

This is the Thirty-eighth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

The Outbreak of the First World War

I had hoped that, among the various documents that I have collected, there would have been some small insight into how this momentous event was regarded in Swanton Morley, but unfortunately it coincided with a period during which the rector, the Rev. Andrew Johnson Hunter was ill and his curate, Rev. E. Vernon Smith, was struggling to carry out his duties. Andrew Johnson Hunter died on 12 June 1914 and his successor, the Rev. George Duncan Barry, does not seem to have been installed until mid- December.

Among the rector's duties was the production of the parish magazine, and we are very fortunate that cuttings from quite a few of these magazines have survived. In fact, it was Andrew Johnson Hunter himself who compiled a book of cuttings, starting in January 1898, which he passed down to his daughter. When she died, her executors gave them to Canon Noel Boston, sometime vicar of Dereham. Then, when he died in 1977, they were given to Canon Arthur Walter, then rector of Swanton Morley, and they are now in the Norfolk Archive Centre. Having said all that, however, these cuttings do not contain a great deal of interesting material about this particular period.

The August 1914 edition, for example, gives a list of the prize winners for good attendance at the school, before going on to talk about the special collection for the War Relief Fund which was made on 30 August, and which amounted to £4 8s 0d. However it does express the hope that many will thank God for an abundant harvest well gathered in a year when it was especially needed.

I do not have any cuttings for September 1914, but the October 1914 edition does focus on "H.M. the Queen's Fund for providing winter clothing for our soldiers at the front." There is also a copy of a letter from the Bishop of Norwich which reminds people that "it is always our duty to keep our bodies in temperance, soberness, and chastity", and asks people to "help our soldiers in this direction." It goes on, "Much harm can be done by good humoured but thoughtless treating, and by allowing young men and girls to be exposed to dangers together." It is hard to imagine such a letter being written today. In view of the fact that this letter was probably written during the retreat from Mons, I wonder what reception it got in Swanton Morley at the time.

There is a much more down-to-earth letter in the only other cutting that I have found for this period. It was written in September 1915 by the O.C the Administrative Centre of a Royal Army Medical Corps unit in Norwich which was seeking recruits. (Conscription did not start until January 1916.)

"The help given to me by the Clergy of Norfolk in response to my last letter has induced me to trouble you again. I have had many recruits from the country districts, and in conversation with these men, I find that many of them have been influenced to enlist through notices they have seen in their Parish Magazines.

It is impossible for me to know what particular parishes have helped in this way, but the Clergy who published notices will be glad to know that they have been the means of sending us recruits, and I write to ask those who have not already posted notices if they will help by doing so.

I have just received a further urgent request for another hundred men."

This led me to wonder if we know when the first soldier from Swanton Morley was killed.