

THE FORGOTTEN FOR SPY

THE UNTOLD STORY OF
STALIN'S FIRST BRITISH MOLE



NICK BARRATT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been one of the most difficult, challenging and enjoyable that I've ever written and would not have been possible without the help and support of some very special people.

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One of the biggest debts of gratitude must go to my research collaborators on this project, Ned Kershaw, Susan and Anthony Stanforth, and Michael and Eileen Barratt. I've been picking away at Oldham's story ever since Susan and Anthony had flagged up the fact that his MI5 file had been released to the National Archives in 2002. Susan was the first person within my family who reviewed the file and realised the significance of the story and followed up with research in relevant secondary literature. Michael was already regularly sending over snippets of information from the USA about the Oldhams and Holloways, gleaned from his store of family knowledge and ceaseless research online. Since this is a book about revelations and secrets, it is fair to state I am *not* the main genealogist in my family! The resolution of his childhood story of adventure from 1933 was thus solved by accident and I was provided with a convenient 'badge of honour' for my subsequent work on *Who Do You Think You Are?*. In particular, I must thank Anthony and Susan for painstakingly reviewing the text for errors; if any remain, they are of my making.

Yet unknown to us, Ned had already conducted some amazingly detailed research into Oldham's life, fascinated by the fact that this extraordinary story had been overlooked completely in the histories of the period – attention perhaps naturally gravitating towards the Cambridge spy ring and subsequent Cold War espionage. I say unknown, but Ned first made contact with me in 2006 after my connection to Oldham had been featured in the *Telegraph*; we swapped emails and then drifted out of touch. However, out of the blue, Ned resumed correspondence again in January 2014 just before I was due to give a talk about Oldham at the National Archives the following month; with extraordinary kindness, he agreed to share his thoughts, research notes and chronology during the preparation of the current work. Without his collaboration, this book would not have progressed in the direction that it has taken, as quickly as it has.

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goods. Finally, I am indebted to Emil Draitser for answering my final panicked questions and sharing his recollections of meeting Bystrolyotov in person. His book, *Stalin's Romeo Spy*, remains the standout work if you want to fully understand the danger, drama and difficulties that a spy in the 1920s and 1930s faced.

However, as usual, I leave the biggest vote of thanks until last, which goes to my family. I am often asked how I find the time and headspace to write, living in a house surrounded by four small children (and at the time of writing a fifth on the way). It's easy – they are a daily reminder of what is important in life, a sense of perspective that was clearly missing from Oldham's existence. So this book is partly for Elizabeth, Charlotte, Chloe, Alice and the one-who-will-be-named (though I doubt whether Ernest or Lucy will feature highly on the list of options). I must also profusely thank my mother, who encouraged me to 'write stories' since I was at school and now helps with the children. However, the final and unending debt of gratitude remains with my wife Lydia, who is a constant support, tower of strength and source of inspiration; she is surely on the path to sainthood for coping with the children while I lock myself away to write. The line always goes up.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

This is a complex story with many different characters. To help keep track of the key players here is a summary of their names and positions (code names given in brackets).

British security services

SURNAME	FIRST NAME	POSITION
Archer née Sissmore	Jane	MI5 agent
Argyll Robertson	Thomas	MI5 agent
Boddington	Herbert 'Con'	MI5 agent
Canning	Albert	Head of Special Branch, Metropolitan Police
Harker	Charles 'Jasper'	MI5 agent
Hunter	Herbert	MI5 agent
Kell	Sir Vernon	Head of MI5, 1909–1940
Liddell	Guy	Special Branch, Metropolitan Police then MI5 agent
Miller	Hugh	Special Branch, Metropolitan Police
Sinclair	Sir Hugh	Head of SIS, 1923–1939
Smith-Cumming	Sir Mansfield	Head of SIS, 1909–1923
Thomson	Sir Basil	Head of CID, Metropolitan Police
Vivian	Major Valentine	SIS agent
Watson	Nigel	MI5 agent
Ottaway	John	MI5 agent

Soviet agents and officials

SURNAME	FIRST NAME	POSITION
Agabekov	Georges	Soviet OGPU agent
Bazarov aka Da Vinci	Boris	Soviet 'Great Illegal' (KIN)
Bazhanov	Boris	Personal Assistant, Stalin
Bessedovsky	Gregori	Soviet chargé d'affaires, Paris embassy
Bystrolyotov aka Gallas aka Perelly aka Galleni	Dimitri Alexander Joseph Hans	Soviet 'Great Illegal' (ANDREI or HANS)
Deutsch	Arnold	Soviet agent
Helfand	Leon	Soviet secretary, Paris embassy
Ianovitch	Vladimir	Soviet OGPU agent
Krivitsky	Walter	Soviet intelligence officer
Leppin	Dr Joseph	Soviet agent (PEEP)
Mally	Theodor	Soviet 'Great Illegal'

Orlov	Aleksander	Soviet 'Great Illegal'
Pieck	Henri Christian	Soviet agent (COOPER)
Weinstein	Erica	Soviet agent (ERIKA)

Oldham's family and friends

SURNAME	FIRST NAME	POSITION
De la Chapelle	Count Victor	International lawyer, friend of the Oldhams
De la Chapelle	Rachel	Count Victor's 'wife'
Holloway	Alfred Ernest	Oldham's uncle
Holloway	Henry George	Oldham's uncle
Hoover	Herbert Clark	President of USA, friend of Lucy Oldham
Oldham née Holloway	Carrie	Oldham's mother
Oldham	Ernest Holloway	Foreign Office, staff officer (ARNO)
Oldham	Frank	Oldham's father
Oldham née Kayser formerly Wellsted	Lucy	Oldham's wife (MADAM)
Wellsted	James Raymond	Oldham's step-son
Wellsted	Thomas Arthur	Oldham's step-son
Everett	William Bostock	Royal Naval Reserve, friend of the Oldhams

