

Our Man in Westminster

by Damian Collins



The Folkestone sisters Margaret and Flora Jeffrey were awarded OBEs at the end of the First World War, with grateful thanks for their work in supporting the millions of service personnel that passed through the town's harbour, between 1914 and 1919. They ran a simple cafe on the harbour arm dispensing free cups of tea and bits of cake to the soldiers waiting to embark on the ships that would take them to the trenches of the western front. For many, it would be a last taste of home.

The Jeffrey sisters also kept visitors' books and encouraged their guests to sign them; each one recording their name, regiment or position, and when they'd been to the cafe. The books ran to many volumes and contained more than 43,000 individual entries including the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and Field Marshall Douglas Haig. Last Friday Step Short, the Folkestone First World War centenary project, completed a massive piece of work

to make these books available online for the first time.

When we started the Step Short project in 2007, local military historian Charles Fair brought the existence of these visitors' books to our attention. They had formerly belonged to the old Folkestone borough council, and were being kept in the county archive at Whitfield. We all agreed that these books should come back to Folkestone and be made fully accessible to people who would be interested to see if their ancestor had signed them during the war.

Kent County Council gave us permission to make a digital copy of each page of the book, and to create a searchable database of their contents. Step Short volunteers then completed the painstaking task of checking and amending the digital index of these books. This has been a real labour of love by the volunteers and a process that has taken as long as it took to compile the original books in the first place.

The newly digitised books were launched at a special event at The Grand in

Folkestone last week and you can view them online at www.stepshort.co.uk

Once you have registered, all you have to do is enter the surname of the person you are looking for, and you can then click to view the actual page in the book they signed, if they come up in the index. Sadly, I wasn't able to find my great grandfather among the 43,000 names, but I did find the MP for Folkestone and Hythe at that time; Philip Sassoon signed the books on October 29, 1915 while travelling back to the headquarters of General Rawlinson's IVth army, where he was serving as a staff officer.

The original volumes of the visitors' books will be returning to Folkestone this summer and the Town Council will be putting them on display in the Town Hall, alongside the First World War exhibition that is being shown by the National Army Museum. A different page of the books will be turned each day, showing the original signatures of the servicemen.

■ See pages 16 & 17 for our special report on Step Short.



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