

## The Christmas Truce, 1914

By December 1914, it was clear that WW1 wouldn't 'be over by Christmas' and already, the system of fortified trenches that would come to typify the bloody stalemate of the Western Front were in place. In Flanders, the British and German front lines were in some places very close – near enough to overhear what was going on and not surprisingly, a certain amount of trench banter often took place – near-misses might generate cries of “Missed!” and some men even exchanged morning greetings when they heard movement on the enemy side at dawn. As the opposing sides got used to the situation, some units curtailed overtly aggressive behaviour and on occasion, brief unofficial ceasefires took place to allow the recovery of wounded or dead comrades. However, none of this came close to what occurred at Christmas 1914.

In the run-up to Christmas, troops sent cards back to ‘Blighty’ and they in turn, received parcels and presents from loved ones. This was the same for the German troops and it was in their trenches that the Christmas spirit first became evident. Germans traditionally celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve and on this day in the Ypres region of Flanders, German soldiers began decorating their trenches with candles and erecting Christmas trees. Many began singing Christmas carols and before long, the British soldiers joined in. Both sides then started cheering each others’ efforts and shouting Christmas greetings. Soon afterwards, men began leaving the trenches and walking out into No Man's Land to meet each other, where they mingled together, talking and exchanging food and souvenirs – notably buttons and hats. In some places ad-hoc games of football were played.

### SOLDIERS' XMAS COMFORTS AT

### W. D. Slade's.

Khaki Service Shirts, 4/11.  
Khaki Wool Jackets, 13/6.  
Khaki Wool Spencers, 8/6.  
Khaki Wool Mufflers, 2/6.  
Khaki Balaclava Sleeping Caps, 1/6.  
Khaki or Navy Mitts, 1/3.  
Khaki Handkerchiefs, 2/11 per doz.  
Body Belts 1/11.  
Wool Gloves, 1/6.  
Marching Socks, 1/- and 1/6.  
Warm Under Vests, 2/6.  
Pants, 2/6.  
Warm Day Shirts, 3/11.  
Pyjamas, 6/9.

#### OFFICERS'

Service Dress, Burberrys, Sam Browne Belts, Swords, Kit Bags, Valises, Sleeping Bags, Etc. Complete Camp Outfits.

### SLADE,

IMPERIAL HOUSE, PROMENADE,  
Tel. 78. CHELTENHAM. Tel. 78.



Left: An advert for Christmas gifts for soldiers from the pages of the Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Graphic.

Right: A Christmas postcard from the Front: sadly neither Harold Brain (left) nor William White (right) survived the conflict.

One Gloucester soldier, Corporal James Philpotts of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, was involved in a truce and afterwards, he wrote about to his parents about the experience. The *Gloucester Journal* printed his letter on 9 January 1915 and here at Gloucestershire Archives it makes fascinating reading, revealing that he swapped souvenirs with the Germans that included cigars, autographs and even Christmas pudding!

It is thought over 100,000 British and German troops took part in these unofficial ceasefires (some of which lasted until New Year's Day) and the following year, a few units again arranged similar ones with their opponents. However, the 1915 truces were not as widespread as in 1914 partly due to orders from the high commands of both sides prohibiting them.

In 1916, after the bloody battles of the Somme and the widespread use of poison gas, soldiers on both sides increasingly viewed the other side as inhuman and no more Christmas truces were sought. As a result, the Christmas Truce of 1914 remains a symbolic moment of peace and humanity amidst one of the most violent periods of human history.