



# DERBYSHIRE LIVES

## THROUGH THE FIRST WORLD WAR

### Beyond the Western Front

The battles were not consigned just to the churned soils of France and Belgium.

Popular culture has cemented the image of British forces fighting in endless trenches along the Western Front. This, however, overlooks the battles fought by British forces across the rest of the globe.

This was after all a 'world war' and the combatants did not just include the European powers. The Ottoman Empire, which incorporated Turkey and much of the Middle East, declared war on the Allies in November 1914. With the aim of using the War to expand territories, the Ottoman Empire posed a serious threat to British interests in the region.

One of the heaviest defeats suffered by the British Forces was the infamous Gallipoli campaign, a pre-emptive strike on the Ottoman heartland of Istanbul. 205,000 British soldiers, including those of the 9th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, died, were injured or contracted disease.

British forces also fought in the Balkan region of Europe in an attempt to assist Serbia against the Central Powers and Bulgaria. This little known Salonika Campaign saw British soldiers fighting the harsh environment as much as the enemy. By the end of the War over 10,000 had died, many of malaria and other diseases.

These campaigns beyond the Western Front included people of Derbyshire. Edgar Osborne served in Palestine, Salonika, Egypt and Jordan. Edgar survived all of this with minor injuries and went on to become Derbyshire's County Librarian for 31 years.



Drawing of Edgar Osborne by John Chaplin.  
Derbyshire Record Office



British Forces in Palestine.  
Derbyshire Record Office

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## A New, Terrible Warfare

New weapons and methods caused loss of life on a scale never before seen.

The wars fought before 1914 had been violent, vicious and terrifying. None, however, compared to the brutality of the First World War.

The technological advancements made in the years preceding the war were used by both sides to devastating effect. Artillery shells and machine guns meant that soldiers had to live in trenches dug into the earth. Aircraft and tanks were also introduced to the battlefield for the first time.

These new weapons caused millions of military and civilian casualties. The horrors of life in the trenches meant that many soldiers suffered from a condition known as 'shell shock'. Symptoms were both physical and psychological and many found themselves reliving the trauma of the trenches many years after they had returned home. It is thought that over 80,000 British soldiers suffered from shell shock.

*Terrific bombardment of canal bank and front lines all day. Shells flying about in hundreds and dugout rocking with the force of the explosion. Feelings beyond explanation. Expecting infantry attack all night.*

Extract from the diary of William Weston. From Chaddesden, William kept a diary throughout the War.



Machine guns were used to terrible effect.  
Image courtesy of Imperial War Museum



Artillery shells.  
Image courtesy of Imperial War Museum

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### Gas

#### A silent killer on the front

Before 1914 the use of gas as a weapon was seen as uncivilised. However, the stand-off created by trench warfare made it necessary to find ways to break the stalemate.

It was the Allied army, the French, who first used tear gas grenades in August 1914. The Germans used gas for the first time on the Western Front in April 1915 at Ypres. Famously the British first used gas at the Battle of Loos in 1915 and the wind blew it back into their own lines.

Chlorine gas was used at first, which attacked the lungs. Towards the end of the war, the more lethal mustard gas was widely used, causing the skin to blister and the victim to choke to death. Soldiers on both sides were issued with gas masks which they would put on as soon as an enemy gas attack was detected.

Although gas was not the most efficient weapon used during the First World War it struck fear into the hearts of men on both sides, with no way of knowing when an attack would take place. Its use was also controversial with many seeing it as an unfair way to fight a war. In total, it is believed that over 90,000 soldiers died as a result of gas attacks.



German gas mask.  
Wellcome Images [www.wellcomeimages.org](http://www.wellcomeimages.org)

*"...war has nothing to do with chivalry any more. The higher civilisation rises, the viler man becomes."*

German General, Karl von Einem



British soldiers after a German gas attack

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# DERBYSHIRE LIVES THROUGH THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## Horses

### Traditional means in the first modern war

As a farming county, many horses were requisitioned from Derbyshire to go to war. Horses were still used as cavalry mounts and to haul ambulances and supply wagons. The Army deployed more than one million horses and mules.

In the first year of war the countryside was emptied of horses as farmers and hauliers lost their best working animals. However, there were not enough horses in Britain alone and thousands were shipped from America. They were so important to the war effort that German saboteurs in America attempted to poison them, give them diseases and even put metal spikes in their food!

It is estimated that half a million horses owned by the British Army were killed during the War. It would be the last time the horse would be used on a mass scale in modern warfare.

*"If the times are hard for the human beings... the same can be said of the animals. My heart bleeds for the animals."*

Brigadier-General Frank Percy Crozier



Requisitioning horse on Ekeston Market Place.  
Courtesy of Derbyshire Libraries and [www.picturethepast.org.uk](http://www.picturethepast.org.uk)

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### Life in the Trenches

A soldier's time in the trench could be miserable, dirty and dangerous.

After early advances the War soon became a stalemate with little progress made by either side. Trenches for the soldiers to live in and between the enemy lines was 'no-man's land', a settled in for what was to become a war of attrition.

The conditions in the trenches were terrible. Standing in mud and water all day caused trench foot, a fungal infection that could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Rats infested trenches in their millions, spreading infection and contaminating food. They bred rapidly and gorged themselves on the human remains. Some were said to grow to the size of a cat.

Body lice made every minute a complete misery; they bred in the seams of uniforms causing constant itching and Trench Fever, a painful and debilitating disease. Soldiers could not bathe regularly, or change clothes, some shaved their heads to avoid getting head lice.

*So far I have avoided becoming "lousy"! I have seen some fine specimens of louse on some of our boys – real beauties, & according to their proprietors, they can't half bite!*

Arthur Hodgkiss, of Milford, in a letter from the front to his family

Added to all this was the horror of war and ever present death. At any moment a shell could hit or an enemy sniper kill an unlucky soldier whose head strayed above the trenches. The conditions took their toll with thousands dying of disease or exposure. For those that survived the experience left them deeply affected and many developed mental health conditions such as shell shock.



Stockpiling barbed wire.  
Copyright Imperial War Museum



Rescuing injured British soldiers trapped in the trenches.  
Wellcome Images [www.wellcomeimages.org](http://www.wellcomeimages.org)

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## The Wiper's Times

Early in 1916, in the ruins of a building in the Belgian town of Ypres, soldiers of the 12th battalion of the Sherwood Foresters regiment found an old printing press. This chance discovery inspired Captain Fred Roberts and Lieutenant Jack Pearson to start a trench newspaper. The pair became the driving force behind The Wiper's Times, with Roberts as editor and Pearson sub-editor. The title of the paper was a nod to the way British soldiers mispronounced Ypres.

The newspaper took a satirical look at life on the Western Front with amusing anecdotes, mock adverts and jokes about senior command. One advert read:

IS YOUR LIFE MISERABLE? ARE YOU UNHAPPY?  
DO YOU HATE YOUR COMPANY COMMANDER?  
YES! THEN BUY HIM ONE OF  
OUR NEW PATENT TIP DUCK BOARDS  
YOU GET HIM ON THE BOARD – THE DUCK BOARD DOES THE REST

The paper's humorous take on trench life was a welcome relief for soldiers and the first edition was a great success, selling out immediately. Despite attempts to shut the paper down, twenty-two more editions would follow before the end of the War.

Both Captain Roberts and Lieutenant Pearson survived the War having fought at the Battle of the Somme, with both awarded the Military Cross for bravery.



Edition of the Wipers Times,  
Derbyshire Record Office

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