Foreign Office staff and associated officials

SURNAME	FIRST NAME	POSITION
Antrobus	George	Foreign Office, King's Messenger
Balfour	Arthur	Foreign Secretary, 1916–1919
Binden	Herbert James	Foreign Office, assistant clerk
Chamberlain	Sir Austin	Foreign Secretary, 1924–1929
Crowe	Sir Eyre	Head of Foreign Office, 1920–1925
Curzon	Lord George	Foreign Secretary, 1919–1924
Grey	Lord Edward	Foreign Secretary, 1905–1916
Harvey	Captain John	Principal Passport Control Officer, Geneva
Henderson	Arthur	Foreign Secretary, 1929–1931
Hilbery	Clarence Anderson	Foreign Office, clerk
Jesser-Davies	Charles	Foreign Office, King's Messenger
Kemp	Thomas Eldred	Foreign Office, clerk (ROLAND)
King	John Herbert	Foreign Office, temporary clerk (MAG)
Macdonald	Ramsay	Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, 1924
Mason	Enid	Step-daughter of Captain John Harvey (NORA)
Montgomery	Sir Charles 'Hubert'	Foreign Office, Chief Clerk 1919–1933
Nicolson	Sir Arthur	Head of Foreign Office, 1910–1916
Norton	Clifford John	Secretary to Head of Foreign Office
Oake	Raymond Charles	Foreign Office, temporary clerk (SHELLEY)

Quarry	Major Francis	Foreign Office, temporary clerk
Roberts	Charles	Foreign Office, temporary clerk
Simon	Sir John	Foreign Secretary, 1931–1935
Smith	Howard	Foreign Office, Chief Clerk, 1933–1939
Tilley	Sir John	Foreign Office, Chief Clerk 1913–1919
Vansittart	Sir Robert	Head of Foreign Office, 1930–1938
Wheeler-Holohan	Victor	Foreign Office, King's Messenger
		Foreign Office clerk, (unknown ID) (BOY)
		Foreign Office clerk, (unknown ID) (TED)
		Foreign Office clerk, (unknown ID) (TOMMY)

INTRODUCTION

The Kensington police are trying to discover the identity of a man, aged about 35, who was found dead in a gas-filled kitchen at a house in Pembroke Gardens, Kensington.

Apart from a table, there was no furniture in the house, but in a cupboard were a number of suits of clothes, including evening dress.

The man was 5-feet 6-inches in height, well-built, clean-shaven and had dark brown hair and eyes. He was wearing a brown mixture suit and a brown striped shirt with collar and tie to match.

THE STAR, 30 SEPTEMBER 1933

History is at its most compelling when a gripping story provides insight about the past. Most historians focus upon dramas played out on national or international stages, featuring politicians, aristocrats, royalty, criminal masterminds, military heroes, state scandals and secrets. However in recent years, a new area of interest has opened up with the rise of genealogy. For the first time, stories within families have started to emerge that are equally fascinating – although they rarely make the pages of history textbooks, and are treasured within a small circle who have traditionally passed the word of mouth from one generation to the next. The internet has changed things slightly, with easy access to research materials, instant means of communication via social media and a vast array of self-publication tools. Even so, it is unusual that our family stories make headline news or do anything other than provide case studies for professional historians to include in their own account of the past.

I've spent a decade researching other people's backgrounds, both on television as part of shows such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* and for newspapers, books and magazines. However, it's been difficult finding the time or (let's be honest about it) the motivation to investigate my own family history. We all love a mystery, especially one that can't be solved, but the best that I could come up with relates to my uncle Michael and a story from his childhood that he used to puzzle over, the so-called event that stuck in his mind as the moment when he became aware of a wider world outside his front door. He recalled that he was six years old when a curious incident took place, in October 1933. His brother David – my father – was seriously ill in the Southgate isolation hospital, north London, with scarlet fever, a 'notifiable disease' that was considered potentially life-threatening at the time. His parents would make the short walk each morning from their home in Berkshire Gardens, Wood Green, crossing the busy Wolves Lane to the hospital gates to check the danger lists posted outside daily at noon. This became a ritual, with anxiety building until they were certain David had made it through the night; a rush of relief, only for concern to grow steadily throughout the day in preparation for another night of worry.

Michael takes up the story.

Later that week it seemed that there was a domestic crisis: my mother had to go to something and earnestly wished for her husband's support, but also wished for the latest news of David's health – it was not dying that was feared but a relapse.¹

It was decided that Michael, who had been kept off school all week having been in contact with his brother, should go instead; the 1930s really was a different age in every sense.

The only snag at that time was the crossing of Wolves Lane, though the light traffic consisted only of bicycles and horse-drawn carts... They drilled me in crossing-the-road procedures, with the special care-in-crossing-Wolves-Lane subroutine; they made sure that I could tell when it was noon and knew where to look for the danger list and could recognise David's handwritten or printed name.

However they omitted to warn me that my brother's name might not be on the danger list. When I failed to find it, no matter where I looked near the isolation hospital, at first I was cheered, but on the way home began to deal with a most unpalatable idea, that there were two ways for a patient to be on the list of danger... Did this mean he was dead? I wished there was a way of making the notice speak.²

At some point later that afternoon, Michael's parents finally returned home without a single word of explanation. Michael was bursting to tell them about his adventure, but having imparted his news that David was still alive and expecting lavish praise for his successful lone mission, he was somewhat disappointed with their response – 'they seemed gladdened by my news, but not outstandingly happy'. He never found out what had caused his parents to leave in such a terrible hurry. David made a full recovery and the incident was never spoken about again.

This is hardly a mystery worthy of the detective powers of Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, but nevertheless the sudden disappearance of his parents haunted Michael from that day on. Equally, I was vaguely puzzled by the fact that around this time his grandparents decided to move to Shanklin on the Isle of Wight, leaving their home of 20-plus years in Edmonton.

Michael's mystery was dramatically solved in 2002 with the release of an MI5 file at The National Archives into a man called Ernest Holloway Oldham, who was his maternal uncle – and therefore my great-uncle. It contained some shocking revelations about Oldham's life, including the newspaper clipping at the start of this introduction. The file also revealed that the date that Michael went on his 'grand adventure' to the hospital was the same one as the inquest into Oldham's death, 2 October 1933. My grandmother Marjorie Holloway Oldham had decided to attend, but only if her husband George Bernard Barratt came too – hence the decision to leave their six-year-old son at home.

Thus with one mystery solved, an even greater one was posed: who really was Ernest Holloway Oldham? For the first time, this book tells the remarkable tale of a seemingly unremarkable man who became the forgotten spy of the Cold War.

In the 1920s, communist Russia had supplanted Germany as the nation most feared by British intelligence services, until the rise of Hitler, fascism and the Nazis in the 1930s shifted attention westwards once more. The secrets of Britain's communication network lay in Room 22 at the heart of the Foreign Office in London, where a man in a brown suit plotted to betray his colleagues and countrymen as stock markets tumbled, the League of Nations failed and the storm clouds of war gathered over Europe once more.

It is a story of weakness, greed and a tragic descent into treachery, deception and desperation played out in the shadowy world of inter-war espionage. It is the story of my great-uncle.

