

FORMBY HISTORY WALKS 3

FORMBY IN WWI – LONGER VERSION

About 2.5 miles circular walk

Start/end point: Civic War memorial at the top of Chapel Lane

Welcome to this walk looking at places in Formby that played a part in the community's activities during WW1. The information is taken from the book "A Community in Wartime – Formby 1914-1918", which in turn is mainly based on details from the Formby Times that was published weekly at that time.

Of course Formby at that time was a lot smaller than it is now – the census from 1911 gave the population as some 6,000, and we can see from the map at the time the village was enclosed by the railway line to the West and Watchyard Lane and Deansgate Lane to the East.

WAR MEMORIAL

We start our walk here at the War Memorial. Following the Armistice in November 1918, two leading suggestions were proposed for a memorial. One was a Cottage Hospital and the other a War Memorial. The latter was chosen and it was unveiled on November 12th 1922. To remember the fallen of WW2 an addition was made by adding a wall behind the Memorial,

Before we move off, just let us take a look down Three Tuns Lane. What is now Wetherspoon's "The Lifeboat" was, at that time, the Workingmen's Club and being a key part of the community it played its role in supporting the war effort. For example, in November 1914 troops were billeted there (whilst being trained in the locality). There will have been a lot of activities in the Club; for instance, In March 1915 there was a hot pot supper for the Territorials from Formby and a total of ten shillings and sixpence, (52 pence in today's money) was raised to buy cigarettes and forward them to the Formby Boys. It was also the venue for recreational activities; for instance in 1916 the Formby Times reported on billiard matches between soldiers and 'Formbyites'.

Next to the Workingmen's Club, where the YMCA charity shop and Village Inn are now, was Formby's cinema – "The Picturedrome" (later, 'The Queen's'). This was a public place of entertainment with various films being shown weekly. Although initially it was not planned to show war films, this changed and recruiting films and documentaries such as "The Fatal Fight", "French Victory in the Vosges" and "The Battle of the Somme" were shown. At one point during the war in 1915 it was suggested that the Workingmen's Club and the Picturedrome be taken over for an Officer's Training School, but this never came to fruition, much to the relief of the people as the Picturedrome was at that time the only place of public entertainment.

Further down Three Tuns Lane at Cross Green there was in 1915 - outside the Blundell Hotel (now 'The Cross House') a Horse Fair at which the army began commandeering horses belonging to local people for military use. As a consequence, there were times during WW1 when the Formby lifeboat could not be used due to lack of horses to launch it. In one case the soldiers camped in Formby provided the horses to launch the boat.

WALK ALONG SCHOOL LANE

Associated with Our Lady's Catholic Church there was a school, now demolished and replaced by the apartments at the corner of School Lane and Church Road. In December 1914 troops were first billeted **at** this end of the village, in private houses as well as the Workingmen's Club. A large room belonging to the church was made available as a social hall for recreational activities such as reading, writing, games and refreshments for troops. Football matches were played between Our Lady's men and billeted soldiers at the Catholic Young Men's Society Ground. Music concerts were also organised, the first was reported to be held in May 1915. In October 1916, after a second period of billeting, soldiers gave thanks for their time at Our Lady's "it has been a pleasure after the parades and fatigues of the day to come and meet such willing workers, ever there, despite weather conditions or any other inconvenience, to give us a hearty welcome and provide us with such nice refreshments at ridiculously low prices."

SCHOOL LANE

On our right stands **Our Lady's Church – Our Lady of Compassion, Formby.**

In the churchyard that lies South alongside School Lane you can find the names of people who lost their lives in the Boer War and both World Wars. Outside the main door of the church is the War Memorial, thought to have been raised in 1917 although we have found no written record of this. It is a beautiful and well-maintained cross recording the names of members of Our Lady's who gave their lives in the War.

At the start of the war there were meetings at the church to make arrangements for Working Parties to produce and provide goods to support the troops.

Facilities for leisure and recreation were set up as soon as soldiers began flocking in to Formby in 1914 and used the room set aside for them as a social hall for the men billeted in and around Three Tuns Lane. Helpers from the congregation provided facilities for reading, writing, games and refreshments from 5 p.m. to 9.30 p.m. on weekdays and even longer on Sundays.

The first soldiers' music concert took place at the hall on a wet Thursday evening in May 1915 organised by Private Neath of the Manchester Regiment. It included piano

solos, 'stirring recitations' and the humorous songs of Private Jones and Private Parkinson including "I parted my hair in the middle". Sport was also offered to the visitors. One football match was played between the boys from Our Lady's against a team of visiting soldiers, won 8-2 by the home team. Formby Times: "The game proved to be interesting to a fairly good number of spectators, and during the second half a collection was made, the proceeds of which will be forwarded to the soldiers' cigarette fund."

WALK UP TO CHURCH ROAD AND TURN LEFT

We will now walk North. Contemporary maps show that on our left was open field and on the right only a few houses before Whitehouse Farm and the Gild Hall.

