

Letters from the First World War, 1916- 18

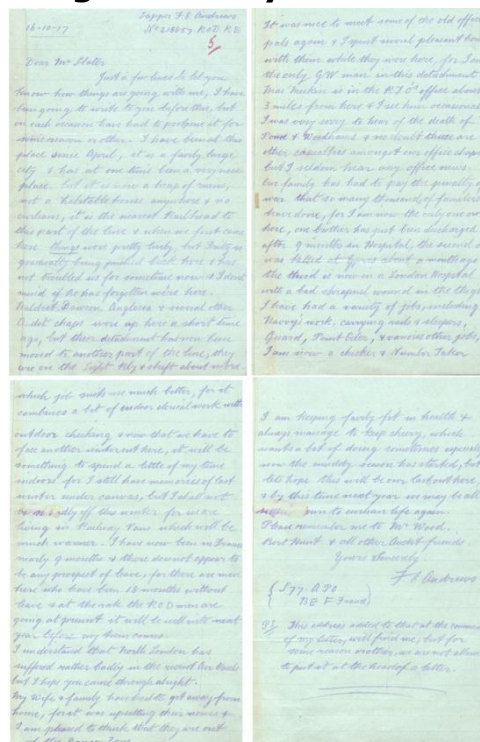


Here you will find all the letters and transcripts from this collection that relate to the soldiers' experience at the railheads on the Western front. Railheads were the nearest points to the front from which men and supplies travelled by train and were then taken to the battle line by motor vehicle or horse.

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Railheads: 'we are living in railway vans'



Frederick Ernest Andrews, 16 October 1917, France. **Born:** 15 November 1879, **Regiment:** Railway Operation Division, Royal Engineers, **Regiment number:** 218857, **Rank:** Sapper, **Returned to office:** 26 May 1919, **Retired:** 15 November 1939

Transcript

Dear Mr Slater

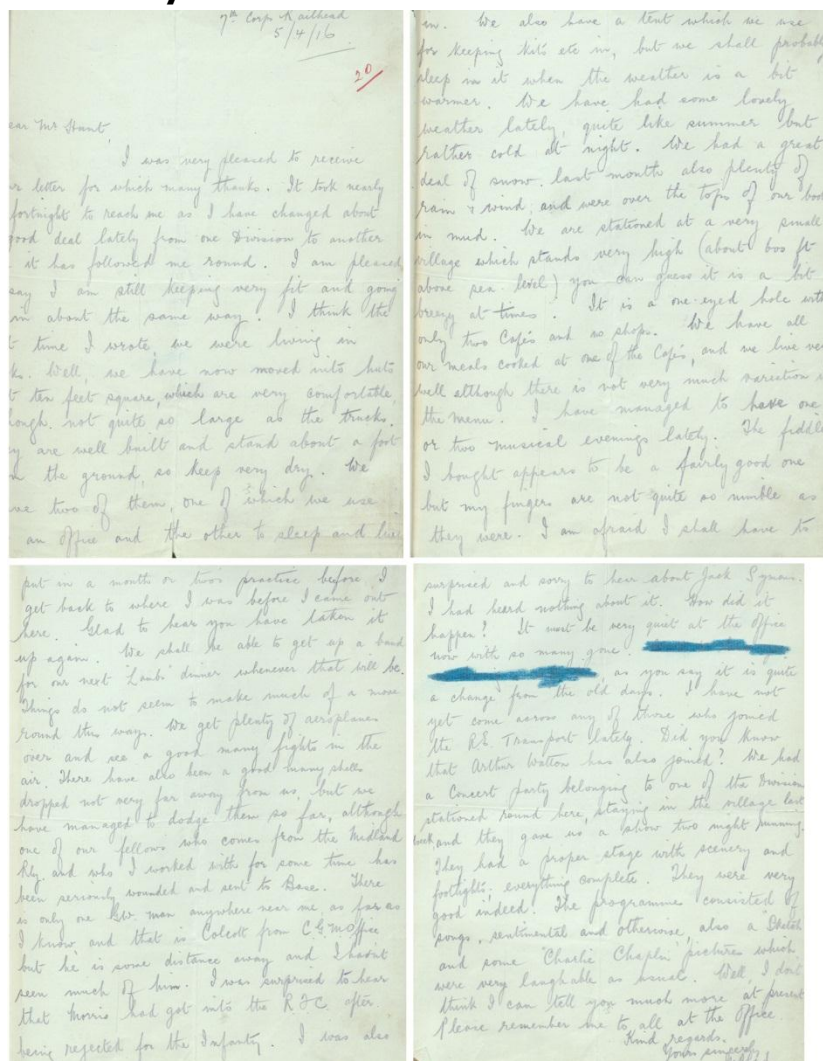
Just a few lines to let you know how things are going with me, I have been going to write to before this, but on each occasion I have had to postpone it for some reason or other. I have been at this place since April. It is a fairly large city and has at one time been a very nice place, but it is now a heap of ruins, not a habitable house anywhere and no civilians, it is the nearest railhead to this part of the line and when we first came here things were pretty lively, but Fritz is gradually being pushed back here and has not troubled us for some time now I don't mind if he has forgotten we're here. Naldrett, Dawson and Anglesey and several other Audit chaps were up here a short time ago, but their detachment has now been moved to another part of the line, they are on the Light Railway and shift about more.

