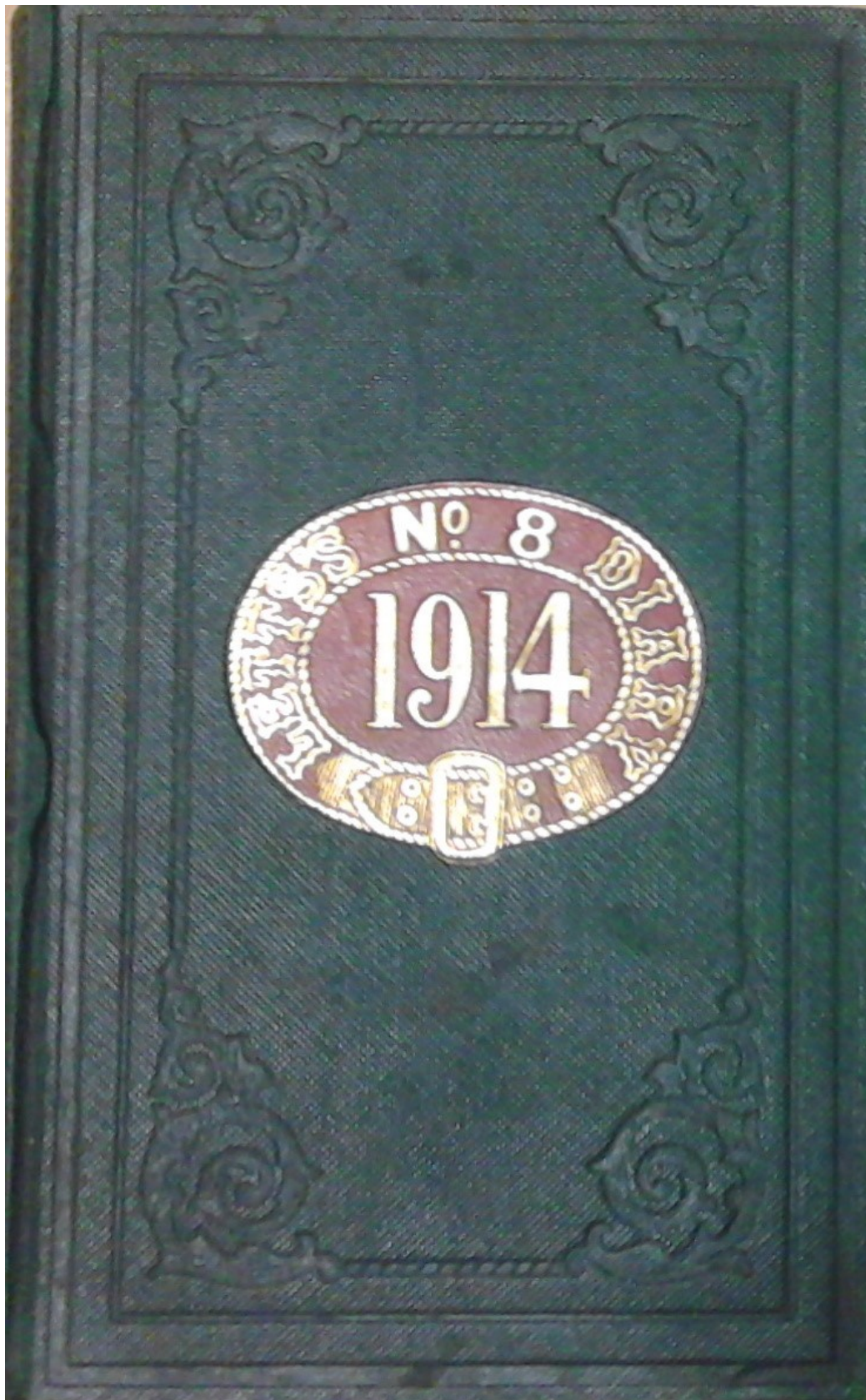


Peace and War – Croxteth: a 'pandorama'

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The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was published in 1914, the year World War I broke out. A number of political events had taken place in the years leading up to 1914, but it is the incidents of that summer that are usually associated with the start of the war: the

assassination of Archduke Ferdinand on June 28th, Germany's declaration of war on France and its invasion of Belgium on August 3rd. Britain declared war on Germany the following day, August 4th. The war ended on November 11th 1918 but, as we have seen, its social impact continued to unfold.

