

## THE WIPERS TIMES

The ***Wipers Times*** was a trench magazine that was published by British soldiers fighting in the Ypres Salient during the First World War.

In early 1916, the 12th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters, was stationed in the front line at Ypres, Belgium, and came across a printing press abandoned by a Belgian who had, in the words of the editor, "stood not on the order of his going, but gone." A sergeant who had been a printer in peacetime salvaged it and printed a sample page. The paper itself was named after Tommy slang for Ypres itself:

Publication was held up after February 1918 by the German Offensive on the western front in that year, but at the end of the War two issues of "The Better Times" were published. The second of these was billed as the "Xmas, Peace and Final Number."

The names of the staff involved in the paper are mostly unrecorded. The editor was Captain (later Lieutenant-Colonel) F. J. Roberts (Frederick John Roberts), MC, the sub-editor was Lieutenant (later Lieutenant-Colonel) J. H. Pearson (John Hesketh ("Jack") Pearson), DSO, MC.



Frederick John Roberts

A notable contributor to the paper was Artilleryman Gilbert Frankau. Also worthy of note are the engravings by E.J. Couzens; his portrait of a chinless platoon commander clutching his cane and wondering "Am I as offensive as I might be?" became the paper's motif.

Most other contributors from the Division used pseudonyms: some now obscure; some intended to satirize contemporary newspaper pundits such as William Beach Thomas (of the *Daily Mail*) and Hilaire Belloc; and some ironic, such as P.B.I. (Poor Bloody Infantry).



The paper consisted of poems, reflections, wry in-jokes and lampoons of the Military situation the Division was in. In general, the paper maintained a humorously ironic style.

The covers of each issue were mock adverts, richly typeset, for war-related music-hall extravaganzas. A few samples (not richly typeset) are given below:

**WIPERS & DISTRICT  
GAS COMPANY.**

—o—o—o—  
**ISSUE OF NEW  
STOCK.**  
—o—o—o—

Owing to the ever-increasing use of Gas in the neighbourhood of Wipers, the Company are increasing their plant to cope with the extra demand. They hope to be able to supply all (and more) than the consumers want.

The Company has Branch Offices at any Artillery Headquarters, where further information can be obtained.

Stock will be issued at 18/ and 60/.

Rapid and regular delivery guaranteed.  
**WIPERS & DISTRICT GAS COY.**  
R. A. GUNNER, Secretary.

## Articles

The daily concerns of trench soldiers all make an appearance in the articles, sometimes explicit and sometimes as in-jokes for which outsiders would not have the key.

**Shelling** (whether from the enemy or one's own side): is referred to all through the magazine. There are occasional small ads purportedly from Minnie (German trench mortar) to Flying Pig (British ditto) and various poems complaining about, or apologising for, incidents where British guns shelled their own lines.

**Sex:** the collections of pornography known to the Division as "The Munque Art Gallery" and "Kirschner's" are frequently mentioned and occasionally advertised, as are the local brothels: the Fancies, the Poplar tree and Plug Street.

**Drink:** the continued supply of rum and whiskey was a prime concern for all at the front. In one serial story, *Narpoo Rum*, a certain 'Herlock Shomes' spent five issues tracking rum-thieves round Hooge. Brief references also turn up to panic buying of supplies by unnamed individuals in the Division after rumours of a whisky drought.

**Rats:** these bred in enormous numbers in the trenches, chiefly fed on corpses but with an eye for anything left in a dugout. One poem in the paper describes how a rat and his wife opened a tin of sardines, ate the contents then sealed the tin back up for the author to find.

The reality of life in the trenches rarely breaks through what the editor termed the paper's 'hysterical hilarity' but when it does, the gallows humour is clear and may appear callous to modern eyes. One example is a quote from an article in a British national newspaper about a bungled trench-raid, followed by a sharp comment from the editor of the *Wipers Times*:

"...They climbed into the trench and surprised the sentry, but unfortunately the revolver which was held to his head missed fire. Attempts were made to throttle him quietly, but he succeeded in raising the alarm, and had to be killed." This we consider real bad luck for the sentry after the previous heroic efforts to keep him alive.

Another such, from the column "Verbatim Extracts from Intelligence Summaries" reads as follows:

"At 10 p.m. the "Flying Pig" dropped a round in our front line at X 9 D 5 2. The trench was completely wrecked—the crater formed being 14 feet deep and 25 feet across. It is consoling to think that over 40 rounds have been fired from this gun into the enemy trenches during the last week."

(Very consoling to the P.B.I.)

Even the weather wasn't immune to it, if you wanted to lay odds on the forecasts:

5 to 1 Mist

11 to 2 East Wind or Frost

8 to 1 Chlorine.

## Poetry

Much of the copy submitted by soldiers of the Division was poetry. Some was good, some was doggerel and occasional pieces were excellent: but not all was welcome. The fourth issue contained this notice from the editor:

"We regret to announce that an insidious disease is affecting the Division, and the result is a hurricane of poetry. Subalterns have been seen with a notebook in one hand, and bombs in the other absently walking near the wire in deep communication with their muse.

Even Quartermasters with "books, note, one" and "pencil, copying" break into song while arguing the point re "boots. gum, thigh". The Editor would be obliged if a few of the poets would break into prose as the paper cannot live by poems alone."

Nonetheless, much of the space in the paper was taken up by poems. Two typical examples are given below.

