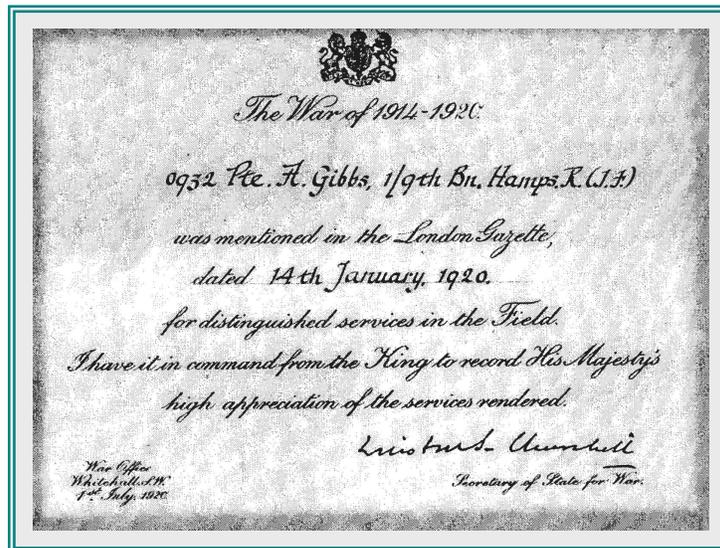


From Merriott to Siberia: Letters to my Father

David Gibbs

My father, Arthur (Art) Gibbs, was a soldier of the Great War. He was first sent to India and then to Siberia, of all places. But, no doubt, Siberia was preferable to the killing fields of Belgium and France, at least his name isn't on the village war memorial alongside those of some of his friends, as it might well have been. Even so, whilst he was in Siberia he was mentioned in dispatches for '*distinguished services in the field*', so whatever it was he found himself involved in it must have been pretty dangerous place to be.



When the war broke out, he had yet to leave the family home in Lower Street, the right-hand end cottage of the row of three opposite today's fish and chip shop. He lived there with his parents and at least two of his six siblings. He was eighteen years old, going on nineteen, just the right age for military service. The picture below left is of



him and two other village lads; one is already serving.

Soon after this photograph was taken, my father was called up and, like a good many other local lads, he ended up in the Somerset Light Infantry, did some basic training at Larkhill camp in Wiltshire and at Crownhill Barracks in Plymouth. Then his



particular company went off to India. Somewhere along the way, he trained as a signaller, no mean achievement for a boy who left the village school a few years earlier

aged just twelve. The photograph above on the right, taken in India, arm twisted to show off his signaller badge, gives an indication of how proud he was of this achievement. Maybe it was this useful skill that prolonged his demobilisation because when the war ended, instead of being (as the old 'Bless 'em All' song went) on

*'a troopship just leaving
Bombay, Bound for old
Blighty's shores, Heavily
laden with time-expired men
Back to the land they adore.*

he was on a troopship bound for Vladivostock.

But this isn't solely about my father's wartime exploits. It's more about letters sent to him from home. There must have been a good many over the years but just four have survived.



The letters were written in 1918 and 1919 by two of Arthur's older sisters, Annie and Minnie. (His mother and father, Emma and George, couldn't write and so had to rely on their daughters.) Annie had left home and was the wife of a village baker, Harry Mitchell. With their very young family, they lived behind and above a small shop just three doors down from the present-day Co-op. The bake house was a separate building in the yard at the rear. Minnie still lived at home in Lower Street.

I think the letters are interesting on various levels. Naturally, they express concern for the safe return of a much-loved son and younger brother, at a time when the news, day after day and very close to home, was often very bleak indeed and put their trust in God that he would return safely. There is evidence of the effect the war was having on day-to-day living, especially with regard to food shortages. And for those of us familiar with old Mert Speak, there are one or two interesting examples. As you read the letters, bear in mind they were written by people whose education was limited to attending the village school, their formal education ending when they were just 12 years

old. You can judge their ability for yourself but I have to say I am pretty impressed.

This first letter was written by Annie, in May 1918. I imagine her sitting at the table, close by the window in the small living room at the rear of the house - a room I knew well as a small boy and particularly remember the high-back settle projecting from the fire place - dipping her pen in the inkpot, busily writing away, the occasional customer calling in the shop next door to buy bread and cakes interrupting her. And when she was finished, I can imagine her walking the few yards along the stepped pavement by the Co-op to the post box set in the side window of the post office, extracting stamps from the stamp machine alongside, and then posting her letter away on its long journey to previously unheard of places far away across the world.

