

Weston-sub-Edge and the Great War 1914-18



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Background to the Great War

The background to the events leading up to the Great War of 1914 are complex and can be traced back to when Otto, Prince von Bismarck, became Chancellor of Prussia in 1862. He desired a strong and united Germany, with Prussia as its main constituent state. By 1871 he had achieved this, with the King of Prussia as Kaiser (Wilhelm II) and himself as Chancellor of the German Empire.

To complicate matters there were several other imperial powers in Europe and Asia.

The Austro – Hungarian Empire, allied to Germany, was in decline under an aging Emperor, Franz Josef with his heir presumptive being the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

The ancient Ottoman Empire to the East was also in terminal decline but supported the German/Austro Hungarian axis.

A third declining imperial power, Russia, had a history of warring with the Turks and had its own internal problems with attempted revolutions being suppressed by the Tsars and the Church maintaining a grip on the peasant population.

France had defined her European ambitions, the priority being to recover the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine taken by Germany in the Franco Prussian war of 1870/71.

Finally, of the major influences, was Great Britain which controlled the largest Empire the world had ever seen and the naval strength to protect its possessions. In perspective, Great Britain represented 60% of the world's merchant shipping and the Empire half the civilized world.

In the far East, Japan was emerging from mediaeval isolation having decisively defeated Russia in the naval war of 1906.

The USA was still recovering from the aftermath of the civil war.

A series of treaties and less powerful agreements were set up linking the axis powers eventually including Turkey.

Great Britain and France signed the “Entente Cordiale” treaty in 1904 which linked the two powers but did not promise military support. Great Britain pursued the role of supporting the weaker powers against the strong preferring a balance of power in Europe. Many of the peripheral smaller European powers remained neutral but importantly included Belgium, her neutrality respected by all and guaranteed by the “Treaty of London,” 1839. Russia was allied to France for defence if either was attacked by the central powers led by Germany.

The Serbians now enter the scenario. The Serbs were a divided race, with one faction committed to liberate Serbian people from Austrian rule. This desire culminated in the assassination of the heir to the Austro Hungarian empire, Archduke Frans Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo in June 1914. Austria

attempted to impose its will on the Serbs seeking independence by issuing a ten point ultimatum. One of these points was disputed by the Serbs and Austria-Hungary mobilized to enforce its demands. Germany mobilized in support. Russia then mobilized in support of the Serbs which caused France to mobilise in support of Russia.

Kaiser Wilhelm believed that mobilization of the great powers would force a negotiated settlement. This didn't happen and Germany implemented the 'Schlieffen Plan' which had been drawn up almost twenty years before and was designed to enable Germany to rapidly win any European war. The plan entailed attacking France through Belgium and as soon as this happened Great Britain and its Empire was drawn into the conflict, Great Britain honouring its commitment under the 1839 Treaty of London after issuing an ultimatum to Germany to withdraw from Belgium or be at war with Great Britain as well as France and Russia.

Germany was amazed that Great Britain would go to war "over a scrap of paper."

Thus commenced Great Britain's part in the "Great War" on August 4th 1914 with dire effects across the world and communities such as Weston-sub Edge.

The British army at commencement of the war consisted of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) which had been established to be deployed in the event that France went to war with Germany. Around 100,000 men went to France to support the French army of over one million men. In parallel the British Secretary of State for War, having recognized that the war would be a lengthy affair commenced raising a citizen's army from scratch from volunteers. The army was only ready, trained and equipped in late 1915 for deployment across the channel.

Weston-sub-Edge men contributed to this "New Army" with loss of life and wounding.

Norton Hall was offered by the Bruce family as a Voluntary Aid Detachment Hospital and was staffed by local women including Weston-sub-Edge residents.



Roll of Honour

The following men of Weston-sub-Edge, who had attended the village school, died during the Great War.

William John Barnes

An agricultural labourer and then a private in the 1/5th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, enlisting in Chipping Campden. He was killed 16th August 1917 near Ypres and has no known grave.

William John Bowld

A market gardener, he enlisted in 1917 as a private in the 2nd Battalion of the Northamptonshire Regiment at Cirencester, and was killed in April 1918 shortly after arriving in France. His body was never found.

James Albert Court

He was working as chef at the time of the war and enlisted as a private in the 15th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment at Cheltenham. He was killed in March 1918 having served overseas from early 1916 and has no known grave.

George Thomas Perkins

An agricultural labourer who enlisted as a private in the 2nd Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment at Birmingham. He was killed in May 1917 and has no known grave.

William Hands Perkins

He worked in a box factory in Hockley Heath before enlisting as a private in the 6th Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry at Birmingham. He went to France in July 1915 and was killed near Armentieres in December 1915. He is buried at the Rue David Military Cemetery, Fleurbaix.

George James Bruce

Brigade Major Bruce warrants a mention since it was his family volunteered Norton Hall as a VAD Hospital and his sister, Maye Emily Bruce was commandant. He served commissioned in 1914 being assigned to the 13th Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles. He later served in the 47th Brigade, 16th Division in 1917 and then 109th Infantry Brigade, 36th Ulster Division. He died from wounds in October 1918 and was finally buried at the Dadizeele war cemetery.



Roll of Honour



Others Who Served



The above plaques can be seen in the Village Hall Weston-sub-Edge

Weston-sub -Edge War Memorial



The End of The Great War

In October 1918 the German effort was clearly coming to an end with civil unrest apparent in Germany as food shortages and “Spanish Flu” contributing to weakening morale. Ludendorff, joint Chief of Staff resigned in late October prophetically stating that “in two weeks we shall have neither Emperor or Empire”. He was accurate to the day and on 9th November it was announced in Berlin that Kaiser Wilhelm had abdicated. This led to an armistice, with complete surrender demanded by the allies with fighting ending at 11.00hrs on the 11th November 1918. The “Treaty of Versailles “ was negotiated and on 29th June 1919 the war formally came to an end five years to the day from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife.

The cost in terms of human life was horrendous.

In round figures:

The Allies mobilised 42million men of which 5 million were killed with a further 17 million casualties (wounded, missing, POW’s).

The Central Powers mobilised 22.8 million men of which 3.3million were killed and a further 11.7million casualties.

Weston-sub-Edge made its contribution and this pamphlet is dedicated to all who served, not just those commemorated on the memorials.

Peace Celebrations in Weston-sub-Edge



Paul's book "From Country Boys to Soldier Boys" detailing all the men and women from Weston-sub-Edge and Aston-sub-Edge who served in the Great War together with much, much more information and photographs is on sale priced at £15 plus £3.50 post and packing (UK only) from:

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From Country Boys to Soldier Boys

Remembering the men and women from Weston-sub-Edge and
Aston-sub-Edge who served in the Great War, 1914-18.



Paul R. Hughes

