

Report on meeting of September 7th 2021

Edward Hilditch: The Diaries of Ernest Wakefield 1936–39

Ernest Wakefield, inspired by reading the diaries of Samuel Pepys, had kept a diary from the 1890s until his death in 1963. He was employed at Fodens and as well recording how he had been occupied at work, and various family matters, he gives his views on how events in Europe are progressing. Edward Hilditch, his grandson, has transcribed the diaries and returned to Sandbach History Society to talk about the period 1936–39.

The first entry for January 1936 records a football match between Crewe and Sheffield Wednesday with a crowd of 18,000 and which resulted in a draw. Later that month, King George V died, aged 70, and a number of diary entries refer to the funeral arrangements. According to custom, the proclamation of accession of King Edward VIII was read at the Ancient Crosses.

An entry in March notes the “disquieting news” about Hitler ordering troops to march into the Rhineland – action which was directly against the Treaty of Versailles, drawn up after WW1.

Ernest Wakefield started work at Fodens as a pattern maker but after studying at college he qualified as a draughtsman and later placed in charge of the drawing office. After the recession, Fodens moved to producing diesels and the company began to prosper. Ernest is promoted and is now paid £5 per week.

Ernest and his wife Jesse enjoy visiting local places of interest and in June 1936 he records a visit to Little Moreton hall which he says is “getting very dilapidated” and that “efforts are being made to get the Ministry of Works to take it over.”

The Wakefields have three children. In 1936, Joyce, the eldest, is working in the LMS offices in Crewe and receiving £2–5–0d per week. Kathleen is a secretary at Fodens on 30/- per week and Lawrence is in his last year in articles as a surveyor. Mr Hilditch said that this would indicate that the family was quite prosperous.

Ernest is heavily involved in Hope Street Congregational Chapel in Sandbach and has been organist since 1912. He makes a decision to give it up but he must have been persuaded to change his mind or gone back to it, as he was still the organist some years later.

In September 1936, Fodens Band won the prestigious National Championship of Great Britain at Crystal Palace. Mr Foden was not known for giving time off but on this occasion the company closed early and celebrations took place.

In October Ernest records that the Jarrow Marchers passed through Sandbach. The marchers, on their way to parliament, were protesting against unemployment (80%) and poverty suffered at Jarrow during the 1930s following the closure of the shipyard.

An entry in November records the “merciless bombing of Madrid” by General Franco’s Nationalists as part of the civil war in Spain. Also in November there were rumours, from Holland, about a love affair between Edward VIII and “an American lady”. With an abdication imminent, Edward enquires about a new wireless.

The new wireless was put to good use on Christmas Day, to hear a service from St George’s, Windsor and to hear the Christmas message given by the new king, George VI. The family had a “good dinner” after which they visited relations before going back home for “songs and games and some whist”. It was obvious, said Mr Hilditch, at Christmas 1936, there was more money and more peace.

By 1937, Ernest was 54 years old and on a number of occasions he mentions health problems. He is getting a lot of headaches and tries Phyllosan (“helps you keep fit over forty”) before consulting his doctor who says his symptoms are caused by pressure at work and prescribes rest. The family take a holiday in March in Prestatyn, staying at a boarding house owned by Miss Dent. Ernest makes the intriguing comment that Miss Dent “looks much better now that she has a new nose.”

In April he describes “one of the foulest deeds of modern times” when referring to the bombing of Guernica, in Spain, by the German Luftwaffe on behalf of Franco’s Nationalists.

May 1937 sees the festivities for opening of Elworth Park with the playground the gift of Mr and Mrs Palmer. Festivities on a national scale take place later in the month with the coronation of King George VI.

Fodens business continues to improve and the company makes a profit. Ernest says there are 230 orders on the books and the factory is “busier than it has been for years”.

Having got engaged in May, Joyce (the eldest daughter) is married on 4th December. Ernest records atrocious weather, with heavy snow. There are 40 at the reception, many of them seeming to end up at the end of the day at the house.

The dairy entries for 1938 are punctuated by reports on the activities of Hitler in Europe. In March the German army had marched into Austria and annexed that country into the Third Reich. In September, Britain and France had agreed that Germany should also annex the Sudetenland, with Neville Chamberlain saying that he had achieved “peace in our time”. But the feeling was that Chamberlain had trusted Hitler too much and things were becoming more serious. The British reaction was to start re-arming. In April there was an increase of 6d to the standard rate of income tax, making it 5/6d (27.5%)

In preparation for war, the government chose Crewe to be a second location for the production of aero-engines by Rolls Royce, considerably broadening the employment base for the town.

Son Lawrence, meanwhile, had completed his articles in surveying at Nantwich and gained a position as assistant surveyor in Formby. His salary was £200pa and was pensionable.

Ernest’s great friend for many years, Frank Hilditch, died in November 1938. Mr Hilditch commented that, although they had been such good friends, Ernest always referred to him as Mr Hilditch.

Involvement with the chapel continues and a diary entry for February 1939 refers to the building being supplied with electricity, removing the need for the two large gas lights, either side the pulpit. Whilst Ernest had the benefit of electricity at church it was some time before it was installed at home.

He writes at some length about the sinking of a Royal Navy submarine on 1st June. HMS Thetis had been undergoing trials in Liverpool Bay and 99 men lost their lives as a result of the hatch being left open while submerging.

From early 1939 the government were investing heavily in air raid precautions. Ernest refers to there being blackouts "all over the area" at the beginning of the year and reports the death of two people in Crewe as a result. Motorists were not allowed to use headlights and several accidents occurred. It was directed that air raid shelters were to be built, but Fodens were apparently not enthusiastic, eventually building some, adjacent to Elworth Primary School. Information was given about how to deal with poison gas and incendiary bombs.

The government were concerned that the Luftwaffe would come quickly and bombing would take place without warning and put into operation the evacuation of children from large cities. Sandbach was required to absorb 2,000 children from Liverpool and Manchester.

In an entry for 2nd September he says that war hadn't started but preparations had been made. Ernest comments on it being a very tense time with "wireless bulletins every hour".

On 1st September 1939 Hitler invaded Poland and two days later France and Britain declared war on Germany.