

## **MINNIE AND THE WAR EFFORT**

**BY RICHARD THOMAS**

Building for a wonderful future was embraced with enthusiasm in the period before 4th August 1914.

During this time 'bigger and better' appears to have been the guiding theme.

The Spa had become one of the most famous in the world and was thronged with what we would refer to nowadays as 'A List' celebrities.

In LAugust 1911 Queen Alexandra and her sister, the Empress Marie of Russia, motored through Harrogate and visited Princess Victoria at Cathcart House (adjacent to the Hotel du Vin).

Prince Christopher of Greece met King Manuel of Portugal for the first time when the Prince and his sister Marie were taking the cure and used to foregather in the Pump Room every morning before breakfast. 'Although sulphur water imbibed in enormous quantities is not exactly a convivial beverage' he got quite a lot of amusement out of the process. Marie was the sister of Andrew of Greece, ie the father of the Duke of Edinburgh.

To accommodate these grand visitors the hotel industry went into over-drive with the gargantuan Hotel Majestic opening on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1900 and on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1943 the Grand Hotel on the Duchy Estate with 5 domes each covered with gold leaf.

The Grand, now Windsor House, was opened about the same time as the Kursaal, now the Royal Hall.

The foundation stone of the Kursaal was laid by the great builder of the Duchy Estate, David Simpson, in his second Mayoralty.

The builder was at his apogee, nearing completion of the Duchy using stone quarried from Birk Crag and creating a magnificent mansion for himself in 1902, named Oakdale, on the North bank of Oakdale Beck and inspired by the wonderful South façade of Haddon Hall,

Derbyshire. This house was renamed, as recently as the 1970's by its last private owner 'Oakdale Manor'. He purchased helped by the sale of his night club business to Mecca.

The Planning Department in 1977 considered it to be an example of wealthy middle class domestic taste with a richly decorated interior and fine quality workmanship.

Mr Simpson resided there for only 12 years, when the outbreak of the Great War caused him to vacate. He also ceased quarrying stone from Birk Crag. The final mounds of debris from the last days of workings can still be seen alongside the middle path from Cornwall Road.

Mr Simpson's eldest son, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J M Simpson was killed in action on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1916.

Prince Christopher of Greece's sister Marie, HIH Grand Duchess George of Russia **and her daughter** remained in Harrogate after the outbreak of war, as they were unable to return overland through Germany and the Grand Duke would not hear of their running the gauntlet of the submarines and the mine-sown coast. 'You are much better off in England and the war won't last for ever' her wrote. Revolution swept over Russia and after a while his letter stopped.

George was arrested by the Bolsheviks in St Petersburg **and** imprisoned for seven months before being lined up with fellow Grand Dukes outside the fortress of St Peter and St Paul and shot.

The Grand Duchess, known to her family as Minnie, decided to be useful. She started a 28 bed hospital for wounded soldiers in Duchy Road, called St George's, which soon had to be replaced with 3 larger house hospitals elsewhere in the town. She catered for over 1,200 casualties during the war.

After the war she returned to Greece (she was the daughter of King George of Greece) and married a Greek Admiral. She erected a small monument where Wetherby Road leaves the Stray in commemoration of those who died in her hospital.

At the outbreak of the war a camp for recruits was set up under canvas on a purely supposedly temporary basis, where Uniake Barracks now stand.

This site, no doubt, was chosen partly because Queen Ethelburga's School (built in 1910) had provided itself with a magnificent sewerage system to which the camp was to be connected. The private Harrogate Rifle Club had built itself a splendid rifle range on Oakdale Farm to fire across Oak Beck to targets on Birk Crag. This also came in useful.

Ackrill's War Souvenir Editions during the Great War depict poignant photographs of those killed or wounded during the war and identifies many with their home addresses, including a Captain from Brunswick Drive, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant from Rutland Road and a private soldier from Ripon Road.

That beautiful book 'The Exquisite Burden' by A A Thompson, which is set in pre-war Harrogate, thinly disguised as 'Nidvale', refers to the train leaving the station platform for the war 'Eight Old Boys, young and quick and eager, running into the long dark tunnel. In the hall of Nidvale Grammar School hangs a gilt-lettered board. It tells that only one of that carriage load came back'.