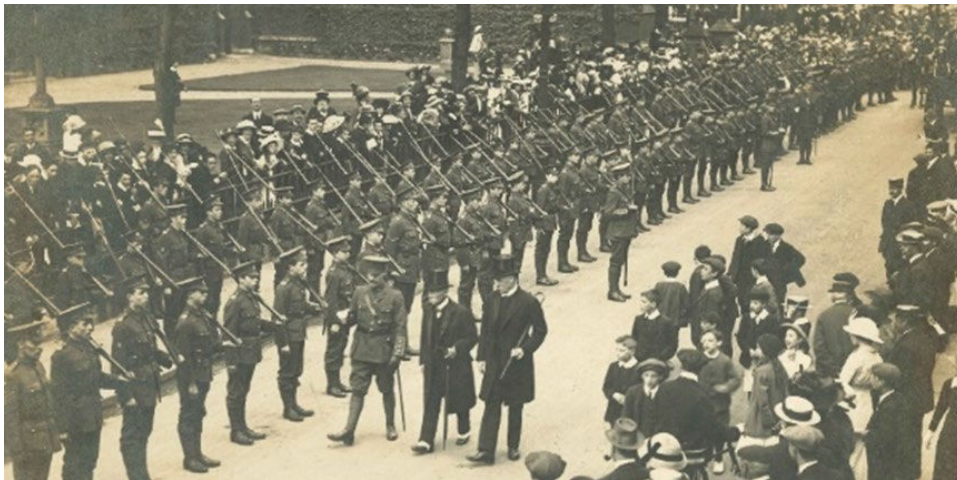


Bedford Modern School during World War I

The School in 1914



On 27 July 1914, the annual inspection of the School's Officer Training Corps took place outside the old School building in Harpur Street. Cadets were inspected by Field-Marshal Earl Roberts of Kandahar, VC. The following day, Austria declared war on Serbia following Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination. As Russia mobilised, Germany declared war on Russia and France, invading neutral Belgium and Luxembourg. As a result, just eight days after this photograph was taken, Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914.

The school had had a permanent Cadet Corps from 1900. Activity declined after the end of the Boer War, although the reorganisation of School Forces as Officer Training Corps in 1908, together with increasing international tensions, resulted in a revival of activity at the school. On the outbreak of war, many OBMs and some Masters signed up for military service. Regular lists of OBMs serving in the Forces were published, where information was available. However, life in school would continue relatively unchanged, although pupils saw visible signs of the war within days in Bedford. The school's playing fields – and much of the town – were occupied almost immediately by more than 17,000 Scottish troops from the Highland Division, who were billeted in Bedford until May 1915 due to the town's central location and excellent transport links. This postcard (*courtesy of OBM David Callwood (1944-49)*) shows Highland troops and men waiting to enlist in front of the Cricket pavilion, still in use today.



School life during the War

For those too young to fight, life in school continued much the same, with regular sports fixtures, although the annual 'Theatricals' and Old Boys' Dinner were cancelled from 1915, resuming only towards the end of the War. In May 1917, a Natural History Society was formed which thrived in school for the rest of the War. Throughout the War, *The Eagle*, the School magazine, printed letters from OBMs in the Forces and published lists of awards and casualties. In July 1918, a special issue reported on an important event in the school's history.

The Royal Visit, 1918



On 27 June 1918, King George V and Queen Mary visited Bedford and the King inspected the school's Officer Training Corps jointly with that of Bedford School. Afterwards, the King addressed members of Bedford Modern School assembled on the playing fields at Bedford School.

The Officer Training Corps



In late 1916, cadet training was increased to ten hours per week and a Military Training Class was added to the curriculum. Membership of the Officer Training Corps at the school fluctuated throughout the war but, following an impassioned plea from the Headmaster, Arnold Powell, at Speech Day in 1918, membership had increased to more than one third of its pupils by the end of the war.

OBM's and Military Service



More than 1,100 OBM's fought in the War. They served in every branch and at every level of the Armed Forces and the international nature of the school's community at this time was reflected in the service of its OBM's in the armies of countries across the British Empire. Unlike most public schools, research has shown that OBM's generally enlisted as soldiers rather than officers, although commissions often followed soon afterwards. A high number served in 'technical' or support branches of the Forces (such as the Royal Engineers, Royal Artillery, Army Service Corps, Royal Flying Corps, Royal Navy and Royal Army Medical Corps).

The youngest OBM to serve was just 14 (having volunteered underage) and the oldest was 59.

This photograph shows Sidney, Hubert and Wilfred Palmer, OBM brothers who served in – and, amazingly, all survived – the War.

Decorations

The Eagle published a comprehensive list of decorations awarded to OBM's. Amongst these were at least 32 Distinguished Service Orders and 57 Military Crosses. Major George Wheeler was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for his valour in Mesopotamia in 1915. His portrait still hangs in the main reception area.



The medal miniatures of RKB Walker (1900-05) from the First and Second World Wars – School Archive

The Armistice

The First World War ended at 11am on 11 November 1918, following the signing of the Armistice. The playwright Christopher Fry, known as A H Harris (1918-26) who joined the Junior School in the last months of the war, remembered that long-awaited day – a Monday – eighty-five years later:

"We were all eager for the great historic moment to arrive! And then the bells of St. Paul's Church, and of all the other churches in the town, rang out and excitement and joy took us over. We hammered on our desks and

cheered, and expected that school would be abandoned, and we could join the crown in the market place. But...class continued as though the world hadn't changed."

Commemoration



At Christmas 1918 *The Eagle* reported that 'this school has done its share, but at a cost.' Those who died were commemorated on the War Memorial, unveiled in 1923. Portraits of Major Wheeler, VC and Lt. Col. Edgar Mobbs, DSO a former England Rugby Captain, were added in 1926. The memorial tablets listed 167 OBMs who gave their lives during the War. Recent research has suggested this number could be as high as 201.

Further Information

The following resources give further information on BMS at war:

[A Roll of Honour for all OBMs who died during the First World War](#) - compiled from the school's memorials and records in the archive.

[BMS Communities on the IWM's Lives of the First World War website](#) - contain images and information about all who served in the War.

[BMS War Memorials](#) - commemorating those who died in the Boer War, Second World War and Korean War