

Surrey's Great War: Voices on the past

Volunteers from *Surrey in the Great War's* oral history project are gathering first-hand memories of life in the county between 1914 and 1950, through recording interviews with residents across Surrey. Woking residents give a picture of life in the Borough from the Great War onwards.

Residents with recollections spanning these dates are often able to tell us about both their family's experience of World War One in Surrey and about the conflict's long-term impact on the county. Their memories, spoken in their own words, reveal personal perspectives on world-famous events. Gathering them produces a mosaic of different experiences. Our oldest interviewee to date is 102 years.



Cheapside, Horsell, c. 1912 (SHC ref PC/80/13)

Our interviewees, from a post-war generation, have memories of their family's wartime experiences shows the conflict's lasting impact. Several recall relatives scarred by the loss of a family member, and working alongside veterans who bore both physical and psychological wounds. Others have happier memories: a grandmother grateful that none of her sons or sons-in-law had been killed, or a father's homecoming following demobilisation.

Schooldays are clearly imprinted in their minds. They remember attending small, 'village' schools in Woking and surrounding areas, sometimes being taught by teachers who had also taught their parents. Classrooms were arranged with desks in rows facing the front and discipline is remembered as strict (as, indeed, it was at home).

A female interviewee remembers studying cooking and housewifery for six months each, during her final school year. Children often left school at 14. Further educational opportunities were unaffordable to most families, children instead went straight into work.



Station Road, West Byfleet, c. 1910 (SHC ref 8511/25/53)

Away from school, our interviewees spent their free time outside. With few cars around, children often played in the roads outside their home. Younger children played with wooden tops and skipping games. Netball, cricket and cycling were popular with older children. Running races were organised on Smarts Field, children fished in the Basingstoke Canal and one interviewee remembers watching boxing matches on heathland. Indoor entertainment included dances and whist drives and attending one of Woking's three cinemas: the Ritz, Central or Astoria. Special days remembered include trips to Wisley Gardens by bike, attending the fair on Wheatsheaf Common and daytrips with the Aldershot & District Bus service.



Peace Celebrations, Woking, c. 1919 (SHC ref PC/160/Alb1/125)



Peace Celebrations, Woking, 1918-19 (SHC ref PC/160/Alb1/126)

Surrey's newspapers show that its residents experienced severe food shortages and rising prices in 1918 and beyond. Our interviewees' recollections confirm this: one remembers Christmas as a subdued affair with 'sensible' gifts and books more common than toys. Several interviewees contrasted the vast amount of imported food available today with the local, seasonal food available in their inter-war childhood. Many families grew their own fruit and vegetables on allotments and traded items with neighbours. Children took food from home to school. Tinned fruit was a luxury. Milk was delivered by horse and great excitement was caused by the visits around the town of the ice-cream seller!

Interviewees paint a picture of Woking as a town in which agriculture and industry flourished. Ottershaw's vegetable-growing farms and the nurseries in Woking's Goldsworth area provided many with employment, as did Woking's brick, coal and timber yards. (Our interviewees remember particularly Brewster's timber yard at Horsell Moor, to which goods came by barge along the Basingstoke Canal, as they used to watch the barges being unloaded.)

Young women considered working in a shop or factory preferable to going into service. Working hours were then 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, plus Saturday until noon. Everyone went home for lunch. Interviewees have differing memories of the job market during the inter-war years: one commented that work was easy to find and people could change jobs easily, whilst another recalls queues of jobseekers 100 people strong outside the labour exchange seeking work.

Memories of the extreme distress felt on the outbreak of World War II by those who had lived through World War I are clear (one interviewee's father described the renewal of hostilities as 'wicked'). Our interviewees were by then of an age to serve in the new conflict themselves.

When the fighting was at its fiercest
And everything looked black
There was the old story,
'Well, you'll get the old job back'.

Can't get the old job,
Can't get the new,
Can't carry on like we used to do.

I look around me and daily I see
Thousands of fellows a lot worse off than me.
In Piccadilly, friends pass me by;
I'm absolutely stranded in the Strand,
But, I confess, I was contented more or less
When I was stony broke in No Man's Land.

Popular post-WWI song commenting on the lack of jobs for veterans, which one of our interviewees remembers her demobilised father singing.

Your County Needs You!

If you would like to help to collect Surrey memories, please get in touch! We need volunteers to help not only with interviewing, but also with research, administration, sound recording and post-processing. We provide full training.

Born in the 1920s/30s? Your story is vital!

Our volunteers are keen to find more people who've memories of inter-war Surrey to share.

If you or someone you know fits the bill, please let us know by emailing

surreyinthewar@surreycc.gov.uk
or call **01483 518238/518239**.