddon that his condition was serious, but no permit could be granted to see him, and the sad news of his death was received this week. Sympathy will be felt for his widowed mother and the family circle.'

There was little that Mrs Sneddon could do on receipt of the telegram, but others were luckier.

'Mrs Laing of Gloag Place received notification that her husband Gunner George Laing had been seriously wounded by shell fire ... she was given permission to visit him and set out last Sunday night.'

As the anniversaries of the engagements of 1915 and 1916 approached, the 'memoriam' columns of the newspaper give some idea of the pain that continued with these losses.

Pte David Brown killed in action in 1915

There is a grave, somewhere in France
That our eyes would like to see

Where lies our dear son sleeping
Who died to keep us free

Inserted by his father and mother, Tarbrax

Apart from the impact of bereavement on a family, the occupations of the missing and 'fallen' show the very ordinariness of those who went to fight and the gap that they would leave in the everyday life of the village.

In May three local lads lost their lives.

Private Richard Sneddon had been employed by Mr Brown of Main Street as a shoemaker before the war. Private Thomas Ferrier had worked as a carter and Private James McKenna, who died from machine gun wounds, had been a baker with the Co-operative Society.

By 1917 there was no reason for villagers to plead ignorance about conditions at the Front.

It is true that the pages of the Advertiser try to portray the war in an upbeat manner. They had to! The government censorship of news was tight. Despite this, the positive messages are littered with graphic descriptions of soldier's lives and it needed little imagination to understand the grim realities of modern warfare that local lads endured.

In January a well-attended lecture entitled 'At the Back of the Front' was held at Limefield UF Church. No doubt the younger members of the audience would have paid especial attention to the guest speaker, for the government had just announced that all young men of 18 years would now be called to the colours. 'It is not intended to send them abroad until they reach 19 years, but the government evidently intend to train them for home defence. This will liberate a large number of fit men for service abroad.'

How would those eighteen year olds feel reading the following report, which was the work of Private James Milne, a former member of the Advertiser's reporting staff, writing from 'somewhere in France'.

'I passed a pretty little soldiers' graveyard the other day, which I might describe to you. I say pretty because it was situated 'neath the shelter of an embankment, and had a frontage to the road, and commanded the reverence of passers by.'

'It is at once evident that willing hands care for this sacred mound, for the crosses, some formed with wood, others of shell cases, and others artistically fashioned from other war materials salvaged from the battlefield, were so arranged that the cosmopolitan character of the heroes sleeping their last sleep in that lovely little spot in France could be at once observed.'

'A hero from the Northwest of Canada lay side by side with Highlanders from Scotland, while near to the graves of heroes from the southern English

counties was the last resting place of another fighter in the Empire's cause from Australia; all at peace with the world after performing their noble tasks. There are many such soldiers' graveyards in France that I've seen, but I thought this one of the most impressive of all.'

No doubt spirits were raised with the return of 'Gypsy' Pat Smith to the village in April to deliver a lecture at Limefield UP Church entitled 'In the Firing Line'.

Pat Smith's standing within the village was high. He had been a well-known and very public figure in pre-war days. He had signed up at the start of the conflict with the Lovat Scouts and had been severely wounded in the opening stages of the Somme.

He must have been an inspiring figure for he is credited with personally recruiting 150 able bodied men to the colours.

During his lecture he reassured his audience that 'the stories about our soldiers drinking are absolutely untrue' and that British soldiers were simply the best!

He went on to explain how soldiers in the German army were more than willing and glad to surrender to the British and described in some detail the 'dirty tricks' that the Hun employed on the battlefield.

Through out the year, the Advertiser described the engagements and battles of 1917 as though victories were being won daily by the Allies.

'The news from the Western Front is again highly encouraging. The German retreat has had to quicken its pace and broaden its scope.'

'One is not allowed to write freely about the Western Front. Big events are impending, but the secret where the next blow will fall is rightly being well kept.'

'The operations on the various war fronts are again at a most interesting stage and Germany must be feeling uneasy under the heavy and continued blows the Allies are dealing on the Western Front.'

Following on the success of the 'Battle of the Somme', the 'hit' film of 1917 was the 'Battle of the Ancre', which made an appearance at the Picture House in March and can only have re-enforced this feeling of victory.

