

Jack Watts 1899-1983:

Air Raids, War Wound, Torpedoed and Flu
a Worthing Man's Amazing Great War Experiences

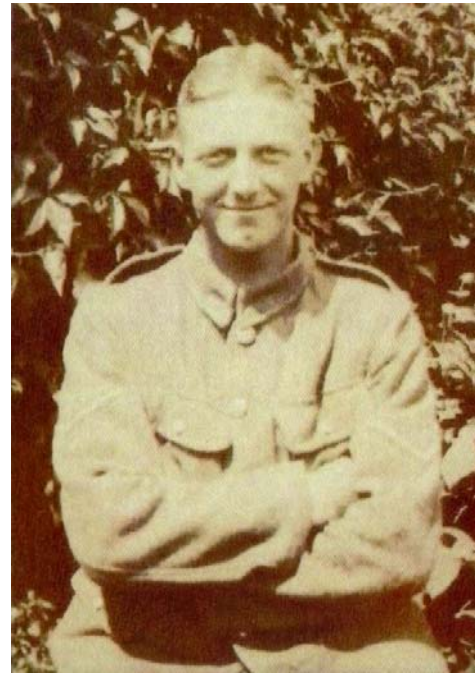


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See Acknowledgments at the end of this study

By Jean Kirk

Summary

Jack Watts was a member of the Watts family who ran a well-known shoe shop in Chapel Road, Worthing. He joined up as a 17 year old early in 1917 and spent the year training at Dover and Clipstone (Nottinghamshire). By spring 1918 he had joined the 5th Middlesex Regiment at Chatham. Jack saw action in France with the 10th Fusiliers in summer 1918, was wounded and evacuated back to England. On the way back he survived an air raid, derailment of his ambulance train and the torpedoing of his hospital ship "HMAS Warilda". Following his recovery he helped deal with the many West Sussex victims of the flu pandemic in late 1918 before being demobbed in February 1919 and returning to the Worthing shoe-selling business.



Jack Watts c1917
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Acknowledgments at end

Introduction

Over the past four years, as a local studies volunteer at Worthing Library, I have been privileged to catalogue the Jack Watts Lantern Slide Collection, more than 1500 slides collected by him and bequeathed to Worthing Library on his death in 1983. I have come to realise what an inspirational and interesting person he was and how much he contributed to the town. On reading about his fascinating World War One experiences in the book¹ he published in 1982, I offered to write them up for the West Sussex Library Service Great War project.

Background

The Watts family shoe business was originally established in London in 1768. It was Jack's grandfather, Nathaniel Lovel Watts, who opened the only branch outside London, when he moved to Worthing in 1888 for the sake of his son's health. The son was Jack's father, Frederick Albert Watts. Nathaniel purchased one of the shops built on the site of the old Infirmary, which had stood between Ann Street and Market Street, and was demolished in 1888.

He opened for business at No. 6 Chapel Road later that year.² The premises were later extended to include No. 8, taking up four storeys and comprising six departments, and continued to be run by the Watts family until the business finally closed in 2001. It was probably the oldest privately-owned footwear firm in Britain to remain in one family throughout its history.



Watts' Shoe Shop, 6-8, Chapel Road, Worthing, c1910
West Sussex County Council Library Service – PC008854
www.westsussexpast.org.uk

Jack's Early Years

Jack lived with his parents above the shop until about 1910, when they moved to a house called 'Nutbourne' in Parkfield Road, West Tarring.

One of his many childhood memories was being taken by his great Uncle Edward Morecraft, a well-known draper, who had his premises in Montague Street, where Marks & Spencer's building now stands, to see the planting of the evergreen oak at the corner of Richmond and Wykeham Road, to celebrate the Coronation of King Edward VII, which took place in 1902, where he was given a big shovel to "help". This stuck in his memory as a new straw sailor hat had been bought for this exciting occasion. The tree is still standing.³

His grandfather, N.L. Watts, was a keen photographer and a founder member of the Worthing Camera Club, and during his lifetime built up a record of all the surrounding villages. On Jack's tenth birthday in 1909, he was given his grandfather's old hand plate camera, and later inherited his lantern slide collection, to which he and others continued to contribute.

