

CANTERBURY IN WORLD WAR I

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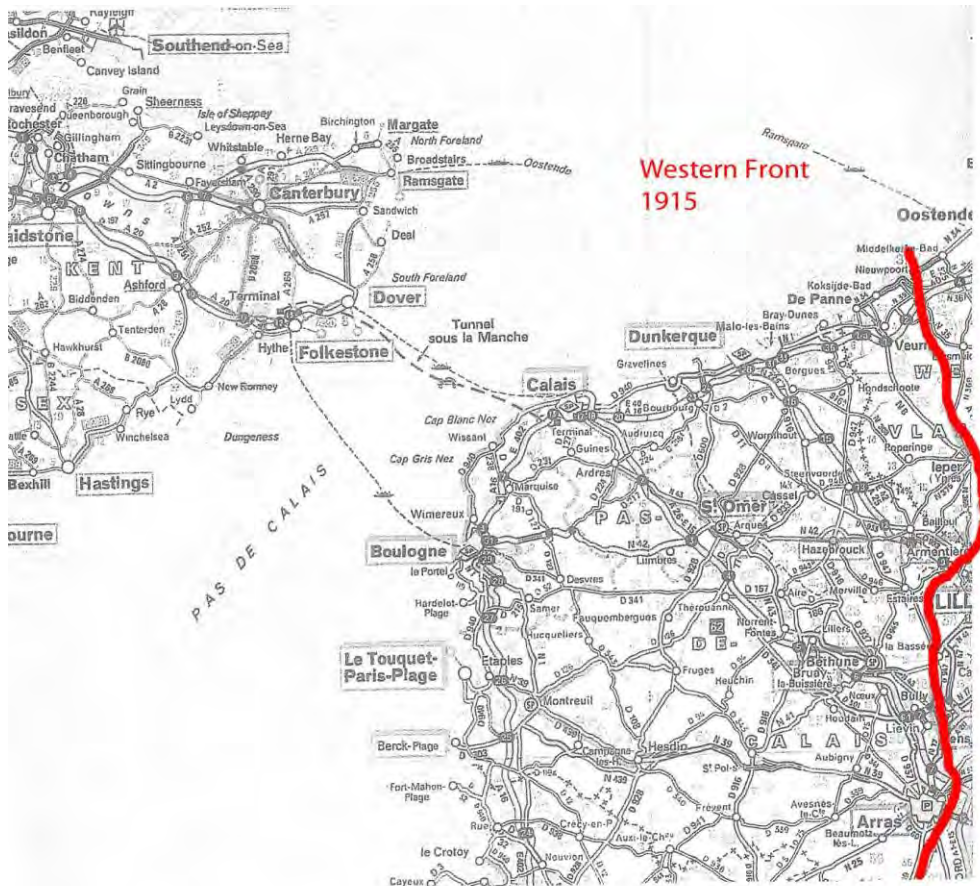
1 June 2013

Summary

The notes upon which the following outline is based were assembled as input to the Exhibition of Canterbury history from 1600 to the present day, held 16 November to 19 December 2012 in the Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury. Roman numerals in bold relate to the Bibliographic sources listed in the Annex.

INTRODUCTION

The strategic importance of Kent in the World War 1 is shown by a map of Kent and the Western Front, the almost static position of the battle line in a predominantly land war. Kent is the closest English county to the front and its ports were engaged in the huge scale transport of men, horses, armaments and materials and, then, the wounded to and from the front for more than 4 years. Kent was so close to the front that the noise of artillery barrages could be heard as far away as Sevenoaks.



