



Dedham in World War I

When we think of the First World War, the awful death toll and hellish trench warfare feature heavily. But what was going on at home? What was life like in villages like Dedham? Perusing the Parish Magazines of the time builds a picture of a community coming together with spirit and determination to play its part in the war effort.

In 1915 an Emergency Committee for Dedham was formed, which issued instructions as to how the inhabitants ought to act in the event of an invasion of the Eastern Counties by the enemy, naming assembly points at specified places in the village where 'all old and infirm people' should go, supervised by the Special Constables of the parish. 'We are locked in a life and death struggle for our existence as a free people. It is an ideal that we have fought for and won in the past', the Committee wrote. 'We must spare no means and neglect no preparation in order to secure it.'

Eighteen Dedham men were at that time serving abroad, and a collection was made so that parcels could be sent to them from the village, each containing a shirt, muffler, socks and mittens, with a tin of shortbread, bulls-eyes, bootlaces, an English-French vocabulary, and a copy of one of the Gospels.

A 'Ladies' Society' had already been working hard, and by the spring of 1915 had made and distributed over 1,200 garments, sent in particular to Belgian and French soldiers and refugees. There was clearly a great desire to help, and workers met two afternoons and two mornings a week at The Grove to make bandages and swabs, which were sent to a depot in Ipswich. Then in July the owners of Great House allowed rooms there to be used for a bigger, more organised effort, to be called the Stour Valley War Hospital Depot. 'The parishes of Stratford and Langham are joining with Dedham', the Ladies' Society wrote, 'and subscriptions amounting to £30 a month have already been promised for the expenses of the Depot and the cost of materials. We want, however, £40 to £50 a month. Help will be voluntary, and all workers, whether for cleaning, needlework or making bandages, give their services free.'



The Depot will be open every afternoon except Saturday 2-6'. An appeal was made for more workers, 'especially those who will promise one afternoon, or two hours every week', and 40 people enrolled themselves in response.

By August there were more than a hundred helpers, including some from Ardleigh and Holton St Mary. A report in the Parish Magazine recorded that, 'Last week's dispatch amounted to no fewer than 422 bandages, 790 swabs, 47 garments of various kinds, 100 sandbags and 467 hospital bags. Besides this men have set to work on splints; fruit and vegetables are sold in aid of working funds, and generous contributions of jam have come in. The regulation hospital supplies are mostly forwarded through the Ipswich War Hospital Depot, but special consignments have been sent as needed to the Colchester Military Hospital, the Essex County Hospital, and the Ardleigh Soldiers' Hospital.

The Ardleigh Soldiers Hospital, had been set up in what was known as The Vicar's Room, previously used as a meeting hall, next to the Post Office. With Red Cross involvement, it was for soldiers who needed nursing care, although not seriously wounded, and Miss Mounsley, who lived at Lamb Corner's Hill House, was put in charge. Contributing to its medical, clothing and food supplies clearly became important to the inhabitants of Dedham.

By late summer 1915, there was fear of enemy action from the air, and it was thought prudent to insure the church building against bomb damage. The cost was £20 for the year, which caused a serious deficit in the ecclesiastical expenses. The Home Office issued strict orders that all lights were to be effectively shaded, with Special Constables ensuring that people complied. But it was considered impractical to prevent light emanating from the church's many large windows, so the evening service was transferred to the Memorial Hall (now Dedham Assembly Rooms).

Just as well. For on the night of 12th September 1915 a Zeppelin crossed the coast on a bombing raid. It passed over Dedham, then Stratford St Mary, where it was shot at, whereupon it turned and dropped four bombs on East Bergholt. Then it headed up the coast before returning across the sea. Luckily its ordnance failed to explode, and people who came to look at the bombs donated £5 13s to the Stour Valley Hospital Supply Depot. 'It is an ill wind that blows no one any good', the Parish Magazine reported defiantly, 'and it would be well if the Germans could know that the only effect of any kind resulting from their visit was this additional and most welcome sum to the funds of the Depot.'

Colonel Green, a Dedham man home on leave, gave a talk about his experiences in France, stressing the need for more men to join up, and by Christmas 1915, 150 parcels were despatched to men from Dedham, Langham and Stratford St Mary serving at the front. As more agricultural workers were called up, farms were left short of labour. There was a national plea, 'Will women take up the work?' In May 1916, a lecturer from the Essex Women's Agricultural Association had no doubt they could.

