

'Pagham's War' 11.xi.2018

Pagham in 1914 was still very much an agricultural parish with little more than a thousand souls. Into this pastoral idyll one might have expected the Great War for Civilisation to have come crashing, upturning every aspect of life. That was my pre-conception as I came to Service Registers, school and tithe records, church minutes. We will see instead civilian life going on and yet nevertheless subtle, surprising and poignant echoes of war.

If we begin with baptisms, they seemed to go on year by year, numbers not fluctuating greatly. Perhaps war came slowly to Pagham as it was not until January 1916 that the first "soldier" appeared in the register as the father of the child. Thereafter other professions continued to outnumber soldiery (except in 1918 when it was fifty-fifty), which may not be a surprise given that most of them were connected with the land and food production, necessary tied occupations. There was also a Bank of England Official and Post Office porter, different kinds of exemption from the frontline. Still, looking through this church family history, it was moving to go further back and find entries for (among others) Albert Edward Williams, Albert George Janman, Thomas Venus, Stephen Misselbrook, George James Hale and Ernest "Kates"; imagining the hopes their parents must have had and how the War ended them.

What about the Marriage Register; did the War affect who and how many were getting married? Here we notice a change sooner: the first soldier to be wed was in May 1915. The number of weddings wasn't a lot higher than pre-War, although 1915 and 1917 were to a degree, but the proportion of bridegrooms who were soldiers is higher than the fathers in the baptism records: over half of them between 1916 and 1918 and they were mostly young men in their twenties; an urgency to their nuptials. I think the vicar, Grosvenor Goode Knox, had a challenge in defining their places of residence; we have military camp, one at Shoreham, another at Weymouth; Aldwick, in billets; local addresses with "home on leave from France" stated in brackets and then the evocative "somewhere in France". There are also one or two dreadful contrasts between Pagham and the Front. On 25 September 1915, a Nyetimber couple made their vows, while Thomas Venus died of wounds in Belgium. Earlier that year, on 8 May, Wilfred Homer (soldier) and Elizabeth Morley celebrated their day; that night Maurice Blackman and James Patten may have slept a few hours before they took part in the doomed Aubers Ridge assault on 9 May. Both were killed as were around 800 men of the Royal Sussex Regiment. We can see why no wartime couples had bells rung on their wedding days.

In other areas of life, Pagham seemed far from the Front and its horribly modern warfare. There were even regular tithe apportionment records, signed and sealed by government officials (you would have thought they had more pressing things to do!) and sent to the vicar. Pagham's church school at Sefter went on regularly with business- repairs, staff appointments, even salaries rising incrementally. That said, echoes of war are to be heard. Each meeting stated that requisition forms had been received and signed. Then, in February 1916, the Local Authority wrote to say that with one or two exceptions the usual prizes for children were going to be withheld "on account of the War."

As for the regular round of church business, this too continued, as exemplified each year in the annual Vestry Meeting and its minutes. One task of this meeting is to elect churchwardens and one Mr W.R. Prior kept being appointed as Vicar's Warden, even though he was on Active Service. In April 1916, the vicar said Mr Prior is 'expected back from Egypt sooner or later during the present year.' (He was still there in April 1920, so belatedly a new Vicar's Warden was appointed). Some facets of church business appeared, if anything, on the up. In 1916, a range of items were donated to the church, such as a clock, curtains and carpet, not apparently in memory of someone killed.

Strangely, church finances improved, notwithstanding a rise in cost of coal during the war years. This was chiefly down to larger donations and collections, which one might not have imagined. On the other hand, the War still intruded on occasion, such as in April 1917 when discussion arose over getting the church insured against air-craft attacks and bombardment from the sea. Coastal vigilance had caught one young visitor to Pagham in 1915, when he was fined 20 shillings for taking a photograph in a restricted area. I am sure the locals were more law-abiding than the tourists!

Once more, within this institutional record, the personal details stand out. Some donors were listed every year in the churchwardens' accounts and over several years we have Messrs Mathews, Hartmann and Davis, each of whom lost a son, in December 1917, July 1918 and January 1919 respectively.

On Armistice Day itself, the local paper reported "Bognor beaming": 'a large number of people were out in the evening rejoicing in the lighting of the lamps and the relief from the lighting regulations. One did not realise how the lamps were missed, until they were put on again.' Lights and bells must also have marked Pagham's proclamation of peace, but the months and years to come were not so simple.

As Richard spoke of the formation of the Royal British Legion, here in Pagham there was debate as to who should receive the remainder of the War Memorial Fund and it was agreed to share it between five veterans. First, some would be awarded to 'Sergeant Major Humphreys, in recognition of his having won the D.C.M.' Then the rest to be shared between four wounded men: 'Sergeant A.J. Benham, who lost an eye and received other wounds; F.R. Lane, badly wounded and likely to have his arm amputated; W.A. Coles, wounded in arm and leg; F. Young, who lost a leg and is almost helpless in his arms.' There is no mention of the mental state of these men.

Then, for those men who could return to work, Sefton School provides an example where gender opportunities, having improved in the War, then take a step back: in May 1919, a demobilised man took up the teaching post his wife had undertaken during the War. At least Mrs Colton, the organist, received a War Bonus of 3 pounds and 3 shillings!

The Baptism Register suggests happier and more hopeful times. Compared to 10 baptisms in 1918 and 7 in 1919, there were 24 in 1920 and 17 in 1921; a veritable baby boom! Of course, there were those who had lost a child (or sibling or spouse) to the War. The Vestry Meeting of April 1921 gives details of the War Memorial 'to the memory of twenty men of Pagham Parish who lost their lives in the Great War' and the Roll, on vellum, 'of all Pagham men who had worn the King's uniform during the War.' (There are, in fact, 118 names on this list). Not only do we have those two permanent reminders of the Great War, but also the beautiful stained-glass windows in the North and South Transepts, from two sets of grieving parents. In the South Transept, they are dedicated to the memory of Lieutenant John L. Mathews, while in the North Transept, they are in memory of Lieutenant Charles Herbert Hartmann. Was there a little window onto differing expressions of grief, that the Mathews windows were dedicated privately, while the Hartmann windows were done so during Morning Service?

In this social survey, a small snapshot of one rural parish, mirrored in communities large and small up and down the land – and indeed across Europe and beyond – perhaps it behoves us to recall just how very personal it was for individuals and their families. I would like to end with one such example. On 6 November 1915, Annie Eliza Misselbrook married Reginald Thomas Blackman (soldier). On 26 March 1916, their child, Reginald Harold Frank Blackman (born on 28 January) was baptized. Annie's only two brothers, Stephen and Frank Misselbrook, were both killed in September 1918. Then, post-war, on 19 May 1923, Annie Eliza Blackman (widow) married Jesse George Blackman (he himself having worn the King's uniform). Annie's story: by the time she is 29, married, a mother, widowed, bereft of two brothers, married again. We remember the women, children and men of Pagham caught up and forever marked by the Great War for civilisation.

'Their soul shall be as a watered garden and they shall not sorrow any more at all.'