

The Zion Letters

The Zion Letters are a collection of letters from servicemen serving in UK forces during WW1 to Harold Hill of the Zion Congregational Church Sunday School and Institute on Stretford Road, Hulme. Most of the men concerned would appear to have been members of the Institute, though some are clearly work colleagues, though possibly also Zion members. Their letters span the period from early in the war until shortly after its end, though the vast majority date to 1915 and 1916.

The letters came to MLFHS in a small suitcase, their provenance was not known by the person who passed them to the society.

There can be as few as a single letter from some men to well over a dozen for others. While early cessation of some correspondence might suggest that the writer has died. This has so far not proved to be the case and so far as is known, none of the correspondents died while serving. Indeed, none of the soldiers named as "Zion's Fallen Heroes" (see below) appear in the correspondence.

The content can be anywhere from the mundane to the highly detailed description of the writer's experiences and feelings about their situation.

Of specialist interest are two correspondents, Ernest Hunter and Gilbert Lightowler, who each served periods of imprisonment for refusing to serve on the basis of conscience. Their correspondence provides a detailed picture of how such cases progressed from arrest to imprisonment.

The collection is in the process of being scanned and transcribed, so what appears below will expand over the coming weeks and while some will simply appear as scanned copies, others will be accompanied by a transcript, which will make reading these sometimes difficult images (originals were often written in pencil and can be difficult to read) a lot easier.

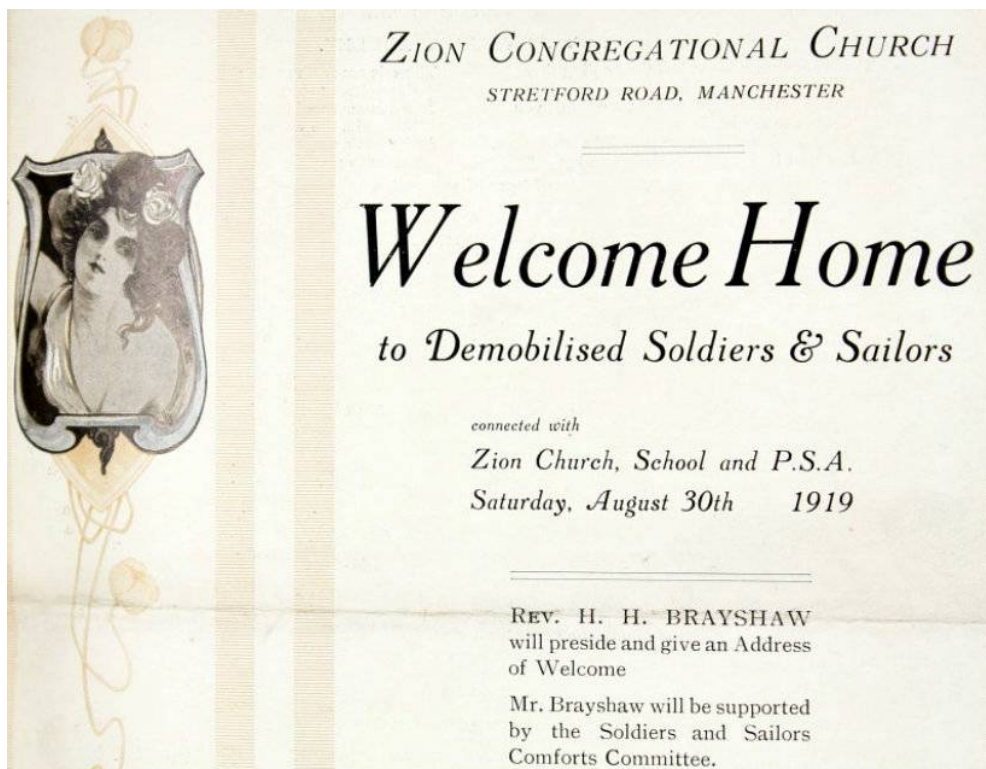
Zion Institute



The Zion Institute on Stretford Road (from *Hand-in-Hand*, their publication)

The Zion Institute was built for the Congregational Church on the site of the old Zion chapel and paid for by a bequest from Enriqueta Rylands, wife of John Rylands of Rylands Library fame. It opened on Wednesday 11 Oct 1911. When in use as a Congregational Chapel, it attracted a congregation of a thousand people for its morning and evening services every Sunday. It also functioned as a community centre offering local residents a variety of activities in its sixty rooms, which included a hall of worship, an assembly hall, a gymnasium, games rooms, reading rooms and a canteen. From 1915, it served as the Headquarters of the Manchester Branch of the Women's Defence Corps, who amongst other activities supported military recruitment drives.

