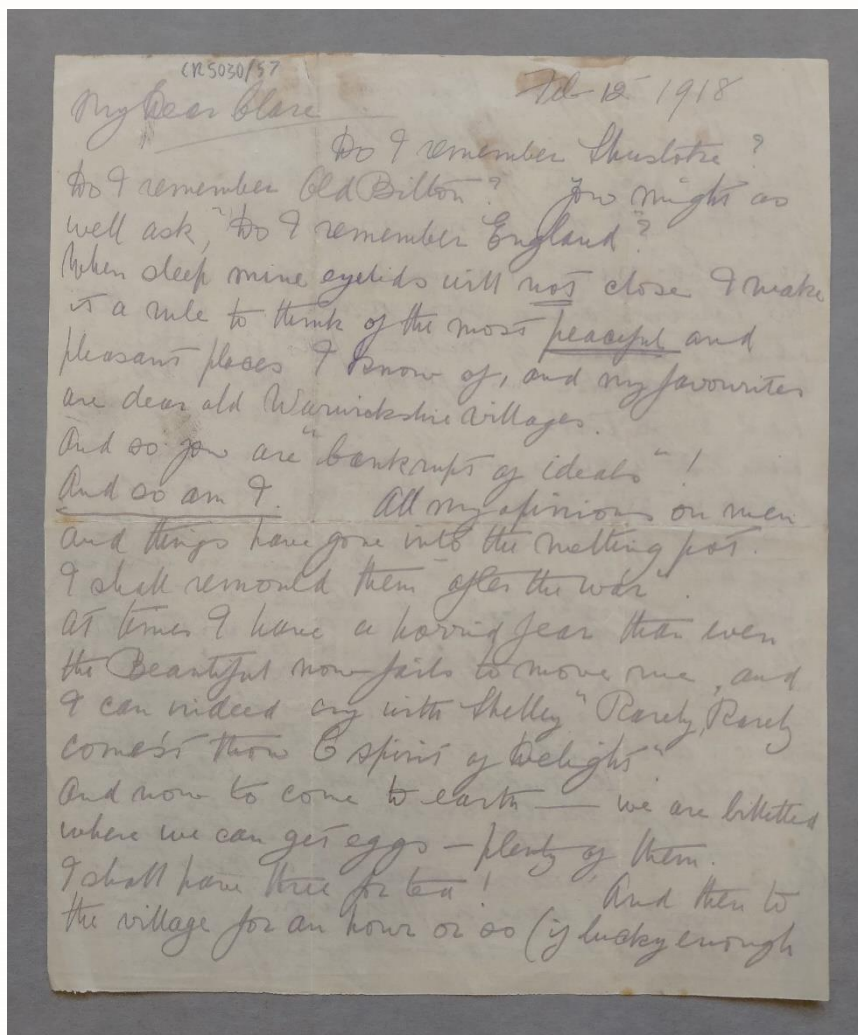


Letter to 'Clare' from James Speight in Italy, 12th February 1918

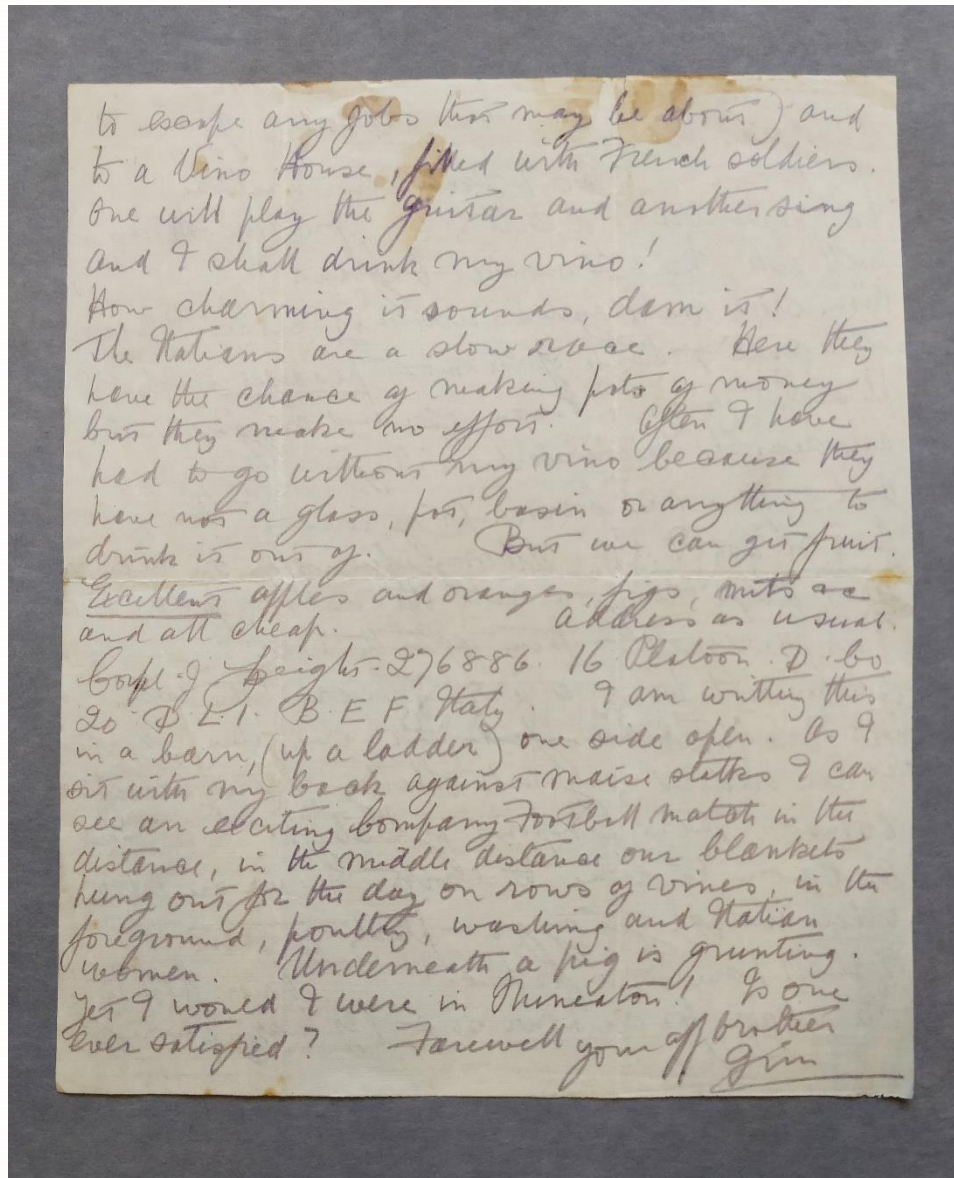
CR5030/57

The Document of the Month for November is a letter from Corporal James Speight of the Durham Light Infantry, who left Sutton Coldfield to serve on the front line in the First World War. Speight wrote many letters to his mother and father, his siblings, and his staff at the studio over the course of his service- over ninety can be found in our collections.¹ The letters range in tone and content, discussing the harsh conditions and the horrors of trench warfare, but also simpler things such as family matters and parcels received from home. Many of the letters could be described as optimistic or poetic, with Speight choosing to highlight camaraderie among the soldiers and capture the beauty of his surroundings where it can be found.



CR5030/57, Warwickshire County Record Office

In this letter to his brother Clare (James William Clare Speight), James reminisces fondly about Warwickshire from a barn in Italy. His idyllic descriptions of both the Warwickshire and Italian countryside make for an escapist interlude amid the bleakness of war. Nevertheless, the mental toll of warfare is a focus of the letter, as James concurs with his brother's feeling of being 'bankrupt of ideals'. A full transcription of the letter is provided separately.ⁱⁱ



CR5030/57, Warwickshire County Record Office

James Speight's action in the First World War

The Military Service Act of 1916 prompted James Speight, in his mid-thirties, to join the army. Upon his conscription, Speight was assigned to the Durham Light Infantry (DLI) and

undertook basic training at the Catterick Camp, Yorkshire. Following a short spell in Andover, Hampshire, the 2nd/7th Battalion to which Speight belonged moved to Colchester in Essex. The 2nd/7th Battalion was initially assembled for home service and would remain here until September 1917, but it seems Speight was deemed fit for the frontline; he crossed the sea from Folkestone in June 1917 and arrived in France as a member of the 20th Battalion.ⁱⁱⁱ