Jack left school at 13 and went straight into the family business, working his way up. His youth was not just spent in and around the shop. The family regularly walked the Downs and Jack acquired a love of the countryside.

World War 1

Early in 1917, Jack joined up. Being under age, he was posted to a Boys' Battalion until he was 18 in March. During his first weeks training at Dover, he experienced lethal attacks by German torpedo boats and some air raids. Probably the most significant raid he witnessed was the Great Folkestone Air Raid on Friday 25 May 1917.⁴ Until this time, Folkestone had escaped from the air raids and shelling by the German Navy that had affected other towns and cities, despite being a prime target. Folkestone

harbour was one of the main embarkation points for troops headed for the Western Front.

The total number killed was 71: 16 men, 28 women and 27 children. The total number injured was 96, but certainly this is a minimum number as there were many with minor injuries who did not attend hospital and were therefore not counted.

Outside Folkestone itself, other bombs fell; 19 at Lympne, 19 at Hythe, 2 at Sandgate, 16 at Cheriton, and 18 at the military camps at St. Martin's Plain, Dibgate and Shorncliffe.

The death toll is shocking to us now but was greeted with disbelief in 1917. Dover had been air raided 18 times, but the death toll had been 22 in total although nearly 190 bombs had been dropped.



Postcard of PT instructors, training camp near Dover, 1917.

Postmarked 13 Aug 1917, postcard reads: (at top) "Save this as a memento", then "Dear Mum & Dad, Just a line to let you know I am alright. I am going to the pictures tonight with the Burts (?) so please excuse this. It is a picture of some of our PT instructors having a box. Will try to write tomorrow. From Jack"

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Jack was moved to Clipstone Camp in Nottinghamshire sometime after August 1917 and experienced the kindness and hospitality of the Midlanders.

The town of Clipstone is near Mansfield in North Nottinghamshire and made its name through the colliery which was first sunk in 1912. Work was suspended with the onset of the Great War and land was made available by the Duke of Portland for a camp to satisfy the need for training troops.

By 20 November 1914, the Nottingham-based company W. Hodson & Sons was awarded the construction contract and work was provided for

over 400 men. The transformation of the farm and scrubland began and the first blocks (called lines) were built along Clipstone Drive.

By the spring of 1915 work was well under way. However, a temporary tented camp had to be built near Forest Town to accommodate the men. A further ten lines of huts were added along Mansfield Road and the history of the camp had begun.

Each Camp line could now hold a battalion of men. The lines were self-sufficient and contained sleeping quarters, mess rooms, cook houses, parade grounds and a guardhouse to keep the men in check. Each hut was heated and had electricity and water provided by Mansfield Corporation.

Three YMCA huts were opened where men could watch concerts, write letters, receive lectures and obtain refreshments. The largest hut was situated on the present-day Newlands Drive and contained a 97 foot long concert hall. A further garrison theatre was positioned near the junction with Clipstone Drive. On the other side of the camp, the NACB (Navy and Army Combined Board) made use of the newly constructed colliery workshops to cater for the troops. The NACB was the Great War equivalent of the NAAFI and included a bakery and grocery store.



Photos taken by Jack at one of his training camps (location unknown)
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Additional recreational activities included swimming in nearby Vicars Pond and in the Spa pools to the northwest of the camp. Local legend suggests that the Duke of Portland was so offended seeing nude soldiers bathing in the Spa pools that they were drained to deter such activities. In addition, men could visit the nearby town of Mansfield to mingle with the local population. Local businesses boomed and early doubts about the impact of the camp were largely unfounded.