1 Map of Kent and Western Front

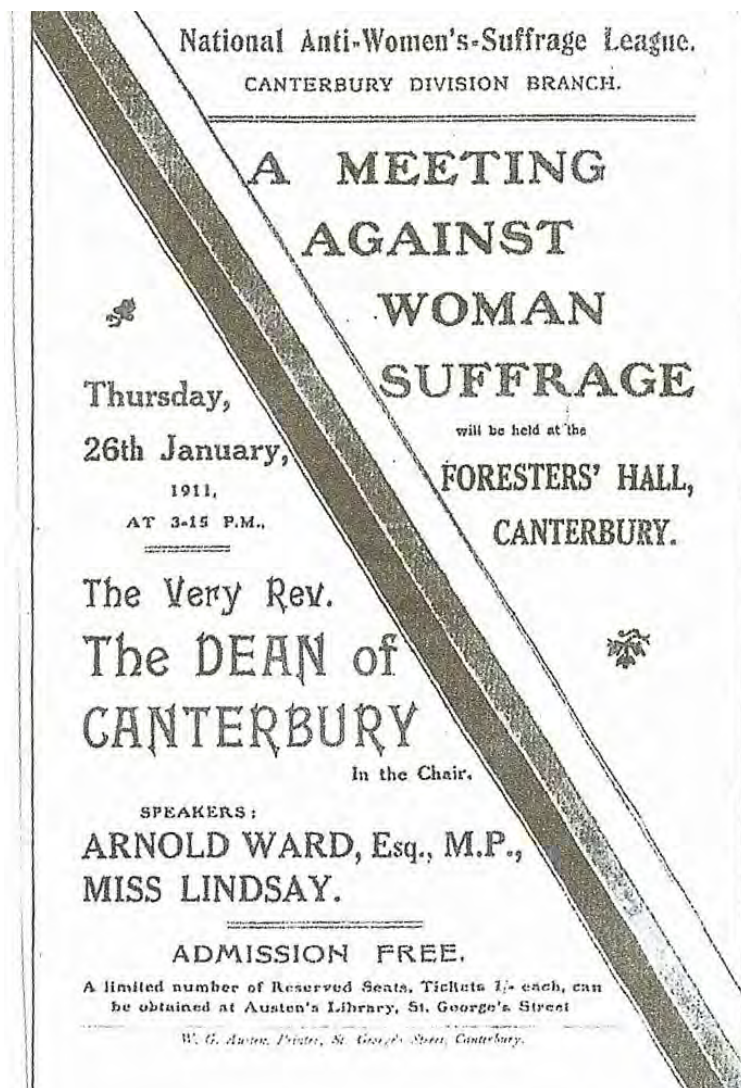
Although about 20 miles inland, Canterbury was the ancient East Kent hub, since Roman occupation (or earlier), of land routes to London and beyond. It was an army garrison town from 1794 (3. p6) and by 1860 was served by two railways leading to, what were to become in The Great War, the “front-line” channel ports. But, despite its strategic position, Canterbury, unlike Dover, Ramsgate and Folkestone, was not attacked from the air during this war. Canterbury also had an ancient connection to the English establishment with the prime and oldest (since 597AD) cathedral in the English church, and a population as long ago as 1086 of over 5000 (5. p140). By 1918 its population was 24628 (1. 2/2/18).



2 Taxis at the Westgate

Canterbury was, at the start of the war, “a quaint market town” (4. p18), “an old fashioned city, about 50 years behind the times” (3. p8). “The upper echelons of the Church as well as a great many ladies of independent means created a formidable social elite... a lady seeking paid employment was socially unacceptable” (3. p8) “Canterbury’s menfolk strongly disapproved of the suffragette movement” (3. p9)

Note: Although these two commentators (Refs 3 & 4) do not provide evidence for their characterisation of Canterbury, other sources suggest the City’s traditional mindset. They are the book “Women of Kent” by Laura Probert, a study of Women’s’ suffrage in East Kent and a piece in the Kentish Gazette and Canterbury Press on 1/8/1914. A quick look through Women of Kent suggests that the middle-class led suffrage movement was more active in the coastal towns than in Canterbury and there is evidence that the Archbishop at the time, Randall Davidson, was unwilling to support the cause (8.) and that the Dean of Canterbury, Henry Wace, chaired an anti-suffrage meeting in the City on 26/1/1911 (3. p9 & 4. p48).



3 Anti-suffragette poster

On 1/8/1914 an unnamed Kentish Gazette columnist wrote:

“TRADE UNIONS AND THE EDUCATED WOMAN.

THE VALUE OF COMBINATION – IS SNOBBERY THE OBSTACLE?