It was nice to meet some of the old office pals again and I spent several pleasant hours with them while they were here, for I am the only G.W. man in this detachment. McMeeken is in the Railway Transport Officer's office about three miles from here and I see him occasionally. I was very sorry to hear of the deaths of Pond and Woodhams and no doubt there are other casualties amongst our office chaps but I seldom hear any office news. Our family has had to pay the penalty of war that so many thousands of families have done, for I am now the only one out here, one brother has just been discharged after nine months in hospital, the second one was killed at Ypres about a month ago and the third is now in a London hospital with a bad shrapnel wound in the thigh. I have had a variety of jobs, including navvy's work, carrying rails and sleepers, guard, point oiler and various other jobs. I am now a checker and number taker which job suits me much better, for it combines a lot of indoor clerical work with outdoor checking and now that we have to face another winter out here, it will be something to spend a little of my time indoors for I still have memories of last winter under canvas, but I shall not be so badly off this winter for we are living in railway vans which will be much warmer. I have now been in France nearly nine months and there does not appear to be any prospect of leave, for there are more here who have been eighteen months without leave and at the rate the R.O.D. men are going at present it will be well into next year before my turn comes.

I understand that north London has suffered rather badly in the recent air raids but I hope you came through all right. My wife and family have had to get away from home, for it was upsetting their nerves and I am pleased to think that they are out of the danger zone. I am keeping fairly fit in health and always manage to keep cheery, which wants a bit of doing sometimes especially now the muddy season has started, but let's hope this will be our last out here and by this time next year we may be all settling down to civilian life again. Please remember me to Mr Wood, Bert Hunt and all other Audit friends. Yours sincerely

F.E. Andrews...

Railheads: 'a one-eyed hole'



Montague Percy Pond, 5 April 1916, France. **Born:** 13 September 1888, **Joined GWR:** 19 May 1904, **Regiment:** Railway Troop, Royal Engineers, **Regiment number:** 87749, **Rank:** Sapper, **Died:** Killed in action on 6 May 1917

Transcript

Dear Mr Hunt,

I was very pleased to receive your letter for which many thanks. It took nearly a fortnight to reach me as I have changed about a good deal lately from one division to another and it has followed me around. I am pleased to say I am still keeping very fit and going on in about the same way. I think the last time I wrote we were living in trucks. Well we have now

moved into huts about ten feet square, which are very comfortable although not quite as large as the trucks. They are well built and stand about a foot from the ground so keep very dry. We have two of them, one which we use as an office and the other to sleep and live in. We also have a tent which we use for keeping kits etc. in, but we shall probably sleep in it when the weather is a bit warmer.

We have had some lovely weather lately, quite like summer but rather cold at night. We had a great deal of snow last month also plenty of rain and wind, and were over the tops of our boots in mud. We are stationed at a very small village which stands very high (about 600 feet above sea level) you can guess it is a bit breezy at times. It is a one-eyed hole with only two cafes and no shops. We have all our meals cooked at one of the cafes, and we live very well although there is not very much variation in the menu. I have managed to have one or two musical evenings lately. The fiddle I bought appears to be a fairly good one but my fingers are not quite so nimble as they were. I am afraid I shall have to put in a month or two's practice before I get back to where I was before I came out here. Glad to hear you have taken it up again. We shall be able to get a band for our next 'lamb' dinner whenever that will be.

