

Wheatley and the Great War

Wheatley Archive holds very few memoirs or memories of the period of the Great War. So, what impact did the war have on the village? Unlike the Second World War and before much airborne fighting, there was almost no bombing. However, an airship (presumably friend, not foe) was spotted over what-is-now Castle Hill Farm sometime between 1918 and 1920:¹



They Were a Wall lists 157 men in its main sections of those who had some relationship with Wheatley and who fought in the war. Only 79 of these are shown on the 1911 census, so only the occupations of these were affected.

Men going off to war were, obviously, of very significant consequence, even more so was the loss of those, probably not limited to the 35 or more detailed in the book. So, many loved ones were lost and mourned, with families torn apart.

The functioning of the village would have depended on the roles lost. The largest sector was in agriculture where 19 of the 56 shown in this sector of the 1911 census (34% and slightly higher than the 28% national average) volunteered or were called up after conscription started in January 1916. It is the opinion of this researcher that this number was easily replaced from the teenage boys of the village as soon as they were permitted to leave school with, almost certainly some female labour as well.² There is no evidence in either the Oxfordshire County War Agricultural Committee Minutes or the Wheatley National School Manager's Book of school children being released to help in agriculture.³ The Women's Land Army was not launched until December 1916; was only 16,000 strong at its peak in September 1918 and so was of no significant consequence nationally or in Wheatley.⁴ The requisition of, probably, most of the farm horses was of much greater consequence as it would have resulted in additional labour being required, depending on the amount of arable cultivation in this period – something of which we do not know. Mechanisation was at a very early stage, so did not compensate for the loss of horses.⁵

¹ Record 2344.

² OHC, CC1/17/A1/1. Between March 1916 and November 1918 the number of women working in agriculture in the county rose, after initial reluctance of farmers to accept them (Minutes 27 March 1916) to a peak of c.1500 at the end of this period with another 100 or so in market gardening. The original minutes of 9 July 1917 had an appended list of the number of women employed in farming in 158 villages in the county, but this list has not survived. Oxfordshire had a population of 146,000 in 1911 and Wheatley about 1000 so the pro rata likely number of women involved in agriculture in Wheatley would have been about ten.

³ OHC, CC1/17/A1/1 and PAR 286/14/A1/3. The war committee of 24 January 1916 flags up that school children should be paid an 'adequate wage', but this is the only reference on this subject. The school managers only met every four months or so, and there is no reference in these Minutes to the subject of early release of school children to agriculture or even to the war that was being waged!

⁴ OHC, CC1/17/A1/1. The only mention of the Women's Land Army is in the Minutes of 4 November 1918 when 190 women were involved across the whole county.

⁵ OHC, CC1/17/A1/1. Reported on 25 September 1916, there was a shortage of competent men able to use a steam plough; and, on 9 July 1917, there was a 'want of men' able to drive tractors.

A reliable list of reserved occupations is elusive on the internet, leaving this article only to schedule and consider the occupations, including agriculture, which were 'lost' in Wheatley.

Agriculture	17
Building trades	13
General labourers	9
Food retail	5
Domestic service/gardening	5
Sawmill	4
Brickworks	2
Dairymen	2
Office/sales jobs	2
Lime burner	1
Railway	1
Post Office	1
Market gardener	1
Organist in church	1
Cycle agent	1
At school, not guessed per father	7
Not known/other	7
TOTAL	79

It seems most unlikely that this would have had any significant impact on life in Wheatley, Yes, there would have been less tradesmen to attend to problems in your house; the sawmill, brickworks and lime-burning businesses would have declined a little; but, other than the loss of life, things would have probably gone on with little change – which would account for the lack of memories.

With very significant market gardening activities providing substantially for the food requirements of the village (and with only one person employed from there going off to the war), Wheatley would probably have been insulated against the food shortages which affected the country towards the end of the war.

Michael Heaton
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