During the last two or three years trade unionism has spread rapidly among women of the poorer classes and there can be no question that immense good has thereby been achieved.... To many – perhaps the majority – cultured women there is no attraction in trade unionism....the obstacle.. is snobbery (which) is highly developed in the educated woman worker, the teacher, the widely experienced business woman, the hospital nurse. It is because she feels that by joining a trade union she will place herself on an equal footing with workers on a lower social scale that the educated woman stands aloof from the most important movement of many years. Sheer snobbery and nothing else!” “ There is a thriving trade union for men and women in journalism”

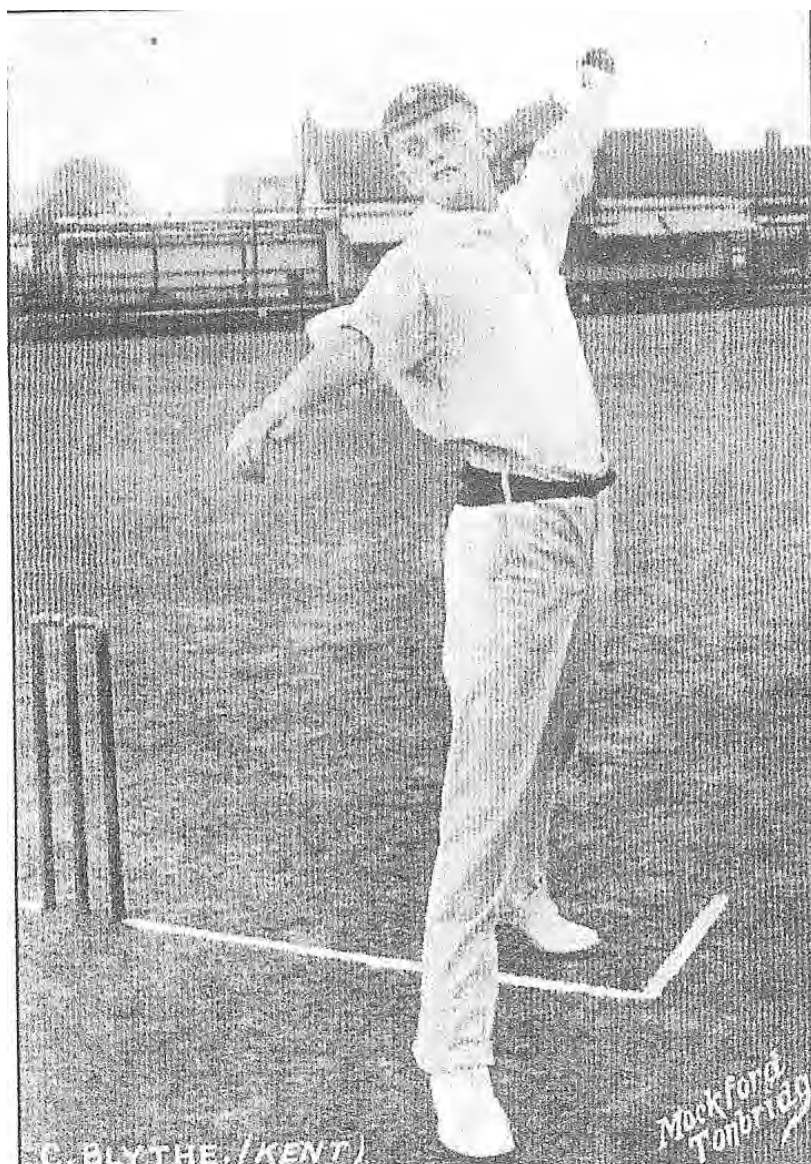
Coincidentally, war broke out the day after the start of perhaps Canterbury’s major social event of the year, the Cricket Festival. This piece about it in the Gazette 1/8/1914 illustrates both the prevailing confidence and class consciousness.

