

The Folkestone Harbour Station Canteen and the Visitors' Books

Folkestone Harbour Station is a location which would have been familiar to the millions of soldiers who passed through it in the Great War. It was the last part of Blighty many enlisted men and nurses would have seen when they left for the Western Front, and the first they would have seen when coming home on leave. The Boulogne-Folkestone crossing was the usual route for soldiers coming home on leave, during most of the war.

How many people passed through Folkestone?

Several million men passed through here in the Great War but the exact number is not certain. In a letter to *The Times* in 1920 the mayor of Folkestone, RE Wood, representing the Folkestone war memorial committee, made the claim that “more than 11 million British soldiers passed through Folkestone on their way to and from the battlefields”.¹

This figure of 11 million seems to have become the most commonly accepted figure locally and obviously reflects the high level of civic pride in the port's role in the Great War. However, in actual fact the true figure for Folkestone cannot have been as high as this. *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire* states that the ‘Total Embarkation of Personnel’ from 1st day of embarkation, 9th August 1914 to midnight 1st/2nd April 1919 is given as 10,935,455.²

However, this figure applies to all UK ports, and Folkestone did not handle all embarkations by any means. Given Folkestone's importance as the main route for men and women going on leave for much of the war, the total number of embarkations for personnel returning from leave is perhaps a better guide. *SMEBE* states that of the near 11 million embarkations in total, 4,001,889 were because of leave.³

The total was clearly several million and other sources do give lower totals. For example in an account of the unveiling of Folkestone war memorial in late 1922 the figure was revised downwards to “over eight millions of Allied troops”.⁴

The Canteen

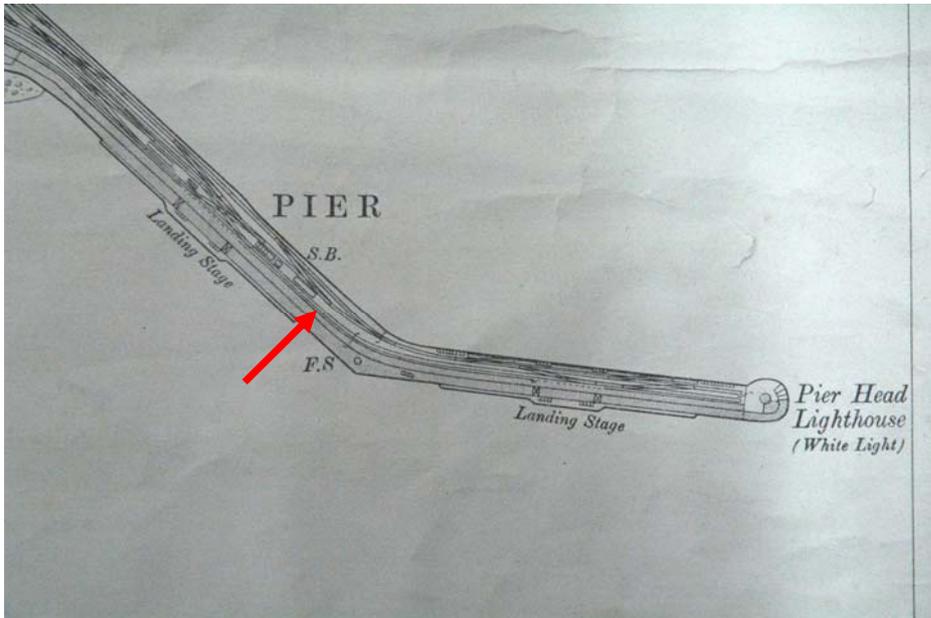
Throughout the Great War, the Harbour Station had a canteen which provided free tea, cakes and buns to soldiers, sailors and members of the Red Cross. According to the catalogue at the East Kent Archives Centre ‘this canteen was staffed by local volunteers and amongst the most devoted were the Misses Margaret Ann and Florence Augusta Jeffery.’ The Jeffery sisters were both awarded the Order of the British Empire, the Queen Elisabeth Medal (Belgium) and the Medal of Gratitude (France).

