

A VILLAGE AT WAR: North Muskham 1914-1917

This glimpse of life in a rather ordinary Nottinghamshire village during the First World War, has been made possible by the discovery of a book of notes compiled between 1910 and 1917 by Frances Olive Lavinia Williams, wife of Walter Hanwell Williams (vicar of North Muskham 1905 - 1937), and to the generosity of the present owners in allowing these notes to be copied.



Frances Olive Lavinia Williams, the writer, with son Denys - more later- and husband Walter Hanwell Williams, vicar of North Muskham.

North Muskham is an elongated settlement about four miles north -west of Newark, sandwiched between the River Trent to the east and the old Great North Road (now the A1) together with the Great Northern Railway (now the East Coast Main Line) to the west. Topographically, this results in a village with no natural centre and with a rather dispersed community; factors which have often contributed to difficulties in administering the parish, and could lead to a sense of isolation. In 1913 Mrs Williams wrote - *'It is a sweet and pleasant place, this little parish, consisting of one long straggling street with the Vicarage at one end, the exquisite though small church in the centre and one old big house, the Villa, at the other end. Many of the people who live in it are fine characters - simple, upright, honest folk in the main, but there are times when the dreariness is appalling and the hours, though filled with work so as not to be without occupation, are ghastly in their absolute stillness and loneliness.'* In addition, the presence in the village of a well-established Wesleyan Methodist chapel and five public houses would not have contributed much to the Vicar's Wife's comfort.

By 1914 the Williams' had spent nine years working hard in the community, including completion of the restoration of the parish church, yet an entry in the notebook reflects the attitude of the villagers to the Church at this time - *'There being no Clerk or Sexton, the Vicar's wife tolls the bell and takes all the expenses at the funerals and weddings. The reason for no applications for the office is alleged to be that there is not enough money to be got out of it!!'* Moreover, it would appear that the Vicar's views had not always gone unchallenged' - *'April 16 Vestry Meeting in the Church Hall at 7.30 (No disturbances at the Annual "Clergy Baiting" Meeting).'* Nevertheless, the first half of 1914 would appear to have been fairly unremarkable; the Williams' celebrated their twenty-first wedding anniversary, the Vicar bought his first car, the Rogation Service was well-attended, coal was 19/6d a ton and eggs 13 a shilling. However, by June - *'Much scarlet fever in the village - nine cases in six houses'* and *'Suffragists very busy with their fiendish work of burning down Churches - Breadsall, near Derby, supposed to have been set alight by them - complete Destruction. Also a Church near London burnt out: I trust under Providence, that our little Church will escape.'*

Little of note occurred during July, but - *'August 4 War declared by Germany and Austria on France, Belgium, Russia and England. At last, the long dreaded threat of the Kaiser has fallen upon us.'* In addition - *'All the banks in England closed for four consecutive bank holidays August 3 4 5 6.'*

Friday 7th they opened with paper money - £1 notes and 10/- notes, also postal orders could be obtained without paying poundage and passed at shops as legal tender. The Stock Exchange is closed down for the present – no business done for fear of a panic. No money can be invested, no foreign interest can be paid in, no shares sold. No money on deposit can be drawn out for the present until the moratorium expires - September 7th..'

It is not surprising that, given the location of North Muskham, the villagers would have had eyewitness evidence of the movement of troops and equipment, and the view from the Vicarage, situated as it was between the Great North Road and the Railway, would have been particularly good. - *'Ever since war was proclaimed the country has been alive with excitement All roads lead to Newark – soldiers, guns, ammunition wagons, ambulance waggons, horses, and all the horrible impedimenta of war have been rushing through the village by road and rail. Troops for the Front, Belgium, going secretly because we are riddled with spies, even here.'* Indeed, the War would appear to have been more successful in drawing the community together than anything which had been attempted previously - *'Mrs Cogan, of the Grange here, has offered her house as a hospital and the Admiralty have accepted it. We have lent beds, made bandages and garments and hemmed sheets, even on Sunday, to be ready whenever the poor wounded men arrive.'* Mrs Cogan had become tenant of Muskham Grange, the largest house in the village, in 1912, and had not endeared herself to the villagers by keeping a pet hyena which had escaped several times, frightening the villagers and, on one occasion, killing four lambs. Although the Grange became known as 'Muskham Grange Military Hospital' it was never named in the official list of auxiliary hospitals and, as we shall see, was fairly short-lived.