Wednesday May 1st
Dear
My Dear Art
I receive your letter also will have
thankfull we was to hear that you was
alright and still in Indian. we do hope that
God will look after you and keep you
there till the war ends. We very often
meet home together all of us but still
is one missing and that is you
God spare each one of us to meet
home again, as you said on Will letter
give you Mother garden path for all
Indian local strand I hope we shall
see you there one day. Mother takes a
great delight in her garden fruit trees
and the flowers now the garden is
crop it look nice she still got her
fruits she has sit a hen last week
she had 12 nice chickens come out
she was please, they are worth 1 each soon

3
month old to a Lady Mrs Blake so
each a lot of money but it is a shame
not any amount of people been here to
buy them they are such a big sort they
want them to eat as meat stuff is
short. the war doest get much better
several more men are expecting there
papers this week men up to 44 got
to go now its dreadful how one
week it would end. Boss heard from
^{But} yesterday morning he was alright up
till then I do hope he will be spared.
Dear Art I hope you wont get tired
of reading this. Now I must say
goodbye with fondest love from us
all from your ever loving sister
Annie May the At time roll on
when we shall see each other again
We had your photos alright, it would
been better, if it had been your real face
We havnt heard anything about
you allowasee
We very often picture your face here
& hope God will
to Turnpike, Bless you.

The aim to be self-sufficient in food that is evident in this letter was not just a wartime measure. Village folk back then, and indeed well into the middle of the last century, grew most of their own vegetables. Most people kept a few 'fowls' for their eggs and, later, for the pot. Not quite as common in my own time, but not unknown, was the 'sitting' of a hen, as my Grandmother had so successfully done. And like my cousin Eddie, Annie's son, who kept and sold rabbits, I recall that when I was a boy we kept a couple of rabbits from time to

time that ended up in the pot; hardly necessary though as wild rabbits were very plentiful in the countryside around the village and there for the catching.

This next letter was also written by Annie, in June 1918.

Wednesday
June 12th Merriott
Knapp

My Dear Brother

Just these few lines
hoping you are well as it leaves us
all present hope you will still in
India, mother receive your photos,
and Min your letter, the photos, are
nice how good to see you, Dear face
amongst those many strangers, How
much better if it had been your
real face but still we must
live in hopes to see you some day
We all think you look well, We
all must and we are praying to
God, to spare you to come home
safe when that day come, Dear
Art do look after yourself as much
as you can We do hope in that
photo those men are kind also
your mates how strange those
black men look I hope they are
kind. What sites you have seen

And been there its better out in
 India than France there is several
 ships missing here again and
 because I expect we shall here
 some news again I hope Bert
 will be spared also Tom. The
 news aint very good again the
 Germans seem to be gaining
 every day but we do hope that
 God will soon bring it to an end
 Dear Art I dont think I have
 any more news now hoping you
 well as it leaves us all at present
 so now I must say good bye
 with fondest love from us all
 from your loving sister Annie

Love from all at
 home, write as often
 as you can

+++++

Bert was the husband of Bessie, another of my father's sister; he was spared. I don't know who Tom was or whether he was one of two Thomas's listed on the village war memorial.

In spite of the heartfelt wish to have their son and brother home again, it didn't happen. Instead, in October 1918 he was drafted into another regiment, the Hampshire Light Infantry, the 1/9 (Cyclist) Battalion, and instead of heading for home he sailed to Vladivostock and from there went on into Siberia. Below is the brief record of the formation and deployment of the battalion, taken from the Hampshire Regiment website.

1/9th (Cyclist) Battalion

August 1914: in Southampton.

November 1915: joined with three other Cyclist Bns and converted to infantry. This 'Brigade' was originally intended for East Africa.

