

Wethered's Brewery

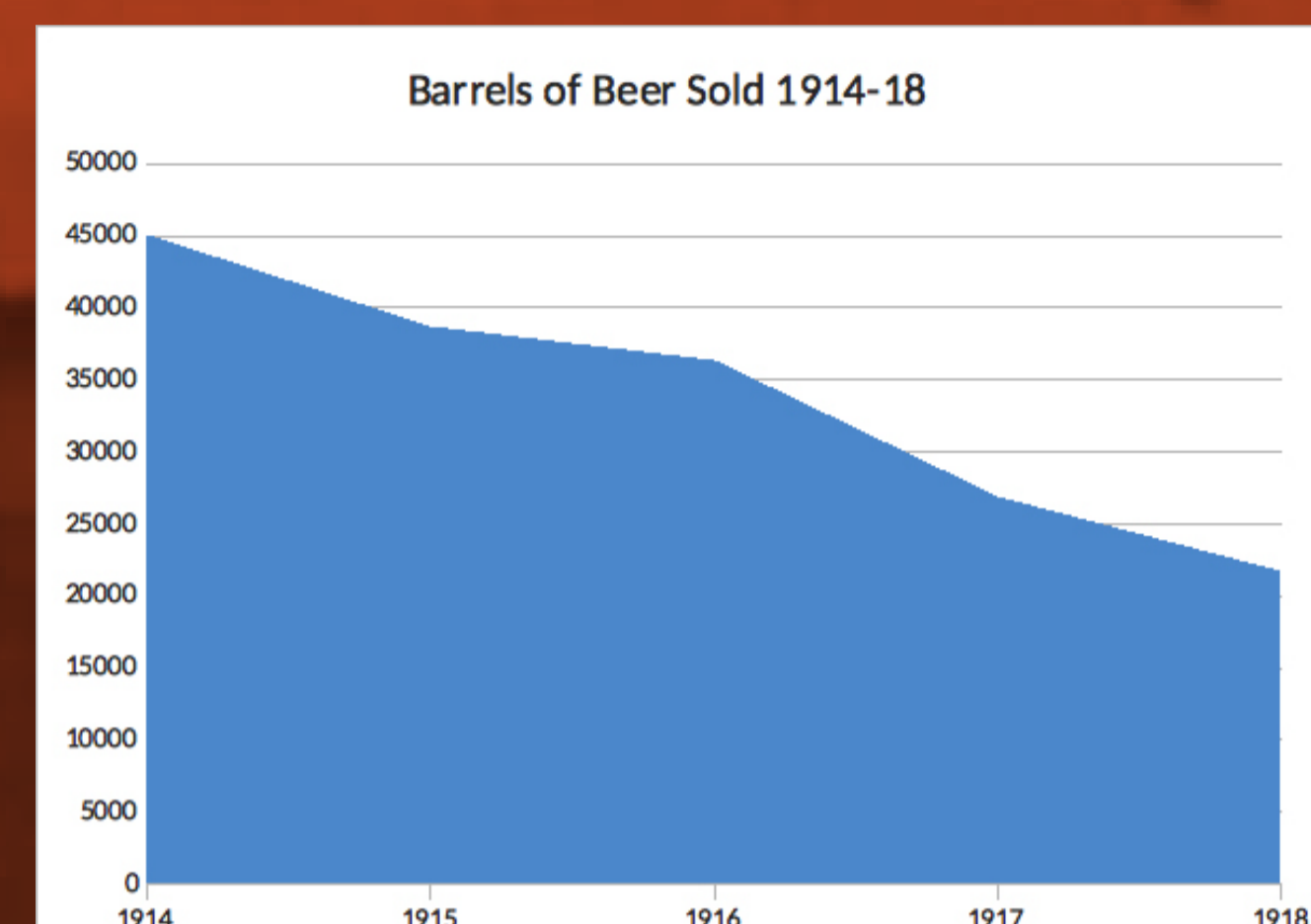
1914-1918: FROM BEER TO BOMBS

Beer sales affected

The outbreak of the First World War in summer 1914 badly affected beer sales for Wethered's and brewers generally across the country.

