

## **Knit one, purl one; blanket stitch and back stitch**

### **– *The efforts of the ladies of Farnhill and Kildwick during WW1***

In 1805, just before the Battle of Trafalgar, Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson send a signal which read *“England expects every man to do his duty”*. One hundred and nine years later another Horatio was exhorting a younger generation to do their bit for king and country.

In 1914, on many a street corner, in many a city, town and village throughout Britain, eye-catching, iconic posters with the slogan *“Your country wants you”* or *“Britons. Join your country’s army. God Save the King”* could be seen. These famous recruitment pictures show Horatio Herbert Kitchener, the then Secretary of State for War, with arm outstretched, and with perhaps history’s most famous pointing finger, appealing to men to join up.

Another poster reading *“Women of Britain say GO”* was a request to the female population to encourage their men folk to join the army. However women the length and breadth of the land did more than just persuade their men-folk to join up. They sought ways in which they themselves could fight the enemy – with skills that had been passed down from generation to generation.

In August 1914 Queen Mary, as patron of a Needlework Guild bearing her name, wrote to The Times: *“I appeal to the Presidents of all needlework guilds throughout the British Isles to organise a large collection of articles for those who suffer on account of war.”*

It was a call-to-action that local women responded to immediately. By the end of the month the ladies of the Kildwick and Farnhill Unionist Club had met, in the club building adjacent to Kildwick bridge, and decided to organise a sewing club to make items for soldiers.



**The view from Kildwick bridge looking towards the Church in 1912. The Unionist Club is the new building on the right.**

On September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1914, prompted by Lord Kitchener, Queen Mary made another appeal to the women of the British Empire to supply articles for the troops. But the ladies of Farnhill and Kildwick were already hard at work with their knitting needles and sewing machines. In October they reported that they had already sent off 569 articles of clothing.

The club, led by its secretary Mrs. Jack Smith, who in one newspaper report was described as “indefatigable”, continued to meet every week until the fighting was over and the soldiers’ need for their help came to an end. Throughout this period, regular reports appeared in the local newspapers – the Craven Herald, Keighley News and West Yorkshire Pioneer – on the sterling work the valiant ladies of the area were carrying out.

The club had six officers and a committee of sixteen and at its annual meeting on March 6<sup>th</sup> 1915 it was reported that the ladies hoped to complete their one thousandth item that week. These items were forwarded to the Red Cross in London, to a collection started by the lady mayoress of Keighley, to the Gurkha regiment and to local men from Kildwick, Farnhill, Crosshills and Junction.

In 1914 the girls of Kildwick school also got involved and sent knitted socks, scarves and body belts to Queen Mary’s Needlework Guild.

For the price of sixpence a booklet of needlework and knitting instructions could be bought from the British Red Cross Society and the patterns were designed to combine accuracy – which was deemed to be very important – with the least amount of work. The names of the patterns such as, ‘Helpless case shirt’, ‘Enteric shirt’, ‘Nightingales’ – which were wraps worn by patients who, owing to wounds found it impossible to move their arms – would surely have filled those women who had relatives and friends fighting at the front with dread.

However the local women continued to meet and continued to send off parcels of shirts, night shirts, body belts, helmets, scarves, swabs, bandages, handkerchiefs, gloves, nightingales and the all-important socks.

Trench nephritis and trench fever were infections due to lice and ticks carried by rats and these were exacerbated by the conditions in the wet and muddy trenches. Soldiers were urged to change their socks frequently but in the freezing trenches trying to keep feet dry and warm would certainly be a daily challenge. The parcel of eighty pairs of socks sent by the Kildwick ladies in 1917 to Lieutenant Jack Petty, a member of the local Unionist club serving with the West Yorkshire Regiment, for distribution amongst his men would be more than acceptable.

Mrs Smith is said to have received a number of letters from soldiers expressing their appreciation, from almost all theatres of the war, including: Egypt, Salonika, Italy, Malta, France, and Ireland, as well as various camps in England and the Isle of Wight.

Frequent requests were made by the group for donations of wool, warm men’s clothing, and money. Other groups in the local area rose to the challenge and in December 1915 the ‘Ebenezer Church Knitting Guild’ in Crosshills had a concert to raise funds for wool.

In the same month the combined efforts of the group in Kildwick together with St Thomas’s Church Sutton, Sutton Baptist Church, Glusburn Institute, Glusburn Baptist Mission, and Crosshills Wesleyan and Ebenezer chapels forwarded a parcel to every local soldier serving in Canada, Egypt, France, the Dardanelles, Belgium and Hong Kong.

