

DURHAM
AT **WAR**



Diary of
CONSTANCE 'CONNIE' KIRKUP

Story of journey out to Switzerland, January 1917

to stay with Angus & Mrs Leybourne & Muriel [Leybourne]

at Rossinieres

after surmounting many difficulties

Connie's diary describing her journey to Rossiniere in Switzerland to meet her prisoner of war fiancé, Angus Leybourne, was very generously loaned to the Durham at War project by the Leybourne family.

The diary is part of a larger collection of correspondence, photographs and postcards exchanged between Connie, Angus and his family. All rights to this material are reserved by the family.

Connie was working as a nurse in County Durham when she set off for Switzerland. Angus Leybourne was an officer of the 8th Battalion Durham Light Infantry, who had been taken prisoner at Ypres in April 1915. He was one of the first British prisoners of war transferred from Germany and interned in Switzerland. Angus's mother and sister Muriel had already travelled out to visit him.

[Durham County Record Office](#) and Durham at War volunteers have assisted with the transcription and editing so that Connie's story can be shared with a wider audience online during the First World War centenary.



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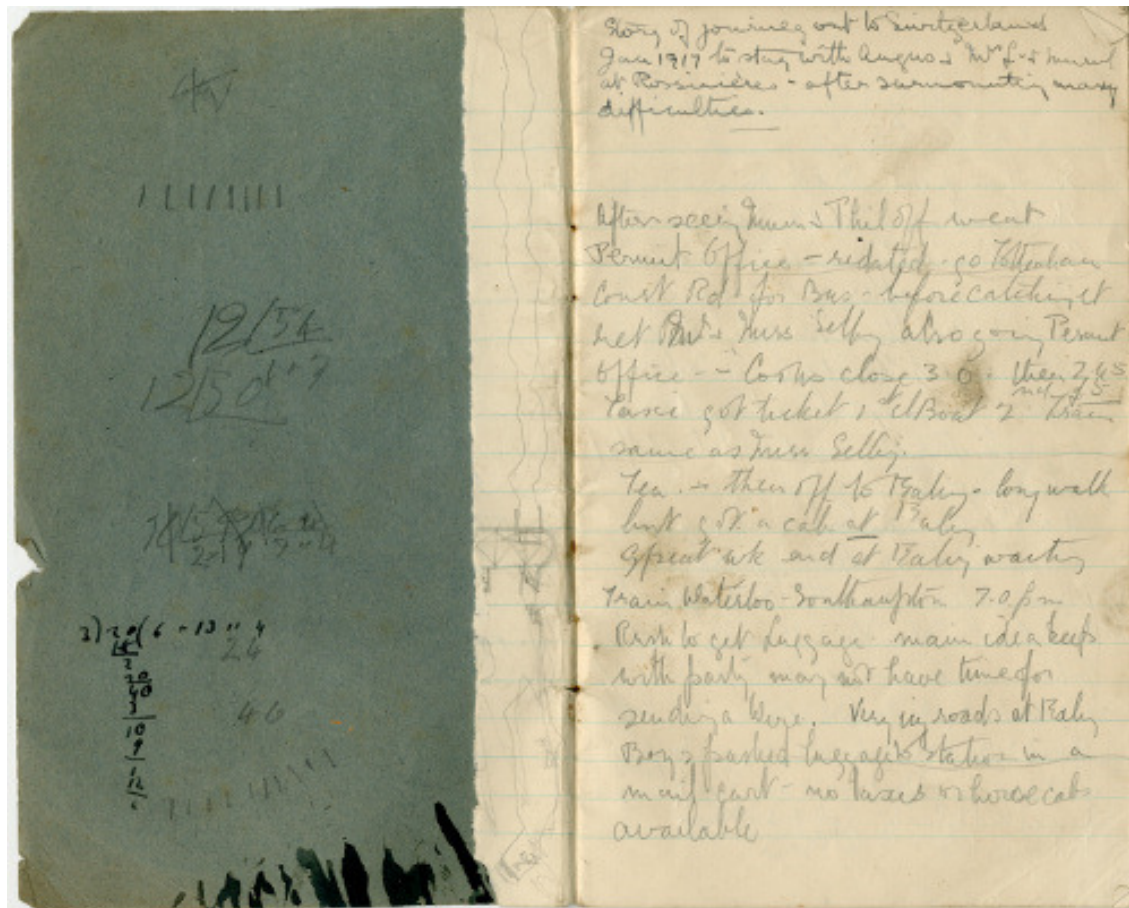


Image © the Leybourne family

Story of journey out to Switzerland, January 1917
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After seeing Mum & Phil off went Permit Office - redated - go Tottenham Court Road for bus. Before catching it met Mr & Miss Selby also going Permit Office, [Thomas] Cooks close 3.00. Then 2.45 taxi, got ticket 1st class boat 2nd train £5, same as Miss Selby.

Tea, then off to Ealing, long walk but got a cab at Ealing. Spent weekend at Ealing waiting.



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Train Waterloo - Southampton 7.00pm. Rush to get luggage, main idea keep with party, may not have time for sending a wire. Very icy roads at Ealing. Boys pushed luggage to station in a mail cart, no taxis or horse cabs available.

On boat, Southampton 8.00pm. Stick close to Red Cross Party. Got through customs first & on to boat. After a bit of fuss about berths, Miss S[elby] & I managed to have a cabin, very clean linen - cabinet makes a washstand - and a delightful stewardess.

