

Children Helping the War Effort

Between 1914 and 1918, everyone was expected to 'do their bit' to help with war work. Many British children were very keen to lend a hand in order to support their fathers and older brothers who were away fighting at the Front.

The first way children helped out was as newspaper distributors. Children as young as four and five could be seen on street corners calling for people to buy their papers. The war brought a demand for up to date news. Imagine a world without radio, TV or the internet and you will understand how important newspapers were in those days.

Children continued to help at home and some would have taken on extra responsibilities if their mother was doing any sort of war work. Around the house they would look after younger brothers and sisters. They would have helped with housework, chopping firewood carrying water from the wells. Topsham did not have piped water until 1916 and their water came from over 200 wells around the town.

Young people also joined long queues for food in the shops. Food was scarce because German U-Boats (submarines) were sinking the ships bringing supplies to Britain. 'Growing your own' vegetables became very important. Topsham Council bought and allocated new allotments for residents near to the Cemetery for people to grow their own food.

Food rationing had to be introduced and coal for heating was also rationed. It was very cold in the school one winter when the boilers stopped working and the children suffered from chilblains (painful and itchy swellings on the hands and feet caused by exposure to cold).

War activities were built into the school week and pupils were encouraged to donate their breakfasts to "Egg Day", on which eggs were collected for wounded soldiers in local hospitals. Topsham had a small VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) hospital in Riversmeet Terrace for soldiers who were convalescing after being wounded.

Topsham schoolchildren contributed to the war effort by knitting socks and mittens for the soldiers fighting at the Front, collecting for war charities, picking apples and blackberries, helping to harvest fruit in the local market gardens around the town. The Boy's School grew potatoes and collected half a ton of conkers for explosive factories whilst the Girls and Infants picked apples and sewed "hospitality bags" to give to servicemen passing through Exeter St. David's Station.

'Flag days' were held to make money for all kinds of wartime projects. Children would sell little flags or badges that people could pin to their coats. They raised money for funding the war effort, for example to build warships, or to help wounded soldiers. There was even a Blue Cross

fund to help horses hurt in battle. Children collected other things that would be useful for the war effort, such as blankets, books and magazines. These were sent to the soldiers at the Front or to the Topsham VAD Hospital.

School leaving age wasn't raised to 14 until 1918, so some children would have already been at work or would have been sent to work to replace the workforce fighting in the war.