The needs of religious soldiers were also considered. The Bishop of Southwell successfully appealed for funds and a temporary hut was built to accommodate a congregation of over 900. This was dismantled after the war and transported to Kirkby in Ashfield to be used as a social centre. Other denominations and religions had similar facilities and huts

were organised for Roman Catholic, Wesleyan and Jewish soldiers. The local church (St. Mary's) was also prominent in the life of the camp. The parish registers record numerous marriages between local girls and camp soldiers.

With the camp now in full swing, up to 30,000 soldiers could be accommodated and the serious business of training for war was the primary purpose. The first tenants of the camp had been busy at work in the area which now forms part of Sherwood Pines to the south of the camp. Rifle, pistol and machine gun ranges were dug and some exist to this day.⁵

In the spring of 1918, Jack's final posting was to the 5th Middlesex Regiment, the Boxers' Battalion, at Chatham. The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own) was formed in 1881 as part of the Childers Reforms when the 57th (West Middlesex) and 77th (East Middlesex) Regiments of Foot were amalgamated with the County's militia and rifle volunteer units. During 1917 and 1918, the 5th (Reserve) Battalion moved to Gillingham and formed part of the Thames and Medway Garrison.⁶

Jack learned to box and was selected to represent the Battalion at a boxing tournament being held at the Engineers' Barracks and won his match because his opponent refused to fight him because he was too tall. This was the only boxing tournament he ever entered and was the only one won without fighting.⁷

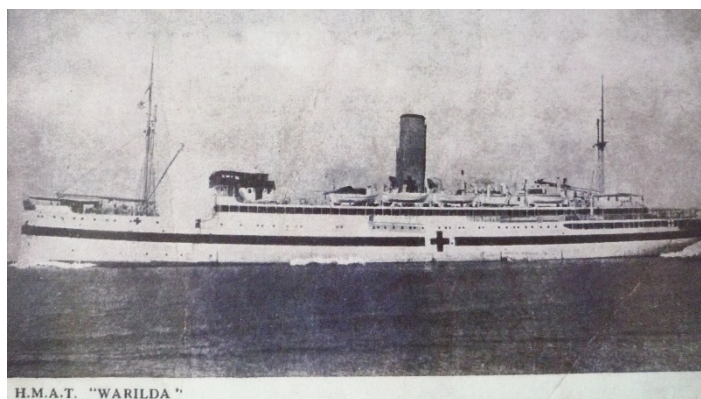
After further training, Jack left for France and was posted to the 10th Fusiliers, the Bankers' Battalion (Stockbrokers), although there was little evidence of the wealthy fraternity when he joined. The Battalion had been formed by the Lord Mayor and City of London on 21 August 1914 and recruited largely from business staffs in the City. Jack describes this as "a step up" and it may be that he had been promoted to Corporal at this time (see letter about "Warilda", following).

In late July 1918, Jack was wounded seriously enough to warrant being returned to "Blighty".⁸ The usual transit of wounded then took place, first to Doullens First Aid Hospital. Doullens is a commune in the Somme department in Picardie in northern France. Doullens was one of the Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS), part of the casualty evacuation chain, further back from the front line than the Aid Posts and Field Ambulances. A CCS was manned by troops of the Royal Army Medical Corps, with attached Royal Engineers and men of the Army Service Corps. The job of the CCS was to treat a man sufficiently for his return to duty or, in most cases, to enable him to be evacuated to a Base Hospital. It was not a place for a long-term stay.

From Doullens, Jack went by ambulance train to Rouen. Here he survived an air raid on the hospital and all the patients were evacuated into trenches and covered with corrugated iron sheets for the night.

Three days later, those marked for “Blighty”, were moved to an ambulance train, which consisted of the usual French trucks, “Dix Chevaux” or “Vingt Hommes” but were fitted with iron racks to take stretchers. On the way to Le Havre, about three o’clock in the morning, two of the end trucks jumped the rails, causing a bit of an upheaval and delay whilst those who had been thrown out of the “beds” were hastily moved to trucks still standing. They eventually steamed into Le Havre around 11 am to be shipped aboard the “Warilda”, an Australian hospital ship.⁹

“HMAT Warilda” (His Majesty’s Australian Transport) was a 7713 ton vessel, built in 1912 by William Beardmore & Company in Glasgow as the SS *Warilda* for the Adelaide Steamship Company. She was designed for the East-West Australian coastal service, but following the start of the First World War, was converted into a troopship and later, in 1916, she was converted into a hospital ship. Her identical sister ships, also built by William Beardmore and Company, were “SS Wandilla” (1912) and “SS Willochra” (1913).



