

Folkestone Harbour & Canteen Visitors' Books

Extract from Charles Fair's article in the
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Many local people will have happy memories of catching the ferry from Folkestone to Boulogne for trips to France. They would have passed through the Harbour Station, a location that would have been familiar to millions of soldiers who passed through it in the First World War. Soldiers would have walked from their rest camps on The Leas down the Road of Remembrance to the harbour. This was the main point of embarkation because the railway to Dover was blocked by the Warren landslip of 1915.

Several million men passed through the Harbour Station, although the exact number is not certain. In an account of the unveiling of Folkestone's war memorial in late 1922 the figure was given as "over eight millions of Allied troops". This is a fact of which the town is rightly proud. These men and women came **from all over the British Empire (particularly Canada)** and represented every race, creed and social class from King George V to the humblest private soldier.

Evidence of this is borne out in the visitors' books for the tea room/canteen which were recently rediscovered by Brian McBride of Folkestone People's History Centre. I have identified the precise location of this tea room/canteen on the Outer Pier and believe that this structure is of international importance.

The Station also has important literary connections. The town has recently been emphasising its literary heritage, through an annual Literary Festival, which brings visitors into the area. **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. 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. One passage in his novel *The Patriot's Progress* is believed to be a description of the Outer Pier.

The Road of Remembrance and Harbour Station have potential to be a point of pilgrimage for many people following in the footsteps of their relatives. One can literally follow in Tommy Atkins' footsteps: if one's ancestor ever had leave or was wounded then there is a good chance that he came through this site. For example, I know my grandfather passed through it several times, as did my grandmother's first fiancée. The

latter, Capt Francis Dodgson, wrote his last letter from England from The Grand, on 3 June 1916 before sailing for France the following day. He was killed five weeks later.

Throughout the Great War, the Harbour Station had a **canteen** which provided free tea, cakes and buns to soldiers, sailors and nurses. 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).

A 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 and women who benefited from the canteen. *[Photo not with article & not on website]*

I 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 visitors' books have only recently come to light: they were catalogued many years ago but 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 People of 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. 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.

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.

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**. **Several VC winners** are also included as are the **major-generals** commanding a number of divisions of the British Expeditionary Force.

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