A few weeks were to elapse before the arrival of any wounded Belgian soldiers, and in the meantime the weather was fine enough for the Mothers' Union to hold their meeting in the Vicarage garden, the harvest was very good - *'Food, as yet, not very high in price – Bread 3d a loaf; Sugar 3d a pound; Coal 18/6d a ton; Eggs 9 for 1/-; Potatoes 4/- a cwt.'* However - *'August 28 Five German battleships sunk without much loss to the English Navy, but the war news from the Continent is grave – great loss of life but very little news can be got through. Troops have been going through by rail for the last three days, to the Front. Louvaine burnt to the ground. God defend the right.'*

Eight men from the village had joined the Army or Navy by September 1914, - *'The list of Honour of those who have gone to the Front for whom we pray in Church grows weekly longer and longer. The War grows more and more terrible and the anxiety daily more and more strained to breaking point. God defend us, the Germans are at Ostend.'* But help of a more practical nature was soon to be required - *'The first two Belgian Refugees, women of the domestic servant class, arrived in this village this month and were given a home at the Grange. A small cottage in Chapel Yard, next to the Blacksmiths, has been taken and furnished and offered to a Belgian family of three until after the War is over. The people of Muskham contributing to the cost of their maintenance for the time.'* This family, a Mr & Mrs Myssen and daughter, Matilda, arrived at the end of October and were installed in the cottage - *'rent free, one pound a week, and coal and potatoes.'* The wounded soldiers also arrived towards the end of October - *'October 29 Thursday, Arrival of 29 wounded Belgian soldiers at the Grange at midnight.'*

Nothing is recorded for November; and, while four Special Constables were sworn-in early in the month, two to serve as 'water constables', December would appear to have been lacking in War-news. However, the number of men from the village listed as *'serving their King and Country'* had risen to twenty-eight. The Williams' teenage son, Denys, returned home from boarding school, and, not surprisingly, Christmas provided the material for most of Mrs Williams' notes -

Xmas Day 1914 Communicants numbered 50 during the day. There was Evensong with Carols at 5.30. Xmas Day this year was an ideal day – a beautiful white glistening frost lay upon everything. It was cold, sharp and fine weather. In the afternoon the Belgian Soldiers at the Grange had a tree laden with presents for them. December 30 Xmas Tree in the school for the Sunday School scholars and teachers – 51 children and 6 teachers.'

'December 31 All the bell ringers being either enlisted in Kitchener's Army, or else busy building huts for the soldiers to live in at Belton Park, the Church bells were, for the first time for many years, silent.'

'A Happy New Year to us all, and may Peace soon be declared.'

'A great flood today, the Trent overflowed its banks and miles of land on either side is submerged.'

1915

The first week of 1915 brought continuous rain and flooding, but - *January 10 A good number of soldiers in Church. The Royal Engineers are billeted in the two Muskhams, for a fortnight, to build bridges across the Trent (about 340 men all told). And, 'Early in January, one of the nurses at the Grange ran away with two of the Belgian soldiers. She was traced to Taplow, Bucks, and was believed to be a spy. The soldiers also appear to be implicated as they were caught speaking German, and were too curious about the Great Northern Railway line and the tubular bridges.'* Presumably, the 'tubular bridges' were the ones the Royal Engineers were practising building across the Trent. Also, this month there is the first mention of wartime air-activity - *'January 19 German zeppelin raid on the Norfolk Coast – over Yarmouth, Lynn and Sandringham. Four killed at Yarmouth, two at Lynn, much property damaged.'*

Little, except parish duties, is recorded for February, but - *'February 17 Horrible day. Coal 22/6 a ton, Eggs 9 for 1/-, Bread 7½d a loaf. Much illness in the village owing to the rain and floods. A flying machine was seen hovering over Simpson's works one night last week, Feb. 12th, but it was too dark to see what nationality it was.'* Simpson's was a large factory in Newark.

'March 1 Very windy day and cold. Visited in the parish all afternoon and morning. The village just now is at a very low ebb, nearly all the young men have gone to the Front, and only old men and the young wives and children are left behind. Several of the railway platelayers are going on elsewhere to become signalmen, so the population is going down rapidly. This terrible war has much to answer for. It will be years before the village can settle again. Coal now 24/- a ton, and very hard to obtain. Only seven Belgian soldiers left now at the Grange.'

