

## **The Letters of Lieutenant Walter Hill**

When researching my book, *Dorchester Remembers the Great War*, I came across Walter Hill, a lieutenant in the North Staffordshire Regiment, who is commemorated on the Holy Trinity Church memorial. An article in the Dorset County Chronicle had an intriguing reference to the fact that his mother had arranged for his letters to her to be made into a book, published by local Dorchester printer Henry Ling. I searched for them for 4 years; asking around locally, putting an advertisement in the Dorset Echo and even contacting Lings, who are still flourishing in the town; all to no avail. Then, last year, as is often the case with research, Serendipity took a hand. I was looking at the Imperial War Museum's online catalogue for something completely different when my wife suggested I see if Walter's letters were on there. Well, I was not optimistic, but there they were, and easily purchasable. What follows is just a short insight into some of their contents, and shows the spirit of the age.

Ellen and her husband, Cannon Charles Rowland Hill, arrived in Dorchester when Charles took up the incumbency of Christchurch, the garrison church of the Royal Artillery Barracks. Five years later they moved to Lyme Regis, but returned to the County Town when Charles became Rector of Holy Trinity Church. Their only son Walter was born in 1892 and at the age of ten was sent to the notoriously spartan Durnford School, at Langton Matravers. In his introduction to the book of letters his headmaster, Thomas Pellatt, said that Walter was very reserved and did not find school life easy. And yet he felt deep down there was a tremendous ambition in the boy waiting to emerge. The Great War would prove to be the event that turned the boy into a man. After completing his education at Winchester College Walter decided that his future lay in the military and in 1911, the same year as his father's death, he obtained a commission with the 3rd Btn North Staffordshire Regiment.

Walter's first letter to his mother was dated 8 August, 1914, four days after the outbreak of war, and was sent from Ireland, where his battalion was stationed. As his unit made its way from Ireland to the south coast of England, for embarkation to France, he described in detail military life on the move. En route the Staffords were joined by other battalions and by the time Walter had reached Newmarket, it had achieved Division strength. In one letter he described the incredible sight of 20,000 men and 76 guns pulled by horses, marching along the local roads, in a column 13 miles long. In every town they passed through they are cheered by large crowds and Walter tells of many instances of kindness. While travelling through Cambridge, for instance, 'Very poor sort of women come out of their cottages with aprons full of apples, while the plutocrats throw us whole boxes of cigarettes and cigars as they fly by in their Rolls-Royce.'

Walter's letters also capture the 'war fever' that was prevalent in the first few months of that terrible conflict. German spies were seen everywhere. On 14 August, 1914 he wrote, 'We caught a spy in barracks last night and lodged him comfortably in the guard room.' Rumours were rife, including one that the Germans had murdered 300 unarmed British prisoners.

Between the lines of Walter's letters we see a young man who felt that the War was an opportunity to prove himself. For him, the cause was right and as a patriotic Englishman he had to do his duty. But, he was also realistic about what was ahead of him, when he wrote, 'England looks very happy and peaceful, it is difficult to think of us being at war, such a terrible war too.' Despite this he was eager to get amongst the fighting, on many occasions

complaining about the slow progress. For him the journey to the war zone was frustratingly long and his greatest fear was that his unit would be held back on home duty and he will not get a chance to take part in the fighting. Hearing of other units being sent abroad he asks his mother, 'Why aren't the North Staffords among the lucky ones and added, 'we came here to fight. Still, I suppose everything comes to those who wait, be it death or glory.'

Walter's dream to fight for king and country came when the 3rd Staffords landed in France on 15 September. But, alas, it was to be a very short dream, lasting just ten days. On 25 September he was mortally wounded by a German sniper, while taking part in the Battle of the Aisne. His servant, a Pte Barnes, tried unsuccessfully to recover his body from no mans land and Walter suffered a lonely death. For his efforts Barnes was Mentioned in Despatches and Ellen presented him with a silver plate for trying to save her son's life. Walter's body was eventually recovered and buried in Soupir Cemetery. He is commemorated on Holy Trinity Church and Durnford School war memorials.

Walter Hill's full story, together with those of 250 other Dorchester men and one woman can be found in, *Dorchester Remembers the Great War*, available from the author, priced £12.99,

including p&p (telephone 01305 263824).

**Brian Bates**