With so many men serving overseas, there was reduced demand.

As the war carried on, the Government imposed higher duties on beer sales and restricted the quantity of beer produced, to reduce alcohol consumption and preserve raw materials. Consequently, Wethered's beer sales fell by over 50% during the war.



A 3 inch Stokes Mortar Bomb.
Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

Munitions contracts

By late 1915 it was clear that Britain needed to produce more shells if it was going to win the war. Wethered's had space within its engineering building to produce munitions and bought the plant to do so. From 1915, it was awarded eight contracts to produce munitions for the army.

By the end of the war, it had produced over 7,000 Stokes Bombs and almost 61,000 artillery shells. The shell cases were most probably made at the brewery and then sent elsewhere for packing with explosives.

Financial returns

The production of these munitions helped the brewery financially, but the profits it made on these contracts were still a lot less than it made from the sales of beer and spirits. Some of the profits were distributed to the munitions workers. The Chief Engineer, Victor Butt, was paid bonuses for overseeing the munitions work of over £2,000 during the war. The brewery was taxed heavily on the remaining profits.



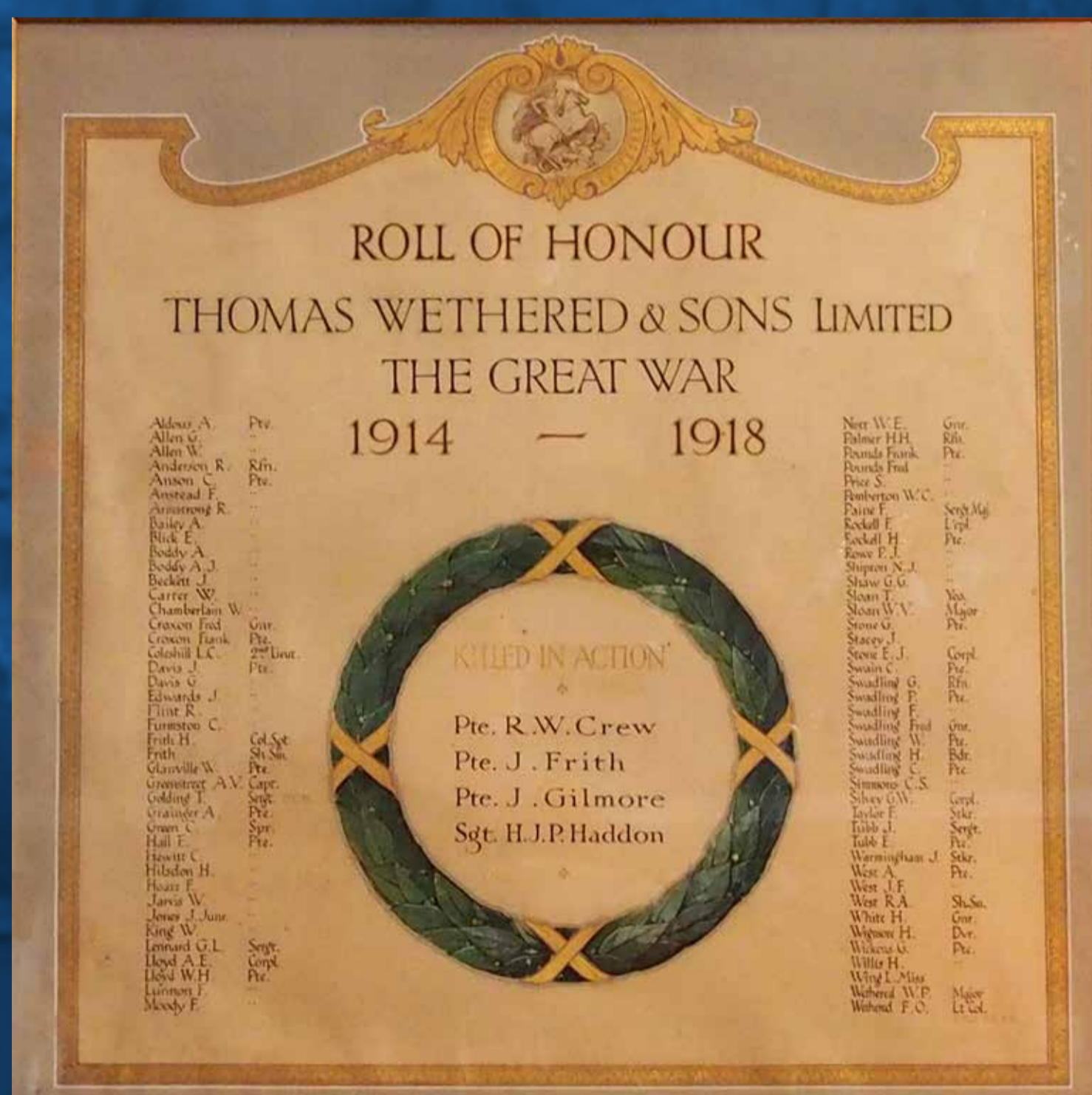
Presenting cups to Brewery employees in the 1920s—Victor Butt is on the left. Photo courtesy of Ray Evans.

