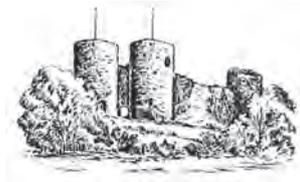


Rhuddlan in Peace & War 1911-1922



Compiled by members of Rhuddlan Local History Society



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Introduction

In the hundred years which have passed, much has been written about World War One, the Great War which raged from 1914 to 1918. The military, naval and air action has been well described by military historians, while political and social commentators have analysed the effects on British national life.

However, how much do we know about what happened in our local community of Rhuddlan and its environs? What was life like before the war and what changes took place for those left behind, the parents, wives and children, the business and trades' people? How was food availability and agriculture affected? Did the war change schools and the role of the churches and chapels? How did women respond to the war effort? Did many of our men go to war and were any exempt because of essential skills? Later, when the terrible conflict was over, how did the community receive its returning heroes and commemorate those who gave the ultimate sacrifice? The War Memorial can tell us the names of those who did not return but do we know anything about the lives of these men? They deserve to be remembered and recognised as people of our community, not names on a list.

It was this lack of knowledge that prompted the Rhuddlan Local History Society to research the subject and the result is this book which tells the fascinating story of our town and rural area in the peaceful pre-war days, the effect of the war years and how life had changed forever in the post war period.

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All material recorded in this book is correct at the time of publication but with the interest and research generated by the centenary of World War I further information may emerge.

Cause and Course of the War

How did the little town of Rhuddlan, a frontier of ancient Anglo-Welsh battles, come to send its sons to fight in the biggest war the world had ever seen?

It started with Serbia, part of which was occupied by the Turkish Ottoman Empire until the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 when the Turks were defeated and their territory retaken. The other part was controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Serbia wanted independence. Serbia's ally was Russia and a group known by the remarkable name "The Black Hand" decided to precipitate a war with Austria, anticipating Russia would join in and send Austria packing. The plan was to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir of Austro-Hungary, on his visit to Sarajevo on Sunday, June 28th 1914. The bomb attack at the Town Hall failed but when the Archduke and his wife Sophie decided to visit the injured in hospital another gang member, Gavrilo Princip, ambushed the car and shot them both at close range.

The war of words between Austria and Serbia was brief before Austria and Russia mobilised troops. Austria's principal ally was Germany which had been hotly pursuing territory particularly in Africa, to build an empire to rival that of France and Britain. Resenting British military might, in particular the British Navy's dominance of the seas, Germany had expanded her army and navy and built warships, alarming Britain and precipitating an arms race. Her intense nationalism and alliance with Austria was seen by France and Britain as a threat and they signed the secret Entente Cordiale in 1904 to support each other in case of war. Russia was equally alarmed by German ambition so she signed the Triple Entente with France and Britain in 1907.

The scene was set. Austria declared war on Serbia on July 28th and bombarded Belgrade. Germany demanded that Russia should stop mobilisation. Russia did not, so Germany declared war on Russia on August 1st. Russia called on France for support so Germany declared war on France on August 3rd. Britain's agreement with France and Russia and her vision of a Europe dominated by Germany was compelling. The last straw was the German invasion of Belgium which had long been a neutral country with neutrality agreed by all the great powers, but Germany disregarded this. In the 1890s Germany had prepared the Schlieffen plan (General Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German Great General Staff) to invade France via Belgium and encircle Paris from the north and west rather than from the east where French troops would be concentrated in a line of forts known as the Maginot line. Britain demanded German withdrawal from Belgium by midnight on August 4th and as this was unforthcoming, declared war against Germany. Rapid recruitment and expansion of the British armed forces ensued.



Germany found herself fighting a war on two fronts, France and Britain on the Western Front, Russia on the Eastern Front; but as each country's Empire joined in battle and new and old alliances were called upon, many other theatres of war opened up, particularly in Italy, the Middle East, the Balkans, Turkey and Africa. The British Empire sent troops from many nations such as Canada, South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand to name but a few and the alliances which had been made to prevent war had turned it instead into a true World War.

The first battle involving British troops took place at Mons where the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) clashed with the German First Army and two of our local soldiers, Captain Geoffrey Rowley Conwy of the Loyal Lancashire Regiment and Griff Evans of the 1st Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, saw action. Though heavily outnumbered, they successfully held back the German advance for 48 hours but had to retreat to prevent being encircled, the French having fallen back already. The BEF then turned and faced the enemy at Le Cateau, holding them up to enable the Allies to regroup and fight the Battle of the Marne, 30 miles from Paris, and prevent the capture of that city. The vision of a war settled by Christmas with a few pitched cavalry battles faded. The Germans withdrew to the River Aisne and began to dig in, as did the French, with a race on both sides to build trenches from the coast of Belgium to the Swiss border (the German defences were known as the Hindenburg line) thus ensuring a static war which would be fought over four long years, costing around a million lives on each side including those lost in sea battles and convoys and non-European territories, and causing the ruin of prosperous nations. It is ironic that the last British shots of the war were fired a short distance from the first, at Mons.

Seven Rhuddlan men served in the Royal Navy or its Volunteer Reserve, 3 in the Mercantile Marine, 6 in the Royal Flying Corps or Fleet Air Arm (combined on April 1st 1918 to form the Royal Air Force), 7 with the Canadian Expeditionary Force and the remaining 204 in many varied British Army Regiments at home and abroad, with most seeing action in all major battle areas, not just in France and Belgium.