'The outstanding feature of the week's programmes has been the great film showing the 'Battle of the Ancre', and the advance of the 'Tanks'. Despite the cold weather excellent houses were secured. The battle film was a specially good one, and gave the public a most realistic idea of modern warfare. .. taken as a whole the picture was an advance on the film showing the 'Battle of the Somme', and it was followed with close interest from start to finish.'

'Letters coming home from the lads at the front in France show them still to be in a cheerful spirit despite the hardships of the recent fighting ... The help of America will now become available in a steady increasing measure and this will be a source of encouragement to our men and to the Allies generally.'

Life at the front was not only dangerous for those soldiers involved in active service as the following article revealed.

'We understand several of the district lads who are not in combatant service are serving in Labour battalions behind the line in France. One who was home recently said it was surprising how quickly they followed up the soldiers with the railway. After every forward push, their duty was to lay a light railway as speedily as possible up to, or as near as possible to the fighting lines. It was often very dangerous work as they were spotted by observers in the German kite balloons and when this took place they were heavily shelled.'

It is not surprising that the strain proved too much for some.

In August a soldier leapt from a train in West Calder in an attempt to escape from the military guard that were returning him to his barracks in Glasgow. In all probability he was absent without leave, having little desire to return to the horrors of the Front. The injuries he received in his flight from the train were severe and it was reported that he would probably have to have a leg amputated. Whatever the outcome, his fighting days were certainly over!

With the ever-increasing demand for men, it was inevitable that the government should consider the position of those in reserve occupations.

This brought a speedy response from the Loganlea miners and at least one local letter writer took them to task over their unpatriotic actions.

'Sir, I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was not dreaming last week when I read in the Advertiser that the Loganlea miners had decided to 'down tools' if the Military Authorities took any men from the mines for service. Do the Loganlea men expect that every tradesman in the country is to fight to defend them while they have a good time at home and make good wages? Who are they that they should dare the government of the land to touch them? Some people have a good conceit of themselves. If every trade was to take up a position like this, the Germans would over-run the country in a month's time. A month of German rule would cure some of those who passed the resolution to 'down tools'.

Goodness knows what the letter writer would have thought when the shale miners threatened to strike over pay and conditions at the end of the year!

Those men who had not been called to the colours, who were exempt or were in a reserved occupation, were given the chance to 'do their bit'.

'Drilling is now going on steadily in connection with the local Company of Volunteers, and good progress is being made. Posters have been issued this

week directing attention to the conditions of service and inviting men to join. The assistance of all employers of labour to popularise the movement is also solicited. Men desirous of joining will be enrolled at the Drill Hall on Monday evening.'

In September the government announced new measures for supporting 'soldier-patients'.

'Hitherto when a soldier or sailor was discharged and was committed to an asylum for mental treatment he was handed over to the parochial authorities to be dealt with as a pauper lunatic ... That stigma has now been removed ... disability pension will be awarded ... and 'service patient' status will be recognised.'

It was good to know that local soldiers, suffering from 'shell shock' and the range of nervous afflictions that accompany men in battle, would be dealt with in such an understanding and sympathetic way!

No such criticism could be levelled against the village in 1917. Its people continued, by and large, as they had done at the outbreak of the conflict, to support those at the Front and help those who were left behind.

During the Christmas that had just gone the Shale Miners Relief Fund had sent over 60 parcels to those troops serving at the Front. At the end of 1917 the West Mains miners agreed to contribute a sum of 6d per man per week with a view to providing a Christmas gift for all of the men who had left the colliery to fight. 'We can never repay the men in Flanders who, amidst shot and shell, and often knee-deep in water and mud, are standing between us and a ruthless enemy, but we can do a little to show that we appreciate the sacrifice they are making.'

Harwood UF Church sent 60 Christmas parcels to the value of 10 shillings each to members of the congregation who were serving abroad. Limefield UF church sent 50 postal orders to the value of 6 shillings each.

The Harburn school children organised their own fundraising activities and sent 10 shillings to the cigarette and tobacco fund for the troops at the front.

The Women's Work Party got off to an early start in their preparations for another winter of war. In September they organised a flag day, one of many through out the year, to raise funds to purchase materials to make comforts. 'We are almost certain to have another winter campaign, and as the need for comforts will be very great, we hope the public will give a hearty welcome to the flag-sellers on Sunday.'