Things do not seem to make much of a move round this way. We get plenty of aeroplanes over and see a good many fights in the air. There have also been a good many shells dropped not very far away from us, but we have managed to dodge them so far although, one of our fellows, who comes from the Midland Railway and who I worked with for some time, has been wounded and sent to base. There is only one G.W. man anywhere near me as far as I know and that is Colcott from Chief Goods Manager's Office but he is some distance away and I hadn't seen much of him. I was surprised to hear that Morris had gone into the R.F.C. (Royal Flying Corps) after being rejected for the Infantry. I was also surprised and sorry to hear about Jack Symons. I had heard nothing about it. How did it happen? It must be very quiet at the office now with so many gone. (Censored line). As you say it is quite a change from the old days. I have not yet come across any of those who joined the R.E. (Royal Engineers) Transport lately. Did you know that Arthur Watton has joined?

We had a concert party belonging to one of the divisions stationed round here, staying in the village last week, and they gave us a show two nights running. They had a proper stage with scenery and footlights, everything complete. They were very good indeed. The programme consisted of songs, sentimental and otherwise, also a 'Sketch' and some Charlie Chaplin pictures which were very laughable as usual. Well, I don't think I can tell you much more at present. Please remember me to all at the office.

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

M.P. Pond

Railheads: 'gun fire and rats'

Sidney Smith, 19 March 1916, France. **Born:** 20 October 1881, **Regiment:** Railway Operatives Division, Royal Engineers, **Regiment number:** 218849, **Rank:** Sapper, **Returned to office:** 19 May 1919, **Retired:** 20 October 1941

Transcript

My Dear Elton and all,

I expect you are wondering why I have never written since leaving England. Well the fact is I have never had a chance for it has been a Cook's Tour since I was last with you. Perhaps I had better try and give you some idea of my adventures from the time we last met. It was not many hours after seeing you all that we were dispatched for France...We landed at a town after a nice long trip... At this spot, a rest camp so called, we spent about a week. What with parades in the daytime for various reasons and employed at the docks all night, unloading flour was the job that came my way you can imagine the rest we had. However we then went on to another base and here owing to illness, we were all isolated for ten days and no letters could be sent. Within a day or two of being released from this I alone of all our boys was packed off to another depot so that was the last I have seen for the time being of our crowd,

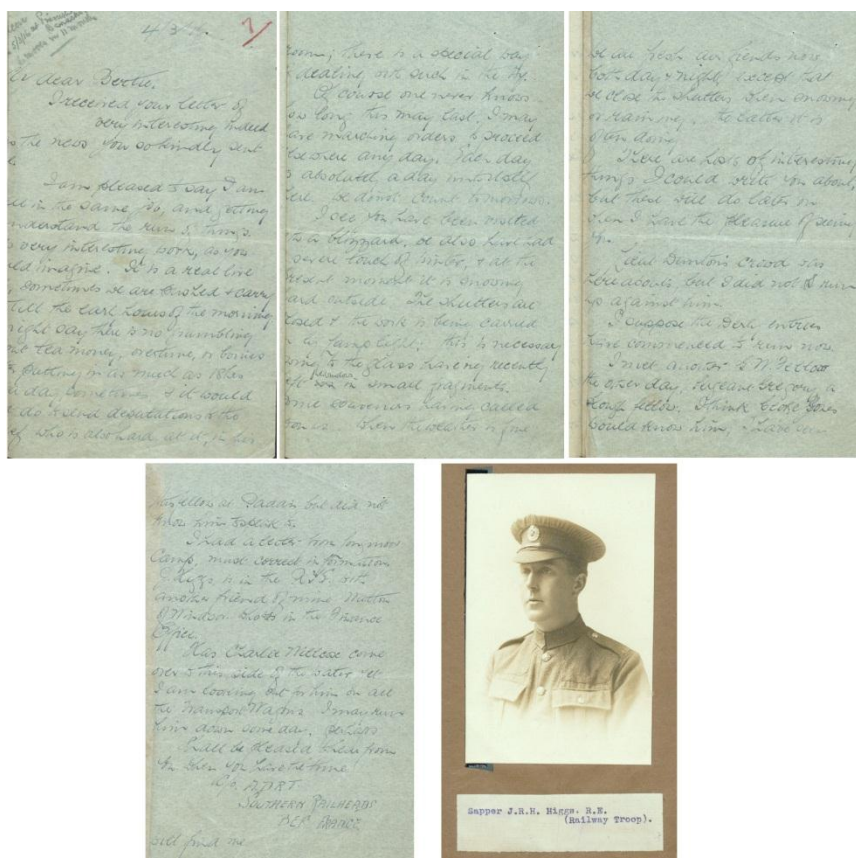
and have been on my own since. After a couple of nights at this depot I was sent to a point to get experience in the work I came here for. This turned out to be the best thing I had touched for the staff were billeted out and I slept in a feather bed which was great for it was under canvas... I soon found out that my luck was in and that happiness and comfort would be my lot whilst there... Alas my dream was soon dispelled, and after a week of civilised existence, I was sent for by the depot. After another 48 hours there I was sent away again to some other spot, but en route, was detained at a rest camp for two days, apparently owing to the absence of trains to the point I was going...