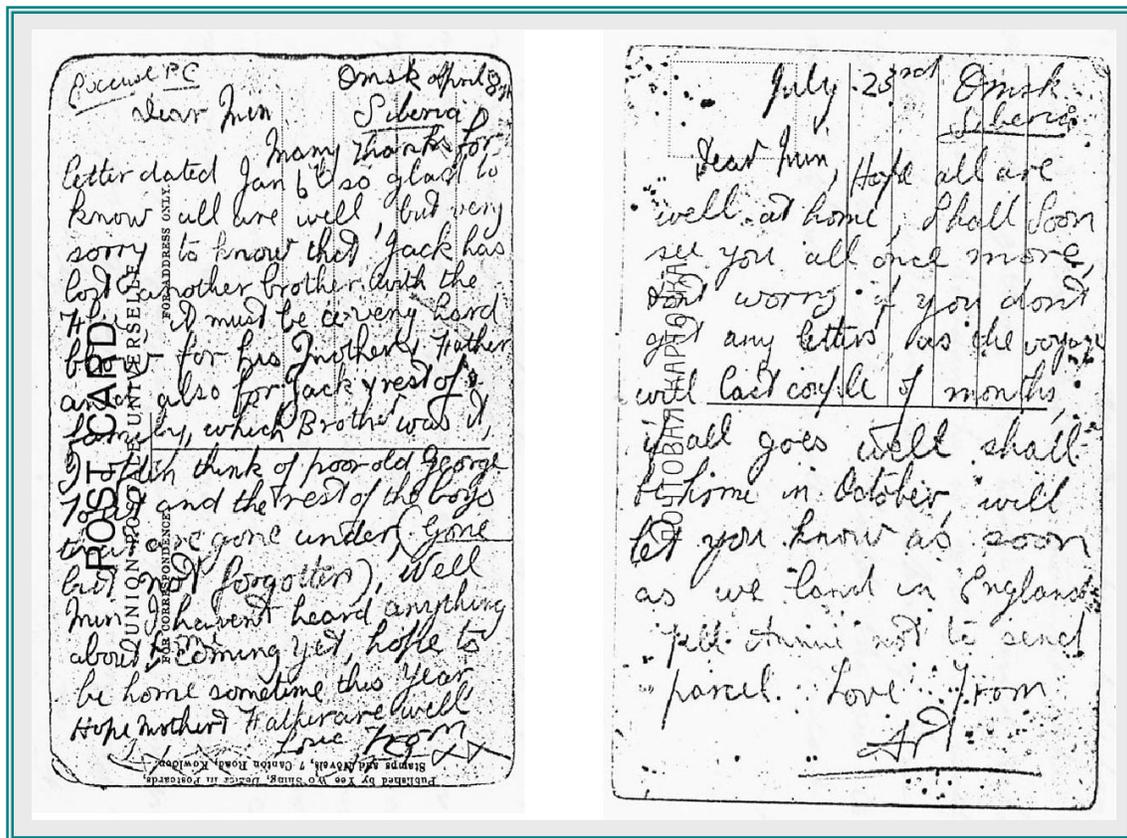
4 February 1916: sailed from Devonport to India.

In October 1918, moved to Vladivostock (arriving 28 November) and on into Siberia, where it stayed until November 1919 thence returning to England. It was at Omsk (at 7 January 1919) and Ekaterinberg (from May 1919). The Battalion sailed from Vladivostock on 1 November 1919 and returned home via Canada.

5 December 1919: arrived at Southampton and then disbanded.

One year previous to the battalion's deployment to Siberia, the Russian Revolution had occurred. One year later, there was still much political turmoil and civil war erupted between the Bolsheviks and the so-called White Russians who opposed them. British troops were deployed on the Russian mainland in support of the White Russians.

At first, my father was stationed in or near the city of Omsk, as these postcards home show and, in late July, he clearly had hopes of being home by October.



Min, to whom the card is addressed, was Arthur's sister. Jack (Tout) came from Hazelbury and was later to become Minnie's husband. Two of Jack's brothers had been killed. The 'poor old George' my father referred to was probably George Rendall, the only George commemorated on the village war memorial - 'Gone but not forgotten', as my father emphasised.

In the deployment notes above, you will see that the battalion later moved from Omsk to Ekaterinberg. You will no doubt know that it was to this city that the last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, his young family and a few trusted servants, taken and held captive