AN ORDINARY LIFE (1894–1914)

I think it is not untrue to say that in these years we are passing through a decisive period in the history of our country. The wonderful century which followed the battle of Waterloo and the downfall of Napoleonic domination, which secured to this small island so long and so resplendent a reign, has come to an end. We have arrived at a new time. Let us realise it. And with that new time strange methods, huge forces, larger combinations – a Titanic world – have sprung up around us.

THE TIMES, 24 MAY 1909

Many dramatic stories have a humble beginning and this one is no exception. On 10 September 1894 a boy was born at 6 Sunningdale Cottages, a small property on Bury Street in the recently developed London suburb of Lower Edmonton. The boy's parents, Frank Oldham and Carrie Holloway, were talented and hard-working teachers who had married in Christ Church, Ramsgate, on the first day of the year; rather endearingly, Carrie firmly believed that she had conceived on her wedding night.

A few weeks after her son's birth, she set out to formally register his appearance in the world by walking the short distance from her cottage past rows of recently built terraced houses, towards the Green – nothing more than a small triangle of grass in the centre of Edmonton that was a reminder of the rural village that had been slowly transformed into a built-up residential area, a haven for families drawn to the outskirts of London by the promise of work who now formed part of a new class of suburban commuters.

Crossing the Green, Carrie bought a ticket at Lower Edmonton station and, after a short wait, joined the north-bound train. Two stops later she alighted at Enfield Town, where she trudged with babe in arms to the registry office. She named him Ernest Holloway Oldham, probably in honour of her half brother Alfred Ernest Holloway, who was affectionately known to his friends and family as 'Ern'.

Carrie had met her husband, Frank Oldham, while they were both teachers. Frank was much younger than his wife, born on 3 June 1867 in Station Road, Hadfield, a small village in Derbyshire Peak District that today is perhaps best known as the setting for the fictional town of Royston Vasey in the BBC's quirky dark comedy *The League of Gentlemen*. Hadfield formed part of the manor of Glossop, long the possession of the dukes of Norfolk, who spotted an opportunity to capitalise on the growing movement towards mechanised factories in the early 19th century and decided to transform Glossop into an industrial town.

Neighbouring Hadfield was developed along similar lines by the Sidebottom family, who purchased the Waterside and Bridge Mill complex from John Turner and John Thornley in 1820 and spent the remainder of the 19th century developing the site as a large spinning and weaving combination. For example, they funded and built their own branch railway to the mill so that raw materials could be brought in and finished goods transported around the country or to the ports for export. This was a thriving business – in 1880, the mills ran 293,000 spindles at 4,800 looms and Frank's father had a key position as loom manager, sufficiently well paid to enable him to purchase and convert six stone

cottages in Post Street, Padfield, which were rented out, apart from the one that the family lived in. This was a typical story of working-class man turned middle manager, rising through the factory ranks to obtain a better station in life.

However, young Frank decided the world beyond Hadfield and Padfield had other attractions, possibly as a result of an unhappy apprenticeship as a grocer when he was 12, and maybe due to lingering trauma caused by the 1874 death of his only sibling, five-year-old Lowe Oldham, of scarlet fever – a known killer before the discovery of antibiotics which would affect one of Frank's grandsons many years later in 1933. Frank left home to attend the Westminster Training College on Horseferry Road, London, which specialised in training teachers for Methodist schools. Formal training to qualify as a certified teacher had become more widespread after the 1870 Elementary Education Act, with the provision of education still seen as a vocation akin to that of a missionary 'bringing enlightenment to the uneducated masses',³ but it was still quite a journey and even steeper learning curve for a young man with an industrial background from a small village in the Peak District. Frank had to adapt to the discipline of a formal training course in the bustling metropolis that London had become.

After graduation, Frank Oldham returned north to take a position as first assistant master at Wellington Street board school in Oldham between 1889 and 1891. He lodged with the Lee family at Churchill Street, a school placement that was probably secured through connections within the Methodist movement via the training college. In 1892, Frank moved south from Lancashire to Cheshire to become the headmaster at the Tarporley British school. It is said that his hair was completely white by the time he reached the age of 25, so perhaps his employment in Tarporley was not entirely to his liking or the children in his care were somewhat of a more disruptive nature than he had been used to. Either way, he left the same year and headed back to London for a new challenge, securing promotion as assistant master at Croyland Road board school in Edmonton – the equivalent to a deputy headship today.

Carrie's journey to the north was more challenging. She was born on 27 January 1859, the last of four daughters, to Henry George Holloway senior and Caroline Wood. The couple had met while employed as the school master and mistress of the Minster workhouse on the Isle of Thanet, Kent, and married on 7 July 1851. Shortly after their wedding, the couple became master and matron of the workhouse – a big change in status that was accompanied by a pay rise (£60 per year between them as opposed to £20 each as teachers) and a house of their own within the grounds of the workhouse complete with the provision of meals, coals and washing facilities.

Tragically, Caroline died of apoplexy on 19 October 1864 when Carrie was only five years old, leaving Henry without a wife, the children without a mother – and the workhouse without a matron. These were expedient times and within a year Henry remarried. His bride, 13 years his junior, was Rosina Wood, who appears to have been Caroline's half-sister. To avoid a scandal and awkward questions about the legality of the relationship under the terms of the 1835 Lyndhurst Act (which equated the status of sister-in-law with sister in issues of consanguinity), Henry and Rosina took the train to Margate and married in the Zion Chapel of a rare non-conformist sect, the Countess Huntingdon's Confession. They were in the presence of an assistant registrar whose wife, alongside an official from the chapel, acted as the witnesses.

Within a year of her own mother's death, Carrie had a stepmother to deal with, followed swiftly by five half-siblings. It was not an easy situation for the feisty Carrie and in 1875, aged 16, she quarrelled with her stepmother and ran away from home. She ended up in Higher Booths, Rawtenstall, Lancashire – a small hamlet whose residents were economically dependent like so many others on the cotton factories for employment.

Following in her parents' footsteps, Carrie at first found work teaching day-release pupils

children aged 12 who attended half of each school day, as long as they had employment for the rest of the time, and who left school at 13 to take up full-time work. Barely older than the children in his care, Carrie probably started out as a pupil teacher – a system whereby elementary school pupils aged over 13 would act as teachers throughout the day and then themselves receive tuition from the head teacher after school hours. Hers was a paid position, with boys receiving considerably more than girls and the head teacher securing an emolument for the education of their charges.

