

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...

THE 'SPANISH FLU'

Esme Mount is ten years old and her life has not changed much since war was declared in 1914. Even though her father got his call up papers, like so many other Brandon men, he has not gone to war on account, (he successfully argued at a Tribunal), that his lime pit business on Thetford Road and his council work was vitally important for the war effort, more so than putting on an army uniform. Today, as Esme walks home from school, under an autumnal sky, she is probably thinking of her plans for the weekend. It is Friday, 1st November 1918. Esme comes home from school and her routine is much the same as normal, then she goes to bed as. The rest of her weekend will be anything but normal.

Esme awakes on Saturday feeling very unwell. Throughout the day her symptoms worsen, she has a fever, and her parents become concerned. On Sunday, poor Esme becomes so gravely ill that her little body begins to shut down and by the end of the day she passes away. What illness had she contracted to kill her within forty-eight hours? The answer is influenza, the one that is sweeping across the globe. During this war, many countries, including Britain, censor their bad news so it does not impact morale. However, Spain, as a neutral, has no such censorship and has been releasing details of their influenza deaths. With an absence of other countries reporting on their deaths, many draw the wrong conclusion this outbreak has begun in Spain, so it earns the name, "The Spanish Flu".

Esme is not the first Brandon casualty of the Spanish Flu, nor will she be the last, but her decline was more rapid than others, making many concerned for what the future holds. Residents fear the disease may be mutating into something stronger, especially when people are falling ill every day. For all the authorities' efforts, which include immediately closing the local school and keeping children at home in a one-month lockdown, they face a tough challenge. The Brandon council is acutely aware of locals' poor living conditions, families are often crammed into small poorly ventilated rooms, so they are proposing to build new council houses but, while the men are at war, there is no one to build them. People have also suffered the deprivations of a lack of decent food over the past year or so, worsened by rationing, and their immune systems are weakened. Last year, Brandon's council Medical Officer recorded an increase of diphtheria and measles cases, the infant mortality rate was said to be the highest it had been for years. The warning signs were there for all to see.

Just over a week after Esme dies, the violence of war ends with the Armistice and there is some irony with another casualty of the flu. William Mutum, a lad who went to war, then was invalided out of the army after being diagnosed with diabetes, becomes another casualty of the flu, just days after the Armistice. His is the last name from this war added to Brandon's war memorial. As such, he will be remembered for an eternity as a victim of war, not of disease. But what of Esme? She is largely forgotten outside of her family, although her name appears on a smaller white cross, in a family plot, in Brandon's cemetery.