Covered vans are used here to convey soldiers about. Strange to say the actual truck I made this last journey in I saw again the next day loaded with sick horses, so being used for any purpose you can guess they cannot be compared to the carriages in which we made our daily trips to town and back. To continue my travels, the next day I was sent to the point I am now writing from, and which I think will be my residence for some little time as I have now taken up regular duties. It is a terrible, Godforsaken and desolate spot. There is naught to be seen except shell holes and rats and these latter are an abomination... There is little to be heard here at night except gun fire and rats and one soon gets used to both. I went to a village, the nearest here, about two miles away, on Sunday last and it was really an awful sight to see how it had been smashed by shell fire. You can now I trust realise the reason for my not writing before, in fact I have only written to my wife and father, and have only received one letter from each of them and that was a few days ago. I can tell you that I hunger for news of home after being here a month without a word... It is also almost impossible to buy anything for there is nowhere to get it...

I trust all is well with everyone at 164 and that poor old Sid is alright again. If Miss Welsh's little affair has come off I wish her the very best of luck and trust she will have all happiness... Please write to me soon some of you. Lots of luck, and good wishes to you all. Your old pal,

Sid

Railheads: 'there is no grumbling'



Mark Anthony Russell, 4 February 1916, France. **Born:** 30 March 1883, **Regiment:** Railway Troop, Royal Engineers, **Regiment number:** 138053, **Rank:** Sapper, **Died:** 1965

The photograph shows John Higgs, whom Russell knew and who was also in the Railway Troop, Royal Engineers. (RAIL 253/516)

Transcript

My Dear Bertie

... I am pleased to say I am still in the same job and getting to understand the run of things. It is very interesting work, as you would imagine. It is a real line here, sometimes we are pushed and carry on till the early hours of the morning. I might say there is no grumbling about tea money, overtime or bonus quotas putting in as much as eighteen hours a day sometimes and it would not do to send deputations to the chief who is

also hard at it, in his room; there is a special way of dealing with such in the army.

Of course one never knows how long this may last I may have marching orders to proceed elsewhere any day. Each day is absolutely a day unto itself here. We don't count tomorrow.

I see you have been visited with a blizzard, we also have had a severe touch of winter and at the present moment it is snowing hard outside. The shutters are closed and the work is being carried on by lamplight, this is necessary owing to the glass having recently left the windows in small fragments some souvenirs [shells] having called upon us. When the weather is fine we are fresh air fiends now both day and night except that we close the shutters when snowing or raining. The latter it is often doing.

There are hosts of interesting things I could write you about but these will do later on when I have the pleasure of seeing you. Lieut. Dunton's crowd was hereabouts, but I did not run up against him.

I suppose the Derby* entries have commenced to run now. I met another GW fellow the other day, Sergeant Gregory, a Slough fellow. I think George Jones would know him. I have seen this fellow at Paddington but did not know him to speak to.

I had a letter from Longmoor Camp. Must correct information. J. Higgs is in the Railway Transport Engineers with another friend of mine, Watton of Windsor who was in the Finance office...

*This was a voluntary recruitment policy in Britain created in 1915. The idea behind it was that men who voluntarily registered would be called to serve in the forces only when necessary. Men were classified according age and marital status, and single men were to be called first.

Railheads: 'gun fire and rats'



Sidney Smith, 19 March 1916, France. **Born:** 20 October 1881, **Regiment:** Railway Operatives Division, Royal Engineers, **Regiment number:** 218849, **Rank:** Sapper, **Returned to office:** 19 May 1919, **Retired:** 20 October 1941

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