A note of discord was struck when the choir from the parish church visited Bangour to entertain the wounded. As usual, the choir performed a range of songs and then joined the wounded servicemen for a meal. A letter to the Advertiser was of the opinion that members of the choir who entertained at Bangour 'should not be sitting down to beef steak pie with the wounded.'

Would they not be better 'waiting on' the wounded?' A reply from a member of the choir suggested not. ' We all have to eat after all. What better than the helpers should sit with the wounded.' Perish the thought that members of the choir might only visit Bangour for the free meal provided!

This correspondence no doubt caused a deal of upset amongst those who saw the motives behind their good intentions being questioned.

A similar bout of letter writing sought to remind soldiers wives about their duties when their men folk were far from home.

'We have received a very strong letter this week about the conduct of soldier's wives leaving their children and attending the Saturday night's dancing in the local halls. The writer says it is shameful to see those whose husbands are in the trenches neglecting their children in this fashion. After receiving the letter we made some enquiry and find there are several bad cases, and we hope the publicity given to it will make those who have young children at home take thought and stop the practice.'

The temptations that such wives 'endured' are well illustrated by the case of a woman from Westwood Rows, who was charged with causing a breach of the peace. Her husband was serving abroad and she made a weekly visit to West Calder to collect her 'separation allowance', leaving her children in the care of a neighbour. The woman was used to leaving early in the morning and returning late at night, with much of her allowance spent! Her neighbour eventually took offence at this, words were exchanged about the conduct of those whose men folk were fighting for King and Country and an assault ensued.

If there was one subject that consumed the attention of the village and the nation in 1917 it was that of food. By the middle of the year the U Boat warfare in the Atlantic was beginning to have an impact on the import of foodstuffs and through out the year villagers were reminded time and again to wage war on 'wastage'.

'The large number of ships which have been sunk as a result of the German submarine campaign should bring home to all classes the need for the utmost economy in food stuffs. The question is of the very highest importance, and all waste must be avoided or we may soon see the nation on compulsory rations. Repeated warnings have already been given, and those who are managing the affairs of the State in these extreme times cannot be blamed if they resort to extreme measures.'

It was obvious that with a high premium placed on food production, local farmers were to seize the opportunity to organise themselves in a bid to get official recognition of their important role and improve their bargaining power. In January they established their own branch of the National Union of Farmers in the village.

One solution to the problem of food supply was the provision of allotments.

'On Wednesday evening a public meeting was held in the Lesser Hall to consider the question of securing allotments in the parish in view of the appeal to the nation for the increased production of food supplies.'

Once a decision had been made, the allotment movement was adopted with a passion and events moved quickly.

'On Saturday last the committee met at Hermand to stake off the allotments on the land granted by Mr Thornton.'

The parish council did its bit to help by 'securing about six tons of seed potatoes for those who had taken allotments in the district.'

In August it was suggested that since there is no Flower Show this year in West Calder, there should be an Allotment Show, with the proceeds and produce being donated to the Red Cross.

Had there been a Show, there is no doubt that Mr Patrick McGovern of Hermand, with his 62 potatoes, large and small, produced from a single potato, would have been a record holder.

In April an appeal was made to the young men employed in the mines to give some of their free time to work on the land. They were to be paid at a rate of 9d an hour for their efforts.

Even women could help!

'Official reports testify to the readiness with which women have rallied to the support of the industry during the year. In many districts large numbers were engaged in the hoeing of turnips and such like duties....a better understanding is being arrived at gradually as to the place women are competent to fill on the land. What the enlightened farmer, and the experienced women worker also, resented has been the foolish contention that a woman could go from the office or the kitchen straight on to the land to do a man's work. All that has now been set right.'

Other local citizens had their own ideas about increasing food production.

'Sir, In these days when food supply is receiving so much attention, might I enquire if the Parish Council have not thought of letting the public park to be cultivated? It is not of much use just now, and it could grow a good crop of potatoes or other vegetables.'

'I would also remind the careless people that they are not acting very patriotically in letting their gardens go to waste land. These gardens used to be well kept, and I hope they will be cultivated this spring. As you remarked last week, there is plenty land round the village which could be cultivated. Are we going to simply sit still and do nothing to help matters? If so, then we deserve to go hungry. WAKE UP.'

One 'enterprising' visitor found a way of solving his food supply problem. When a supply of ham was delivered to West Calder station he attempted to hide a roll of bacon beside his suitcase, picking both up and attempting to walk nonchalantly from the station.