The following years of 1916 and 1917 saw Kildwick sending twenty Christmas parcels to the 6th Battalion of the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment, in which many local men served. These parcels contained socks, mufflers, mittens, Christmas cake, a half-pound tin of mints, twenty five cigarettes and a wallet containing blotter, notepaper, envelopes and a pencil.

In March 1918 the Craven Herald reported that members of the Kildwick branch of the Skipton Division Unionist Association had forwarded five pounds and five shillings to Sir Arthur Pearson's Blinded Soldiers and Sailors Hostel at St Dunstan's. St Dunstan's was founded early in 1915 by Sir Arthur Pearson – himself blind. A house, in Regent's Park, owned by a New York banker, was placed at Pearson's disposal, completely free of charge, and it was to here that soldiers and sailors, who had been blinded, were brought.

The ladies' group in Kildwick was kept busy throughout the war, and can be forgiven for having put their needles, scissors and wool to one side for a short while when they had a day out in Blackpool in August 1916.

The Battle of the Somme was a month old and had another three months to go when the group set off to the coast. It had been a worrying time for the area as three local men Albert Bower, Richard Inskip and Harry Walmsley had all been wounded. Mrs Woodrow, of Lindley House, Park Road, Crosshills, had become Vice-President of the group in 1915 and she and her husband generously paid for the ladies to go on the motor trip to Blackpool, with a meal provided. It seems incredible now – in the days of mobile phones, tablets, iPads and the like – that the ladies sent a telegram from the seaside to thank their benefactors!

After a day enjoying a glorious sea breeze, high tide and brilliant sunshine, back at their headquarters in Kildwick, thanking Mrs Smith who had made the arrangements and singing 'For she's a jolly good fellow', they could have had no idea that within a month news would reach them that six local men had perished. For a short time the worries about loved ones and the horrors of living during the conflict had been put to one side.

Siegfried Sassoon was twenty eight when war broke out and the poetry he wrote at this time tends to be patriotic but as the war went on his enthusiasm began to decline and he began writing poems condemning officers and how the war was being run.

In 1917 he wrote his poem 'The Glory of Women' – a somewhat sardonic poem – critical of some women's attitudes at that time.

Some aspects of the war women were not told about or – in some cases as the poem emphasises – *You love us when we're heroes home on leave, or wounded in a mentionable place* – they only wanted to hear things that were considered tasteful and respectable. The last line of Sassoon's poem really needs no explanation. *O German mother dreaming by the fire, while you are knitting socks, to send your son, his face is trodden deeper in the mud.*

Lord Horatio Kitchener's recruitment poster could be credited with thousands of men leaving their homes, families and employment to do what they considered to be their duty. Could it be that Kitchener was just as successful in bringing the realities of the war to the women those gallant men left behind?

In 1914 he asked Queen Mary to acquire three hundred thousand pairs of socks – to be distributed at the front. At a gathering in the Kildwick and Farnhill Unionist club just a few months after the Armistice, a list of the comforts that had been made by the members of the sewing group and which had been sent to those serving in the forces was read out (see below). The list included one thousand eight hundred and twelve pairs of socks produced by this small group alone.

These local ladies could be justifiably proud of their efforts. However the names on the War Memorial at the bottom of the church steps show that many of the socks knitted in Kildwick and Farnhill – just like the socks knitted by German wives and mothers in places such as Konigsberg and Frankfurt – had indeed been trodden in the mud of the bloody battlefields so far away from the green and pleasant land in the Aire valley.

## Appendix – From Keighley News, 18th January 1919

**PATRIOTIC LADIES** — *On Tuesday evening the lady members of the soldiers' comforts fund in connection with the Kildwick and Farnhill Unionist Club had a pleasant gathering in the club rooms. After a "faith" supper Mrs. Jack Smith, the indefatigable secretary to the fund, was presented with a pair of solid silver flower vases in appreciation of her work since August 1914.*

*The lady members of the fund have met weekly for over four years to make comforts for the lads from Kildwick, Farnhill, and Junction serving with the forces, and the following is a list of the articles made and sent out: 1,812 pairs of socks, 59 pairs of bed socks, 53 pairs of laces, 101 pairs of mittens, 13 pairs of gloves, 2,310 cigarettes, 30 packets of tobacco, 254 packets of sweets, 233 scarves, 112 body belts, 2 blankets, 50 day shirts, 34 night shirts, 25 invalid shirts, 60 pillows, 60 bandages, 63 handkerchiefs, 28 nightingales, 79 swabs, 254 cakes, 254 writing pads and 309 postal orders.*

*Subscriptions from various sources have been received amounting to £111 3s 1d.*