“HMAT Warilda” showing the Red Cross

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Time as a troopship: 5 October 1915: 10th Reinforcements, 9th Battalion embarked from Brisbane heading to Egypt.

8 October 1915: 10th Reinforcements, 1st Infantry Battalion embarked from Sydney heading to Egypt.

8 November 1915: 10th Reinforcements, 1st Brigade of the AIF, embarked from Liverpool, New South Wales, Australia. The ship arrived at Fremantle, Western Australia on 15 October 1915, and reached Suez on 5 November, a Friday, where the troops were disembarked.

25 May 1916: Tunneling Companies, 2 Reinforcements embarked Melbourne.

1 June 1916: Tunneling Company 6, 3rd Tunneling Company embarked from Fremantle, Western Australia 1 June 1916. Disembarked Plymouth, England, 18 July 1916.

On Saturday 3 August 1918, Jack Watts was among the wounded transported by the “Warilda” from Le Havre, France, to Southampton. In mid Channel, she was torpedoed by the German submarine UC-49.

In his book, Jack wrote that it was eight o’clock at night when they left dock to join a convoy going to Southampton, under naval escort. All was going well, when about 2 am there was a mighty bang, and the world seemed to collapse around them. A torpedo had hit the boat amidships, putting one set of engines out of action. They went round in circles and it

appeared other engines were out of control, so as the boats were lowered they crashed into one another, causing a great loss of life. For those on the top deck, left without lifeboats, life seemed to be at an end, when out of the darkness one of the escorting naval torpedo boats loomed and it was not long before survivors were hauled aboard.¹⁰

The following is a transcript of Jack's letter home:

"Cpl F.J. Watts 77901

10th Royal Fusiliers

Binyon Ward, Royal Berks Hospital, Reading

Sat Aug 3 (1918)

I told you that I had been marked up for a French seaside shop which was Trouville, but just before I was due to leave, word came it was full, so the doctor marked my card with a Ring B which being interpreted means Blighty, so on Thurs midnight, I was packed off with a hundred others in motor ambulances to a hospital train. We left about 4 o/c in the morning and after a slight collision, we at last arrived at Le Havre at 11 o/c Friday. We were at once put on board in beds and then given dinner; we stayed in harbour all day, had plenty of food and sleep.

At 8 o'clock (at night) we slipped our moorings and sailed out of the harbour in fine style, all of us feeling highly bucked at leaving France, if only for a short time. It was a lovely evening, sea as calm as a mill pond, with a sunset like a fiery furnace, while silhouetted against it were sundry steamships, and a part of the Channel Fleet. We went out about two miles and then stopped for it to get dark. We moved off about ten. After that I don't remember anything, till I found myself thrown out of my cot by a violent explosion: we had been torpedoed.

We were all very dazed, and I at last came to, by hearing a plaintive voice saying "Would you mind getting off my head"!

Nobody seemed to know what had happened so we followed the crowd (in a series of hops) h'up the staircase, it's wonderful to see how the wounded help one another; the chap who I had palled up to was hit near the same place as me, so we linked arms and as previously stated 'opped! When we arrived on deck, things were in a nice turmoil, we were quickly allotted to boats and soon found there was not sufficient to go round, so we waited and saw the old boat gradually sink by the stern, it's a luvly feelin' as Harry Lauder says but in that ten minutes, which seemed like ten years, all my "awful" past came back to me. I remembered all the naughty things that you, Mother, had locked me in my room for when I was a kid, all the dams I had said in France, and finally all the kit I had unlawfully "scrounged" to make up my own deficiencies – but my thoughts were soon broken by the order to get into a certain boat, which we (Ossi and myself) tried to obey; we slid down the davit rope, but just before we got to the bottom the boat capsized, so you bet we slid up again in double quick time to the deck. The boat was full, most of them were saved including 3 "sisters", but a Brigadier of the Waacs was drowned, she got caught up in the ropes: we tried for about 15 minutes to get her free, but she broke her leg and fell back into the sea in a dead faint and finally sank. During this time (since the explosion) our escort (two destroyers)

