

A fit country for heroes?

The experiences of Salford's returning soldiers after 1918

In this article **Steve Illingworth** explores the conditions for returning British servicemen at the end of the First World War in relation to the promise by Prime Minister Lloyd George about creating 'a fit country for heroes'. In particular, it looks at the experiences of former soldiers in Salford, a town at the heart of the devastating losses suffered in the conflict.

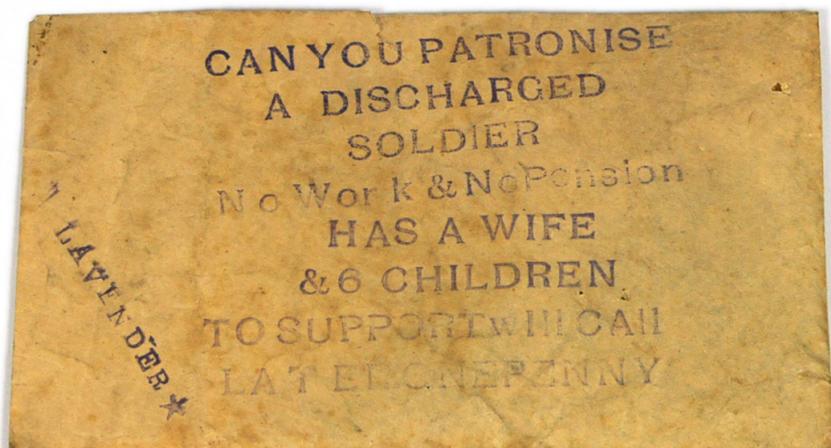
On 23 November 1918, a few days after the armistice that ended the First World War, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George announced in a speech at Wolverhampton that he wanted to create 'a fit country for heroes'.¹ In saying this, he was acknowledging the horrors that the returning soldiers had been enduring. Many would have life-changing injuries and psychological damage, while nearly all would have seen close friends die and carried out acts of incredible selfless bravery in the face of constant enemy fire. The Prime Minister and the soldiers themselves would have hoped that these sacrifices were not made in vain. Hopefully the 'heroes' could return to a better country, where they could enjoy an improved standard of living and be treated with due respect by the British public. Did this happen in reality? This article will explore the post-1918 world for British soldiers, with particular reference to events in the northern industrial borough of Salford.

Soldiers from Salford were involved at the heart of the conflict on the Western Front and also in the attack on Turkish forces at Gallipoli in 1915. Perhaps the most iconic day of the entire Western Front campaign was 1 July 1916, the first day of The Battle of the Somme, where the British Army suffered 58,000 casualties in one day. A number of regiments with Salford soldiers were involved in the assault on the heavily fortified German front line on that day and the losses incurred had a profound effect on the town. On this day and many others during the war, there were many examples of bravery and selflessness by Salford soldiers, many of which were recorded by Salford Council at the end of the war on filing cards. Examples included Henry Coates from Eccles New Road in Salford, who was awarded the Military Cross for being 'instrumental in getting three wounded officers into safety under heavy fire.'² A similar act of selfless bravery was shown by Joseph Holmes of Bermondsey Street in Salford, who received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for 'rescuing wounded Lieutenant Ames and carrying him under fire for 500 yards to our new line.'³ These men, and many others like them, would have hoped at the very least to return to a prosperous Salford where their skills and character were valued in a 'fit country for heroes'.

According to historian Ian Kershaw, the story of the soldiers returning to Britain after the war was one of disillusionment and despair. He claims that Lloyd George's words about a fit country for heroes 'would soon seem no more than a hollow mockery to many soldiers who had come home from the trenches'. Like several other historians of this period, Kershaw suggests that the heroism of the servicemen was soon forgotten as they struggled to recover the standard of living they had achieved before the war.⁴

The story of Salford's illegal street markets in the immediate post-war period creates an impression of economic hardship for returning soldiers. Many of them had been small shopkeepers before the war and found that they were unable to resume their businesses when they returned, due to changing economic conditions and the emergence of local

An envelope containing lavender, being sold by a discharged soldier.
Salford City Archives



A street market set up by ex-soldiers in Salford.
Salford Local History Library Collection