Life in the classroom of a northern industrial town was not easy. This was an era when you grew up fast and most of the half-day students resented being treated like children when they were considered adult enough to work for the remainder of the day, often alongside their parents and older siblings. Discipline was a common problem in the village classroom, particularly for a young southern girl who was only a few years older than her charges and – unlike Frank – had not undergone any formal training to become a certified teacher.

In the 1870s, children normally wrote on slates with slate pencils – grey sticks of rock that squeakily left a whitish grey trace on a heavy slice of shale that would be fitted into a wooden frame for ease of handling. Once, a rebellious boy, on being rebuked by Carrie for failing to pay attention to his work, waved his slate at Carrie with the words ‘I’ll buzz t’slate at t’head’.⁴ Unfazed by this threat, Carrie reached up to the boy’s ear – she was much shorter than most of her pupils, never reaching five feet in height as an adult – and dragged him off to the head teacher’s office to receive corporal punishment, then deemed acceptable to dispense at that time.

When she first started work she lodged with Jane Rushton, a widow who let rooms in her property in Rock Terrace, but by 1891 she was living as a boarder at 3 Mount Terrace, Higher Booths, Rawtenstall, with George Littlewood, the school master and his wife Maud and their son Harry Beaumont Littlewood who was a 13-year-old pupil teacher in Carrie’s school.

Quite how and when Frank and Carrie met is a matter of conjecture, but they decided to tie the knot and married on the first day of 1894 at Christ Church, Ramsgate. Carrie moved back temporarily into her father’s house in St Lawrence, Thanet, safe in the knowledge that her stepmother Rosina had passed away ten years previously, in 1884. The newlyweds set up home in 6 Sunningdale Cottage, Lower Edmonton, Frank having found work as a teacher in the local elementary school.

Croyland Road board school catered for the educational needs of the local community. It was opened in 1884 with the capacity for 200 boys, 100 girls and 261 infants and it had been necessary to enlarge the school in 1889 and 1891 to cater for the growing population as Edmonton continued its expansion as a commuter suburb. In the Bury Street district alone, the population grew from a shade under 23,500 people in 1891, just prior to Frank’s move into the area, to around 62,000 in 1911. Despite Frank’s position in the school, he was still teaching in the lower echelons of the educational hierarchy. Certified teachers – let alone uncertified ones such as Carrie – were still seen as second class, mainly drawn from working-class roots and somewhat unfairly categorised as ‘struggling to move out of their class on the basis of limited academic and social aptitude and training’.⁵ This was in comparison to secondary school teachers, who tended to find employment in grammar or private schools. They often came from a similar background to their middle or upper-class pupils and usually held a university degree in their chosen subject.

Carrie’s firm hand and strong character were probably essential qualities in the Oldham household. The family expanded over the next six years with the arrival of Marjorie Holloway Oldham on 2 December 1896 and Kathleen Helen Oldham on 22 June 1900. By 1911 the cottage was no longer large enough and they had moved to a new house on the same road, 135 Bury Street, which would remain the family home throughout Ernest’s childhood and indeed for much of his adult life as well. It was cramped space by modern standards, built out of brick and slate but comfortable for the time. Upstairs

were three rooms – Marjorie and Kathleen were forced to share – with two rooms and a scullery downstairs and a further room at the rear. Their small garden backed onto glass houses associated with the long-standing nurseries in the area and a brick works. Beyond that lay a few open fields.

The house was uncluttered by the range of domestic technology that we'd take for granted today: there was no radio or television to provide household entertainment, unlikely to be a telephone given the annual cost of a line and no electrical appliances to help with the daily chores or indeed heat the property – a real concern when trying to look after a new baby, especially during the harsh winter of 1894–95 when temperatures in mid-February never crept above freezing. Hand-powered washing machines had been in use from Victorian times but refrigerators for food storage were not invented until the 1910s and remained unwieldy, unaffordable and often unsafe until the 1920s' introduction of Freon. This was an early CFC which was far less dangerous to people in terms of domestic leaks but, as we now know, incredibly damaging to the ozone layer.

When the Oldham children were growing up at the start of the 20th century, people used outdoor pantries to keep food chilled but mostly bought daily produce from local shops, farms or dairies. Electric street lighting had started to appear in the area from the early 1900s, although it wasn't until 1913 that Edmonton fully abandoned gas lamps. The supply of domestic electricity from 1907 brought the enticing prospect of modern conveniences, although on the grounds of cost most appliances would remain a dream for many of the residents of Bury Street. Into the first decades of the 20th century and beyond, women like Carrie would still beat carpets and rugs in the street and scrub their doorsteps, while her children played in the car-free roads outside.

Frank embraced his new life in the community. He already had a talent for music and was asked by the vicar of St Michael's to become the organist for the congregation. His position secured his family their seats in the vicar's pew at the front of the church for every service and his children a first-hand view of the sermons that were preached. Frank also found time to train local choirs, reputedly to a competition-winning standard, and spent the remainder of his spare time involved in study, acquiring a range of certificates and diplomas to prove his academic merit.

Despite never breaking through the class divide to teach at Latymer school, Edmonton's nearby grammar school, in 1903 he was selected to serve as first assistant master of Houndsfield Road council school before eventually being made headmaster in 1916, a position he retained until his retirement in 1930. The council school was a much larger establishment than its older and more refined neighbour; in contrast with the 24 pupils taught at Latymer's new buildings which opened in 1910, the staff at Houndsfield had over a thousand students in their care. As such, it is fair to assign Frank the rather hackneyed but well-merited description of pillar of the community, for which he was formally recognised by the Anglican Consultative Council with the award of the Distinguished Service Medal in 1928. A clasp was granted for it five years later, when he and Carrie made the somewhat sudden and unexpected decision in 1933 to leave their home of 40 years and retire to Shanklin on the Isle of Wight.

Ernest Oldham, however, attended Tottenham County School, one of the first co-educational secondary schools in the county that had been established by Middlesex County Council in 1901, pre-empting Balfour's Education Act passed the following year which gave more power to local councils to create state schools. Then, instead of following in his parents' footsteps and pursuing a career in community-based education – and perhaps reinforcing the aspirational nature of Frank's rise through the elementary school ranks – a decision was taken to send Ernest to Muncaster House school, often rather confusingly called Muncaster College, a small sixth-form boarding school situated in the small village of Laleham on Ferry Lane by the banks of the River Thames.