One of the consequences of World War I was the decline of the aristocracy in Britain. In October 1919, *Country Life* magazine commented: 'People who formerly lived in very large houses are now getting out of them. As to who goes in is another matter.' (October 25th edition, quoted in *The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars*). The Molyneux family stayed in Croxteth Hall until 1972, but there were changes over this time, especially during World War I, when the Hall was used as a hospital for wounded soldiers and officers.

However, in 1914 few people could predict these changes. In [an article in History Today](#) – 'Germany, Britain & the Coming of War in 1914' – Richard Wilkinson (a history teacher at Marlborough College) states: 'While these horrors were in the future – only a very few visionaries guessed what war would be like either on land or sea'. The brutality of the war, the number of casualties was unimaginable.

The strangeness and abruptness of the war is apparent in the diaries of Lady Helena Mary Molyneux, Countess of Sefton. Helena Molyneux was married to Osbert Molyneux, the 6th Earl of Sefton, and lived at Croxteth Hall until 1943. In 1914, she was 39 years old and had three children.



portrait of Lady Helena Molyneux (maiden name Bridgeman) as featured in Patricia MacKinnon-Day's series of plates: *Chain of Gold*, alongside a portrait of Elaine Johnston, a current security guard at Croxteth Hall

Helena Molyneux's diaries are in the archive at Liverpool Central Library and can be viewed by appointment. Last week I spent a morning reading through her 1914 diary to get a sense of her lifestyle at that time and her perceptions of the looming war. Helena's diary accounts are quite undemonstrative – there are few descriptions of her emotions or feelings, no private confessions – they are records of her daily life at Croxteth: the rats, rabbits and grouse that her sons shot, horse-riding outings, walks, tennis matches and lunch engagements. Reading between the lines there is a sense of contentment and peace, a love for her family and an appreciation for luxuries.

As the diary continues however, there are brief mentions of the war. She carefully records specific events and the deaths of individuals. On August 15th, she writes that 'our Expeditionary Force all safely landed in France' (her husband's uncle, Henry Hervey Molyneux also kept a diary at this time, and his entry on August 15th reads: 'no war

news'). Some days later, on August 24th, she writes of the 'first news of our troops fighting' and we learn that she has begun to attend 'Ambulance Class'. Nevertheless, between these occasional references to the war, life carries on almost as normal: 3rd October 1914 'Shopped and lunched at the Ritz...'

Two years later, the war had painfully changed the lives of the Molyneux family. Helena's son Cecil was killed in the battle of Jutland in 1916, when he was only 16 years old. Just nine days after learning of their son's death, wounded soldiers began to arrive at Croxteth. On June 9th, 1916, Helena writes: '*Our first batch of soldiers patients came in to the hospital - 12 from Alder Hey*'. Helena's daughter Evelyn died the following year, at the age of 14. Her eldest son, Hugh, became the 7th and last Earl of Sefton.

After the war, Helena dedicated much of her time to charity work. During World War II, she worked as a waitress at the S Gordon Smith Institute for Seamen. Throughout her life, she was a keen gardener, and even after she moved from Croxteth in 1943, she visited regularly, spending time in the gardens. On August 27th 1947, Helena died in the gardens at Croxteth.



The gardens at Croxteth Hall

The following images are photographs of extracts of Helena's diary (although some of the pages say '1913' she altered an older diary to record her life in 1914):

Featured image: the cover of Henry Hervey Molyneux's 1914 diary

References:

The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars, Adrian Tinniswood, 2016

'Germany, Britain & the Coming of War in 1914', Richard Wilkinson, History Today, Issue 42, March 2002

For information on Lady Helena Molyneux's diaries, click [here](#).

For information on Henry Molyneux's diaries, click [here](#).

For more information on Croxteth Hall during WWI, click [here](#).

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