

October 1914 ...

The excitement from a couple of months ago has given way to concern. Mr and Mrs Chapman of Beavor House are collecting donations such as tobacco, writing paper and fruit to send out to the local men at the front. They hope these gifts will keep the men's spirits up. We have received confirmation that one of our men has been killed and many are still missing. I will tell you more about them next time. You see something extraordinary happened in the town this month. We usually disregard the gossip going around, however fear and ignorance has now provided a breeding ground for it ...

About five years ago two gentlemen came to Brandon with their families and opened up a shop specialising in quality fabrics and clothing. Housman & Mr Relhan's is now one of the town's largest shops, spreading across 1 and 2 High Street, and both gentlemen play an active part in the community. However, when war was declared a few tongues spilled out gossip about Mr Housman. Was he a foreigner? Perhaps spying for the enemy? Suspicion was raised.

It is true that Mr Housman was not born in England, although his family originated from Cornwall. In fact he was born in Donegal, Ulster. Perhaps more to the point, there is this messy subject of Home Rule in Ireland and some people think there are Irishmen willing to assist Germany in the war. Ignorance and fear have led some locals to believe such fantastic stories about Mr Housman. The Police should have acted to protect Mr Housman. However they didn't. In fact they acted on the gossip.

It all escalated during the morning of Monday 26th October when Police arrived from Mildenhall. The authorities felt it was a matter too serious for Brandon's Police. Mr Housman was arrested under the 'Alien Act' and took off for questioning. He then had to prove he was a British citizen. Fortunately for him he was able to do this. However, had he not been able to do so then he would have probably been put away in one of those detention camps. As it is he has been allowed to return to his shop. But you know what? Despite all the humiliation of poor Mr Housman there are still some people who continue to question his patriotism! These are nervous times.

Postscript:

After the Armistice many towns and cities sought a war trophy to mark the nation's victory. Brandon's war trophy was a German machine gun. Perhaps there was some embarrassment felt in the town at the treatment of Mr Housman, or perhaps it was purely coincidental, but it was Housman & Relhan's who displayed the trophy first.

It is documented that Mr Joseph Housman was still running the shop in Brandon's High Street in 1925. Mr Harold Relhan and his family had left the business a few years previously. Mr Housman would eventually return to his roots in Cornwall. He died in St Austell, in 1950, aged 78.

*The men featuring on Brandon's war memorial from the First World War are featured in a 54 page book which can be bought from Craft Cabin, Bunches & Bows, Heritage Centre and the Brandon branch of the Royal British Legion. Copies cost £5 each, and proceeds will be donated to the Poppy Appeal.