

# Personal Stories

*from* Our Parish

Frederick James Hoddinott



## One Pound of Love

Address given in All Saints, Winterslow on Remembrance Sunday, 1998

by

Canon Clive Cohen

I didn't see it, but several of you did, and drew it to my attention - a small piece in the Salisbury Journal almost exactly two years ago.

"Can anyone help Jane Benham, from Oxfordshire, solve a puzzle that's been bugging her since she bought a box of letters for £1 from a Salisbury junk shop twelve years ago? The letters were written by Jim Hoddinott, of Winterslow, and rifleman Jack Andrews to a Miss Evelyn Seager during the First World War."

I wrote to Jane, and to-day I want to tell you the previously untold story revealed in those letters - in these letters - treasured through seventy years and then abandoned to their fate, and rescued for £1 from a junk shop. They are simple letters. They tell of the innocent love of a young man for a young woman. The tragedy is they are set against the backdrop of the fearful end of the age of innocence.

Frederick James Hoddinott, known always as Jim, was born in Ringwood, the elder son of James and Rose Hoddinott who came to live at Farm Cottage, East Winterslow, when James went to work for George Bright of Roche Old Court Farm. Evelyn Priscilla Elizabeth Seager was the pretty and vivacious little daughter of Sydney Herbert Seager, a Salisbury plasterer and his wife Mary Ann. The family lived at 88 College Street. At the time our story begins both were 19; Jim worked with his father on the farm and Evelyn was in household service. Jack Andrews we will meet later.

"East Winterslow, (6 July 1914),

Dear Evelyn, I am just writing a line to thank you for writing to me. I went to Salisbury Saturday night and I went up to your home and your mother gave me the letter. I am sorry I did not come in Wednesday night, but hope to see you very soon. Very pleased to say I am quite well. Hope you are the same, dear. My dear, I am sorry I did not write before, have not much time. I think this is all this time, dear. I must now close." And the letter is signed, "With best love from your loving sweetheart, Jim", and marked with five crosses for five kiss-crosses.

“79 Chicknell Road, Weymouth, (18 September 1914),

“My dear Evelyn, You will be surprised to hear I am in the army (Jim was the first non-reservist from Winterslow to volunteer), and am now stationed at Weymouth. Have had your letters, but have been too busy to write before. Please forgive me not writing before, it is not because I don't care so much for you, as I still love you with all my heart. Please darling, will you send me a stickyback of yourself just to cheer me up? I should like to see you once again, it seems such a long time since we met. Write as soon as you can, pet. Don't be angry with me for not writing before; I will try and write more regular, as I shall have more time now. I don't know how long I shall be stationed here. Will let you know if we are shifted. Well my darling..... I rather like being a soldier. There are six of us here and we get on very well together. We get a very good allowance of food, and we have a bed to sleep on, so you see, darling, we don't do so bad. You will write as soon as possible won't you, dear. I know I ought to have written before, but I will write regular in future as far as my duties will allow me..... Must close with my fondest love and kisses to you my own sweet darling. From Your Ever Faithful Lover, F J Hoddinott”.

The signature is surrounded by twenty one kiss-crosses.

“Pte F J Hoddinott, A Company, Section 2, 3rd Wilts. Regt, Weymouth, (14 October 1914)

Dear Evelyn, I was very pleased to have your letter. Pleased to hear you was keeping well, as pleased to say I am. I rather like being a soldier. I have enlisted for the war. Weymouth is rather a pleasant place. But we are no; allowed into the town itself without a pass. I'm going to have my photo taken as soon as possible, so you'll be able to see how I look in my soldier's clothes. I hope you will enjoy yourself while you are at home. As you say it would be better if I was there. But we must hope for the best. Perhaps it won't be so long as we think before we have an opportunity of seeing each other. We had a hard day's v/cA yesterday. We had to go trenching in the afternoon in case the Germans come. We shall be ready for them, but I don't think they will come. Well, I can't stop for more now, so, darling, I must close, with my best and fondest love. From your Ever Loving Sweetheart, F J Hoddinott.”

The rest of the page is filled with kiss-crosses.

“Pte F J Hoddinott, A Coy, 3rd Wilts. Regt, Weymouth, (14 December 1914)

My darling Evelyn, At last I am writing a letter to you, but you will forgive me for not writing before as I am busier than ever before now, as I am an officer's servant and I have just about enough to do. I think I shall like it alright. I have to get up early mornings now. I have to call him at quarter to six. We are shifted from our old billet. We are stopping at an hotel now, but I would rather have stopped where I was; we were nice and comfortable there. I still go there very often; they makes us very welcome.”