This was the sort of school usually reserved for the sons of senior army officers or even the

offspring of members of Parliament – by no means an elite public school such as Eton, but nonetheless a step up from Ernest's social background and a world away from the working-class terraces of Edmonton. Behind the scenes, one detects the influence of Carrie's family, who were continuing to move up in the world – her brother, Henry George Holloway junior, was building a commercial empire in Thanet whilst performing civic tasks as a registrar and collector of local taxes. Another brother, William, was despatched at the earliest possible opportunity into the Royal Marines where he eventually attained the rank of lieutenant. Meanwhile, Ern Holloway had chosen a career overseas in the Diplomatic Service and rose through the echelons of the postal service in Southern Rhodesia, to the point where he was listed in the Colonial Office lists as a key civil servant in the administration. By coincidence, he returned to England on 6 August 1909, having sailed first-class on the *Imanda* from Durban and it may well have been his encouragement – and possibly funding as well – that enabled his nephew to attend Muncaster House. This was the sort of schooling that would prepare a young man for a white collar professional career or a commission in the army.

Whatever the motivation for the later part of his schooling, the experience had the desired effect. Rather than train as a teacher, Ernest Oldham decided to apply to join the civil service, which at the time was only accessible via competitive examination. Later documents, based on information provided by Oldham himself, stated that he successfully sat and passed the test for the position of second division clerk in the civil service on 13 November 1913. This is untrue. There was no examination for second division clerk held on that date and the surviving papers kept by the Civil Service Commission for the examination held on 22 September 1913 fail to reveal Oldham's name amongst the candidates. Earlier records show that he actually sat the exam on 7 October 1912, just after his 18th birthday, having left Muncaster House in the summer. The reason for this deception is clear when the results are examined more closely; candidate no 721, EH Oldham, came in a disappointing 702nd out of a field of over 1,500 candidates – only the top 150 were offered jobs, which meant that he was unsuccessful in securing work.

His English and handwriting weren't too bad – 380 and 360 marks out of a possible 400 respectively – but manuscript-copying, an important skill for a clerk, only earned him 136 marks out of 200, while he was weak in languages (Latin 195 out of 400, French much better with 307, but no attempt made to take German) and he hardly covered himself in glory with his mathematical abilities (elementary maths and arithmetic 230 and 290 out of 400). In fact, his strongest subject aside from English was science (360 marks).⁶

At the tender age of 18, this setback should have marked the end of Oldham's aspirations for a civil service career before it had even got off the ground, but there was still a glimmer of hope. Many of the unsuccessful candidates ended up being selected over the course of the year as those above them failed to take up their posts and replacements were summoned further down the list. Even so, it would have been an awfully long time before Oldham could have expected to be called up, given his low position. Once again the influence of his uncle can be discerned behind the scenes.

Ern Holloway returned to England from East London, South Africa, on the *Galician*, docking at Southampton on 23 July 1913 – once again travelling first-class but this time accompanied by his young wife who was 18 years his junior. Holloway was described as a civil servant on the passenger list and one suspects that during his stay in England he caught up with his London chums in the service and put in a good word for his nephew, as one did in those days, before he returned to South Africa on 15 November. It is perhaps no coincidence that Ernest Oldham was called up for the civil service the same month and on 11 December 1913 was formally appointed to the Board of Education.

It is fair to say that he did not hang around – certainly not long enough to leave any trace in the official records – as 20 days later he was transferred to the Board of Trade where he commenced his

new duties on New Year's Day 1914. His employment there was of only slightly longer duration, as he moved to the Foreign Office on 1 April 1914 as a second division clerk in the Chief Clerk Department. The institution was steeped in history, there being an unspoken assumption that to succeed one needed to have schooled in Eton. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles that would have blocked most other men, Oldham's career at the heart of Britain's global diplomatic network had begun.

INSIDE THE FOREIGN OFFICE (APRIL– AUGUST 1914)

No one knows so well as the politician whose privilege it is for the time being to represent the Foreign Office in Cabinet and in Parliament, how impossible his task would be if it were not for the devoted and disinterested labour of the men whose life-work lies within the walls of the Department.

SIR JOHN SIMON, FOREIGN SECRETARY (1931–1935)

Ernest Holloway Oldham had joined one of the most venerable institutions in Britain, if not the world at a time when the global reach of the Foreign Office was never wider or its role in international politics more challenging. Indeed, challenging described the environment in which the 19-year-old Ernest Oldham found himself working – especially when you consider that he was state-school educated in an age when most of his new colleagues had attended one or other of the finest private schools in the land and he was still living in his parent’s working-class terraced cottage in Edmonton.

The Foreign Office was a highly structured world, a hierarchical mix of politicians, permanent civil servants and temporary staff, despite changes which had seen attempts at modernisation over the previous decade. At the very top was the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (or Foreign Secretary) Sir Edward Grey. He was assisted by an Under-Secretary of State the Liberal MP for Camborne, Sir Francis Dyke Acland. However, politicians came and went on the shifting tides of public opinion expressed at the ballot box, so a body of professional civil servants undertook the bulk of the work as well as provided necessary continuity. In charge was the Permanent Under-Secretary – not to be confused with Acland’s role – who was by this stage the real Head of the Foreign Service and the main advisor to the Secretary of State. The role frequently required him to receive foreign ambassadors, oversee the general running of the office, and act as the point of liaison with other government departments, especially with the armed services and rudimentary intelligence services. In 1914, this important position was held by Sir Arthur Nicolson, who had entered the service of the Foreign Office in 1870 and was coming to the end of his career; it was his misfortune to be overshadowed by his dynamic Assistant Under-Secretary of State, Sir Eyre Crowe, who oversaw widespread changes to the way the office was run after 1905 in response to new technology such as the telegram and later the telephone, which generated a vast increase in the volume and speed of communication.

Crowe’s fellow Assistant Under-Secretary was Sir John Tilley, and he described the main points of the reforms – in particular the creation of a General Registry to log the influx of correspondence and papers, with subsidiary registries which would be maintained by second division clerks such as Ernest Oldham:

They were to take complete charge of the archives, and deal with all such matters as docketing, registration, finding and putting away papers, and with the distribution and management of the print.