'Singling out the root crops, weeding, hoeing, rolling, harrowing, pea-picking, helping with the hay-making and harvest, tending poultry and pigs, stock-feeding, milking, dairying are all parts of farming which women are quite capable of undertaking.' Ploughing she did not much advise them to take up, since it was work of a character which was beyond a woman's physical strength. Naturally a woman could not do as much hard work as a man, and if paid by time, the lecturer thought 3d an hour a fair wage for women who have not had much experience in farm work.

The Government also provided suitable clothing, if required, at 'very moderate' prices – for instance good strong boots at 7s 8d a pair (over thirty hours' work needed to buy them, at that rate). She concluded by appealing to women of all classes to come forward to help their country in this work, which was next in importance to the manufacture of munitions. 'Field work for women has been looked upon by some as derogatory. That is a great mistake, for good, honest work cannot be derogatory.'

At Hill House, Lamb Corner, an enterprise was set up for women and children who wished to contribute in less strenuous ways, making toys to take the place of German made toys. An instructor was brought down from London, and the co-operative was affiliated with the British Toy Association. In due course an exhibition was held, in which prize winning toys included a doll's motor, a small working model of a crane, an acrobatic clown, a wooden horse and, made by two ten-year old girls, some Woolley Willies. The report gives no clue as to what these last, wonderfully named, objects might have been.

Children and teachers in the Sunday School were contributing their pennies in order to send parcels to Essex Regiment men who were prisoners of war in Germany. By June 1917, there were reckoned to be 46 such unfortunates, costing £2 10s each a month in food parcels.

Seeking finance, the Government established the National War Savings Association, and villagers were urged to contribute weekly. 'When a subscriber has contributed 15s 6d he is entitled to a certificate for that amount, which five years from the date of issue will be worth £1', the Parish Magazine announced. 'For an absolutely sound investment there is none that can compare with these War Certificates, and we urge everyone as a national duty as well as a common prudence to avail themselves of this great opportunity which the Government offers them.'

Food production was also a constant anxiety, and villagers were asked to grow as much as possible from fields, gardens and allotments. Eggs were particularly valued, and volunteers collected from those who could spare them. Typically about 150 a month were donated to the wounded soldiers at Ardleigh Hospital from Dedham villagers.

Almost every issue of the Parish Magazine had to record the death of one or more local men, a tragedy for the families and a source of great sadness to the village. But life wasn't all hard work and mourning. Soldiers, first from the Royal Garrison Artillery, and later the Herts Yeomanry, were billeted in the Grammar School, and they put on singsongs and concerts at the Memorial Hall, which usually involved backing from local musicians. Songs of humour and sentiment were sung to a packed hall.

The Stour Valley War Hospital Depot went from strength to strength, and by August 1917 they could report sending over ninety thousand articles in the previous twelve months to help wounded soldiers. “We are grateful indeed for your abundant help”, responded the Red Cross, and Essex Regiments.

Finally, a hundred years ago the ‘war to end all wars’ came to its close. Dedham had lost 33 of its young men. That summer scarlet poppies in the cornfields would have been a poignant reminder, as they were in Flanders fields. It was decided a permanent memorial to them should be erected in Royal Square. A committee was formed to organise it and raise the money required. A prestigious designer, W D Caroe, was approached – his design a way-side market cross made of limestone, with surrounding steps which could be used as seating. Wording to express the village’s feelings was chosen from a seventeenth century sea captain’s farewell to those of his crew who had not survived a terrible winter stuck in the ice, after an attempt to discover the North-West passage.

*‘We that survive, perchance may end our days
In some employment meriting no praise
They have outlived this fear and their brave ends
Will ever be honour to their friends.’*

The cost of the proposed memorial was estimated to be £475. The average weekly wage then was only just over a pound. But by December 1919 J. P. Clover, chairman of the parish council, was able to announce that subscriptions or promises amounting to £430 had already been collected, and he didn’t anticipate any difficulty in raising the rest.

This would have been an extremely busy time for stonemasons, with villages and towns across the country wanting to honour their war dead. But finally, in August 1921, the Memorial Cross was ready for its unveiling. No outside dignitary was invited, the preference being for the ceremony to be carried out by Dedham men and women. Major-General Ross-Johnson addressed the assembled villagers, after a church service and procession. “Let us see”, he said, “that our children are brought up in the right way to love and honour justice and truth. It is the character of a people which makes a nation.”

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