

VILLAGE ECHOES

When Great Britain declared war on Germany on Tuesday 4th August 1914, the parish of Goudhurst and Kilndown was largely the same peaceful, rural community that it had been for centuries. The only significant change in the lifetime of the inhabitants had been the railway extension from Paddock Wood to Hawkhurst, involving construction of a station at 'Hope Mill for Goudhurst' in 1892. A small business enclave had rapidly built up around the station, including the Seaborne Coal and Coke Company, the Station Hotel (now the Green Cross), and the local auctioneers Hudson, Mills and Smith, who held a cattle market nearby every other Wednesday.

Agriculture – especially the growing of hops and fruit – and landed estates were by far the largest sector of the local economy in 1914, so the farmers and landowners and their many employees formed the heart of the community. The commercial infrastructure supporting them in the centre of Goudhurst extended from the High Street into North Road and Church Road, with outposts on the Cranbrook road and at Curtisden Green. At Kilndown, Frederick Morris was the grocer and draper as well as running the local post office, while James Richer ran the Globe and Rainbow public house. Other enterprises in the parish included butchers, a chemist, a hairdresser, shoe and boot makers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, builders, undertakers, a laundry, carriers, confectioners, dressmakers, solicitors, a chimney-sweep, gasworks, waterworks pumping-station, an artificial teeth maker, the fire-brigade, Doctors Harvey and Collingridge, and a sub-branch of the London County and Westminster Bank – everything a reasonably self-sufficient rural community could need.

The spiritual needs of the parishioners were well catered for and, coincidentally, the Church of England establishments in Goudhurst and Kilndown had both welcomed new incumbents in 1911. The Sacred Heart Church in Beresford Road served the Roman Catholic population; Methodists worshipped at their small chapel further up the same road and also in North Road and Kilndown, and Curtisden Green had a Baptist chapel built when Bethany House School was founded.

A remarkable range of schools, both public and private, operated for children from within the parish as well as from outside. The Goudhurst Ladies College in Beresford Road and Bethany House School for boys were private establishments: both operated as boarding-schools, but many children from the better-off families in the locality also attended as day-pupils. Most of the Goudhurst village children attended the co-educational Public Elementary School on Clay Hill Mount; in 1913 it had 293 pupils registered. There was also a small school at Winchet Hill, while Kilndown had a main school for older children and a small school for infants at Riseden Quarter.

In the relatively limited amount of leisure time available to them, the villagers of 1914 could take advantage of various facilities and educational opportunities offered by the Goudhurst Hall and Reading Rooms or, in Kilndown, the Church Club and Institute; these are now known as the Parish Hall and the Quarry Centre respectively. There was no shortage of activities during 1914: in February there was the chance to see the Drama Club perform a pantomime, "The Sleeping Beauty", adapted from the original by Charles Gripper, son of the local schoolmaster, and in March to attend a talk given by the vicar about Malaysia. In April there was an evening of entertainment given by the Gymnastic Club under the tutelage of Colour-Sergeant Charles Hyde, and in May – by complete contrast – a large audience attended a meeting in the Parish Hall to protest against the prospect of Home Rule in Ireland. In June there was a tennis tournament and the Horticultural Society held its annual fruit, vegetable and flower show. On 3rd August, Bank Holiday Monday, a garden party with sport and entertainment was held at Crowbourne; the next day, Great Britain declared war: for the unsuspecting population of Goudhurst and Kilndown, absorbed in work and play in their rural community, it was as sudden as that.

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