Thus all correspondence and official material – much of it highly sensitive – passed through the hands of fairly junior staff. However, there was a problem, as Tilley identified:

[They] soon acquired much the same familiarity with their subjects as we had previously had. They saw all the papers, read them carefully in order to give a correct description of them on the dockets and in the registers and, if they wished to be efficient, learned the subjects in such a way as to be able to produce the correct papers at the correct moment, but they did not express opinions, except perhaps an occasional verbal one. After a few years of this work, their occupation naturally tended to become monotonous and they were bound to wish for release in favour of the higher class of work for which they considered that their training had made them competent.⁸

Tilley also revealed his disdain for the means of examination that was used to recruit new staff, an attitude from the ‘old days’ of the Foreign Office – goodness knows what he made of Oldham’s performance:

I have already pointed out that they were recruited by means of a competitive examination of relatively great simplicity and it would have stultified our system of recruiting to say that the training in routine matters placed them on an equality with the new recruit who was the finished product of university. Moreover, if the Office wishes to attract that finished product it must maintain an adequate number of annual vacancies and a reasonable rapidity of promotion. In so small a Service every vacancy that is filled otherwise than from the normal source has a discouraging effect. At the same time, there were obviously good brains among the second division clerks and their disposal was a serious problem.⁹

In total, there were usually three or four assistant under-secretaries, one of whom was Oldham’s superior, the Chief Clerk – the post that Tilley had held since October 1913. His job was one of utmost importance – the pivot around which most of the daily routine within the Foreign Office turned, covering the general establishment of the office, and all its finances:

[The Chief Clerk’s] department pays the salaries, records the promotions, receives the medical certificates, lists the misdeeds, notes the qualifications, in short, supervises the activities generally of the entire staff of the office. He it is who makes the principal contacts with the Treasury, who holds the purse strings and without whose approval no appointment can be made and no additional personnel engaged... He must have not only ability and force of character; he must have tact, vision, and a sound psychological instinct.¹⁰

In terms of the other departments in existence when Oldham joined, a quick summary of the key areas will suffice, as he had little connection with them during his early days in the Foreign Office. The routine management of the Registry fell within the remit of the Librarian, whose department managed the internal archives of the Foreign Office. The Parliamentary Department, originally set up to prepare materials should questions for the Secretary of State arise in the House of Commons, mainly dealt with the ciphering and deciphering of communications and housed the King’s Messengers. This was the body of staff who had traditionally delivered diplomatic messages at home and abroad and whose work was somewhat diminished by the rise of telegraphy but was still nonetheless important in ensuring the secrecy and security of Britain’s communications. One of their number, Victor Wheeler Holohan described the two categories of messenger that operated in Oldham’s time:

The Home Service Messengers are appointed by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and are carefully picked men of the warrant officer type. They carry secret papers from Whitehall to persons in London and the same country and are a fine body of men. At one time they wore the badge, but this practice has now ceased. They need no passports for their work, and have other means of identification.

The Foreign Service Messengers are also appointed by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs after they have passed the necessary Civil Service examination and have also been recommended by a selection board. They are given the Silver Greyhound badge, their passports are printed in red (describing the holders as being 'charged with despatches') and are also bound in red cloth stamped in gold with the legend 'King's Messenger's Passport'.¹¹

These were so-called Red Passports and were a much prized possession, along with the Silver Greyhound badge, as it provided a form of diplomatic immunity when on one's travels.

The remaining staff of the Parliamentary Department numbered no more than four or five secretaries and a Staff Clerk who would deal with the administration of the department plus the care of the records, archives and – most importantly – the cipher books and codes. This was Mr John Gritton who was, in the inimitable view of another of the King's Messengers, George Antrobus:

One of the most loyal and devoted public servants I have ever known. He seemed to work 12 to 14 hours a day and I do not remember his taking a holiday in the 20 years I knew him. He was never ill and never tired and his work, which involved a vast and intricate mass of detail, was always up to date. How he did it I never knew; if you asked him he would just smile and murmur: 'Nothing, my dear fellow, it's nothing at all when you're used to it.'¹²

The main diplomatic work of the Foreign Office was dealt with by various political departments which were arranged geographically; a separate Consular Department handled correspondence to the various consulates around the world; and the Treaty and Royal Letter Department prepared formal documents of diplomatic representation, including matters of protocol, rather than the actual negotiation of treaties. The Passport Office issued passports, as its name suggests.

Aside from introducing the Registry and implementing changes to the internal administrative machinery within the Foreign Office, Sir Eyre Crowe also attempted to bring in young men such as Oldham from a wider range of backgrounds, and therefore develop a new class of civil servants. According to Antrobus, 'his contempt of the public school system led him to distrust and therefore not to make the best use of, its products'.¹³ This was an oblique reference to the fact that many people working in both the Foreign Office itself, as well as the diplomatic and consular service around the world in embassies and consulates, were the product of the public school system, with a perception held widely throughout society (as well as by men within the Foreign Office such as Tilley) that scholars from Eton generally received the top jobs.

Furthermore, there had been a property qualification of £400 in place – an independent income was considered important to maintain a suitable standard of living overseas, as well as possibly remove the risk of any temptation from corrupt local officials – with the result that the diplomatic corps before 1914 was largely staffed by those from a more aristocratic background. There was still a clear class divide in operation, according to Antrobus:

Life in 1915 was still much as it had been a generation earlier. Society in England still lay in well defined strata of two main orders. You belonged either to what were known as the Upper Classes or

you did not and there, so far as 'Society' with a capital S was concerned, was an end of it. But the great point about these two divisions – a point which is now usually forgotten – is that they had nothing to do with wealth or position or occupation. They were concerned solely with birth, breeding and (in a less degree) education.¹⁴

Oldham had joined the Foreign Office when many of these restrictions were being swept away, but these reforms would only fully take hold in the decades after World War I, when the Foreign Office was merged with the Diplomatic Service and the property qualification was finally removed. However, in 1914, some traditions remained. In keeping with the fashion of the day, Oldham would have conformed to the smart dress code expected of a civil servant described by Antrobus:

The man about town of the early years of the century never walked abroad without three essential articles of adornment – the morning coat, the top hat – or, as hatters would say, the silk hat – and the walking stick.¹⁵

This was the world that Oldham had joined from his more humble roots – hierarchical, with strict codes of dress and professional conduct that reflected the legacy of an 'old boy' network that was still largely in place. He travelled to work from his parents' house in Edmonton by public transport, catching the train to Liverpool Street station and then commuting across town to Whitehall. His working hours were predominantly 10.00 am till 5.00 pm, with an hour for lunch, working on files in the Chief Clerk's Department and drawing an initial annual salary of £100.

