

## **East Brent Parish History Group**

### **Meeting Notes for 7<sup>th</sup> May 2014**

#### **Commemoration of The Great War**

I am now able to provide a report on Dr. Tim Moreman's talk on "The Isle of Wedmore Remembers the Great War, 1914-19" which took place at the 5th March meeting. Please be aware that Dr. Moreman has spent a great deal of effort in his research and retains Copyright to anything contained below and in his full report.

Dr. Moreman's research project started a few years ago (2011) for St Mary's Church in Wedmore, looking at the men from the village and surrounding area who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Great War. It now involves the church and local schools and looks at both those who died and a selection of servicemen who returned from the whole Isle of Wedmore (defined as being Wedmore, Blackford, Theale, Cocklake, Clewer, Mudgley and the Allertons).

1. The project began at a Remembrance Day service when his daughter was handed a cross bearing the name of a deceased a serviceman and asked "Who was he?" No one could tell him anything about him.
2. (The aim is) ... to ensure that all these men are properly remembered as individuals, as opposed to a just a long list of names read out each year on 11th November, before it is too late to find out more about them.
3. This exercise has become a personal act of Remembrance to the fallen – part of Tim's professional life as a historian has been spent working with the British Army making him well aware of the sacrifice made by its officers and men.
4. His fundamental aim is to try and bring these men 'alive' to the local children and make them fully aware that the otherwise mute names on the local War Memorials actually represent 'real people'.

To do so he has used a wide range of sources - primary documents conveniently now found on Ancestry.co.uk, from the National Archives, Imperial War Museum and National Army Museum and family information when available. To date information for the project has come in from all over the UK and as far afield as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa, as well as gathered locally from Wedmore and the surrounding Parishes.

To date two men with links to East Brent, for example, have surfaced of interest to him :

- Harold James Wadden, who ran an Ironmongers in Wedmore during the Great War until conscripted into the Tank Corps in 1916 and....
- W.A. Ham, Somerset Light Infantry, who farmed in Chapel Allerton in 1911 and whose family later moved to East Brent.

This is a very brief summary of his talk and does not contain much of the great detail in his presentation. If you require a fuller report, please let me know.

John Rigarlsford continues with his collation of all those WW1 Servicemen from or connected with East Brent Parish. If anyone has photos, badges, medals, memorabilia etc. please get in touch with John at [jonrig@rooksbridge.org.uk](mailto:jonrig@rooksbridge.org.uk) or via myself.

## The Shadow of the Workhouse – Presentation by Pat Hase 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014.

This talk concentrates on life in Axbridge Union Workhouse from its opening in 1836 until its official closing as a Workhouse in 1929 (although the building continued to take in people after that time as a Public Assistance Institution). The fact that the building remained in the public eye long after the rules of the Poor Law ceased meant that the building itself was still “The Workhouse” in the eyes of the public.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 created Poor Law Unions which were to become the same areas which controlled Civil Registration from 1837 and were later used as Local Government boundaries. The Axbridge Poor Law Union comprised initially of 38 parishes stretching as far north as just south of Yatton, included Blagdon, Cheddar, Wedmore, Burnham on Sea and of course East Brent. Each parish had elected representatives known as Guardians of the Poor who met fortnightly to oversee the running of the Union, reporting back to Commissioners in London.

The conditions in the Workhouse had by law to be no better than that of the meanest agricultural labourer could provide - work schedules and menus were standardised across the country but the staffing at Axbridge had a remarkable stability and in general conditions in rural workhouses were better than those in the larger and often over-crowded urban ones. Axbridge was built for 300 inmates but the average number resident at any one time was under 200.

By transcribing some of the Admission, Discharge, Punishment, Birth & Death registers etc from the Workhouse which are in the Somerset Heritage Centre, coupled with census returns and parish registers it has been possible to follow some individuals before, during and after their stay in the Workhouse and some remarkable human stories unfold.

There were very few families in Axbridge Workhouse. Out of the first 300 children baptised in the Workhouse only 14 had known fathers. The inevitable unmarried mothers – described at one point by the Chair of the Guardians as “A more hardened bunch of young women I wouldn’t wish to meet - who can’t or won’t tell me who the fathers are!” Another group were the elderly and infirm - who entered the Workhouse not necessarily because of destitution but because the Workhouse incorporated an Infirmary which pre-dated free hospitals. One resident of Brent Knoll who died in the Workhouse was described (only 1 week before on a census) as being “of Independent Means” and in fact left a Will. The workhouse did not have a burial ground and after death all inmates were sent to their home parish for burial.

There were sad stories of the very vulnerable members of society - those with physical or learning difficulties who were kept in the Workhouse because at the time it was cheaper for their parish than sending them to a specialist establishment. The Workhouse was not a prison and inmates could leave “at their own request”. The records show evidence of some people working the system and using the Workhouse to fall back on when the seasonal work of the agricultural labourer proved difficult.

The records show that the Union employed an Industrial Superintendent to teach the men and boys boot making and shoe repair so that they could have a trade when they left. Children received an education at the Workhouse School and it seems that more of the Workhouse children were able to sign their names when they married than those who had not been inmates. There were some treats organised – a trip to Weston on a train, children went to stay on a farm for 4 weeks during the summer, a Christmas lunch followed by a magic lantern show by a local vicar are just some which were reported.

Conditions in Workhouses across the country did vary but although examples can be found of individual problems, in general it does look as if Axbridge was amongst the better ones with a caring attitude from its staff towards its inmates.

#### Future Meetings

East Brent Parish History Group Meetings take place at 7:00 pm in East Brent Village Hall generally on the first Wednesday of each month.

The next meeting will be on **4<sup>th</sup> June 2014**.

The following meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2014 will be a "Member's Meeting". This is an opportunity for anyone to come along and discuss their family's history and their memories of the Parish. There may be someone there who can answer that query you have about the Parish or the wider area. You may also have that bit of information that answers someone else's questions.

Please note that there will be **no meeting during August**, the following meeting will be on 3rd September 2014.

All are welcome at any meeting. If you have any photos & memories, please bring them along. Thanks to donations, we now have a scanner and computer permanently available for use at our meetings. Photographs and documents are precious and don't need to leave your possession. There are many stories to be told. I look forward to seeing you there.

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