'March 17 Thursday. The most severe snow storm for the last sixty years. The drifts were so deep that carts could not get to Caunton for three days. Many lambs were buried in the snow. The mail cart had to be dug out at South Muskham and no papers came into the village that morning.' But news of the first local casualty was received around this time - *'On March 12th, Lieut. Col. Laurie of Carlton on Trent was killed in the battle of Nieuve Chapelle, France.'* And, by March 26 - *'All the Belgian soldiers gone now from the Grange, save one. Two of the soldiers, who have been discharged from the Army, have brought their wives and have settled down in the Village to live.'*

More people left the village during the Spring - *'Soon we shall have very few left – the war and moving on to get work is fast emptying the Village. The war news seems to grow more and more terrible. We hear of our poor men, prisoners, being burned alive, and shot when wounded. Surely God will avenge such fiendish sins as these – we wait and cry with the Saints of old 'How long, O Lord, how long'?*

However, casualties were not confined to the battlefields - *'May 22 Terrible Railway accident, three trains collide at Gretna, Carlisle. Over 158 soldiers killed and 300 burned and injured.'* Also - *'Last Monday, May 31st the zeppelins came to London – several victims, six so far, and several fires.'*

But June was to provide more local interest - *'June 4 Thirteen wounded English soldiers arrived at the Grange, mostly arms, hands, and one or two of them poor 'gassed' victims. 'June 13 Sunday, started open-house for the wounded soldiers from the Grange, from 4.30 to 6 p.m. every Sunday this month and next. From all accounts the men are very badly fed and not too well treated over there now, poor souls.'* June continued very hot and dry - *'No rain for nearly six weeks, no hay and very little garden produce, no strawberries. On Thursday last, the anti-aircraft guns were rushed through here up North. Hull and Newcastle, Gravesend and Sittingbourne have all suffered severely from the air-raids of the Germans.'* And a national hero was killed in an accident - *'June 19 Lieut. Warnford V.C. killed while trying a new Forman biplane. Killed ten days after receiving his V.C. for destroying a zeppelin – only twenty-three.'*

The only entry for July 1915 concerns the repair of the churchyard wall, and the first week in August finds - *'All the Vicarage servants away for a week's holiday.'* And - *'August 15 Registration of every British subject tonight between the ages of 15 and 65. In this household there are four.'*

But reminders of the War soon reappeared - *'Several armed aircraft flew over here this week, there being German raids on the Coast with much damage and serious loss of civilian life.'* And - *'August 19 Eight anti-aircraft guns rushed through the Village on their way to Newark. They remained all night on the*

watch for zeppelins just outside the Ossington and near the Midland Station, but fortunately no foreign aircraft appeared.'

'August 26 Recruiting March of the 14th Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters through this Village.'

September passed without comment, and only domestic and parochial notes occupy the early weeks of October, but - *'October 21 Went round visiting the mothers of the soldiers at the Front. There are now ten wounded British soldiers at the Grange. Weather beautiful, cold and dry, war news daily more conflicting. The Notts and Derbys terribly cut up in France – Col. Fowles, Captain Handford and Lieut. Handford killed, Major Beecher and Lieut. J V Edge wounded, eighty men killed. When will it end?'*

'November 1 All Saints Day. Took the soldiers (9) from the Grange to the whist drive in the Church Hall. November 8 Lantern Lecture on the War by Professor Dolby of the Nottingham University, crowded room, all the wounded soldiers there. Very good lantern Slides.' Also, in November a committee was formed to organize Christmas parcels for local men involved in the War - *'Collected from house to house, for Xmas presents for the soldiers and sailors gone from this Village, the sum of £10. Decided to send each man a nice parcel.'* *'St Thomas' Day, took out my little presents to the sick, widows, and my Bible Class girls.*

'The horrors of war deepen, there can be no Xmas joy this year, sadness is everywhere. There is hardly a young man left in the Village now.'

'Have just sent out 43 parcels to our men at the Front and elsewhere, containing – For those abroad, - Notepaper, Soap, Peppermints, Tobacco, Cigarettes, Gingerbread, Foot comforts, s Vermin killer, Xmas card, Calendar.

For those at home - Large cake, plum, Gingerbread, Tobacco, Cigarettes, Chocolate, Peppermints, Xmas card, Calendar.

Only the very old and young are left with us now and the village grows smaller weekly.

Since August 1914 nearly 75 people have gone - soldiers, soldiers' families and death have moved them away - we are slipping back to isolation and loneliness quickly.

My little book, begun in 1910 - 'rough notes and odd jottings', is getting nearly full.'