*Realizing Men must laugh,  
Some Wise Man devised the Staff :  
Dressed them up in little dabs  
Of rich variegated tabs :  
Taught them how to win the War  
On A.F.Z. 354 :*

*Let them lead the Simple Life  
Far from all our vulgar strife :  
Nightly gave them downy beds  
For their weary, aching heads :  
Lest their relatives might grieve  
Often, often gave them leave,  
Decorations too, galore :*

*What on earth could man wish more?  
Yet, alas, or so says Rumour,  
He forgot a sense of Humour!  
  
The world wasn't made in a day,  
And Eve didn't ride on a bus,  
But most of the world's in a sandbag,  
The rest of its plastered on us.*

## Miscellanea

The paper is sprinkled with small paragraphs and half-column articles such as "People We Take Our Hats Off To" (frequently the French), "Things We Want to Know", "Answers to Correspondents" and small ads. Some were obviously spoofs:

LONELY PRESIDENT wishes correspond with anyone.

Can write charming note. Has corresponded with most of the crowned heads of Europe.-

Write "Dignitas," Washington, U.S.A.

To Subaltern: Yes, every junior officer may carry a F.M.'s baton in his knapsack, but we think you'll discard that to make room for an extra pair of socks before very long.

TO LET-; Fine freehold estate in salubrious neighbourhood. Terms moderate. Owner going east shortly.-; Apply Bosch and Co., Messines.

While others were not for outsiders:

Things We Want To Know

The name of the celebrated infantry officer who appears daily in the trenches disguised as a Xmas tree.

How much money changed hands when it was known that he didn't get married on leave.

Whether a certain officer is shortly publishing a little song entitled "Why was I so careless with the boots."

To Troubled.-; Certainly think you have just complaint against people in the next dugout, and if you care to take the matter further there is no doubt you will get damages. It certainly was scandal if, as you affirm, the picture was one of Kirschner's.

We regret a further rise in property today.

### **Acronyms and slang**

- B.E.F. = British Expeditionary Force
- F.M. = Field Marshal
- Flying pig = British 9.45 inch Heavy Mortar
- Minnie = *Minenwerfer* - German trench mortar
- napoo/narpoo = there's none/there's no more (corrupted from *il n'y a plus*)
- P.B.I. = Poor Bloody Infantry
- AFZ = Army Form Zero - the Army has a numbered Form for every possible purpose - AFZ = loo paper

### **Adverts**

<p align="center"><b>Or on the Front Line at Ypres Salient itself</b></p> <p align="center"><b>BUILDING LAND FOR SALE</b>          'Build that House on Hill 60'          Bright – Breezy and Invigorating          Commands an excellent view of the historic town of Ypres</p> <p align="center">For particulars of Sale apply to Boche &amp; Co. Menin.</p>	
<p><b>Cloth Hall</b> <b>Ypres</b></p>	<p><b>"Dead Cow Farm Cinema"</b></p>

<p><b>There were also sales of 'No-Mans Land'</b></p> <p><b>THE SALIENT ESTATE – COMPLETE IN EVERY DETAIL</b>          Intending Purchasers will be shown around at any time Day or Night – Underground residences are ready for Habitation!          Splendid Motoring Estate! Shooting Perfect!! Fishing Good!!!</p> <p>Now's the time. Have a stake in the Country. No reasonable offer refused.          Do for Home for Inebriates or other charitable Institution.</p> <p>Delay is dangerous! You might miss it!          Apply for particulars etc. to: Thomas Atkins &amp; Co. Zillebeke and Hooge.</p>
---

### **Trench humour: First editorial column of the Wipers Times, 1916**

Having managed to pick up a printing outfit (slightly soiled) at a reasonable price, we have decided to produce a paper. There is much that we would like to say in it, but the shadow of censorship enveloping us causes us to refer to the war, which we hear is taking place in Europe, in a cautious manner.

We must apologise to our subscribers for the delay in going to press. This has been due to the fact that we have had many unwelcome visitors near our printing works during the last few days, also to the difficulty of obtaining an overdraft at the local bank.

Any shortcomings in production must be excused on the grounds of inexperience and the fact that pieces of metal of various sizes had punctured our press. We hope to publish the "Times" weekly, but should our effort come to an untimely end by any adverse criticism or attentions by our local rival, Messrs Hun and Co, we shall consider it an unfriendly act, and take steps accordingly. We take this opportunity of stating that we accept no responsibility for the statements in our advertisements.

### **Extracts from the first edition**

#### **Things We Want To Know ...**

#### **Proof That We Are Winning The War, by Belary Helloc**

[This is a satirical reference to Hilaire Belloc, editor of the pro-war magazine Land and Water, which was notable for its inflated estimates of enemy casualties and unbounded optimism.]

In this article I wish to show plainly that under existing conditions, everything points to a speedy disintegration of the enemy. We will take first of all the effect of war on the male population of Germany. Firstly, let us take as our figures, 12,000,000 as the total fighting population of Germany. Of these 8,000,000 are killed or being killed, hence we have 4,000,000 remaining. Of these 1,000,000 are non-combatants, being in the navy. Of the 3,000,000 remaining, we can write off 2,500,000 as temperamentally unsuitable for fighting, owing to obesity and other ailments engendered by a gross mode of living. This leaves us 500,000 as the full strength. Of these 497,250 are known to be suffering from incurable diseases. This leaves us 2,750. Of these 2,150 are on the eastern front, and of the remaining 600, 584 are generals and staff.

Thus we find that there are 16 men on the western front. This number, I maintain, is not enough to give them even a fair chance of resisting four more big pushes, and hence the collapse of the western campaign.



Norman Bambridge  
Basildon Borough Heritage Society  
January 2023 – updated December 2024