

## October 1916...

Francis Owen was always destined for good things, being one of those handpicked few from Brandon to receive a scholarship at Thetford Grammar School. He stood out as an auctioneer at Thetford, while serving as a director of the Thetford, Norfolk and Suffolk Building Society. Sundays were the only day he did not work, leaving that day to teach at the Baptist Sunday school, on the High Street. So there was shock this month when, at the age of thirty, he died. Francis was no victim of warfare but instead tuberculosis, an illness that consumed him for the past year. Such was his standing in the community that on the day of his funeral business was suspended, with all shops closing early, houses along his funeral route closing their blinds and even soldiers on leave attended. His loss was as great as any Brandon lad's death in the trenches.

There was more anxiety when a huge plume of smoke, which could be seen for miles, ascended over the town. The reason was a haystack just off London Road, consisting of about thirty tons of hay, catching fire. The Brandon Fire Brigade duly arrived with their steam engine and pumped water onto the fire before eventually extinguishing it. Trouble is, what wasn't burnt was sodden with water and of no use to either man or beast. Fortunately the stack's owner, Alfred Towler, had taken out insurance against such an event, so will not be out of pocket.

Talking of flames, Alfred English, the High Street tailor, has been fined because his wall mounted gas burner, which illuminates his office at night, was throwing light across the street during a black out. These prosecutions have become common, and now the police come down hard against those who do not tow the line. I cannot overstate the fear of some Brandonians who believe they may be the next victim of a night time Zeppelin attack. I am sure it is no coincidence our Parish Council have just taken out insurance to cover losses from air-raids.

So you see a lot can happen in the space of a few weeks. The lads serving at the front know this more than most. In a split second a poor decision can be their last, but the consequence of poor decisions is not confined to those fighting. You see our old narrow bridge has, as long as we can remember, been accustomed to the relatively slow pace of pedestrians, horses and carts. Although when a cart weighed down with timber comes through you would do well to get out of its way, some are huge and take a lot of stopping. That advice now applies to the many military motor vehicles, but it seems some people travelling through do not share the locals' wisdom and they still try to squeeze through. Just this month a woman in a motorcycle sidecar came off worse following a collision with a military truck. Fortunately the impact was not enough to seriously damage either machine, but the woman was thrown across the bridge. Remarkably she suffered only cuts and bruises, although eyewitnesses reckoned she came close to being catapulted over the parapet and down into the river below.

It certainly has been a chaotic month, but it doesn't end there. A Brandon war widow has been assaulted on the Market Hill and the court case will be heard next week ...