1916

'31 December 1915 January 1 & 2 1916 - Three days of Prayer - Penitence and fasting and intercession for the War. Celebration and Matins at 8 a.m., Litany at 12, Evensong at 7.

January. 14 Earthquake shock, accompanied by a rumbling noise, felt all over the village about 7.30 p.m.'

'Food is getting very dear now - Bread 4½d a small loaf Beef 1/- a lb. Sugar 4d a lb. Eggs 7 a 1/- Fresh Butter 1/7d a lb. Coal 24/- a ton, and scarce.'

'The village is very empty and very quiet in these days - nearly all the young men are called up in groups to serve the Country. This week Charles Richmond his wife and family (five in all) leave the village for good, he having obtained work in Nestlé's Milk factory in Salisbury.'

'All windows have to be closely secured at night now, to avoid danger of Zeppelins, and all motor-cycle and carriage lights must be lowered.'

'January 31 Monday, Visit of German Zeppelins over the village between 7.30 and 7.45 p.m. but, as the houses were nearly all darkened, no damage was done – they came back over our house about 11.30 and explosions could be plainly heard in the distance. 59 Killed, 81 injured in the raid, - Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk all suffered. Six or seven Zeppelins came over.'

'February 2 Wednesday. Evensong in Church in the dark. It reminded me of the Early Christian Worshippers in the Catacombs – we all clustered under one shaded lamp near the screen, keeping one ear open for the roar of possible Zeppelins, but none came. Never before, I venture to think, have Muskhmites had service in the dark. In future Evensong on Sundays is to be at 6 p.m. and a messenger be kept at the Bathley (telephone) Crossing, to run down and give us warning should more Zeppelins come. The 'Bathley Crossing' was the Great Northern level-crossing on Bathley Lane, where the signalman would have received the earliest news of any prospective zeppelin activity.'

The last of our village lads join up on Tuesday, February 8th. We are now left with three old men in the choir, there are no more young men in the village now save two farm-hands, four munition makers, our son who is too young to attest yet, and a few married men with children. The soldiers have been fetched away from the Grange and we hope the place is closed down now and that no more poor soldiers will be allowed to come as they were so badly fed and treated, and the house was not well-conducted as a soldiers' hospital ought to be.'

February 24 Very heavy snowstorm. Many trees and shrubs broken by the weight of the snow. Country very pretty to see today. No papers came, so we are bereft of War news.

At the Parish Council Meeting it was decided to call a public meeting to see if any women will offer their services on the land as there are so few men left here to help the farmers. Twelve women came forward to work.

Again, parochial duties and the weather are the only topics noted during March and April.

'May 20 Put the Church clock on one hour to "New Time" according to Act of Parliament.'

'May 23 Our son Denys enlisted as Driver in the A.S.C. Motor Transport and went to Grove Park E. C. As his brave young feet went down the drive, and his gay smile lingered in my eyes, I wondered "shall I ever see your dear face again". He is only eighteen and very delicate.'

'June & July Wet cold months'. and. June provided 'nothing of importance to chronicle.'

'July 2 Mr Holland called up to the Colours. July 4 Mr Shepherd called up – the first two married men to go.'

'July 11 The first of our village lads to be killed in the great drive at the Front – George Talbot, aged twenty years. Edward Gascoigne wounded in the arm.'

'July 17 Memorial service for George Talbot. Three men of the Royal Engineers came to give the Last Post.'

'August 16 Air raid on Blackheath - Denys in the midst of it. His motor was struck several times with shrapnel but he was not hurt, Laus Deo. Three bombs exploded close to him.'

In September the War was to move nearer home - 'September 3 Air raid on Retford. The gas works, a church and three houses damaged, also several persons injured. The same night, thirteen Zeppelins invaded England – one was brought down near Enfield, London, all the crew perished.'

'Lighting restrictions very severe in this village - we grope in darkness – indoors and out.

Bread 9d a loaf, Butter 1/10d, Eggs 2d, Coal 26/- a ton, Meat 1/3d.'

'September 7 Denys returned home on seven day's leave, but developed jaundice as result of a chill.

September 13 Denys and I went back to Dunmow and I remained with him until he was better again. It was good to be with him.'

'September 24 Harvest Festival Sunday.

During the night (Saturday) the Zeppelins visited the village and dropped a fire-bomb in the Trent, close to Thompson's house – near the ferryboat. We all went down to view it after early celebration - there it lay just at the water's edge - a malignant black bag -oozing some objectionable gas. The Military people were sent for to destroy it. The Zeppelins were visible and came over the village between twelve and one o'clock. They came and returned but all the village escaped with safety, Laus Deo. Only a few hundred yards from our Church.'

