

World War One

In 1914 Ernest was living at Eva Street in Elworth, Sandbach, with his wife and two young daughters and was employed at Fodens as a pattern maker. He and his family were regular attenders at Hope Street Congregational Chapel, Sandbach and there are many diary entries referring to choir rehearsals and organ practice.

The first diary entry which mentions the war is for 30th July 1914 where he states his opinion that there is no need for war. During August and September his opinion gradually changes and he relates how suddenly things start to happen. The impact is felt directly at Fodens where, in September 1914, the War Office orders 10 steam wagons at 3 days' notice and there is no August bank holiday or wakes holiday for the employees that year.

In October 1914 Ernest records that Belgian refugees have been welcomed to Sandbach and some are employed at Fodens. Ernest had previously attended evening classes in French and, as the only one in the company who understood the language, he found himself acting as interpreter.

Mr Hilditch showed a photograph of a badge, issued to all employees at Fodens in 1915 bearing the words "On war work". Apparently, suffragettes were in the habit of pinning white feathers on young men who were not in uniform. The badge gave some protection from accusations of cowardice.

In 1915, Fodens was experiencing labour problems with workers demanding an increase of 5 shillings on their £2 for a 54 hour week. Ernest's brother Jim was a trades union member and the company told him to leave the union or lose his job. This gave rise to a mass meeting where 304 to 13 voted to strike. Fodens retaliated by bringing in "blackleg" labour and issuing an ultimatum to return to work or be sacked. Eventually, by June, the strike was settled with partial reinstatement and a 2 shillings increase. Ernest describes how, with strike pay at 17 shillings and 6 pence per week, the family was virtually down and out by this point. Fodens refused to reinstate Jim who went on to become a highly valued employee of Rolls Royce.

In February 1916 Ernest reports on Zeppelins flying over Sandbach and the beginning of blackout procedures. There is also reference, at this time, to women being employed at Fodens to take the place of men who had been called to fight.

Amongst the accounts of war-related matters, there are details of such things as family gatherings (particularly at Christmas) and the birth of children. When his wife becomes pregnant, he uses the euphemism "Taken ill". In 1916 Jessie gives birth to

twins but, sadly, they died. In February 1918 his entry again refers to his wife "being unwell" and giving birth to a baby boy – after which Ernest went off to choir practice!

On 1st July 1916 he writes of the greatest disaster of the British Army with 21,000 killed that day. (Battle of the Somme.) Works holidays are postponed and more munitions are required.

The entries for July 1917 refer to the sinking of British ships by German U-boats and the government's measures to encourage more home-grown food: parks are dug up and allotments created in all areas. Ernest has one and many of his diary entries refer to his successes and failures with his allotment.

At the end of each year Ernest writes a summary of his thoughts. His "Thoughts on 1917" is one of the most poignant sections of the whole diary, said Mr Hilditch. He talks about his friends who are fighting and says that whilst not serving, his is no shirker.

In July 1918 Ernest records that he is too ill to attend work because of influenza. Later in the year he reports that there is "no Sunday School because of the influenza epidemic". It was to become the most serious global epidemic in recorded world history.

By August 1918 Ernest is reporting that the Allied forces are in a position to counter attack and there are references to Allied advances; by the end of September he is talking about the German forces collapsing and by the end of October he reports the collapse of the Austrian Empire. In November he reports the abdication of the Kaiser, the declaration of a German republic and the announcement of an Armistice. The news is welcomed at home and Fodens declare a holiday.