THE GILD HALL

The Gild Hall was known at the time as the '**Queen's Jubilee Hall**'. In 1914, when troops were first billeted in Formby the Jubilee Hall was designated as the detachments HQ, and the soldiers used the "adjacent field for drill". The Gild/Jubilee Hall was an ideal central location for the Army Recruiting HQ. and the Formby Recruiting Officer, Captain William Bindloss, a solicitor, had an office here though he lived not far away in College Avenue. Soldiers were billeted in this area in private houses, the Golf houses and in Victoria Hall.



One of the most iconic photos of Formby during WWI is that of a parade passing by the Gild Hall. Towards the front are Dick and Sandy Bourhill.

WALK ON UP CHURCH ROAD TO THE CORNER WITH OLD MILL LANE

As we walk up Church Road today it is nice to know the road surface is much better than a hundred years ago. In 1915 it was reported that a horse in a horse and trap slipped on the poor surface and fell seriously injuring itself. The three passengers tumbled out of the trap and sustained severe bruising. 'Formby Times': "...it was the local road surface that caused a problem. Councillor Dickenson and two friends were driving along Church Road in a trap. The road was slippery and known as an accident black-spot ... On this occasion, the horse pulling the trap slipped and fell opposite Whitehouse Farm, causing itself serious injury. The shafts of the vehicle were broken and all three passengers were thrown into the roadway, sustaining severe bruises. The horse and trap were taken to the Forge in Church Road."

MOORHOUSES BUILDINGS

Next, on the left, we come to the site of the Council Offices of the Formby Urban District Council during WWII. If you look up, above the frontages of the current shops and businesses you can see the original building. This was the “seat of power” of the Council at the time! The Formby Roll of Honour, introduced in September 1914, to list all those men who had joined up for active service was posted here. It was also shown in the various churches and Post Offices in Formby.

Military Tribunals were held here every Friday evening, the first being in November 1915. They reviewed the cases of men who wished, or whose employers wished them, to be excused military service. Also, local people would come to collect and return registration forms for rationing when it was first introduced in 1917. Wartime cookery classes and demonstrations were also given here.

CABLE STREET and WILLOW GROVE

In Cable Street we can pick up threads of Formby life at the time.

In the initial rush to enlist, the Formby Times reported a number of the Freshfield Band – which practiced regularly at a house in this street – had joined up already. Thomas Halliwell, a cornet player who lived at number 14 soon joined them. Albert Waddington of number 4 was soon also to join.

The Freshfield Band have lost another instrumentalist. Thos. Halliwell, cornet player, has joined the Royal Engineers, and left Formby on Thursday morning for Aldershot. Albert Waddington, Cable-street, who feared rejection on the eye-sight test, has “got through,” and hopes to be “in the ranks” shortly.

WALK ON TO “CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH”

In November 1914, the Congregational Church School, presumably in the vicinity of the church, opened a room for the soldiers’ recreational needs. A room was set aside for them to read, write letters home, play games etc, with refreshments available at “a very nominal cost”. In the fortnight before Christmas 1914 there were plenty of concerts, games and “lantern shows”. So we have this recreational room for soldiers at this end of the village and the room in the Catholic School for soldiers at the other end of the village. A third recreational venue opened in December 1914 - the Soldiers’ Institute in the Wesleyan School on Elbow Lane – and this was open to all; also, Holy Trinity Church used its Parish Hall from November 1914 with weekly concerts for troops stationed nearby and as a Y.M.C.A canteen till 1917.

At a public meeting held in Victoria Hall shortly after the outbreak of the war it was agreed that working parties, most being affiliated to the different church groups, would be set up and coordinated by Mrs Florence Storey. Mrs Storey was the widow of Edgar Storey, a wealthy mine owner and industrialist, who lived at Brock House near St Peter’s Church. In October 1915 the Ladies Work Society became -associated with the Congregational Church and became the Congregational Guild for War Service.

FORMBY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND THE SOLDIERS.

(To the Editor of the "Formby Times.")

Sir,—As a large number of soldiers are now billeted in the immediate vicinity of this church, it has been decided to place the church schoolroom at the disposal of the troops. The premises have been suitably arranged for their use, and facilities provided for writing, reading, games, and music, also for obtaining refreshments at a very nominal cost. The premises are open every weekday from 4 o'clock, and on Sunday from 2 o'clock, until "roll call," and the men have already shown their appreciation of the comfort and facilities afforded them by attending in considerable numbers each evening.

We feel it may not only be a matter of general interest to know what is being done for the soldiers in this part of the district, but that others may wish to take a part in the work by making some contribution towards the expenses incurred.

We specially desire to make clear that only those soldiers billeted in this end of the district are being invited to accept the hospitality offered by us, and therefore the work in no way clashes with, or overlaps, that done elsewhere.—Yours, etc.,

W. H. WICKS,
Minister.

A. E. GUNSON,
"Rougemont," Victoria-road,
Freshfield, Hon. Treasurer.

R. G. KNIGHT,
Hon. Secretary of Committee
for Soldiers' Welfare.

This Guild of War Service, together with Mrs Storey's Working Party, appear to have been the two main voluntary groups throughout the war. Mainly they made items of clothing and bandages for the troops at home and abroad.