'October 1 Put back all the clocks one hour, to the original time.

Heard the Zeppelins out again. Sat up until 1.30 a.m but no harm came.

Evensong at present, until further orders, at three in the afternoon.

All the village is wrapped in darkness now. Not a chink of light is allowed to be seen from any door or window and the nights are very long.'

November found the villagers again collecting for the troops - 'Christmas Fund Collection for Sailors and Soldiers £20.15.0d Contents of Christmas letter to men in England - Christmas Card and seven shillings. Contents of Christmas parcel for men overseas - 1 card, 1 tin of Oxo, 1 pair of laces, 2 cakes of soap, 1 tin of sweets, 1 tin of peppermints, 2 handkerchiefs, 2 pairs good socks.'

'December 18 Denys came home on six days leave, it was a joy indeed to have him and he got a good rest in bed which he needed much. He looked thin and tired but was happy to get home. God bless him in all his ways and keep him safe.'

'December 31 There is nought to chronicle but the diabolical massacre of War – oh the weariness and terror of it all!'

1917

The early months of 1917 would appear to have been a particularly depressing period. -

'January 1 May the Lord our God give us Peace this coming year, and grant that our Sons may be given back to us alive and safe and soon. Dear God how soon?'

'January 23 Denys came home on extra leave before going up to London.'

'January 26 Denys went up to join the O.T.C. at Grove Park S.E. for Motor Transport Commission - six weeks course.'

'The most severe frosts and coldest winter known for over twenty-two years. The Trent is full of lumps of ice and many pumps are frozen up. Coal very difficult to obtain and very dear, 25/- a ton for the commonest kind.'

'February 18 William Adamson and Arthur Worthington called to the Colours, that leaves us now with only four boys in the Village.'

Moreover, food was becoming more expensive and rationing was introduced for some items -

'Eggs 5 a 1/-, potatoes £10 a ton. Rations – 4 lbs Bread, 2½ lbs Meat, ¾ lb Sugar, per head per week.'

'March 22 No flowers out yet but snowdrops

The longest winter I ever remember and our soldier lads are without fires in their billets, day or night. God grant the War is over soon or we shall lose our reason, the terror, the terror of it for our loved ones. Oh Lord God is it not enough? Is there no pity? Stretch forth thy Mighty Hand and help us, we humbly beseech Thee.'

At this time, Mrs Williams was obviously feeling the strain - *'Have been too ill to write much in this little book for several weeks, worry and overwork the doctor says.'*

'April, The first week has been the coldest since records of weather have been kept – snow, hail, wind and severe frost. Many birds frozen to death.

April 8 Easter Day. Cold but fine, no Church decorations owing to there being no flowers, not a single dafodil out yet.'

'May 1 Denys sailed for France.'

By the end of May the weather had improved and Mrs Williams appears to have recovered. -

'May 23 Beautiful weather now.' And, *'May 26 Planted Vicarage field with carrots, turnips, potatoes and beans. Eggs 6 a 1/-, Butter 2/2d a lb., Sugar hardly to be obtained, Bread very poor quality, very black and indigestible. Mutton 1/8d to 2/- a lb.'*

'Mr Gardner is collecting all waste paper in the Village and the proceeds of sale to go towards the Xmas parcel fund for our men.'

'June 13 Great aeroplane raid on London, 97 killed and over 400 injured. The bombs dropping plainly heard here about 10.30 and onwards in the morning.'

'July 12 Thursday. Denys gassed while moving the guns, and taken to Boulogne hospital, his eyesight affected. The separation is so terrible.'

'Completed the little War Chapel in the Church this month, the East end of the South Aisle, where we may say our prayers for our dear ones so far away and in danger.'

Nothing is recorded for August, October or November, and both September and December have only one entry each - *'September 16 Put back clocks to 'old time'.*

December Sent off soldiers' parcels – socks, soap, OXO, sweets, notepaper, books, handkerchiefs and cards.

The book ends - *'1918 What is in Store? Is it Peace or War?'*

Of the North Muskham men who served in the Great War about twenty-five per cent were killed, but Denys, the Williams' son, survived and came home; eventually to marry and lead a normal life. When the livings of North and South Muskham were combined, in 1919, the Vicar and his wife moved into the more conveniently situated South Muskham Vicarage, where they remained until Canon Williams retired in 1937.