Evelyn must have left her former employer, because the letter continues, “I don't blame you leaving, dear. I wouldn't put up with her jaw. I had your stickyback, dear, it was very good, but I shall be glad to have a proper one. We are having lovely weather down here, just right for us chaps drilling etc.. I don't think we shall be shifted from here for a bit. I should like you to see us. I wonder when we shall see each other again, dear. It does seem a long time since we met. The war doesn't look much better does it, but we must hope for the best. I don't expect we shall be going for a bit. We have such a lot to learn..... I don't think there is any more news to tell you, so I must close with all my best and fondest love.

From Your Ever Faithful and Loving, Jim.”

And a mass of kiss-crosses.

Just a few days later Jim writes again. “Just a line or two to tell you I am in the next draft for France. I wish I had been able to have come and seen you before I went, but I suppose I shan't be able to now. You must not worry about me as I shall be alright. I hope dear you are keeping quite well, as pleased to say I am. I expect we shall go tomorrow. I can't tell you where to write to, but I will try and send my address on.....I hope you will have a nice Xmas. Can't stop for more now; dear; as we are rather busy getting ready today.”

It was 24 January 1915 before Jim wrote again, and this letter was quickly followed by another.

"Pte F J Hoddinott, 10229 D Coy, 2nd Wilts. Regt., 7th Division, British Expeditionary Force, France. (28 January 1915),

Dear Evelyn, Just a few lines to answer your letter and parcel, which I received quite safe. I think it was very good of you to send it out here to me and it was just what I wanted as I cannot get any paper etc out here. We.....get plenty of rain out here, and I see by the photos you sent me that you have had a lot of rain in Salisbury, and it must have made it very awkward for getting about. (There was serious flooding in Salisbury early in 1915). Thank you very much for your photo. I think it is exactly like you..... You asked me what I should like most, and you would send it. Well dear, I think what would be most welcome out here would be some eatables as we only have tinned food out here and anything from home is very acceptable. It was very good of your mother to offer to send me some mince pies, and I should be very glad of them..... Please remember me to all at home and I shall be looking forward to a line from you soon. And now I must close.

With heaps of love. From Jim."

A line of kiss-crosses was his parting gift to Evelyn before another cross, stuck in the mud of France, wrote of Jim and of so many, as it had of Christ nearly 1900 years earlier, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle was the first big British offensive of the war, so early that steel helmets were not then in use. The 2nd Battalion, The Wiltshire Regiment, went up into the line on 10 March. Their war diary, written in the line at the time, begins, "10.3.15. All the morning the British wounded streamed past and it was not until about 1 p.m. that the Battalion received the order to advance." It goes on to tell of four days of confusion, of advance and counter-advance, before the Battalion was stood down to the reserve line on the 13th. That is, those who remained. In the four days the Battalion lost 6 officers killed, 11 wounded and 2 invalided out. 58 NCOs and men were killed, 162 wounded and 56 were reported missing. The diary entry for the night of 10 March and the following day reads, "Nothing much happened during that night or the following day except a shower of bullets and shellfire all the time." Nothing much happened, except Jim was killed and Evelyn's hopes perished.

"British Expeditionary Force, France, (13 March 1915)

Dear Mr and Mrs Hoddinott, It is with the deepest regret and sympathy that I have to report to you the death of your son, Private Hoddinott. He was shot through the head and died instantaneously. In expressing my own personal sympathy I am also expressing the sympathy of the whole of D Company, for your son was a fearless soldier, well liked by all of us."

So ran the letter which, early in April, eventually found its way to Jim's parents in East Winterslow. Their son was aged just 20. James and Rose put a short announcement of Jim's death in The Salisbury Journal on 12 April. That is how Evelyn, who was also just 20, learned of his death. Evelyn immediately wrote to them; it was Rose who replied.

"East Winterslow, April 16(1915)

Dear Evelyn, I thank you very much for your kind letter and sympathy, for it was a sad blow to one and to all of us. We had it put in the paper so that his friends would be able to see as we did not know all of them. I expect his photo will be in very soon. I am glad he wrote to you from Weymouth and sent you his photo. I have some copies and am giving them to his friends - such a lot of people ask me for them. I am enclosing you a card and when I come into Salisbury I should like to come up and see you and your parents. I miss him very much. He was such a good boy and a good boy for the garden and also for flowers. The last letter I had from him he asked me to put some flowers in his garden and make it look nice for him to see. I did not think that I should never see him again, but God knows best. He has taken him for some good purpose. His sister and brother feels it very much as he was a good brother to them and they was proud of him. Well I think I must draw this letter to a close.

