

THE WESTERN KENNET VALLEY IN THE GREAT WAR

Roger Day

This profusely illustrated work is the first major study of the military's use of the Western Kennet Valley in the Great War. During the early years of the war the British Army increased massively in size and literally hundreds of new companies were formed. Because of this rapid expansion it was impossible to accommodate and train all the units at existing depots and as a consequence many were quartered in provincial towns, such as Hungerford and Marlborough.

The book also looks at the local Volunteer Force (the First World War equivalent of the Home Guard), which is examined in some detail, as is the role of the region's three VAD Red Cross Hospitals that were largely staffed by local women, who provided convalescing soldiers with comfort and support as they recovered from illness or injury.

The surrounding countryside also played its part and several military sites were established on the Marlborough Downs, such as the Army camp at Chiselton, the RFC aerodromes at Yatesbury and a PoW Camp at Ramsbury. Many miles of practice trenches were excavated in the downland chalk by the Army's new recruits and route marches of 20 miles or more were a regular feature of their training. This study also includes the stories of nine men from the region who went off to fight giving the reader an insight into army training and service life on the Western Front.

The Western Kennet Valley in the Great War provides a fascinating insight into how one small corner of England made its own very significant contribution to the "War to end all Wars" and how, in turn, the war made a lasting impact upon this apparently secluded part of rural West Berkshire and Northeast Wiltshire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger Day was born in Marlborough and for the past forty years or so has been passionately interested in the area's recent wartime history. This fascination has resulted in the publication of five books, all with WW2 themes. His interest in the First World War was aroused following the discovery of a cache of more than 200 letters written during the conflict by his grandfather and great uncle. Roger currently lives in Hungerford with his wife Sandra and when not writing enjoys photography and walking in the countryside. Other books by Roger Day include *Ramsbury at War*; *Savernake at War*; *Membury at War*; *Look, Duck & Vanish*; and *Tonight We Die As Men* (with Ian Gardner).

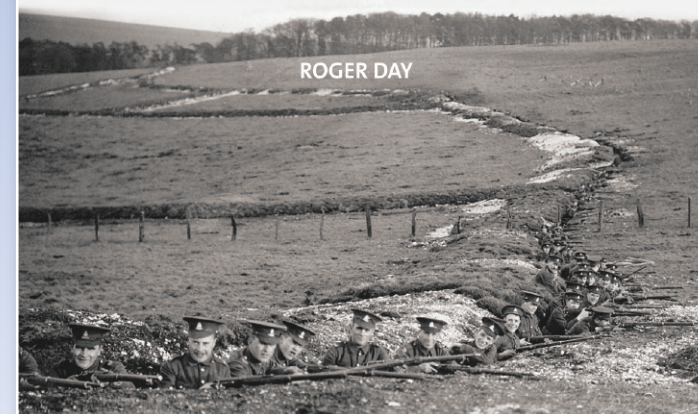
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Above: Men of the 7th Battalion in an early style of trench system on Rockley Down. Trench design evolved rapidly as the war progressed.

Left: Lieutenants Ashbrook, Burnet and Chalmers. Sadly, Stanley Burnet died of severe burns following a collision at Yatesbury on 31 May 1918. (Rod Priddle)

Example of a double-page spread.

4 Farming and Prisoners of War

DURING THE CLOSING thirty years of the nineteenth century farming in Britain experienced a severe economic downturn caused by cheap imports of grain and a number of bad harvests. Many farmers had gone out of business forcing those that remained to consider new farming methods. However, by 1900 things were slowly beginning to improve.

At the start of the new century the overwhelming majority of the region's male workers

FARMING AND PRISONERS OF WAR

49

earned their living either directly in agriculture, as farm labourers, tenant farmers and land owners, or indirectly, as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, corn merchants or shopkeepers. Most small farms in the Kennet Valley combined arable and livestock and were known as mixed farms. However, those on the Marlborough Downs tended to specialise in sheep rearing and the rolling chalk hills supported vast flocks of a breed known as the Hampshire Down - over the years their droppings and constant grazing has helped enrich the short downland turf.

In the valleys cattle were the predominant farm animals and they were kept for breeding, fattening for the butcher or milking. Throughout the final quarter of the nineteenth century dairy farming had expanded on a spectacular scale, as this was seen by many farmers as an effective way of dealing with declining cereal prices, and despite being very labour-intensive it suited the region's many small family-run businesses. The most popular breed of dairy cow was the Shorthorn, which was also bred for beef, and characterised by its coat colours of roan, all-red or red and white.

Before the First World War high-density baling machines were quite an unusual sight in Britain but the Army's insatiable demand for animal fodder and bedding soon changed that. During 1915 a huge department, run by the ASC, was formed to supply the Army's needs for its tens of thousands of horses and mules. It consisted of eight foreign companies, six in England, one in Scotland and one in Ireland that quickly requisitioned tractor engines and bakers from farmers and agricultural contractors. They were then divided between the companies and sent out with small teams to locations all over the British Isles. Helping the warblers were civilians, members of the Women's Land Army and Women's Forage Corps who worked with the teams forking hay into the bales, sorting and tying bales and weighing. The bales, which were very heavy, were then loaded onto wagons using a manually-operated grab and taken to the nearest railway station. This picture and the following two images are believed to have been taken near Farnham. What was a steam ploughing and thrashing contractor by the name of Fall had his premises. During the War ASC (M) units used Fall's stable area as a wagon yard and it is possible that some of the civilians could be members of the family. All three tractor engines were manufactured by Fowlers of Leeds and appear to be in steam suggesting they may be about to set off for a day's work. (The Museum House Collection)



Above: Lieutenant Fred Burn leading a group of PoWs through the centre of Ramsbury during the early evening of Monday 3rd June 1918. (Mrs V Brown)

Below: Hungerford Town Band leading a section of ASC personnel along Bridge Street. (Hungerford Virtual Museum)