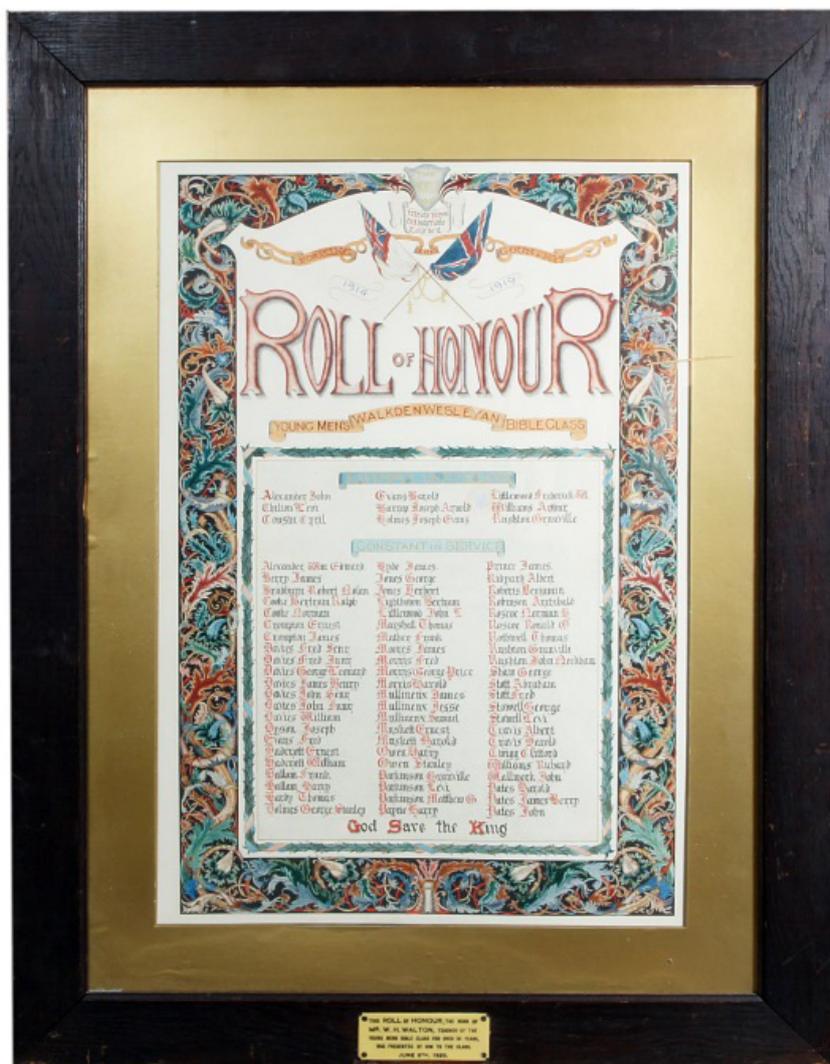
competition in their absence. The solution for many returning soldiers was to set up unofficial markets on street corners. One of these was Bernard Waywell, who spoke to Salford Council about this situation in August 1922. He had served for four years in the war. He said that there were 55 discharged servicemen who had set up stalls at the unofficial market in Broughton, Salford. This was just one market, so there must have been hundreds of former soldiers with stalls across the whole of Salford. Mr Waywell told the council that he and his colleagues 'had been compelled to start selling goods at markets to earn a living; that before the war some of the men had occupied shops, which they had to give up owing to army service, and on their return they were unable to get them back again.'⁵ The situation concerning the unofficial markets was a double blow to the former servicemen.

As well as having to resort to selling their goods on street corners due to economic hardship, the former shopkeepers then had to endure attempts by the council to close the 'illegal markets' down, due to complaints by market stallholders from the existing licensed markets in the town. There were also complaints from local residents, such as Mary J. Smith of Lower Broughton, who complained that 'the noise of buying and selling is distracting.'⁶ Far from being treated as heroes, this particular group of returning soldiers were seen mainly as a nuisance by local residents.

