

March 1917...

Reverend William Foord-Crocker, Rector of St. Peter's church, improved the lives of many in Brandon, before he died suddenly in 1899. His replacement, Reverend Joseph Light Wyatt, is more than qualified to step into the great man's shoes. Before coming to Brandon, Wyatt travelled to India to build schools and churches from nothing, and took it upon himself to learn the Tamil language, which eventually brought him back to these shores when Cambridge University invited him to lecture on the language. This month Reverend Wyatt celebrates fifty years of teaching Christianity and throughout his career he has sought to improve people's lives. He now faces one his biggest challenges here in Brandon, as the town through no fault of its own, is in steady decline. Ironically it is the son of his predecessor who epitomises this decline.

Fifty-six year old Percy Crocker runs Brick Kiln Farm, on the edge of Town Street. It owes some of its past success to the fact Percy could rely upon his sons to help out. Today, in the spring of 1917, his sons are hundreds of miles away fighting in the fields of Flanders rather than working on fields in Brandon. The town is lacking able-bodied men to do any work so other Brandon businesses are feeling the strain too. Just last week Lingwood's fur factory went to court to argue that their foreman, who has just received his call up papers, should not go to war. The army has already taken forty men from this business so they can ill afford to lose another. Lingwood won the argument so the man can stay ... for now. Percy cannot equal their influence. Last year he was unable to harvest all his crops and many of them still lie rotting in the ground.

The authorities consider it virtually criminal that a farmer could leave his crop in the ground to rot, especially when food is becoming scarce, so they issued Percy a written warning stating he has to manage his farm better. The council had hoped soldiers stationed nearby, training with the Army, could be billeted with local residents and put to work on farms like Percy's. However this plan soon unravelled when local residents refused to accommodate the soldiers and demanded their own sons were returned from war to do the farming. I can see their point, most of these soldiers are from the city thus lacking any experience in farming, but this removed any hope Percy had for receiving assistance. The council have other options too, which they hope will alleviate local demand for food. The cemetery will be offered up for allotments and those with larger plots can hire a motorised tractor and plough at 15s per acre, which includes a driver and petrol. They have also arranged for a delivery of seed potatoes for residents to plant, but there is concern that these have yet to materialise and time is running out.

The authorities have an ulterior motive for writing to Percy. Brandon Hall Estate is being broken up and auctioned off at the end of the month. Percy rents his land from the estate and its derelict state might drive down the auction price. Or worse it might put off any potential buyer and Brandon can ill-afford to lose any investment right now. You have to feel for poor Percy. Perhaps if his father was still alive he could ask him to summon some divine intervention.