“CRICKET NOTES: NEXT WEEK’S FESTIVAL AT CANTERBURY

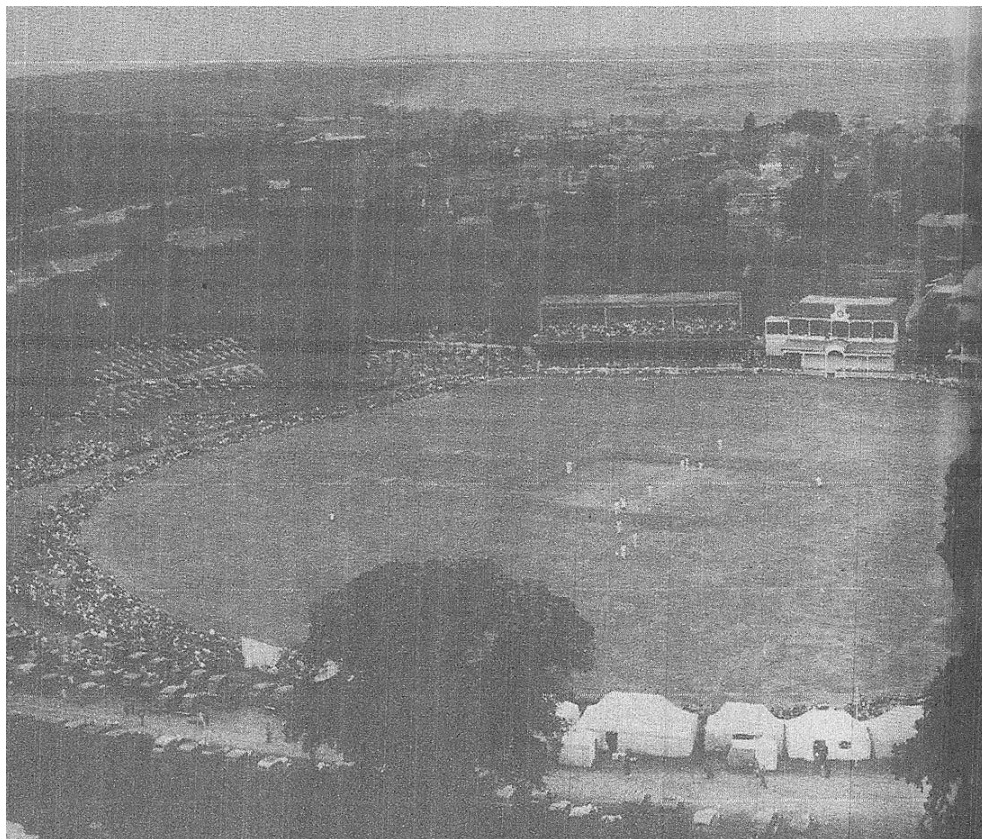
There will be no need to remind our readers that the Cricket Festival is both the oldest and easily the most famous of any in the Country. Year after year, people come to Canterbury in their thousands – their visits being as much of a custom with them as were the pilgrimages in the old days to Becket’s shrine...Of later years especially the Festival has become more and more a democratic festival. Nobility and clergy, middle-class and artisan and labourer coming in the most natural way. In their support of Kent cricket there are no class distinctions, and the enjoyment which is derived is essentially a mutual enjoyment.”

2.

Kent was a cricketing power in the years before the war, winning the Championship in 1909, 1910 and 1913. Their outstanding bowler, who also played for England, was Colin Blythe and he was to be one of the Club’s twelve casualties of the war.



4 Colin Blythe



5 St Lawrence cricket ground



6 Soldiers at St Lawrence cricket ground

START OF WAR

“When war broke out (4/8/1918) the British Army was hopelessly ill-prepared. Part of the problem was tradition. Britain had always relied on a large navy to defend itself from invasion....All the other great powers had systems of conscription (compulsory military service). This meant that Russia, Germany, Austria and France all had large armies in 1914.” (12).

News of the outbreak reached Canterbury via a telegram posted on the window of the Kentish Gazette office (photo Gaz 8/8/14 p5) and the paper showed signs of local unreadiness, before and after 4th August.

Gazette 1/8/1914

PRECAUTIONS AT CANTERBURY GARRISON

In view of the present grave European situation, preparations are being made at the Garrison in the event of hostilities. Brigadier-General Bingham has been recalled and all leave has been stopped to the troops whilst those away on furlough have been ordered to immediately return. Sentries have been placed on guard at all entrances.”



7 New recruits marching past drill hall Canterbury barracks

Front page of the Gazette 8/8/1914

CITY & COUNTY BOROUGH OF CANTERBURY
FOOD SUPPLIES

The public are earnestly requested to REFRAIN FROM PURCHASING PROVISIONS FOR STORAGE PURPOSES, the extensive supply of food in the Country happily rendering this unnecessary.

Immediately under this was NOTICE FROM BUTCHERS

Owing to the very grave position into which our Country has been suddenly plunged, the BUTCHERS are face to face with an APPALLING RISE IN THE PRICE OF ALL LIVE STOCK. Consequently, we, the Master Butchers of Canterbury are obliged (not willingly, but of necessity) to raise the price of meat."

