

Introduction

The idea for this book came from my local history studies of local newspapers in Chiswick Library. I was recording items from the *Chiswick Times* and the *Acton Gazette* year by year from the 1890s, and when I reached 1914 found a wealth of material about the First World War. There were reports based on local journalists' interviews and letters from soldiers and sailors. Some letters were written direct to the papers but most were letters to relatives, friends, former employers, churches and clubs that were sent to the *Chiswick Times* for publication..

The Rev. R.A. Oldfield, vicar of St Mary Magdalene Church in Chiswick, received many letters from former members of his London Diocesan Church Lads' Brigade in Chiswick who were serving in the army, mainly on the Western Front but also in other parts of world, and in the navy. The letters to the *Chiswick Times* and extracts were published nearly every week during the war. The Church Lads' Brigade at St Mary's was a thriving organization. Of particular importance was their band. They had a football team and the brigade had outings to seaside resorts and other places.

The main part of the book consists of the letters from servicemen and some local newspaper reports. I have also included an abridged article that appeared in the Brentford and Chiswick Local History magazine about the beginning of the war, and short reports about events when the war ended. There is a lot more – munition workers, women, and conscientious objectors – that could be the subject of another book.

As well as graphic descriptions of battles and the horrors of war the letters to the Rev. Oldfield often wrote about what might be thought trivial matters – like the weather and food. They ask about friends serving elsewhere, and give news about other 'Chiswick lads' they have met on the Western Front or elsewhere. They ask for cigarettes and boots to be sent to them and acknowledge receipt with thanks. It is the first time nearly all have been abroad and their opinions of local populations – particularly about those in India and Egypt would not be acceptable today. They often reminisce nostalgically about happy occasions before the war.

The letters are censored, of course, and the names of ships and place names are sometimes deleted by officers. I expect the *Chiswick Times* editors tidied up a few of them and some of the place names may have innovative spellings. Nevertheless they give a view direct from the men in the ranks and gives some insight into how they sustained themselves in the midst of the horrors of war, with thoughts of home, loved ones, music, and happier times.

