

Saturday 9th November 1918

According to the 'Thetford & Watton Times', Germany has asked for an armistice and our Prime Minister, Mr Lloyd George, has conferred with America's President Wilson about the terms he will offer Germany. Talk of an armistice comes as no surprise. The letters returning home from our lads suggest the German army as being on the verge of collapse. But then they have said that for weeks.

Sunday 10th November 1918

We prayed the rumoured armistice would happen, but as night descends we are still not sure when it will, although some say it will be tomorrow.

Monday 11th November 1918

OH WE CANNOT DESCRIBE OUR JOY – THE ARMSITICE FINALLY ARRIVED TODAY!!! There was talk it would happen at eleven o'clock this morning, so excitement grew, although this was countered by some trepidation too. What if it came to nothing? What if the Germans launched a sneaky attack? We waited. Then it was confirmed. Emotions spilled out. We took to the streets in celebration. It was the children who embraced it first. They ran about shouting and singing. They waved flags. Those who had no flag waved ribbons instead. You could see them all about the Market Hill, blowing trumpets while others squeezed noisy 'bladders'. Their faces were a delight. The younger ones have known nothing but war, so for them it was a new beginning.

To begin with there was a notable absence of adults celebrating, many of them are suffering the effects of influenza, perhaps in a weakened state of recovery, while others care for someone with the disease. You must also consider that so many men are away in the army, while their wives and daughters work to put food on the table. The latter was somewhat alleviated when the two huge fur factories, owned by Messrs Lingwood and Mr Rought-Rought, gave their staff the day off. I dare say the owners were caught up in the hysteria because they even paid their staff for the rest of the day. A historic day in more than one sense! Then we saw the adults set about hanging flags and colourful bunting from windows.

Then we heard a sound not heard in Brandon for over four years. The bells of St. Peter's church. In wartime the bells would only ring to signal an invasion of our island, but now they heralded happier times. We owe gratitude to the five bell ringers from Thetford, who came over and proceeded to ring out 720 changes. Sadly, Brandon's bell ringers had been depleted during wartime, with one of them, William Westlake, dead from wounds inflicted in Flanders. The church then conducted a Thanksgiving Service and today was indeed a day to be thankful for. We were thankful that no more lads would be killed in the war, although it came too late for sixty-four poor souls. It also came too late for those men who returned home damaged. It came just in time for the starving and diseased of Brandon. The night bonfires and fireworks around town gave us an optimism that the dark miserable days of war were now behind us.

Epilogue

In the days following the Armistice, our Government declared an immediate end to all conscription. No more would men be compelled to go to court and be judged on whether they could stay with their families. Our lads in the army began returning home, ironically it was those captured and held as Prisoners of War, who were the first. Cecil

Crocker had the distinction of being Brandon's very first one home. The popular misconception is that the Armistice signalled the end of war. In fact, the armistice is merely a ceasefire – "*If you do not fire at us, then we will not fire at you*", meaning some of our lads remained on the front line into the following year, sometimes occupying parts of the German line, just in case the Germans tried to catch us with our guard down. The actual end of the war did not come until peace was signed in June 1919.

When the lads returned home, having seen things no one should ever see, they needed to get a job. Their priority was no longer to capture a muddy trench, but instead feed a family. For them there was no counselling. No time to dwell on things. The transition from military to civilian life proceeded at varying degrees of success. William Mutum had fallen seriously ill while on active service, leading to his medical discharge when army doctors discovered he had Type 2 diabetes. He never truly recovered, and his depleted immune system saw him succumb to influenza less than two weeks after the armistice. His was the last name, the sixty-fifth, to be added to Brandon's 'Roll of Honour'.

William Royal returned to employment at George Woods' saw mill. It did not go well for William, when in February 1919 he jumped into a water-logged pit to bail water from a flooded saw machine. His overcoat got caught in the machine, dragging him onto it with such force that it broke an arm, both legs and smashed his skull. Death was instant. The mud of Brandon had done for William what the mud of Flanders had failed to do. His subsequent funeral bordered on the farcical. The Rector of St. Peter's waited ages for the funeral cortege, not knowing a service was being conducted by Albert Challis in Town Street's Methodist chapel, all in keeping with the wishes of William's widow. When the cortege arrived at the cemetery, the rector was having none of it and diverted them into the church for a second service before poor William could be finally laid to rest.

So why should we remember the Armistice of 1918? After all, conflict seems to be in the genetic makeup of humanity, no matter how painful it is. The Armistice signalled the end of Britain's involvement in the first global war – a 'World War'. Empires fell, society changed, and a new world power emerged. Many of today's conflicts have their roots in the war of 1914-18. The war was like no other before it, and like nothing since, with slaughter on such an unprecedented scale that it was considered, perhaps hoped, to be the "*war to end all wars*". If so, this would be forever known as 'The Great War'. Lessons needed to be learned. Memorials sprang up, pointing up to the heavens, to remind us that war comes at a cost and we should think seriously before entering such a thing again. Even when war was declared in 1939 some Brandon residents were heard to say, "*I hope it's not like the last war.*" Sadly, memorials only tell the victims' tale. Survivors, such as Percy Basham who lost an arm and yet returned to Brandon to get a job and put in a hard day's graft with the best of them, have no memorial. Their legacy is only maintained by those who remember them. If this Armistice Centenary does nothing but make us consider how much we might lose if we were to ever return to darkened days of war, then that must surely count for something?