

## Hartest remembers the Great War

There cannot be many of you who, at some time, have not been into the Crown..

Once the village pub was the heart of the community, indeed most had more than just one. Only a generation or so ago, before radio and then television began to keep people in their houses in the evenings, pubs were the places where people could gather to talk about the day's work and events, swop stories, sing songs, and tell others of their experiences. The pub was central to the rural community in a way which is hard to understand now.

Above the old fireplace in the Crown, if you bend and look directly above you, you will see coins, hammered into the oak beam. Some are recognisable, Victorian pennies, an old trade token or two, a 19<sup>th</sup>C Italian coin, and many others which have been so polished and worn that little is now decipherable. Each one is fixed by a sturdy nail, hammered through the metal to bind it forever to the oak. If you try to prise one loose then you will surely fail; though many have tried.

There is a local tradition that these coins were put there in the early days of the war, by wives and sweethearts, when spirits were high, and the expectation was that the boys would be home before too long. There is a poem which tells the tale.

*The Florins and the Farthing* by Les Barker.

The year was 1914 and the men were off to war

To fight for King and Country, for that's what young men are for.

To be brave; to leave their loved ones; to kill, perhaps to die.

Their loved ones' lot to stay behind, to wait and wonder why.

The bravado and the beer was flowing in the public bar

And lovers swore to wait till lovers came back from afar;

Each nailed a florin to a beam that spanned The Crown

And as each man returned home safe, a florin would come down.

The men took off in trains with farewell kiss and fond goodbye,

In trains that took them off to boats, more trains, and then to die;

A line of florins waited for the swift return of all,

And beside them hung a farthing, poor and solitary and small.

Was it all that he was worth, or was it all that she could spare?

Was the forfeit of a florin more than one poor purse could bear?

And as they nailed it to the beam, did she feel ashamed?

But a farthing or a florin, it's a symbol just the same.

Symbols of the constancy of lovers left to wait,  
Symbols of their hope, and maybe offerings of fate;  
And as each soldier came home, as each couple reunite,  
A florin was brought down for every man back from the fight.

A florin was brought down for every man back through the door,  
But at the Crown at Hartest, you will still see twenty four;  
Twenty four who never came back from the fields of France alive,  
And a solitary farthing makes the number twenty five.

Touching? Or maudlin? You choose. If you want to be pedantic there are many examples of "literary licence"; no florins that I can see, and the number of coins is all wrong. And no evidence that any were taken down when a loved one came home; no nail holes can be seen.

But it set me thinking about who the boys might have been and which ones didn't make it home to their sweetheart. I live in Boxted and I have long wondered why there is no memorial to any men from this village who may have died. The one at Hartest is in a prominent position on the Green, and you will find them in almost every Suffolk villages. Most of these sad reminders were built in the early twenties. By then, families had begun to make sense of their new order. No Dad any more to provide for the food, no older son to rely upon as the parents grew older. Just fading photographs, and memories that got no less painful as the years went by.

There are fifteen names there on the stones in Hartest; but little can be read about who they were beyond the name, their rank, and their regiment. One solitary name doesn't even show the rank, as it was added some years after the rest. A sad forgotten afterthought, long after the flowers from the commemorative ceremony in October 1920 had faded.

As my contribution to the interest around the centenary of the start of the war, I have researched these men; who they were, where they lived, what they did, and on the anniversary of their death I shall tell you something about them and their lives. And over the next four years, for the duration of the war, our village church bells will toll to mark the exact date of each man's death. They will sound the peal of Grandsire Doubles, with half-muffles, just as they did in 1920 when there was barely a family in the village who didn't have tears to shed on that damp foggy day in October.

(to be continued)