Shortly after his arrival in France, Speight saw action 'over the top'. The 20 DLI began an offensive on 31st July 1917, the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres.^{iv} The battle would last until December and caused hundreds of thousands of casualties.^v For the 20 DLI, there was a shorter spell of action at Ypres, but Speight's letter recounts casualties in his battalion, German prisoners carrying wounded men, and his discovery of a bullet hole in his mess tin.^{vi}

Speight's battalion later moved to Italy in November 1917, where they were situated on the Piave River. Here, his life seems to have been quieter in some respects, with opportunities for drinking 'vino' and army football matches amid the trench digging, dugout stays, and shell fire. This letter of 12th February 1918 gives a sense of his encounters with Italy, with his somewhat stereotypical descriptions of Italians demonstrating how service on the continent often exposed soldiers to unfamiliar people and lifestyles. Similarly, within his own battalion Speight observes the disparities between himself and his comrades in a letter of 2nd December 1916, acknowledging that many have only their army pay to live on while he has additional income at his disposal.^{vii}

By August 1918, Speight had returned to Catterick, where he trained as an Officer Cadet. Despite writing of his wish to leave the army following the armistice, Speight was not officially discharged until 1920.^{viii}

The Speights of Warwickshire

Born in 1879 to Edward and Louisa Speight as the youngest of seven, James Speight grew up in Rugby. His father had previously been headmaster of the Wesleyan School in Rugby, but changed profession to become a photographer, a trade into which almost all of Speight siblings followed him. Some of the brothers started up photography businesses further afield in Market Harborough, Exmouth, and Kettering, but others stayed closer to home; Clare Speight set up his own studio on Coton Road in Nuneaton, while Harry Speight ran one in Redditch.^{ix}

James branched out to Sutton Coldfield, with his first studio located at The Mount, Victoria Road, later moving to The Parade.^x A series of James's diaries, spanning 1897 to 1914, give an account of his initial development in the profession, also painting a picture of his experiences and travels as a young man.^{xi}

James Speight married Cecelia Gertrude Hill after the war in 1920, and the couple had three children together- John, Richard, and Sylvia. James continued to run the Sutton Coldfield studio up to his retirement in 1950, and the town remained his home until his death in 1977.^{xii}

ⁱ See CR5030/1- 79 and CR4781/4-6, 8-18, Warwickshire County Record Office.

ⁱⁱ See CR5030/57, Warwickshire County Record Office.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Durham Light Infantry, 2nd/7th Battalion', contributed by Durham County Record Office, *Durham At War*. Available at:

<https://www.durhamatwar.org.uk/story/12560/#:~:text=Before%20the%20First%20World%20War,each%20of%20about%201%2C000%20men> (accessed 13/10/2023).

^{iv} 'Durham Light Infantry, 20th Battalion (Wearside)', *Durham at War*. Available at:

<https://www.durhamatwar.org.uk/story/13135/> (accessed 13/10/2023).

^v 'What You Need to Know About the Third Battle of Ypres', *Imperial War Museums*. Available at:

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-third-battle-of-ypres-passchendaele#:~:text=The%20Allies%20suffered%20over%20250%2C000,the%20Third%20Battle%20of%20Ypres> (accessed 13/10/2023).

^{vi} See CR5030/13, CR5030/25, and CR5030/26, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{vii} See CR5030/2, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{viii} *Gentleman Jim of the 20 DLI 1916-18*, by Simon Jarman (2015), p. 254. Under the library reference C.920.SPE at Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{ix} *Edward Hall Speight and his Family- Rugby's Photographers*, by John P.H. Frearson. Under the library reference B.RUG.FRE at Warwickshire County Record Office.

^x *Kelly's Directory of Warwickshire, 1908*, Kelly's Directories Ltd, p. 278; *Kelly's Directory of Warwickshire, 1912*, Kelly's Directories Ltd, p. 286.

^{xi} See CR4453/1-10, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{xii} 'James Speight- The War Years', by Rachael Marsay for *Our Warwickshire*. Available at:

<https://www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk/content/article/james-speight-war-years> (accessed 13/10/2023).