

Farnhill Volunteers and the WW1 Poets – 6

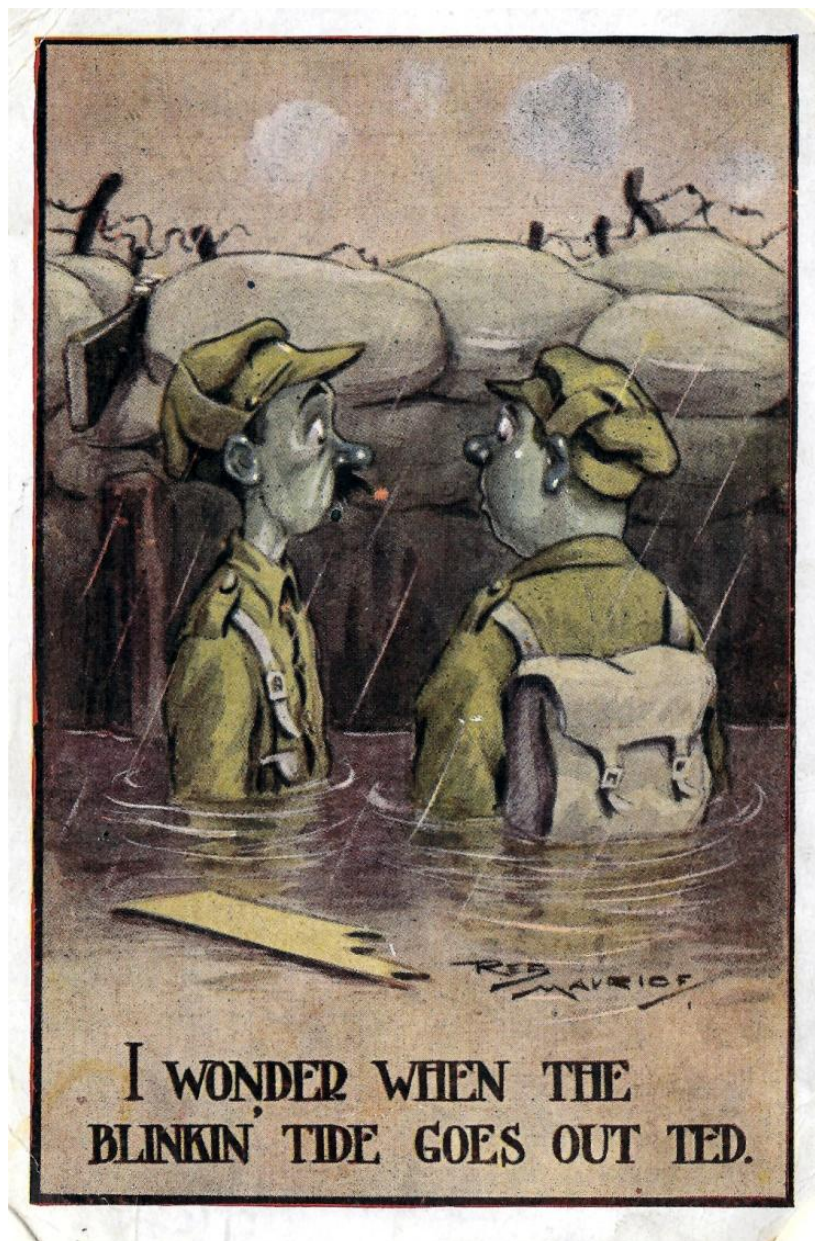
Life in the trenches

– Break of Day in the Trenches, by Isaac Rosenberg

Most of the Farnhill Volunteers who served in the Army will have experienced trench warfare and the problems that came with the unsanitary, cold and wet conditions, without the opportunities change into dry clothes and boots.

Many of the Volunteers were hospitalised with the illnesses brought on by these conditions, such as trench-foot, trench-fever, and frostbite. Among these was Joseph Green who died in his sleep on 13th November 1916, of a kidney infection which was almost certainly the consequence of trench-foot.

A typical response to life in the trenches was the development of dark humour, exemplified by the postcard below – from the collection made by Percy Walmsley (who himself was hospitalised with frostbite in November 1915).



In his poem *Break of Day in the Trenches*, Isaac Rosenberg, also uses dark humour by turning the trench into a pastoral landscape in which a man might engage with local wildlife. This is, however, somewhat different to the type of pastoral scene described by Edward Thomas in *Adlestrop*.

**Break of Day in the Trenches,
by Isaac Rosenberg**

The darkness crumbles away.
It is the same old druid Time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.

Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.

Ironically, Rosenberg himself died at the break of day – killed in action on 1st April 1918, during the German Spring Offensive.