There are examples of even greater hardship among former Salford servicemen. A small envelope in the Salford city archives tells a poignant story of a discharged soldier with 'no work and no pension' but with 'a wife and 6 children to support'. The envelope contains a few pieces of lavender, used

by householders to freshen up the odours of their house. The unnamed former soldier would have posted these envelopes through doors, hoping that he could 'call back later', as the wording on the envelope says, to collect 'one penny' in return for the contents of the envelope.⁷ Of course, it is always possible that unscrupulous entrepreneurs could try to capitalise on the sympathy of the public at a time of strong emotions about the war by pretending to be former soldiers. Having said that, the other evidence of hardship, such as the unofficial markets, as well as the modest amount being asked for by the lavender seller, suggest that this envelope is indeed poignant evidence of the kind of desperation faced by some soldiers when they returned to civilian life after 1918.

As well as economic hardship, there is evidence that soldiers returning to Salford suffered unnecessary



frustration over the way the authorities handled their situation. In two different ways, laudable attempts to honour the returning 'heroes' by the government and by the local council were undermined by inefficiency and incompetence. Some complained that honours they were supposed to receive had not arrived. George Hampson from Pendleton in Salford had been to see council officials in September 1918 about a Military Medal he had won and had been promised that he would be notified soon about when to collect it. In June 1919 he wrote to complain that he had heard nothing and was clearly frustrated about the 'long delay'. 'I cannot see any reason for this long delay in my case', Hampson wrote, 'when others have received theirs which were won at the same time.'⁸ Hampson and others in his position could be forgiven for thinking that honouring his distinguished war service did not seem to be any kind of priority for the authorities.

In a similar situation, Salford Council planned a 'civic reception for ex-servicemen' where all the soldiers, sailors and airmen from the borough

who returned from the war would be invited to a special event to honour their service, with refreshments, transportation, entertainment and distinguished guests. Clearly there were good intentions here and there is evidence that the former soldiers were enthusiastic about this idea at first. The problem was the 'distinguished guests'. There was an admirable sense of ambition from the council in trying to secure the attendance of extremely eminent people such as head of the British navy Admiral Beatty, head of the British army Field Marshal Haig and of David Lloyd George, Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922. However, Beatty, Haig and Lloyd George had to withdraw from the scheduled events due to other commitments and also due to an apparent 'misunderstanding', so the event was postponed several times. This became a source of great frustration for the Salford ex-servicemen and this annoyance was voiced by Ernest Pritchard, who had served in the 19th Lancashire Fusiliers in the war. In a letter to the Salford Reporter on 2 October 1920, Pritchard wrote about

'disappointment amongst the returned heroes, who have been waiting to be entertained for so long.' He implored the council to go ahead with the event anyway despite the withdrawal of distinguished guests – 'never mind waiting for "Mr Nobody"', was how he put it. Pritchard voiced the frustration of many when he concluded his letter with 'The enthusiasm for this function is on the wane, and has been on the wane amongst my associates for some time.'⁹ The event did finally go ahead a week later, on 9 October 1920. Yet this was nearly two years after the end of the war in November 1918. Ernest Pritchard and his 'associates' must have felt that this was no way to treat returning 'heroes'.

On the other hand, it would be too facile to dismiss all the efforts by the authorities and to be totally disdainful of their bungling attempts to honour returning soldiers. As well as the stories of poor administration and occasional insensitivity, there is evidence that the local authorities in Salford had a genuine desire to treat the ex-servicemen with the utmost respect. Simply by trying to secure the attendance of household names such as Lloyd George, Haig and Beatty for the civic reception, Salford Council was giving a powerful message about the special nature of the event they were planning. The delay was primarily due to the unfortunate unavailability of these very busy and important people on certain days. Despite the setbacks, the council did persevere with their plans and the event finally went ahead. 'Special cars' were laid on to take the ex-servicemen out of Salford to the very popular venue of Belle Vue in Manchester. It is easy for modern readers to make fun of some of the entertainment provided for the former soldiers and their families, such as a 'mirthful, mystical humoristic Anglo-French entertainer' and 'England's premier whistler', but a full programme of variety acts was provided, the mayor of Salford was in attendance and every ex-serviceman received a personalised 'illuminated certificate'.¹⁰