There was large support for this voluntary work. Records show on one particular week there were 60 members on a Tuesday and 41 on the Thursday.

Both men and women were involved in the Guild. Elderly men made bandages and it was reported that one bad-tempered man became calmer and more sweet-tempered after making the bandages.

Production of items was also carried out by some members at home.

WALK TO THE GRAPES

When billeting in Formby started in November 1914 the Grapes Hotel was used to billet officers.



WALK DOWN GREEN LANE TO ST PETER'S CHURCH

See the Wooden Cross memorial. After the armistice a number of Thanksgiving Services were held on Sunday 17th November 1918 at the church as well as other churches in the village. The one at 11.30 a.m. was by invitation only for Council members, dignitaries and other 'prominent residents': this included local Police, Volunteers, Boy Scouts and 'any discharged soldiers or sailors or any members of the Forces on leave in the district'.

WALK ALONG GREEN LANE TO THE CRICKET CLUB

Now the Formby Guard – the local Territorial Reserves, formed in September 1914- established their Headquarters at the Cricket Club, and some training sessions, drill practice and rifle practice took place here. In September 1915 the Formby Guard held its first public parade in uniform.

The Cricket Club was also made available to the troops billeted in Formby. There are reports of cricket matches between soldiers and the locals. A letter of appreciation from the Liverpool Pals (21st and 22nd) thanked the people of Formby for their hospitality and included thanking the Formby Cricket Club for making "its magnificent ground available for cricket and running".

Perhaps the most unusual reported cricket match was between eleven ladies and eleven wounded soldiers in August 1916. *"A tennis ball was used, the gentlemen had to bowl and field with their left hand only. The outstanding player was nurse Miss Matthews, who played in her uniform, took three wickets and "struck out with rare force and very few of her hits were fielded."*

WALK DOWN TIMMS LANE

Freshfield Bowling Club – there were many opportunities given to troops to use these facilities. For example, in June 1916 the Bowling Handicap Competition "that has recently so entertained the soldiers attending the Holy Trinity parish Hall ... came to a conclusion." Corporal White won the First Prize of 20 shillings and Private Acker claimed 15 shillings. Later that month, 26 wounded soldiers from hospitals in Southport enjoyed a Bowling Challenge here. All the Bowling events were very popular.

Victoria Hall – This would have been widely used during the war years. There was a Public Meeting here in 1914 and later a muster of the National Guard as well as meetings for Working Parties.

We are not far away from **Freshfield Station** which was the local railway station used mainly for incoming and outgoing troops. Mainly this was because the tract of land alongside the station and Victoria Road, known as Poverty Fields, was used for camps with tents set up for the soldiers.

WALK ALONG GORES LANE

At **Old Town Lane** we can find the former homes of two of the fallen soldiers from the early days of the Somme.

Archie Smith-Maxwell lived at number 33 'Old Town Lodge' and cricketer Kenneth Hutchings is one of the men commemorated by the wooden cross standing in St. Peter's Churchyard: he lived at 'South View'.

The two houses are adjacent to each other next to the Chemist.

WALK DOWN OLD TOWN LANE AND TURN LEFT AT FRESHFIELD ROAD

There are a number of people who are linked with the war years along Freshfield Road.

Professor Garstang lived at number 70 'Hilbre' and was involved with official organisation within Formby and communications with visiting dignitaries. He is remembered for his work in archaeology at Liverpool University and gave his name to the 'Garstang Museum' there.

George Thompson is another young man commemorated by the wooden cross standing in St. Peter's Churchyard family: he lived at number 54 ('Parkfield').

TURN LEFT AND WALK UP ROSEMARY LANE

Rosemary Lane was a favoured residential area in the early 20th century.

When the initial rush to enlist by volunteers began to slow down in 1915, the local politicians agreed with the Military to organise a Recruitment March with bands and speakers on 22nd June. The march went through Formby and ended by going along Rosemary Lane to the empty fields alongside.

Holy Trinity Church is on your left as we walk along.

The Parish Hall (built 1908) was used as a YMCA canteen until June 1917.

Thursday evening concerts began in November 1914 and continued throughout the war when soldiers were billeted in the Village.

There was a Formby Local Relief Concert described very well – Marjory Wilson p.53

Within the Church there is a Memorial to Harold Bennett Beardwood, one of the sons of the Postmaster, who died in 1917.

TURN LEFT INTO CHAPEL LANE.

On our Right can be found **Elbow Lane** where, a little way down on the right, lies the **Wesleyan Chapel** (today the Methodist Church).

This was used as a Soldiers' Institute and for Concerts. Local musicians such as Lucy Beesley and Hope Christophers would prepare musical evenings and farewell concerts for troops here.

FROM ELBOW LANE WE CAN RETURN TO CHAPEL LANE & THE WAR MEMORIAL