Wethered's Brewery

1914-1918: THE MUNITIONS GIRLS

From the brewery to the frontline

Many men from the brewery joined the army soon after war broke out in summer 1914. When it was clear that the war was going to continue for a long period and many men would be needed, conscription was introduced. Overall, 80 men from the brewery served during the war.



The Brewery Roll of Honour, now located in the Royal British Legion hall, Marlow. Photo courtesy of Shaun Murphy.

The munitions girls

While it was able to keep a small number of men working on the munitions contracts, the brewery had to find a new source of labour if it was going to keep operating.

It had first employed women in the bottling factory in 1913. With the outbreak of war, it employed many more women across all parts of its business. By 1918, overall it employed more women than men and in its annual report in 1919 it noted that its ability to complete the munition contracts was due to 'the zealous co-operation of the "munition girls" who were trained on the premises.'



Photo of the Brewery's munitions workers taken during the war. Courtesy of Michael Eagleton.

Munitions work

The munitions work was well-paid compared with other options available in Marlow to women at the time. The weekly wage rates were high but earnings could be boosted by working overtime and through the bonuses that were paid from the profits on the munitions contracts. The work was hard but not as dangerous as in the factories where the shells were filled with explosives.

The pay had to be good as prices rose steeply as the war went on because food became scarce. In real terms, food prices in 1917 for example were probably about 14 times higher than they are today.

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JAMES FRITH 1898 - 1916

Of the 80 men and one woman from the brewery who served during the war, four were killed in action. The youngest was eighteen-year old Private James Frith of the 2nd Bucks. Battalion who worked in the brewery's engineering shop.

James was killed on the Western Front on 18 July 1916, one of 78 men who died when a British shell landed by mistake on a gas cylinder by the trench they were occupying. This is the letter that the chaplain sent James' parents, who lived in Ashley View, New Town in Marlow.

“Dear Mr Frith

I grieve to be the bearer of sad news, but you will prefer my writing to receiving just official details. Your son was brought into No.7 Casualty Clearing Station yesterday afternoon, having been badly gassed. Everything possible was done for him, but that was little hope and he passed away two hours after admission. God bless you, and help you in this great sorrow and may He comfort you with the realisation of how nobly your son died. ‘Greater love have no man than this.’ You must think of him as being at rest. I shall lay his body to rest in the cemetery of this little town with all reverence, and the grave will be carefully marked out and tended. All his personal possessions will be forwarded to you through the War Office.

Gold bless you, and make you proud of your boy's memory.

Yours in all sympathy

F M Sykes”



Merville Communal Cemetery, France where James Frith is buried. Photo courtesy of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.