were racing round dropping depth charges and if the large patch of oil etc is anything to go by, the submarine was sunk.

After a time, the destroyers came alongside and took all of us that were alive off, unfortunately a lot were killed by the explosion. We cruised around till daylight, picking up in the meantime seven of our boats and saw the old boat go down about two and a half hours after she was struck. It was a grand but awful sight, a sudden plunge, a volume of steam, an explosion and then all was still – except us on the top of the destroyer, who were bally cold, being clothed only in a pair of pyjamas and a wet blanket, not what one would select – oh What! But we were on our way to Blighty safe and sound once more and on this beautiful place we landed about 9.30 this morn. We were then bundled into bed, given hot tea bread and bacon – all this was on an ambulance train by the way – and then fell into a deep sleep: when we awoke we were in reading station and found ambulances ready to take us away to this comfortable hospital, where we are now comfortably installed in nice white beds.

That's all! Except that Jerry dropped a bomb about 100 yards away from our ward at Rouen, it's a lovely war.

By the way, would you mind if I had a little cash, in the excitement, my mate forgot to remove the greater part of my belongings, he also omitted to bring my cheque book – I don't suppose it will be long before I get home on both legs, so I don't think it would be worth you coming to see me, anyway we will see, more later. Heaps of love from Jack"

Of the 801 persons on board, a total of 123 lives were lost. Had she not remained afloat for about two hours, the loss of life would undoubtedly have been greater. Amongst the survivors was her commander, Captain Sim, who was later awarded the OBE by King George V. Her wreck lies in the English Channel.¹¹

The wounded were thankful to arrive at Southampton and be carried to waiting ambulances by American soldiers.

A scene never to be forgotten was the sight of the "Warilda" breaking in half and sinking, silhouetted against the rising sun on that beautiful (for those alive) August morning.¹²

Despite being marked clearly with the Red Cross, as with a number of other hospital ships torpedoed during the war, Germany claimed the ships were also carrying arms.

The attack occurred in mid-channel, miles from land. Very few of the 800 on board would have survived had not the ship, although badly knocked about and with a tremendous hole in her starboard side, been able to remain afloat for a considerable period, which some of the survivors put at two hours. Whilst the balance of the evidence seems to show that only one torpedo was fired, some of the survivors are convinced that the submarine made doubly sure of sending the ship down by releasing a second torpedo. At any rate, the damage was of an extensive nature.¹³

There was outrage in the press at the attack on the "Warilda" without warning. An article in "The Times" said that there were about 600 wounded men on board, the majority of whom were so seriously hurt that they were quite unable to help themselves. In addition, there were a number of Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC's), medical officers and men and a crew of 115.¹⁴

Jack recovering from his bullet wound and narrow escape from drowning on the "Warilda", probable location: Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading

