

Memories of Wickford

Author: Willie Muir, St Andrews, Fife
Date Range: 1915-1916

Letter dated 29 October 1987 (From handwritten document, some parts illegible shown by and guessed words in italics)

Dear Mr Hall,

It was a considerable surprise when a few days ago a cutting from the Standard Recorder of Friday 29 March 1987 was received. In it is a picture of yourself astride 'an old delivery bike' in Wickford and an accompanying story of your firm which are both very interesting; and also have opened the floodgates of memory and let incidents of 71 years ago come pouring out. That being so I can well imagine you on your bike, in your day, pushing up the London Road with a full carrier or up the Southend Road to Shotgate and elsewhere as we used to do on our bikes, as far as Walton on the Naze, Shoeburyness, Foulness Island and Canvey Island and back to Wickford. We, 'The 65th (Lowand?) Division Cyclist Company' were an entirely new unit of the army. There was a company for each division. Recruiting started in Glasgow at the beginning of June 1915, continued for 3 months, then a month under canvas for (still growing in strength) and on tofor 4 months where we were licked into shape.

We got everything: drill route and cycle route marches,, trench digging, the lot! In rotten weather sometimes: a blizzard when marching over the Hills. But we were altogether in a good billet, the town hall, and in which we could have organised dances with the girls of the village (pop 2,300). Slept on straw palliasses on 3 boards on low trestles. I am telling you all that so that it can be compared with the luxury we experienced in Wickford – after we had recovered from the welcome!! We, the advance party, officer, sergeant and about a dozen men, one evening, early February (1916) were given a boisterous send off to an unknown destination (except to the officer) and arrived at Kings Cross, London in time for a breakfast in a canteen, free! The journey from Scotland to London was always boring and our arrival at Liverpool Street station did nothing to dispel that condition, cold, tired, nor did our arrival at Burnham on Crouch, but we were glad to get out of the train, even although the weather was the most miserable imaginable – very, very dull with a thick drizzly mist – journey's end!!!

The officer went into a house to report and 'take over' (leaving us 'standing at ease' on the street). But our rising spirits received a sudden slump. The officer came out and said someone had blundered. We should have de-trained at Wickford. What a shock! As sergeant in charge (under the officer) I must have seen the boys back to Wickford and into billets but the next thing I can remember was having a meal in my billet with the blacksmith and his wife. I had actually arrived! Their house was to the NW of the Runwell Road which, at that time, had a high hedge along that

side with the footpath on that side also. It was somewhere behind that hedge. That was my billet for only 3 or 4 days while the officer arranged accommodation for the whole company. It was very comfortable and luxury to sleep in a bed again but while the men were 2/3 in a billet I was alone and the people in the house had nothing to say. Perhaps it was the shock of having a soldier (foreign! from Scotland) deposited in their family circle and I felt very lonely and far from home.

The men couldn't just lie about their billets during the day so my duty was to have them on parade, outside, but the weather made that a nightmare for me. The heavy soaking mist persisted and at one period it snowed sufficient to give the roads, when it melted, a thick covering of slush and a hard frost came during the night and it froze hard. (The roads in the village were impassable). The thaw suddenly came in the morning and with it the misty drizzle. To march on it was impossible, a man would slip and knock the feet from another and that was happening throughout the whole squad. Falling on the wet, frozen ice, while carrying full marching order including a rifle, was no joke so we halted; but that didn't work either because it was so raw cold. However, these first days of welcome and extreme misery passed. The company arrived and the sun shone (metaphorically at least) and we began to enjoy ourselves in Wickford and Essex for a year.

To avoid a lot of explaining there is a sketch map (of sorts) enclosed (*not attached to document*) – at least it shows the position of the various places which are remembered.

Our billets, ringed in red, come first. They were most important.

No.1 was only occupied till the company arrived and I can't remember ever hearing the blacksmith's name.

