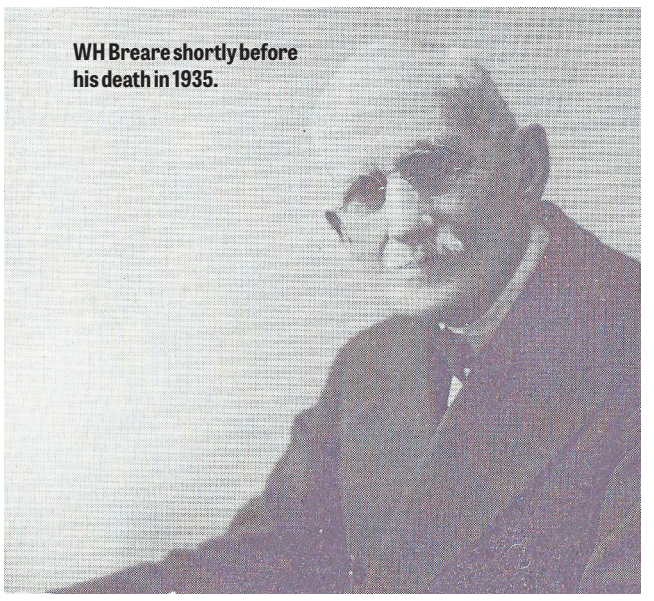
NEWS

Harrogate Heritage

Harrogate heritage page remembers patriot and great editor WH Breare


WH Breare shortly before his death in 1935.

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For almost twenty years from 1995, the eminent local historian Malcolm Neesam contributed a series of remarkable articles to the Advertiser, initially under the headline 'Bygone Harrogate' and later using the title 'Our Heritage'. In association with Harrogate Civic Society, we are proud to republish a selection from the series. The views expressed were those of the late Mr Neesam at the time of writing and do not necessarily reflect the current view of the Advertiser or Harrogate Civic Society.

During the dark days of the First World War, Harrogate Herald editor WH Breare provided an invaluable service to men on the front line. Malcolm Neesam tells his remarkable story...

A current research project has required me to examine every copy of the Harrogate Herald newspaper printed between 1914 and 1918, of the First World War, a task I have found depressing beyond words.

The issues for 1914 after August 4, are still recognizable as the old Harrogate Herald, which was always the heavyweight newspaper filled with the week's news.

The articles were usually written in a confident, self-justificatory style, full of national sentiment and pride at the dedicated service of 'our boys in uniform'.

During those first few weeks of war, the paper reported the progress of local volunteers, sometimes showing lines of men in civilian costume, sometimes showing rifle practice in the spa room's gardens, or at Birk Cragg, and sometimes showing visits by military officials.

One particularly interesting photograph shows crowds around the Drill Hall in Strawberry Dale. Another shows Harrogate postmen lined up in front of Lord Derby's recruiting office in Raglan Street.

Every week of every month in every year from September 1914 to November 1918 the pages of the Harrogate Herald were filled with photographs of the district's young men who had either died on the war front, been injured - often frightfully - taken prisoner, or were missing.

Throughout the First World War, one man - William Hammond Breare – provided a much needed human side to the conflict, by his service to local men on the war front.

WH Breare, born in Massachusetts, was a musically gifted child who had been sent to Yorkshire at the age of 14 to study music with Mr FW Hirst in Leeds, but his interest in journalism led him to become an associate of Robert Ackrill, founder and proprietor of the Harrogate Herald.

Eventually, WH Breare married Robert Ackrill's daughter, and became editor of the Herald, a post he filled with brilliance for over 50 years.

