

Curragh History Archives



The Curragh Camp Pre-1922

Through the eyes of a young boy Jim Smith

When father was called up he went for his medical and was found to have malaria (which he hadn't known about but was not unusual in those days) and therefore found "unfit for overseas service". After his initial training in London at, I think, Eltham Park, he was posted to the Curragh of Kildare camp in Ireland. In those days the whole of Ireland was under British rule. He left just after Christmas but was allowed home on leave first. He managed to get together a hamper of goodies and got as far as Tunbridge Wells by train. He then walked the fourteen miles home carrying the hamper – much to our delight.

Father settled into his work and was promoted to corporal. In 1916 he wrote home suggesting we went to Ireland for a week's holiday. What an adventure! One problem was what to do with Jack's pet rat. This was his prize and joy and had been bought originally for 1 shilling and sixpence (7½ p) After a long journey to Eastbourne by bus and train we managed to sell it back to the pet shop for sixpence (2½p) but having left the shop, Jack couldn't stop crying and so Mum bought it back again for 1 shilling. The problem was solved when the rat died in the night, whether or not from the stress of the journey we never found out.



Cpl. Sidney Smith
Curragh Camp 1916

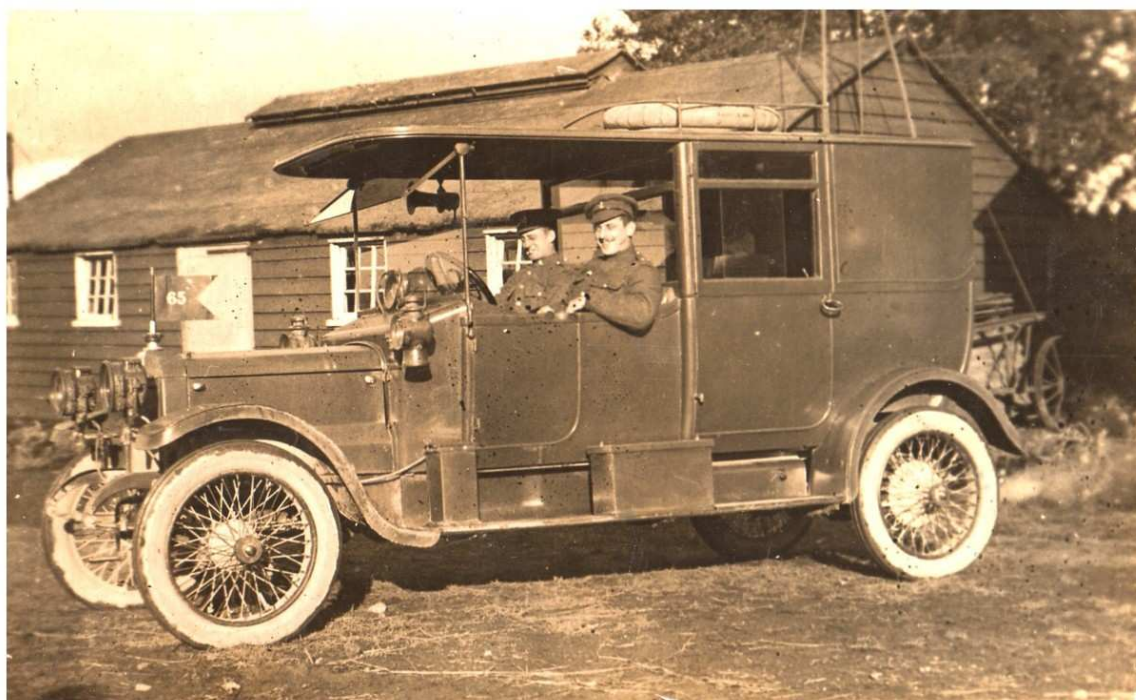
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We left the cottage without locking it up as we were only expecting to be away for a week. We took the footpath that went past the cottage to Franchise drive, through the hop fields to Ticehurst Road station (now Stonegate), a 2-3 mile walk. I don't remember much about the journey – it must have been a long one by train and sea, but I do remember driving to Brownstown in a horse drawn jaunting car with the passengers sitting along the sides facing outwards. The weather was dry and the roads were very dusty and in our faces all the journey.

Father had rented a cottage for us in Brownstown, just outside the army camp. Camp gives the wrong impression; nowadays it would be called an industrial estate. There were large workshops for lorries and traction engines, stables, mules for hauling guns, horses for the cavalry regiments and the lancers. Besides the working side of the camp there were blocks of married quarters, two churches – Catholic and Church of England - as well as shops.

However, before our week was up, German submarines had started attacking shipping in the Irish Sea. All civilian traffic to the mainland was banned and we were stranded in the land of plenty – as much eggs, butter, milk and bread as you wanted. To a 7 year old it seemed bliss!