On 8th August 1914 the Defence of the Realm Act was passed, giving the Government wide-ranging powers during the War, aimed at defending the Country from internal enemies and mobilising the war effort. "Some of the things the public were not allowed to do included flying a kite, lighting a bonfire, buying binoculars or feeding wild animals bread. Alcoholic beverages were watered down and pub opening times were restricted (an afternoon gap lasting until 1988)." (8.)

"There were street celebrations throughout Britain..(and) many believed that the war would be over by Christmas.(11.). The Government asked for 100,000 volunteers but got 750,000 (predominantly working-class (2. p275) in just one month". (11.) "Trade unions renounced strikes and all political parties, including the Irish Nationalists, supported the common effort (2. p268).... Suffragette movements suspended campaigns". (2. p274). All imprisoned suffragettes were unconditionally released (10/8/14)(8.). In practice the government made little use of (the DORA powers) and Britain, self-mobilised for war. (2. p271).

In Canterbury the Gazette announced that Lord Kitchener, who had recently purchased a house near Barham, had been appointed War Minister and called for 500,000 men (8/8/14 p5). Several pieces in same edition of the paper show the resolve and rapid change of mood in the City:



8 Lord Kitchener's appeal

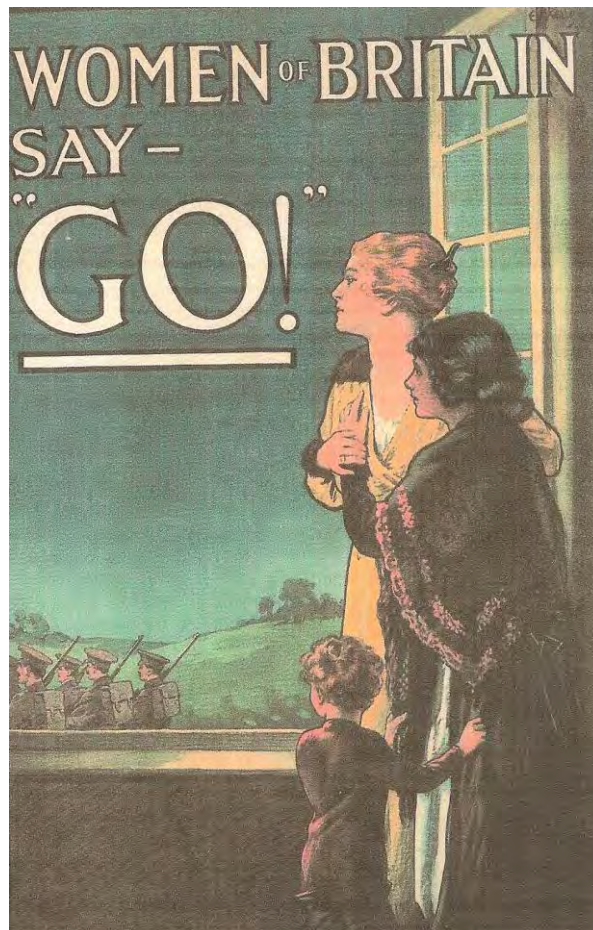
HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED IN CANTERBURY

3.

The grim realities likely to ensue...were reflected in the grave faces to be seen on every side. But there is no panic...the practically unanimous opinions expressed by men of all shades of political thought and creed in the locality that England's cause was a just one and that she literally been forced into the conflict to vindicate her national honour.

- * The Marseillaise was played at the Cricket ground
- * The gas holder in Martyrs Field and water works in Wincheap are guarded at night by troops
- * Canterbury trades holiday excursion is abandoned
- * Houses at which troops are billeted have chalk marks on the doors indicating the number and company of the men
- * Government vets are commandeering private individuals' horses
- * Skating rink taken over as troop accommodation

"Britain was swept with flag-waving, patriotic jingoism befitting its great Empire" (6.p5). Soon, women were getting involved in nursing, fund raising and helping the likes of Belgian refugees. "The iconography of womanhood was a common feature of early war posters" calling on men to enlist and protect British women from violation from hoards of invading Huns, a concept made more real and dreaded after the press coverage of the Rape of Belgium" (6. p5).



9 War poster