The photograph of the canteen shows clearly the granite of the harbour wall on the right of the picture. If you look carefully at the picture you can just make out a book on the table. This is one of the visitors' books that were signed by many of the men who benefited from the canteen.



(Photo courtesy of Folkestone Library)

We have tracked down the exact location of the canteen and it was on the furthest platform on the Outer Pier at the point where the Pier bends. The arrow indicates the location.



(Extract from 1906 Ordnance Survey map)

The following picture is taken from the point of the arrow looking south east.



These pictures show respectively a ‘then and now’ comparison with the location of the canteen and the entrance to the canteen. The site of the canteen therefore still exists and could still be preserved.

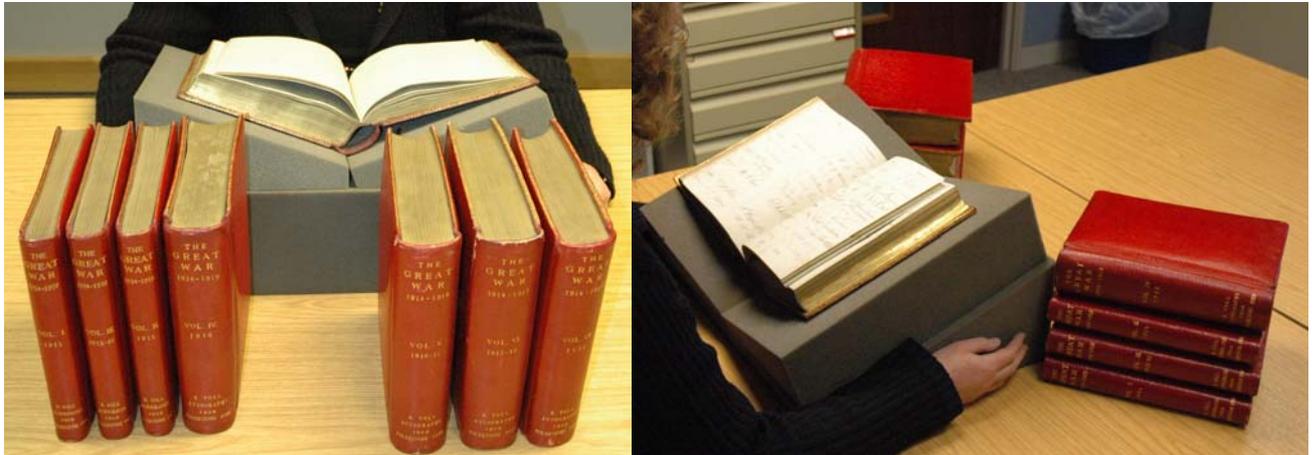


The Visitors’ Books

The visitors’ books have recently come to light in the East Kent Archives Centre⁵ in Dover where they were catalogued many years ago, but where they have not so far come to the wider attention of historians. The catalogue goes on to say ‘the albums were carefully bound after the war and were finally presented to the Borough of Folkestone in 1920 in order to provide a permanent reminder of all the serving men and women who used the Harbour during 1914 to 1919.’

There are eight volumes of the visitors’ books. Totalling 3,518 pages, they cover 1,604 days of the Great War with entries starting on 9 June 1915 and finishing on 29 October 1919. A conservative estimate, based on 12 names per page is a staggering 42,000 names.

The books are a wonderful roll call of those who passed through this site in the Great War and include men and women from all over the British Empire. Every race, creed and social class from King George V to the humblest private soldier is represented. Date of visit, rank, name and corps or unit are almost always included. A few men have also written their regimental number and a number have written comments or short poems.



(Above: the autograph books in East Kent Archives)

This is a fantastic resource for people researching an ancestor as the books would give definitive proof of when he or she passed through this particular spot. This would be particularly true for the many men whose service records do not survive in The National Archives and for whom it can be difficult to piece together a service history.