Zion celebrated the return of its members on 30 August 1919 as the following announcement shows.



Harold Hill

Harold Hill was born 7 October 1880, the son of Samuel Hill, a clerk in the Manchester Corporation Gas Department and his wife Emma (nee Greenwood) who had married in 1879. Harold followed his father into council employment; working as an assistant clerk in the South Manchester Overseers' Department in 1911, rising to Principal Clerk in the same department a decade later. He had a single sibling, a sister, Florence, some seven years his junior. Neither had married by 1921, nor, indeed, by 1939, when both were still living at 75 Humphrey Road in Old Trafford. By this time Harold was a Superintendent in the rating and Valuation Department of Manchester Council. The family had lived at 75 Humphrey Road

since at least 1909 and it was to this address that all of Harold's wartime correspondence was addressed.

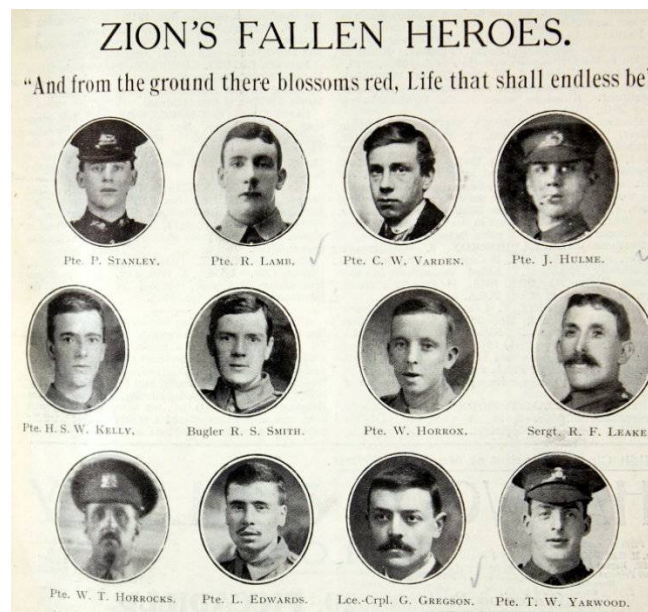
Harold did not serve in the Great War. By 1916. He did not sign up, as so many did, in 1914 but when in January 1916 the Military Service Act was passed, conscription was imposed on all single men aged between 18 and 41 he would potentially have been eligible. However, clearly he was not enlisted. One of the letters speaks of him having appealed and another is addressed to him while recovering from an illness. The Act exempted the medically unfit, clergymen, teachers and certain classes of industrial worker deemed essential to the war effort. We do not know on what grounds he was exempted; his job was hardly essential. Possibly as a Sunday school teacher, though this seems unlikely, perhaps it is more likely that he was rejected on medical grounds.

However, Harold's contribution to the war was not inconsiderable. He took it on himself to correspond with those men with whom he had been associated at Zion and who were serving in the armed forces. In addition to letters, he also sent out newspapers (particularly the Evening News and Manchester Guardian), church magazines (Hand-in-Hand) and sometimes prayer books and testaments.

This correspondence extended from the earliest days of the war until well into 1919. He was diligent in his responses. Each letter he received, he annotated with the date of his reply. The letters show that this contact with home and the world which they had left behind was greatly valued by the correspondents.

While the correspondence spans 1914-19, this is not continuous. There is a noticeable gap covering 1917 with just a single letter from this year. Whether this relates to letters which have been lost, which seems unlikely, or whether Harold suffered some serious illness which prevented him from writing is currently not known. He was certainly sufficiently unwell in March/April 1915 to warrant recuperation in Wales.

The letters with each correspondent also appear not to have all been saved. Many of the letters or their envelopes are annotated "Keep" but so far it has not been possible to understand the basis on which this decision was based.



Some of those connected with Zion who had been killed were mentioned in Zion's monthly magazine *Hand-in-Hand* as shown in the (undated) extract above. Whether the list of "Fallen Heroes" above is comprehensive or one of a number of such announcements remains to be established.

Harold annotates some of the letters with "*H-in-H*" possibly implying that further information about those serving may have been published in the magazine. Further research is necessary into this source.