We moved from our lodgings to married quarters in the camp. These were blocks of brick buildings; two floors with a verandah the full length and an iron staircase at each end. There were two to three rooms in each flat. Father continued to do well and was promoted to sergeant. He was detailed as driver to General Stuart-Wortley, the commander in chief and we moved again, to the Headquarters, where we had our own bungalow. Jack and I were photographed sitting on the general's horse, but unfortunately the photos have been lost. I don't know what we would have done if the groom had not been holding the horse.



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The bungalow was within walking distance of the butts on the firing range. There were red flags to show whether or not the range was in use. Jack and I would go there when the flags came down and pick up the odd live .303 bullet that had dropped through the duckboards. Jack had used Dad's small lathe to make a brass cannon that would fire ball bearings and the General's son, who was about our age, could make gunpowder. Saltpetre and charcoal plus something else I can't remember and the cordite from the .303 in the touch hole (where the powder is ignited behind the shot). We would fire ball bearings at the trees in the plantation of beech trees near the house. Once Jack picked up a hand grenade. The pin was out but the plunger had jammed. He walked into the bungalow and said to father "look what I've found". Father took it very gently and walked out to the plantation and exploded it. The guard was turned out thinking it was a republican attack. We survived the telling off.

The General moved to a mansion in Ballyfair and we had the cottage at the end of the drive. It was a typical Irish mud and turf built cottage with lime-washed walls two feet thick and thatched with straw. The kitchen window looked out over a field and a large shire horse used to come to the window for mother to wash the blood off his nose from the horse fly bites. Hay making was very different – instead of the Sussex wagons we were used to they used bogies. This was a flat platform on two wheels with a windlass across the front. The hay was put up in large cocks and winched into the boggy by a rope. Jack and I both went to the village school. As most of the local boys went barefoot we did the same. Our feet soon hardened though we never got to the stage where we could walk on the stubble after the corn was cut.

Dad spent a lot of time waiting around for the General while he was shooting or fishing, so he spent his time collecting bits of Connemara marble and bog oak. I still have a piece of the dark green marble carved in the shape of a lady's shoe and beads made into a necklace. I remember Dad made a model weaving loom from bog oak but unfortunately it hasn't survived. Jack and I made friends with a boy, Paddy Nolan, at a farm nearby. The farmer's name was O'Grady and he had three grown up sons. I remember one of them saying "why doesn't your father put the old devil in the ditch?" Sometimes father would bring home a good sized trout from the fishing trips, but rationing didn't exist as far as we were concerned. Dad got on well with the locals: he had to carry spare petrol in cans and he found that two gallons would get far more cooperation from the locals than the Webley .45 he had to wear

After a time he returned to the army workshop and we moved back to married quarters. Jack and I went to the army school - this time with boots. The teachers were all commissioned officers. Jack is third from the right on the back row in the photo below and I am on the far right, second row from the back. The camp was within walking distance of the Curragh racecourse. We were not interested in horses but there were men in the crowd with all sorts of gambling games and card tricks. I remember "find the lady" which was a dice under a cup and "pitch and toss". I had a penny and won ten pence, but foolishly carried on playing and lost the lot. That cured me of gambling for life.

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The Army school at the Curragh of Kildare camp. Jack is third from the right on the second row from the back. I am on the right, second row from the back.

When the armistice was signed in 1918 there were great celebrations. A huge firework display was organised with rockets that exploded high up and then dropped a parachute with a light attached. However disaster struck when some soldiers from a Scottish regiment who were rather the worse for drink threw their rifles and unused rockets on to the bonfire. Sparks and rockets were flying everywhere. Mother was wearing a fox fur which was set alight. She was badly burned and had to go to hospital. Jack and I ran home terrified. Fortunately Mother recovered, though she was badly scarred. Father was demobilised but carried on as a civilian manager in the workshops until 1920 when we returned to the mainland.

After four days in the United Services hostel in London we arrived back in Burwash and the cottage at Mottensden, nearly four years after leaving it. I suppose we had paid the rent all the time we had been away. The cottage was still unlocked and intact, and Mr Wallace was still living next door. The only casualty was an old fur lined driving coat – the moths had been busy and when it was taken down all the fur dropped off. Walter Morris the farmer had been in and borrowed a hand saw and a brass table lamp (our only lighting was candles or paraffin lamps) but he promptly returned them with thanks as soon as we reappeared.

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Jim Smith 2008

A recent photograph of Jim Smith ex-Curragh resident.

This article was sent to me by Caroline Shelton. It gives a account of her father Jim Smith's time growing up in the Curragh Camp. Jim came to the Curragh on holidays in 1916 and due to restrictions imposed during WW I was unable to return to England and became a resident of the Curragh Camp for the next 5 years. The article gives a insight as to what life was like back then for the young Jim And his brother Jack.

(M McNamara Oct. 08)