No.2 was not far away from No.1, across the Runwell Road.English and two grown up daughters. In it I had the companionship of another Sgt. Billy Chisholm which continued there and in No.3, withEnglish and his family, we were introduced to new 'ways'. We had our meals (at least evening) with the family. It was an interesting place as there being three or four there could be conversation. So many questions and answers about our two countries. My first astonishment was the ingredients of the 'old man's' supper: a raw onion about the size of a tennis ball, a lump of cheese and a large glass of ale. Language also was often a source of amusement, though it must be stated that, at that time, the purest English was said to be spoken in Inverness and Dublin. One night the fellow who worked in the ironmongers (fiancé of the elder daughter) was present and he said: 'Bill, what do you call lices?' (laces). I looked up and saw Billy slightly smiling. 'Laces', I said. Then the fellow said 'Well one of your signaller chaps came and asked for a pair of wangs!' (Whangs = a leather strip, piece of cheese, bread,word mostly used in Ayrshire district and used in the poems of Robert Burns).

We were not long in No.2 before we were moved to Mr and Mrs **Waterman, Jolimont**, on the N side of London Road. This was indeed luxury! The big front room upstairs was our bedroom. Soldiers

had various names for their 'beds', e.g. 'scratcher' or just 'a wee pickle straw' (Pickle = a small quantity or a grain of corn). (Do I hear you say 'you're tellin' me?') In No.3 the bed was large, double and white linen sheets!! Oh, how we slept!

Mr Waterman was a draughtsman, travelled to London and aroused us in the morning in time for our first parade down beside the station at 7 a.m. When we arrived there (at No.3) Mr Waterman 'laid down the law': 'You boys won't go upstairs with your boots on and you will keep your equipment in the greenhouse' - and we didn't say 'naturally' but thought it. But she was, oh, so kind and looked after us. When I got into disgrace (from which I recovered later) and she was told, she looked at me and said 'Willie, whatever will your mother say?' THAT made me hang my head more than all the rest of it. I had let her down.

Having had such kind treatment do you wonder that I remember Wickford? When at the scout jamboree the year Wembley was opened I took a run down one afternoon and paid her visit.

As far as economics are concerned our visit didn't make any difference to the village. We were fed and clothed so that our wants were few. A pair of laces, perhaps, or polish – soldiers friend. Cyclists were classed as 'mounted infantry': had our 'mounts' been steeds instead of bikes we might have taken an interest in 'Halls'. To be honest that is one shop that is not remembered.

The street, on emerging from the station access – coming the hill, is a bit confused. One turned to the left there were a few shops, not many and past them houses with fencing in front. The road to the kirk and *Southend*? across the other side, PO on the right, hotel to the left. Perhaps that is..... Then the other way to the right, beyond the railway bridge, a wee baker's shop, which didn't look across the street but SW along it; or maybe it was the little cobblers shop that looked that way? The bakers became a fashion with the baps because of its extra special cream cakes. The cobbler was patronised by the sergeants when he supplied solid leather belts 2½ ft x 2½" complete with solid brass buckles which we wore with our 'walking out dress' instead of the web equipment one. It cost 2/6 and, would you believe it, mine is still in my possession!!

I don't want to require another page and apologise for boring you so long, and would crave you will forgive a hawering auld man! The photocopies are enclosed (*not attached to document*) to give you a glimpse of the backgrounds, ignore the 'blokes' who are standing in the way. (By the way, none of them are any more, except myself, so there is nobody to yarn with who would know what I was talking about.) Therefore you have had to suffer this imposition. Enough.

I do hope you are enjoying your retirement. Of course, you will have a car, but if I were there it would be a great enjoyment to potter around your roads again as we used to do, sometimes overnight and bivouac with a blanket, groundsheet. Give my best wishes to your son Christopher. I trust he will have a happy and prosperous time and crowds of customers.

This requires no reply. It is sufficient to have written it down and dispatched it to Wickford.

With my kindest regards,

yours sincerely,

Willie Muir

(Ex sergeant)

(DofB 1892)