The nature of work was routine and, dare one suggest even slightly dull, throughout the spring and early summer of 1914, until the morning of Sunday 28 June. Just after 10.45 am Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Sophie were shot dead in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a Serb belonging to a group that supported the formation of a separate Yugoslavian state. Although the assassination took place at a weekend, everyone associated with the Foreign Office who heard the news would have known that the delicate balance of alliances and treaties that maintained an uneasy peace within Europe had just been shattered. They would have waited in trepidation for the return to work the next day. Meanwhile, those officers who remained on duty over the weekend, such as the cipher clerks and King's Messengers, were faced with a growing flood of telegrams and correspondence from around the world as consular staff and diplomats tried to contact the politicians and senior civil servants who would frame Britain's reaction to the shocking news.

The atmosphere on Monday was tense but there was no great sense of panic; these were, after all, seasoned professionals. Nevertheless, the following days must have been deeply unnerving for the young Ernest Oldham, still a novice within the corridors of the Foreign Office, watching his elders and superiors involved in constant discussions about what responses to send out. The bigwigs at the top were summoned for crisis meetings with the Prime Minister and his Cabinet while messages flowed thick and fast via the King's Messengers, all ciphered or deciphered with the help of the clerks before the urgent correspondence was typed up and despatched.

Sir John Tilley recalled the unfolding drama from the perspective of one of the senior – and therefore calmer – heads in the department, and naturally emphasised how well the Foreign Office coped with the sudden increase in business:

The first difficulty in any great crisis in the Office is to deal with the flood of telegrams which have to be ciphered and deciphered; this is work which must be done and must be done at once; moreover,

such moments, telegrams are not only much more numerous but much longer than usual communications to be made to this or that government, lengthy arguments by this or that government in favour of some particular course of action, mean a tremendous burden of work for the Office and the embassies.¹⁶

The standard answer was to throw resource at the problem – not all of it willing, by the sound of it. Many staff found themselves co-opted into working longer hours or switching to new duties dealing with the influx of correspondence. Even this was not sufficient to cope with demand. For perhaps the first time in its long history, the Foreign Office worked around the clock:

In normal times the telegrams which arrived after office hours were dealt with by the Resident Clerks on duty. At an ordinary time of crisis the Resident Clerks were helped by benevolent juniors... In July and August 1914, it soon became evident that no arrangement of this sort would suffice and the department responsible for ciphering and deciphering was largely augmented and divided into three shifts so that the work could be carried out continuously. Juniors, diplomatic or consular, returning from enemy countries, provided an immediate increase of staff.¹⁷

From then on, events moved quickly, with the Foreign Office staff at the heart of the unfolding diplomatic drama. Relations between Serbia and Austria-Hungary had remained strained ever since the controversial annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austrians in 1908 and the assassination provoked anti-Serbian riots in Sarajevo over the next few days, raising the political temperature in the Balkans.

On 5 July, German Kaiser Wilhelm II promised to support any Austrian reprisals taken against Serbia, whose government was blamed for the atrocity – though this was largely political expediency on behalf of the Austrians who wished to further exert their influence over Serbia. Primarily, the German position was an attempt to block any Russian military response, whose own interests in the area were tied to an agreement to aid Serbia if it was threatened; but in effect it widened the crisis by drawing in the other Great Powers, in particular France and Britain, who were bound by the Triple Entente to support Russia.

After a meeting of the Austro-Hungarian Ministerial Council on 7 July and discussions lasting further two weeks, an ultimatum was issued to the Serbian government in Belgrade on Thursday 23 July. It demanded ten points of action, mainly linked to the suppression of separatist movements opposed to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The action points would also include Austro-Hungarian officials acting on Serbian sovereign territory and the Serbian response was required by 5.00 pm the following Saturday – 25 July.

Sir Edward Grey noted at the time that he had ‘never before seen one state address to another independent state a document of so formidable a character’¹⁸ – indeed, it is said that the Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph, was himself taken aback with the strength of demands when he saw a draft on 21 July – but along with France and Russia, Britain urged the Serbians to comply – despite recognising that the deadline was far too tight for meaningful consideration of the terms.

The day before the deadline, frantic diplomatic initiatives took place across the courts of Europe. The French ambassador tried desperately to impress upon Grey that, should Austro-Hungary invade Serbia, then mediation would be useless. It was now or never. In turn, Grey attempted to persuade the German ambassador to take part in a four-power summit in Vienna with the aim of securing an extension to the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, urging that Britain, France, Italy and Germany ‘who had no direct interests in Serbia, should act together for the sake of peace simultaneously’.¹⁹

There comes a point in every international crisis when the spectre of war becomes more of probability than a possibility. The tipping point arrived on that Saturday 25 July, when Serbia delivered its response. The Serbian government went further than many had expected in meeting Austro-Hungarian demands, conceding virtually all of the major points in the ultimatum – bar one or two clauses which threatened to compromise its status as an independent nation. But the Austro-Hungarian government still rejected the terms – including international mediation for any outstanding issues – and promptly broke off diplomatic relations. Both sides began mobilising for war.

Levels of diplomatic activity within the Foreign Office were elevated and took on a new gravity. In what can only be described as frantic shuttle diplomacy, Grey desperately tried to persuade the Russians to negotiate with Austria-Hungary while attempts were made on 26 July to convene the international summit proposed two days previously. Russia had already started to mobilise its troops in readiness for any aggression towards Serbia but agreed to halt until mediation had taken place. However, although Italy and France agreed to attend the summit, Germany refused.

In a last ditch effort to prevent what looked like inevitable military conflict in the Balkans, Sir Edward Grey met with the German ambassador to Britain, Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky, whose own diary records how close Grey came to averting disaster between 24 and 27 July.

Sir E Grey went through the Serbian reply with me and pointed out the conciliatory attitude of the government of Belgrade. Thereupon we discussed his proposal of mediation, which was to include a formula acceptable to both parties for clearing up the two points.

Given goodwill, everything could have been settled at one or two sittings, and the mere acceptance of the British proposal would have brought about a relaxation of the tension, and would have further improved our relations with England. I therefore strongly backed the proposal, on the ground that otherwise there was danger of the world war, through which we stood to gain nothing and lose all; but in vain. It was derogatory to the dignity of Austria – we did not intend to interfere in Serbian matters – we left these to our ally. I was to work for ‘the localisation of the conflict.’²⁰

Berlin was in no mood to urge restraint upon its ally and the following day Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Belgrade was bombarded, provoking the Russians into a full mobilisation of their forces. In turn, Germany issued its own ultimatum on 31 July to demand that the Russians stand down their troops while at the same time requesting that France remain neutral in event of war with Russia. The Russians refused while the French coldly replied that they would act in accordance with their own interests. In consequence Germany prepared to march its troops through neutral Belgium against France.