The 'heroes' of the First World War were honoured and commemorated by thousands of war memorials across the whole country. In this respect, Salford was no exception. Not only the soldiers who lost their lives but also those who served at any point in the war were named on memorials erected by businesses, streets, social organisations and a particularly ornate memorial for the employees of Salford Council involved in the war. Many of these were paid for by public subscriptions. Despite the hardships of the post-war economy and high levels of unemployment, great

sums of money were raised in this way through the donations of people from all social backgrounds. This allowed for a large number of memorials to be created and also encouraged high-quality craftsmanship and artwork in their creation. A good example in Salford of the thought and care behind a memorial is that designed for the Young Men's Walkden Wesleyan Bible Class. The fact that there are 75 names on the Roll of Honour for this society is a fascinating insight into changes in social and religious history over the last century, as it hard to imagine a similar organisation having such a large membership in 2018. Equally striking is the intricate detail and elaborate decoration in the design. It clearly mattered to the local community that the returning soldiers were honoured and remembered with a great deal of thought and care.¹¹

It has been said that a society should be judged by how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members.¹² In this respect, Salford in the immediate post-war years showed care and compassion in the treatment of its injured returning 'heroes'. Newspaper stories of the time show several examples of how disabled servicemen were rehabilitated and given useful work to do. Walter Rimmer had lost the lower part of his right leg but was able to run the kitchens at the Ocean Ironworks in Salford. Edward Oddie had lost the whole of his right leg but became a car driver for the Salford Electricity Department, which had 'necessitated a slight alteration of the pedals to enable him to exercise complete control of the waggon by the use of the left foot only.'¹³ Here were two uplifting examples of how great efforts had been made to enable these two returning soldiers to be given the dignity and material benefits of skilled and useful paid work.

Despite Salford Council's tardiness with the civic reception for ex-servicemen and the occasional failure to deliver a medal in good time, there were genuine efforts made to provide very thoughtful and totally respectful tokens of appreciation to the returning soldiers of the town. 'Illuminated certificates' were sent to local soldiers. Like the war memorials, a lot of meticulous care and design went into the production of these certificates. It might be thought, cynically, that soldiers who had endured the horrors of the First World War would be very unimpressed with receiving merely a colourful piece of card in return for all their efforts. However, several letters to Salford Council suggest that these certificates were very well received. Touchingly, Alfred Atherton, a former sergeant in the 10th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, called it 'a beautiful

token of remembrance'. He went on to say, 'I will always cherish the kindly thoughts which the members of your Council have placed on record to one who is proud of being a Salfordian.'¹⁴ He, and others like him, had no doubt that they were being treated like 'heroes' on their return.

When studying the immediate post-war period in Britain, it is easy to generalise and claim that politicians did not care enough about the condition of returning soldiers. At first sight their efforts fell well short of Lloyd George's promise of a 'fit country for heroes' and it might be supposed that the former servicemen would feel let down. However, the economic circumstances were very difficult and largely beyond the control of the politicians, limiting the prospects that the soldiers could return easily to their former livelihoods. The evidence from Salford suggests that local politicians were deeply respectful of the returning soldiers and made admirable efforts to honour them. Sometimes these efforts were undermined by inefficiencies but there was often genuine appreciation from those who had fought

Economically, the returning 'heroes' would struggle, but they were still cared for and treated with great respect by the people and politicians of Salford and the rest of the country.

REFERENCES

- 1 Speech at Wolverhampton, 23 November 1918, quoted in *The Times*, 25 November 1918.
- 2 From Salford City Archives.
- 3 *ibid*
- 4 I. Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949*, Penguin History of Europe (London: Allen Lane, 2015). Paperback edition 2016, p. 94.
- 5 From Salford City Archives
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 *ibid*
- 8 *ibid*
- 9 From the Salford Local History Library Collection
- 10 From Salford City Archives
- 11 *ibid*
- 12 This comment is often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, though this has been disputed.
- 13 From the Salford Local History Library Collection
- 14 From Salford City Archives



Further reading

D. Stevenson, *1914-18* (Penguin, London, 2012)

I. Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (London: Allen Lane, 2015)

M. Stedman, *Salford Pals: a history of the Salford Brigade: 15th, 16th, 19th and 20th Battalions Lancashire Fusiliers* (Pen and Sword Military, Barnsley, 2007)

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