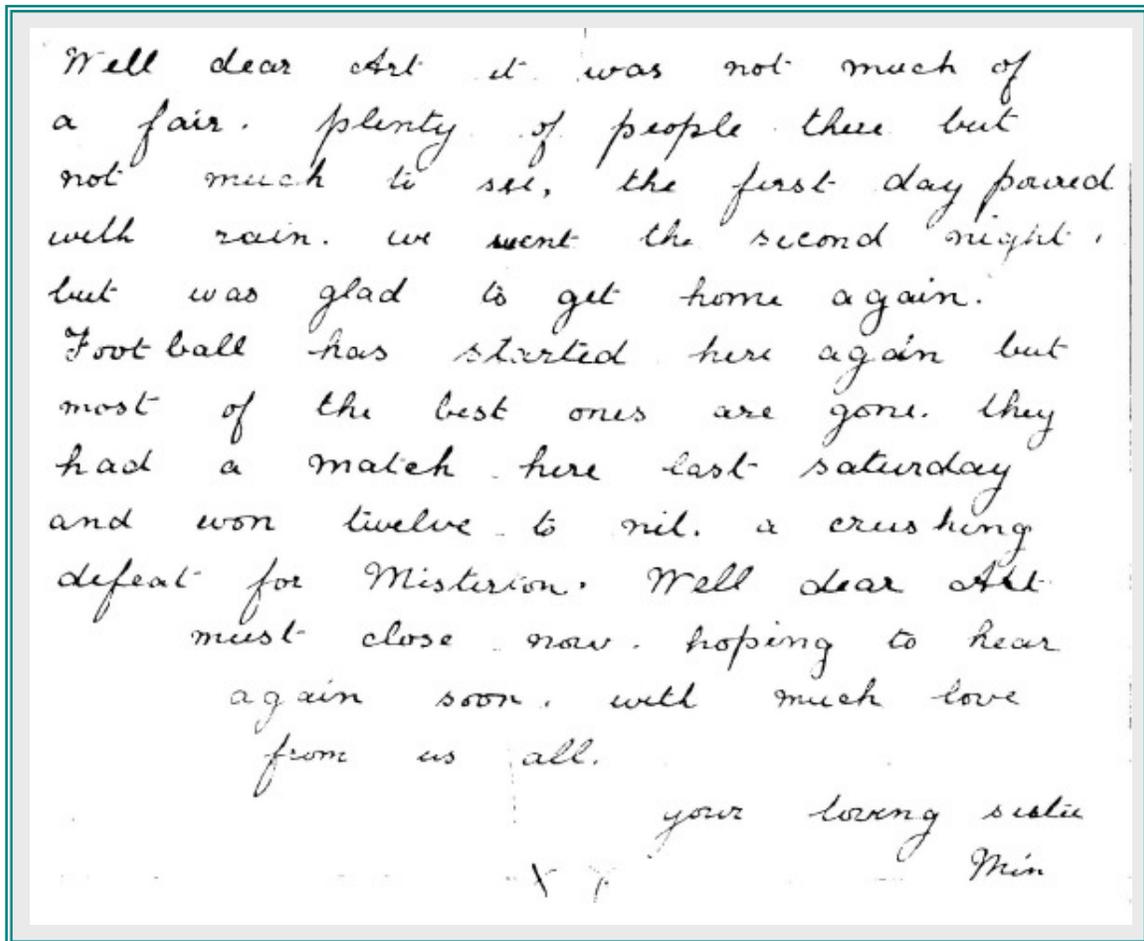
by the Bolsheviks some months earlier, were finally taken. It was there, in July 1919, when the White Russians and their allies surrounded the city and the Bolsheviks were facing a local setback, they were finally murdered to prevent their release.

In September 1919, Arthur's sister Minnie wrote this letter from the family home.

Lower St
Merriott--
Sept 13th

Dear Art

many thanks for letters which we received quite safe. glad to hear you are keeping well. no letters us all at present, we are anxious to know when you will be home for good. you said on the letter received to day that you expect to be home by September, which we hope will be true. as nearly all the boys are home. Will Be Come has been out of the Army for some time, and is gone to Wilkes to work. Mother & Father are still keeping alright. Father is still at the same place. Mother does not go out to work so much. and I am very glad, she has plenty to do at home. The weather at present is lovely. they are very busy with the harvest; anxious to get it in as the weather lately has been awful.



Well dear Art it was not much of
a fair. plenty of people there but
not much to see, the first day poured
with rain. we went the second night,
but was glad to get home again.
Football has started here again but
most of the best ones are gone. they
had a match here last Saturday
and won twelve to nil. a crushing
defeat for Misterion. Well dear Art
must close now. hoping to hear
again soon. with much love
from us all.

your loving sister
Min

Will Osborne was my father's friend; he is standing behind him in the photograph at the start of this article. It seems Will (or Bill, as I believe he was more generally known) went off to Wales to work, probably in the coalmines, like a good many Merriott and Crewkerne chaps had done and continued to do for years. They were known locally as Crewkerne Miners or Crewkerne Welshmen.