Britain insisted that the neutrality of Belgium, framed in 1839 by the Treaty of London, should be respected by all sides and once again Grey summoned Lichnowsky in a futile attempt to limit the scale of a conflict that neither man wanted but seemed unable to prevent. Diplomatic correspondence between London and Berlin continued throughout the day, with last-ditch attempts made by the Russian Tsar himself to prevent hostilities – but to no avail.

Late on 1 August, Germany declared war on Russia and, when French forces started to mobilise in response, invaded Luxembourg and prepared to invade Belgium. Although a formal request was made to the Belgians on 2 August to allow German troops free passage towards France, this was rejected. Germany declared war on France on 3 August and began the full-scale invasion of Belgium, with troops pouring over the border.

The final diplomatic attempts to avoid conflict had been overtaken by military events on the ground as the first shots were fired on what would become the Western Front, and the mood

Whitehall was that of resignation towards the inevitability of war. The staff in the Foreign Office had ~~literally worked around the clock during the crisis and, caught in the eye of the storm, men like~~ Oldham would have felt the failure to broker a solution more keenly than most. These were employees rendered increasingly helpless to prevent the conflict and fearful of the days ahead.

Grey certainly suspected the full horror of what was to come, no doubt mindful of the words of Sir Eyre Crowe, who had advocated an anti-German stance for a decade. Standing at the window of his room in the Foreign Office alongside John Alfred Spender, editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, Grey gazed out across St James's Park as the sun set. As the first lights appeared along the Mall, he murmured: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'²¹

The following day, the Cabinet voted to issue a final ultimatum to Germany: if its troops did not withdraw from Belgium then a state of war would exist between the two countries. At 7.00 pm that evening, the ambassador to Berlin, Sir Edward Goschen, delivered the message to the German Secretary of State to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Gottlieb von Jagow, leaving five hours for the Germans to comply. The terms were rejected. Goschen sent a telegram to Sir Edward Grey, informing him of the refusal, but Grey never received it. Thus there was uncertainty over the exact diplomatic status between Germany and Britain within the Foreign Office until the deadline expired. This led to mistakes being made by the harassed staff of the Foreign Office as the enormous strain of the previous few days finally showed. As the clock ticked down, Sir John Tilley recalled.

The first piece of duty that was thrown upon us mingled comedy with tragedy. Owing to some mistake which arose because someone had forgotten the difference between Berlin and London time, a certain proclamation had at the last moment to be altered by hand in time for issue as soon as war was declared. Accordingly a large party of us were gathered on the ground floor and told, like naughty schoolboys, to write out a thousand times the words 'His Majesty, mindful that a state of war now exists between this country and Germany'...²²

Furthermore, the terms of the earlier ultimatum had mistakenly suggested that Germany had declared war on Britain, not the other way around. Henry Nicolson, the son of the Permanent Under-Secretary, was hastily despatched just after 11.00 pm to the German embassy in Carlton House to retrieve the earlier version, in an attempt to clarify the diplomatic situation.

At length the butler appeared and led Nicolson up to the private apartments, where the ambassador Karl Max Fürst (Prince) von Lichnowsky, lay on a brass bed in his pyjamas. Nicolson told him there had been a slight error in the document sent previously and he had come to substitute for it the correct version. Prince Lichnowsky pointed to the table, where an envelope was lying unattended: 'You will find it there,' he said, as if in a daze. It seemed he had not read it, but guessed its significance since the passports of the embassy staff were enclosed. Nicolson had been told to get a receipt, so he took the blotting pad, pen and inkbottle across to the bed. While the ambassador was signing, shouting came from The Mall, and then singing – the 'Marseillaise' – as crowds streamed back from Buckingham Palace. Earlier in the day they had broken the embassy windows. Lichnowsky took no notice. Without a word, having signed the receipt he turned out the pink lamp beside the bed – but then, perhaps feeling that he had been uncivil, turned it on again. 'Give my best regards to your father,' he said, sadly, with the pronounced 'r' and short 'a' of the accent of Silesia, his birthplace: 'I shall not in all probability see him before my departure'.²³

On this farcical note, the Great War had begun.

Chapter three

IN THE FIRING LINE (1914 – 1918)

You have fought valiantly and never lost a trench, or failed to do what was required of you. You have often been hungry and thirsty, had to endure intense cold and rain, mud and discomfort, had to work and march in the course of your duty, till you had hardly strength to stand. You have done all this without a murmur, and with a cheerfulness which has been beyond all praise.

UNIT WAR DIARY, 5TH BATTALION KING'S OWN SHROPSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY, 2 FEBRUARY 1918

Before the retirement to the Haig Line, those of the battalion... seeing themselves surrounded, determined to fight to the last. Owing to the fact that very few got away from this melee very little is known of the actual details of this fight.

UNIT WAR DIARY, 1ST BATTALION KING'S OWN SHROPSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY, 21 MARCH 1918

On 4 August, the knowledge that Britain had issued an ultimatum to Germany brought crowds onto the streets of London, congregating outside Downing Street, considered the most likely place where a formal response from the German ambassador would be announced.

The Times described the scene in its edition published the next day:

As the evening wore on, the crowd became denser and excitement grew. The German reply was not expected before 11.00 pm. Towards 11, a number of visitors and members of the permanent staff of the Foreign Office gathered in the corridors, which were brilliantly lighted. But the expected dispatch from Sir Edward Goschen was unaccountably delayed. For reasons which can only be surmised, the German Government appears to have delayed it.

Information from a reliable quarter nevertheless reached His Majesty's Ministers, shortly before 11, that the British demand for assurances in regard to the neutrality of Belgium had been summarily rejected. The necessary decisions were therefore taken and an official statement was issued to the effect that, in consequence of this rejection, His Majesty's Ambassador at Berlin had received his passports and that His Majesty's Government had declared to the German Government that a state of war existed between Great Britain and Germany as from 11.00pm.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, several members of the Diplomatic Corps called at the Foreign Office to ask for information. The scene was one of extraordinary animation, though a sense of the extreme gravity of the moment was everywhere noticeable.

As the news of the declaration of war reached the street, the crowd expressed its feelings in loud cheering. It left the precincts of Downing Street and gathered in front of the War Office, where patriotic demonstrations continued until an early hour this morning.²⁴

Although adverts and messages occupied the first two pages as always, there was extensive coverage in the rest of the paper, including a large notice at the heart of page three, the first news page, which

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