> *One man – William Hammond Breare – provided a much needed human side to the conflict*

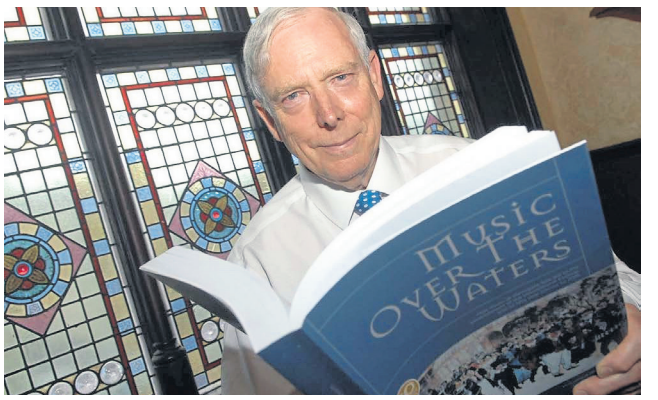
WH as he was known, contributed articles to the Herald on a regular basis. His criticisms of musical events were particularly lucid.

Much could be said of WH Breare's stimulation of both theatre and music in Harrogate, but for the purposes of this article, I must restrict myself to his letters to soldiers throughout the dark days of the 1914-1918 war.

Each week, Mr Breare wrote a letter To Our Boys in Service that opened with the unchanging phrase Dear Chaps, ...

Unlike his highly literate and knowledgable music criticisms, Mr Breare adopted a chatty and friendly style of writing, that told his Dear Chaps about the homely and familiar things going on in Harrogate, about a small fire in a sweet shop, about an old elm in Valley Gardens being blown down, or the Kursaal visit of Catlin's Pierrots and the Jokes told by Miss Marie Lloyd.

Moreover, every local serving soldier was posted a copy of the Herald, so that copies were circulating throughout the trenches or on the battle ships of the war fronts. The homely news kept spirits alive throughout the dark years from 1914-1918, and the Herald was read eagerly by men who knew nothing of the Harrogate district, but who valued a touch of home news as a relief.



The late Malcolm Neesam.

But WH Breare took his efforts one stage further, when he published letters from serving soldiers, which poured into the Herald office at the foot of Montpellier Hill.

These letters invariably assured home readers that all was well, and that the enemy was on the run, and that morale was excellent. But they also contained requests.

One soldier might be in need of a new razor, another might require a watch, or some fresh socks. Requests were received for a gramophone to provide entertainment in quarters, or for an accordion.

Whatever was requested, Mr Breare printed the details, and thousands of packages were dispatched from Harrogate containing items which were received with immense gratitude.

Sometimes, soldiers home on leave would call on Mr Breare to thank him for his support, and none were ever turned away from his office without a cigarette, some friendly words and encouragement.

If a soldier needed assistance reaching home in Boroughbridge or Pateley Bridge, for example, WH would ensure they got it.

He never discussed his visits from desperate mothers, wives or sweethearts for news of loved ones, but he pulled many strings to try and obtain information, something his status as editor enabled him to do.

After the war, he worked unceasingly to provide ex-soldiers with employment, and on many occasions, gave financial relief out of his own pocket.

Apart from the Grand Duchess George of Russia, nobody did more during the First World War to maintain morale in the Harrogate district than WH Breare.

This article was first published on October 11, 2012

A note from Harrogate Civic Society: It is now more than four years since Malcolm's death. He left behind an astonishing body of work that we at the Harrogate Civic Society are determined should be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of future historians and, indeed, for the benefit of anyone who cares about Harrogate.
Not long before his passing, we discussed with Malcolm and the Advertiser republishing at least some of his articles.
Many of Malcolm's articles dealt with the history of the town, exploring the people, places and events that helped to form the Harrogate we know today. At other times Malcolm concentrated more on contemporary issues.
While acknowledging that Harrogate could not stand still, he was convinced that change should always be tested.
In September 2024, the first re-publication of Mr Neesam's articles appeared and this article continues the series.
We are grateful to Malcolm's family for their approval, and to Simon Kent, Paul Jennings, and Graham Chalmers and his team at the Advertiser for their support and encouragement.