With my sincere sympathy. I remain, yours faithfully, R. Hoddinott."

Evelyn carefully put the letter with the precious few from Jim and kept them in a little cardboard box that once held "Fisherton Cambric Stationery".

Later in 1915 she struck up a friendship with Jack Andrews. His first letter to her, written at the end of July that year, begins, "Dear Miss Evelyn" and concludes, "Yours sincerely, J.A. Andrews". As the months progress "Dear Miss Evelyn" becomes "Dear Evelyn" then finally "Dear Eva". And the signature changes from "Yours sincerely, J.A. Andrews" to "Love from Jack" then "Best love from Jack" and finally to "Fondest love from Jack". The address at the top of his letters also changes, from "Windsor Street, Salisbury," to "C Company, 5th Rifle Brigade, Isle of Sheppey, to British Expeditionary Force, France".

At the end of February 1916 Jack was blinded and taken to hospital. When he regained some sight, he wrote,

*"A/Cpl J. Andrews, 767, Rifle Bde 29-3-16*

*Dear Eva, I hope this finds you quite well. I am doing fine as you will notice. I am writing this myself. I can see the pencil, but I cannot see the writing paper after I have written..... Any letters I receive the nurses read to me. I was very pleased to get your letter yesterday. I was beginning to wonder if mother had sent the letter on that I wrote to her and (asked her) to send on to you, or rather I should say a letter that one of the nurses wrote for me..... The sisters are very very busy and I didn't like to ask them to write too many letters for me, though I know they would have done. So with pleasure I will be able to write oftener now, and I hope the day is not far distant when I shall be able to read my letters as well. I was hit on 29 February. My sight began to come back on 23 March. Remember me to your Ma and Pa.*

*I'll now close. With Much Love From Jack."*

A fortnight later Jack's mother wrote to Evelyn, copying this letter that she had just received from the front.'

*"I am sorry to be the writer of this sad news, but your son. Number 767, died in my ward in this hospital this morning (7 April). When he was admitted he had lost his sight, but received it for two days which gave us great pleasure. He had a relapse and passed away quite peacefully without great suffering."*

And Mrs Andrews added her own personal note to Eva, "I am crushed, but, please God, I must bear up as I have five more sons in it now."

Carefully Evelyn placed this letter with the bundle of letters she had kept from Jack. Carefully she placed the bundle she had had from Jack with the few she had had from Jim, and put them in her stationery box. She had loved twice in the innocent days of her youth, when young men and women should hold hands and whisper what might be to each other. She had loved twice and she had been loved twice. And now, in the space of thirteen cruel months, kisses marked with crosses on the paper had become graves marked with crosses in French Melds.

The spark in Evelyn flickered, and she shrank into herself. In the years that followed she had other jobs; she had other boyfriends, but increasing deafness and the demands of ageing parents ensured she, like so many of her generation never married. She lived on in College Street, saved by her wonderful sense of humour, and her strong Christian faith - Evelyn was a regular worshipper at St Mark's - until she was too old to care for herself and went into Maristow Rest Home. 88 College Street was sold and all its contents cleared; and these letters, the love of 3 lives, found their way to a Salisbury junk shop, priced £1.

There in 1984, Jane saw them and rescued them. Jane's biggest regret is that she did not start, researching them sooner. You see, Evelyn lived on and on, until she was 96. She did not die until 1991, and could have been reunited with her lovers' letters. But by contacting the Journal when she did Jane has made known the sacrifice of three lives, Jim's, Jack's and Evelyn's. Until then, Jim was but a name on our War Memorial and Jack on the War Memorial in Salisbury. We did not even have a photograph of Jim. Now we have a copy of the one sent Evelyn by Jim's parents, who both lived to see a second world war and who are both buried here in the churchyard. Now we know Jim, Jack and Evelyn's story. Now we know, and now we will remember.

I am greatly indebted to Jane Benham for allowing me free use of the correspondence and her researches, and to the Curator The Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire & Wiltshire Regiment (Salisbury) Museum, for supplying a copy of the 2nd Battalion's War Diary. Photocopies of the complete correspondence (which I have taken the liberty of tidying in this pamphlet) have been placed among the parish records of All Saints, Winterslow.