It is hoped that the books can be digitised and indexed so that they can be made available to all.

Many famous people of the day left a record of their passage. Politicians include Andrew Bonar Law, Lord Derby (Under Secretary of State for War), David Lloyd George, William Hughes (PM of Australia) and Winston Churchill. Representatives of the Royal Families of Belgium, Rumania, Spain and Serbia are to be found as is the odd writer such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Senior soldiers and sailors include General Sir William Robertson, General Sir Henry Wilson and Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes. A number of VC winners are also included as are the major-generals commanding a number of divisions of the British Expeditionary Force.

(Right: a page from the visitors' books showing the signature of David Lloyd-George, Secretary of State for War on 13 August 1915.)



The Station does have some important literary connections which are worth preserving. The town has recently been emphasising its literary heritage, through an annual Literary Festival,

which brings visitors into the area.⁶ Britain's greatest war poet, Wilfred Owen, passed through the Station on at least two occasions. He wrote a letter on 28 December 1916 from the Metropole Hotel before crossing the Channel the next day. He also went through the Station on the last occasion he left England on 31 August 1918.⁷ Another example is Henry Williamson, author of *The Chronicles of Ancient Sunlight* and most famously *Tarka the Otter*. Williamson spent several months based in Folkestone in 1919 as Adjutant of a unit for soldiers returning from the Western Front and was responsible for demobbing those who had finished their service. He would have been on the Station/Pier complex on a daily basis.⁸ One passage in his novel *Patriot's Progress* is believed to be a description of the Outer Pier. It is quite possible that Owen and/or Williamson might have signed one of the books.

Another use of this part of the station/pier complex may have been in November 1914. In that month the eminent Victorian soldier, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, who had been to the front to see the recently arrived Indian troops, died at St. Omer. 'His remains were brought to Folkestone where they were placed for one night in a room, on the Harbour, converted into a Chapelle Ardente. Troops mounted guard throughout the night and acted as an escort on the journey to London.'⁹

The future of this site

Sadly, this unique location is under threat. Under the Folkestone Masterplan the site is due to be demolished and replaced with modern buildings.¹⁰ The history will disappear under concrete.

An attempt at obtaining Grade 2 listing for the Station recently failed, although as of this moment (early March 2008) an appeal has been lodged with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

It is proposed that as much as possible of the structure of the Station/Pier complex be saved and used, particularly the location of the canteen which we would like to see restored and recreated as a museum. We believe this would be a significant enhancement to the cultural appeal of the town and would support the regeneration.

If you would like to help, please contact your Member of Parliament and let them know that this vital part of our nation's heritage is in grave danger. Contact details for your MP can be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alms.cfm>

Endnotes

1 *The Times*, Thursday 1 April 1920, p. 19 column D. I am grateful to Clive Maier of the Great War Forum for providing this information from The Times digital archive.

2 *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire*, p. 510. (This is comprised as follows: Officers 772,196, Other Ranks 10,121,263 and Nurses 41,996.) This of course includes multiple crossings by the same person as this total is considerably higher than total enlistment.

3 *Ibid.* The total for leave consists of Officers 398,538, Other Ranks 3,582,465, Nurses 20,886

4 *The Times*, Monday 4 December 1922, p. 9, column B

5 East Kent Archives Centre, Enterprise Zone, Honeywood Rd, Whitfield, Dover CT16 3EH Tel: 01304 829306 Email: eastkentarchives@kent.gov.uk

6 see <http://www.folkestonelitfest.co.uk/>

7 *Wilfred Owen – a new biography*, Dominic Hibberd, 2002, pp. 202 and 331

8 I am grateful to Anne Williamson of the Henry Williamson Society for this information

9 *'Memories of the Harbour'* by a Mr Hickingbotham in *Folkestone – Past and Present*, 1954

10 The Masterplan can be viewed here: <http://www.folkestoneharbour.com/index.aspx>