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Acknowledgments at end

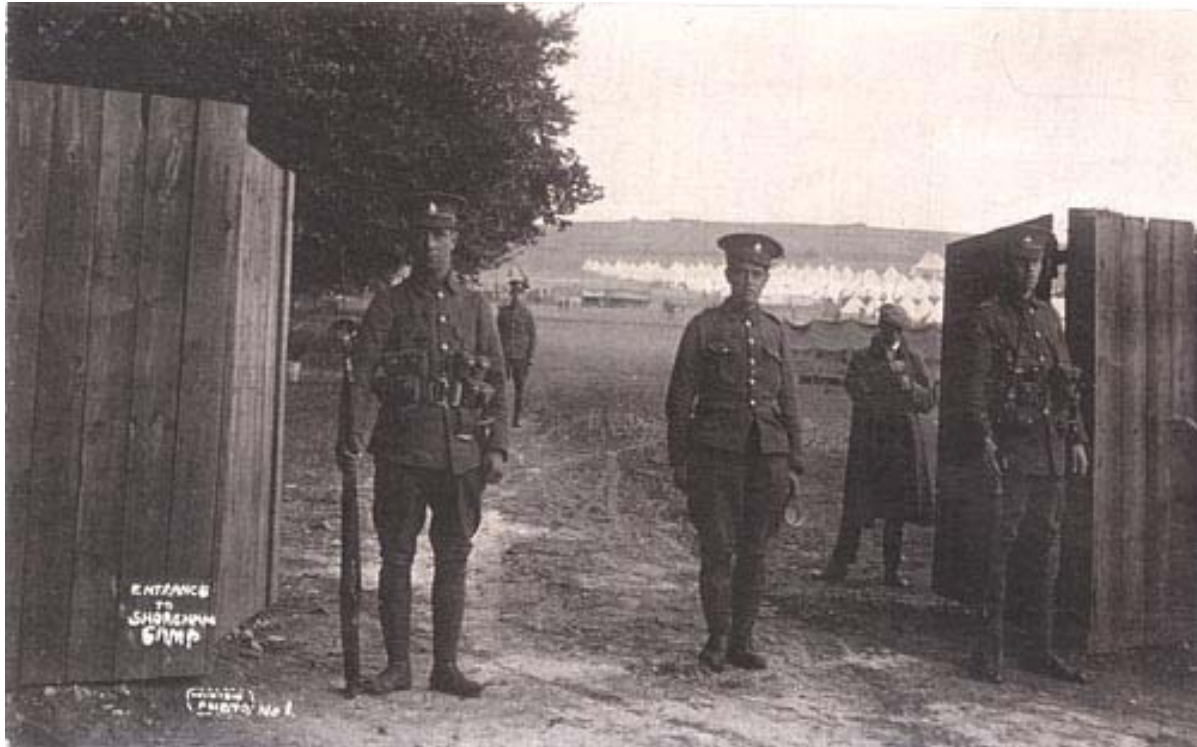
Jack was sent to recover at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. The Reading War Hospital complex during WW1 was one of the largest in the country. There were 6 main war hospitals in Reading. No 1 Battle Hospital (The Reading Union Workhouse opened in 1867) was the headquarters and the Royal Berkshire Hospital was No.6. The other 4 War Hospitals were local schools (Redlands, Katsgrove, Wilson & Battle). The Royal Berkshire Hospital passed over 50 beds to the military at the start of the war although more beds were taken over for military purposes as the war progressed. This caused a problem in 1915 as there was a meningitis epidemic which meant there were not enough beds so they put up marquees on the back lawn. Apart from the main war hospitals there were a number of auxiliary hospitals in the town that were run by the Red Cross and some of the larger houses in the area were used for convalescence.¹⁵



After six weeks, really enjoying life, being taken on many river trips by local inhabitants (including a very pretty bunch of young ladies from the local drapery store), he finally reported for duty at a convalescent camp adjacent to Shoreham, not far from home.

Shoreham Camp had been established as a training camp in the Buckingham Park area in 1914 and a block of the Infirmary in Upper Brighton Road was set apart for military patients. The Infirmary was

then called the Steyning Institution and had been built in 1901 to replace the first Steyning Union Workhouse in Ham Road, which had originated after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The new Infirmary, later known as A, B, C, & D Blocks, came into use in 1906. It was not renamed Southlands Hospital until 1932.¹⁶



Shoreham Military Camp entrance c1915 –
West Sussex County Council Library Service, P003437
www.westsussexpast.org.uk

The Infirmary cared for wounded soldiers during WW1, earning the Southlands Guardians the thanks of the Army in 1919 for its treatment of military patients. In 1918, the shortage of able-bodied inmates, necessitated the employment of German prisoners of war (POWs) to care for the 16 acres of gardens.

