

October 1918...

Herbert Docking's war experience was a thoroughly miserable one, which began when he enlisted in 1915. He would have volunteered for the army earlier but instead chose to wait for the birth of his son. Five months later, while Herbert was training with the army, his son died. The following year, while Herbert was engaged in the defence of Kut, just south of Baghdad, he suffered bouts of chronic diarrhoea, which led to frequent visits to the military hospital. Ironically, his saving grace while he was in the frontline, was being shot in the face, for this meant evacuation to India for medical attention rather than be captured by the Turks when they took the town. Hundreds of men died in the battle. Just as many died as prisoners. When Herbert was deemed sufficiently recovered, he returned to the Middle East in a comparatively safe role - as a servant to an army medical officer stationed in Basra military hospital. Herbert, having survived warfare, was then exposed a different danger. Disease.

In April 1918, Herbert was again hospitalised, with doctors diagnosing his muscle pains as myalgia. Then he contracted a fever and the diagnosis was malaria. On 18th October, Herbert's wife, Polly, living at Foster's Cottages on the Bury Road, received a telegram stating her husband was suffering from bronchopneumonia. Three days later, a second telegram proclaimed his condition as being 'critical'. A third telegram, received on 24th October, informed her that he was dead. It seems the postal service from the Middle East had been very slow in processing the mail. Four days before Polly received her first telegram, Captain Flood, of the Royal Army Medical Corps, had already declared Herbert had died from pneumonia, as a complication of influenza.

The world was in the grip of a flu pandemic, known by some as the 'Spanish Flu', eventually affecting one-third of the planet. Esme Mount walked from school to her home at 'The Laurels', on Thetford Road, one Friday afternoon. The next morning, she was stricken with flu and died on the Sunday, less than forty-eight hours after finishing school for the weekend. This disease, despite all the deprivations of four years of war, had become the single deadliest threat to life in Brandon.

Perhaps the scarcity of decent food, or the stress of war, had depressed people's immune systems. Perhaps it was the transient troops, coming and going through town that spread the disease. No one can be sure. Nevertheless, there was no doubt about the distress caused by the numbers succumbing to the disease. The only practical advice was to go to bed at the first signs of any symptoms, a voluntary quarantine if you like. Eat nothing or very little, "*starve a fever, feed a cold*". Those who survived were often in a weakened state for weeks after. Despite the advice, Brandon's council declared the town's death rate for the month ran to fourteen, with the majority being influenza victims. No one was immune. William Foord-Crocker had been reverend of St. Peter's church two decades previous. If divine intervention could step in and save anyone, you might think it would spare his granddaughter, Daisy Crocker. Sadly, she too succumbed and died. Too many children were affected. Brandon's schools closed their doors and cancelled lessons for a month in the hope parents would quarantine their children and curtail the spread of the disease.

With every passing month, Brandon's morale was sinking to new found depths. Now, more than any time previous in the conflict, the town was desperate for an end to this war ...