

December 1914

It's Christmas already! It only seems like yesterday that Mr Gentle was having a "Guess the weight of the bullock" competition in his butcher shop. That was a year ago and looking back now it does seem to have reflected a less hostile time. This Christmas we have unfamiliar soldiers amongst us while our lads are in Flanders ...

A soldier recently billeted with a Brandon family brought diphtheria with him. The family are now facing a most miserable Christmas because one of them has since caught it and the house will need disinfecting from top to bottom. On another note Colonel Hamilton, of Brandon House near the bridge, has been urging residents to donate money to a fund he has just set up. It should be noted that the school children did a marvellous job of raising more than thirty shillings in just two weeks! The Colonel is hoping to use this money to purchase wool and other materials, which will be used by women volunteers to make winter garments for our lads serving in France. By all accounts the lads have been exposed to some very bad weather lately. They tell us they are enduring very cold nights and frosty mornings in the trenches, so hopefully these garments will keep them warm through the winter months. Colonel Hamilton suggests that if you have any winter clothing you may want to donate, then you can simply drop it off in his billiard room and he will ensure it gets sent out.

Talking of our lads in the fighting. There has been some frantic posting of letters and Christmas cards out to them and it goes without saying that the bulk of the letters are going to France. However one letter was received into the town from France and has really caught our imagination ...

The letter has been written by William Ashley, who joined up in 1898, and who is a veteran of the Boer War. He should have come out of the army four years ago but opted to extend his term until this summer just gone. This war put paid to any notion William had about leaving the army and he was immediately called up, literally days before he would have demobbed. He can thank the Kaiser for that! Just after Christmas Day his wife, who lives in Thetford Road, received a letter from him.

"On Christmas Eve the Germans started shouting Christmas greetings, and of course we did the same. Then they started singing Christmas carols, and of course we joined in until it became a general thing.

On Christmas Day they continued being friendly, and started coming out of their trenches towards ours, and by midday we were all mixed up together, shaking hands and exchanging tobacco and cigarettes. It was a sight I never expected seeing. The majority of them say they are fed up with the war.

So you see it wasn't such a bad Christmas after all. But of course that sort of game is finished, and we are settling down to the realities of war. I must say it was a treat to leave the trenches without being shot at."

So Christmas did not signal the end of the war as we had hoped. Yet William's letter offers some optimism that the Germans do not have the stomach to continue with this war. However. There are some amongst us who believe William was wrong to fraternise with the enemy and should have shot them as they left their

trench. They say that is why he went to war and the Christmas spirit should only extend to our friends, not enemies.

Postscript:

William was demobbed in August 1915. He returned to Brandon and worked as a woodman before re-enlisting and returning to France in March 1917, although as a labourer behind the lines and not directly involved in the fighting. In March 1919 he left the army for the final time. William died in 1958.