At the time Jack was posted to Shoreham, Asian flu, Spanish flu or the "Black Death" was ravishing the country. The 1918 flu pandemic (January 1918 – December 1920) was an unusually deadly influenza pandemic, the first of the two pandemics involving H1N1 influenza virus (the second being the 2009 flu pandemic). It infected 500 million people across the world and killed 50 to 100 millions of them - 3 to 5 per cent of the world's population at the time - making it one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history.¹⁷

Southlands Hospital was being used by the British troops suffering with this illness. There were great numbers of deaths and many men were given military funerals. Jack, as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) was in charge of one of the funeral parties, which travelled far and wide.

These usually went well except when they arrived in Worthing on one occasion. The widow expressed a wish to see her husband once again and they had arrived with the wrong gentleman.¹⁸

After moving to the Duke of Yorks School at Dover, in a few weeks, in February 1919, Jack arrived at the Crystal Palace "to be demobbed" and given an Army overcoat to return home in, receiving in lieu £1, when he gave it up at the local railway station.¹⁹



Postcard postmarked 16 Dec 1918 expressing boredom while waiting to be demobbed
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Postscript

In due course, Jack returned to the family shoe business. Like his family before him, he took an active part in the life of Worthing. In 1923, Jack married Sallie Buckels from Nottingham, presumably someone he had met when at Clipstone Camp. They had two daughters, Gillian and Sallie Jean.

Prior to and during World War Two, Jack joined the National Fire Service, part of which time he was a patrol officer in the villages from Adur to the Arun and north as far as Crawley.²⁰

From 1946 until 1970, he was a magistrate. He was the original secretary of Worthing Round Table and in 1946 became a Rotarian from which he resigned in 1971 after 25 years.²¹

His interest in photography continued throughout his life. Between 1955 and 1980 he gave over 100 illustrated talks on the "Do You Remember" theme. His lantern slides appeared in many public exhibitions.²²

His book "Old Worthing as I Remember It 1906-1920", written in 1975 and first published in July 1982, was a full and very personal account of Worthing and its residents during the first quarter of the twentieth century, comprising some 21,000 words and more than 100 photographs.²³

Jack was widowed in 1971 and died on 6 December 1983.

He had kept the bullet which wounded him and wore it attached to his watch chain for many years, presumably to remind him of his good fortune.



Acknowledgments

The images on pages 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12 and 13, and transcript of the letter on pages 8 and 9, are reproduced by kind permission of Jack's younger daughter, Gillian Bridges, and grandsons Tim and Rupert Bridges. The family provided a great deal of advice and help in researching this case study and the author and West Sussex County Council Library Service would like to thank them very much.

¹ Jack Watts "Old Worthing as I Remember It 1906-1920" (Jack Watts 1982)

² Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.67

³ Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.65

⁴ Janice Brooker, ancestry.com website

⁵ www.clipstonecamp.co.uk

⁶ www.forces-war-records.co.uk

⁷ Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.79

⁸ British English word for Britain.

⁹ Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.79

¹⁰ Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.79

¹¹ Wikipedia

¹² Jack Watts *ibid* p.79

¹³ The Times (London, England) Tues 9 Aug 1918, p.4, Issue 41861

¹⁴ The Times (London, England) Tues 9 Aug 1918, p.4, Issue 41861

¹⁵ Information supplied by Archivist at Royal Berkshire Hospital, Nov 2013

¹⁶ Southlands Workhouse and Hospital by Reverend John White (League of Friends of Southlands Hospital, 1990)

¹⁷ Wikipedia

¹⁸ Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.80

¹⁹ Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.80

²⁰ Phoebe Somers' Article, West Sussex Gazette, c1975

²¹ Phoebe Somers, *ibid*, c1975

²² Jack Watts, *ibid*, p.67

²³ Phoebe Somers, *ibid*, c1975