

## THE GREAT SEND OFF 7<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2014



The main entrance to Lever House, Port Sunlight.

As a “potential recruit” I walked through the truly grand entrance to the office complex of Unilever, where each volunteer had to book in. Having never been in this building, I stood open mouthed, and with a twist of irony, looked to the bottom of the steps to see bronze busts of Sir William Hesketh Lever (Lord Leverhulme), and his brother James. The, as we got up the stairs, each person was handed an A4 sized envelope with a food voucher attached to it, and a sticker with an image of one of Lever Brothers famous soap brands on it. Inside the envelope were two or three A4 sheets of paper giving information on the history of Port Sunlight; brochures for events in Port Sunlight; a free admission family ticket to the Port Sunlight Museum; a free admission ticket for the Cheshire Regimental Museum; a special commemorative train ticket; and the final item, which was of particular interest to me, was a card giving basic details on one of the original 1914 “700”, my particular card was appertaining to W/862 Private Frederick Williams, who was killed in action on the Somme, on 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1916. Once into the South Wing building, everybody was issued with a paper bag containing an apple, sandwich, and a kit-kat, and then we all had to sign the Visitors Book.



**Volunteers signing the Visitor's Book**

There then followed quite a long period of waiting around, with a choral group singing Great War songs, before we were given a briefing by one of the event organizers. Then the Chief Executives of Unilever and Port Sunlight Heritage gave speeches, which was followed by practising singing songs.



Once this had been accomplished, we were then broken down into our various "soap" groups – in my case "Vinolia", denoted by the sticker on the bottom of our envelopes, and taken outside to be formed up into "soap" companies by an ex-Regimental Sergeant Major and an ex- Colour Sergeant from the Cheshire Regiment. Having been formed up, the "700" were "marched" up to the entrance to Lever House, where an actor, dressed as Sir William Hesketh Lever, gave a superbly quoted speech given by the original person. As the speech was going on, there were camera men from local newspapers and TV channels everywhere, with the Port Sunlight Brass Band standing behind us. Beyond them were hundreds of people who had come along to see us off.



**'Sir William Hesketh Lever' addressing the volunteers.**

Speeches done, we were then marched off to Port Sunlight Station where we were to get on a specially laid on train to take us to the historic walled city of Chester.



**The "700" at Port Sunlight Station, awaiting the special train bound for Chester**

We disembarked at Chester station singing "Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag", and were formed up outside into our companies, and after yet more singing (it was beginning to grate a bit by this time!),



**The disembarkation at Chester Station**

we eventually marched up through the city centre. Here, the ineptness of our Cheshire Regiment Living History Group (NOT the ex-RSM or the ex-CSM) shone through. They had joined us at the station, and were scruffy, long haired, unshaven, with very little or no military bearing whatsoever, with the exception of the "OC". As we approached the city centre, where the Duke of Westminster was standing with other city dignitaries, they tried to give an "eyes-right", and failed miserably!! Once the embarrassment had subsided, we eventually marched into Chester Castle, where we saw in true magnificence, the men of the Mercian Regiment, conducting their 'Mons Day Parade'.



**The volunteers marching through Chester City centre, towards The Castle**

We, the '700', were kept apart from the 'Mons Day Parade', and were formed up around the statue of Queen Victoria, who was standing sentinel, watching with cold eyes over the proceedings below. Then it was the turn of another actor, albeit in incorrect dress, representing the North West Area Commander of time, General Sir Henry McKinnon, who gave a superb word-for-word recital of the exact speech given by the General on that September day in 1914. Once his speech had ended, the event turned into a bit of an anti-climax, as we were not "dismissed", but very much left to our own devices. We wandered over the Mercian's gazebo where we had to queue in our soap-branded companies to be issued with our certificate and "King's Shilling" by the same re-enactors who had tried to march us down from the station! I met up with two very good friends of mine, Ade and Steve, and had a wander round the regimental museum, where the lads grilled me over all things 13<sup>th</sup> Bn Cheshire Regiment. From here we wandered back to Chester Station for our free train back to Port Sunlight. We paid our respects at the village war memorial, and then visited the Port Sunlight museum.



**'General Sir Henry McKinnon' addressing the '700'**

Peter Threlfall