The local constabulary had been advised that there was a shady individual in the station and had posted a police officer in hiding in the railway yard. When the thief tried to leave with his ill-gotten goods he was apprehended and later spent 10 days in prison (without the option of a fine, a sign of just how serious the food situation was perceived to be!).

Sooner or later the government had to step in to ration and control the supply of certain foodstuffs.

The somewhat ominously named Food Controller made an Order in April to ban the sale of fancy pastries. 'We are steadily getting down to the plainest of fare, the object being to make our resources hold out until a new harvest is gathered.'

In the same month the Advertiser warned that the food situation was critical and that rationing was on the way.

'Food rationing is coming. Fifty of our ships were sunk last week, double the weekly average, and yet people are eating bread more than ever.'

In November the Food Controller banned the sale of cream from Dec 8, 1917 to April 30, 1918, except for the purpose of making butter, or for consumption by invalids, young children or other persons upon a doctors order.'

In December there was almost a food riot in the village!

'The shortage of butter supplies is as acute as ever, and when a supply does reach the village it is sold in a few hours time. Recently when butter supplies have reached the premises of the Buttercup Company the employees have been compelled to close the shop until the butter could be made up into half or quarter pounds. Last week the crowd of purchasers was so large, that the police had to regulate it. The people were allowed in one door, one at a time, and another policeman guarded the other door which was used as an exit.'

By December the sugar allowance had been fixed at 5lb per person per week and the price of bacon, ham and lard had been fixed by the government. One local farmer found himself in court and fined for selling butter above the price fixed nationally.

There were ways that existing food supplies could be made to 'go further'.

'Under the auspices of the School Board a series of demonstrations in war time cookery are being given in Stewart Street School. ... the syllabus includes bread and flour rations and their substitutes, as well as savoury

dishes, balance of food and economy meat substitutes. There is no charge for these courses which are similar to ones being held all over the Lothian's.'

If 1917 was a year in which the war touched the lives of villagers more than ever, in other ways it saw an attempt to return to some kind of normality.

The annual 'games' had been suspended in 1915 and 1916. In 1917 the village tradition of sporting competition was re-established.

'Arrangements are being made for an athletic gathering on Burngrange Park, West Calder, on Saturday 28th July. The programme of events include a 5 a-side football tournament, 100 yards sprint, 300 yards half mile handicaps, dancing competitions, etc. Excellent prizes are offered and should attract a good entry.'

By the end of April the village also had its very own Troop of Boy Scouts.

If any section of the community was kept more than busy throughout the year it was the local police force.

Through out May and June there had been a series of burglaries in the district. The description of a soldier had been circulated in connection with them.

'When Constable Hutchinson was cycling between Rosebank and Gavieside Farm, he spotted a man in a long coat sitting on a wall. His suspicions were aroused and he stopped to speak. He asked the man to undo his coat and discovered that he was wearing a uniform underneath. The man had a pair of cut of trouser legs attached to the coat to hide his legs and thus look like an ordinary civilian. Constable Hutchinson arrested the man and took him to West Calder police station.'

Crimes when they occurred appeared to be speedily resolved.

In September fruit and tobacco were stolen from the shop at Gavieside. Within one and a half hours of the crime being reported, three young men were apprehended. They were later fined ten shillings each. In the same month two miners were quickly arrested when a quantity of beer went missing. They were both fined £1 and 5 shillings. In November a bottle of whisky was stolen from a local pub. Again, the bottle and the thief were quickly discovered and the latter was sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment.

As the year drew to a close there were no illusions this time that this would for certainty be the last year of war.

'When the year 1917 was ushered in we cherished the hope that it might be the year of victory, and it was received with joy.'

In its last edition of the year, the Advertiser recounted some of the events of 1917 and predicted with some truth that 'An event bigger with fate than the collapse of Russia has been the entry of America into the war. Our people hardly realise as yet its full significance.'

American entry into the war secured Allied success, but not before Germany made one last desperate and bloody attempt to win.

The pages of the Advertiser foretell this and make an appeal for village and nation to stand as one to secure victory.

'The year 1918 will doubtless be the most trying in many respects that we have yet faced, but if the sacrifice is made to bear equally, our people will stand up to it more courageously, and the national will to see the struggle through to a finish will be all the stronger.'