Crewkerne Fair was a washout, a lot of people about, not much to see. Ah! Well, 'twas ever thus. No doubt still is.

Football had started again, but most of the best players are gone, perhaps from both sides.

By this time, the allies had accepted the fact that the Bolsheviks were now completely in control and decided to withdraw from the conflict. News had filtered through back home that troops from Russia were returning. Expectations of Arthur's return were high.

A few weeks later, on 24th September 1919, Annie wrote her final letter (below). My father didn't receive this letter until the 19th November when he was in Vancouver, Canada and was at last on the way home. He annotated the envelope accordingly.

Wednesday

Sept 24th

Snappa
Merriots

My Dear Art

Once again I am taking the pleasure
of writing to you these few lines hoping you are
quite well, as it leaves us all at present. Mother
and Lottie is still working they are digging their
potatoes today I hope they will have a good crop,
the hope you will be home soon to have some
of them. We are still living in hope to see
you soon. We have been in a bit of bother
from some landless men, but we are
hoping to see if we don't hear for certain you
are coming home. It will send on you parcel
but we all feel sure you will be home
as they never will keep you another winter
they are sacking all hands of work, and taking
back all return soldiers so they might soldiers
should be minded first. Lot and his friends
are gone to Seaton today she has her holiday
this week she is across Gylbo sometime she
was 21 last week getting on. Eddie started school
today after 2 months holiday he is getting on well
at school I hope it will be the making of him
some day. Reg is writing rather I should like you to
hear sometimes. I think this is all with kindest
love from your loving sister Annie x x x x x

Once again, in the letter George and Emma's potato crop figures prominently, an indication of the importance of a having a good crop to see them through the winter months.

Workers are being sacked to make way for returning soldiers - that must have caused some friction, but in Annie's opinion 'so they ought, soldiers should be minded first'.

Younger sister Lottie, just 21, was off to Seaton on holiday. I wonder how they got there in those days? By train, I suppose, from Crewkerne, change at Chard Junction, something that is no longer possible. And nephew Eddie started back at school - he attended Crewkerne Grammar School. He's 'doing well' and his mother hopes 'it will be the making of him'. He eventually became the head teacher of a school in London.

Clearly, boys of the Hampshire battalion must have been involved in the fighting in Siberia in some way or other. Whether or not my father ever fired his rifle in anger, I know not. Like so many old soldiers, during his lifetime he said very little about his wartime experiences, certainly not to his family. And yet, to be mentioned in dispatches suggests very active involvement at some time or other.

It occurred to me that his service record might provide me with an explanation. Not so. I've searched and searched but can't find his service record, possibly because more than forty percent of WWI service records no longer exist; they were destroyed by German bombing in WWII.

But on one occasion my father made a remark to me that continues to provide a small clue to why he was mentioned in dispatches. He once told me it was for '*riding shotgun in open trucks on a train travelling across Siberia in sub-zero temperatures*' and that he believed the train was transporting, amongst other loot, no doubt, '*the Russian crown jewels to Canada*'.

Of one thing we can be sure, it was definitely not the official Russian *crown* jewels that were being shipped to Canada for, unbeknown to the Bolsheviks, they had been stored in Moscow, in a vault in the Kremlin, and were not discovered again until 1926. In recent years, the public have been allowed to see them.

But most rumours contain a grain of truth and maybe it could well have been jewels of some sort. If not the so-called crown jewels, it could possibly have been other jewels from the extensive hoard accumulated by a succession of Russian rulers, some of which they deemed to be their private property. But I really don't know. How I wish I did. So, I continue to seek an explanation. I believe there must be an answer out there somewhere.

As the deployment record shows, the 1/9 Hampshire battalion finally left Vladivostock on 1st November 1919 and returned home via Canada, arriving at Southampton on 5 December 1919. More than one year after the end of the Great War proper, my father's war was finally over.

That a village boy, my own father, should have found himself far from home and so close to a truly momentous historical event, I find most intriguing. Indeed, without knowing exactly why, I take pride in it. I am proud, too, that he was mentioned in dispatches. I just wished that he'd told me more about it. And, more importantly, that I had had the sense to ask.

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