Had meal in Salle a Manger. Afterwards on deck, until 12.00. Dark waters, smooth, crept quietly to Solent, then the roll began! Retire to bed, discussion what [to] sleep in – ended in comb[ination]s, knicks, socks & nightdress, life belt.

Up at 5.30, on deck, very green. Miss S[elby] went down for breakfast, not me. Stewardess, jug of tea on deck. Missed Red Cross Party - left 7.35 train. No train till 5.15 to Paris.

The following paragraph is out of chronological sequence

Went to get money changed at Charing Cross, but no Swiss money, told English notes good anywhere on Continent. Returned Kings Cross for luggage, thence to Waterloo where met Miss Selby.

Le Havre Jan 23 1917

Supposed best hotel in Havre, but poor in comparison, will know better another time - go straight to hotel. Remember this is France in war time. Took cab, what a cab - Scarlet Pimpernel days – bottom filled [with] clean straw like dog kennel. Cabby in fur coat, but all great fun. Left luggage, went to a café, had a meal, cost a lot & not worth it, then a train to Havre. Nice residential part, lovely, on hill overlooking sea - glorious sun glittering on snow – walked back to town.

Find Miss S[elby] has her head screwed on right, all people in hotel are English, some of them came across with us. The magic word Red Cross Party so far passed



all our luggage without any trouble. I am now beginning to feel an experienced traveller.

Took tram to station at Le Havre, had heavy luggage weighed, just had to trust them, I didn't know about it. Porter ushered us into an office where our luggage was & said we owed 4fr 70c excess luggage, but it promised to turn out well, as seen later.

Then chased up & down train in a panic to find our porter with our light luggage, when found had to trust that he would put in our heavy luggage. I daren't venture out of the train again in case it started, you see one has to climb up 2 steps into a continental train, no easy job.

We ate our hard boiled eggs and tea (which we had bought on the boat in the morning) before we arrived at Rouen. The train was called "Paris Rapide", but oh my, what a slow affair, it left on the tick & arrived 2 hours late. Of course the train for Switzerland with our Red Cross wives had left.

At Paris – scared, "where should we stay?" Miss Selby, "oh, anywhere," but it was solved for us as we drew into Paris station. Welcome sight, a British Red Cross man saw me hanging out & returned my wave. He had been left instructions to collect two lost wives (or if not wives, "future wives") & 3 other ladies & a gentleman. To the HQ. of the Red Cross - a most luxurious hotel. An officer met us in the lounge, asked if we had dined. We said "yes", we didn't tell him it had been off hard boiled eggs & stale sandwiches, but very satisfying & good.

We shared a luxurious double room, oh, what soft delicious beds. I was so tired I hardly knew what I was doing.

In the morning, we had breakfast in the Salle a Manger. It looked as if it was meant to be a Winter Garden, I was really rather cold. Breakfast was of course "French" but alas not rolls, I heard they are not allowed, however the coffee was very good.



Most of the people in the hotel were in khaki & a few civilians, probably like ourselves. At 10.00 we reported to the officer in charge, as directed. He enquired into our case, took charge of our tickets & the little slip of excess luggage, promising to send to the station to get our boxes & take them to the Gare de Lyon. He said that as our luggage was not registered it was a good thing we had this paper as we could not otherwise have claimed it.

We went out & were directed by a man to the Arc de Triomphe to catch a tram to the shops. We went miles and when we were told to descend we found ourselves at the Bastille, not a very good shopping area. Next time we asked a "lady" where the nice shops were, that brought us to the Palais Royale and we found a huge store, rather like Selfridges or Harrods. We just loved it & wandered from bottom to top, had lunch in a Ladies Luncheon Room, such a treat after the meals in Le Havre, and also we had an English speaking waitress, who directed us to the Louvre. Most of it was closed to the public.

After a parley (with necessary actions) with a Gendarme we found our way to the Hotel de Ville & across the Seine to Notre Dame (R.C. of course).

We returned to the same big shop, where I bought a "blouse", & English speaking waitress for tea - very dainty pale lemon tea cloths & serviettes - & then by underground to our hotel before dark.

Whilst upstairs having a wash & a chat with our kind chambermaid word came, drawer [sic] curtains, Zeppelins coming, but everything went on just the same. The lights were not extinguished, vehicles going about in the streets, & the lounge in which we sat waiting all lighted by electric candles, had light coloured blinds & no outside shutters - strange isn't it. We hoped that once more we were not going to be stopped on our journey to Switzerland. As a matter of fact, it was all very tame, the air raid alarm turned out to be a fire alarm.

After dinner in a magnificent dining room we saw our officer friend to whom we had



given our tickets. He returned them together with everything fixed up for us, luggage registered, wagons lits booked & he changed my last English £5 note.

At 9.20 we were taken by ambulance to the station, found our wagons lits & were soon undressed & into our bunks - the only thing that worried me was in case I slept in. I wasn't sure whether I had made the attendant understand the time we wanted to be called. One amusing incident - I arose, dressed about 5.30am & did not trouble to wake Miss Selby until I was ready. I went along the corridor & as our door did not latch very well I looked for something to prop against it from the outside. I spied a bolster pillow amongst what I thought (in the dim light) was a bundle of carry alls lying in the corridor - when suddenly the supposed bundles leapt to life as the train attendant. I got a great shock & forgot for the time that my explanations in English were no use. However I just had to leave the door open, he didn't seem to understand I wanted him to put his head against it to keep it shut.

At Frasne, we got out (about 7.00am), snow all round us, it was a little wayside station, bitterly cold. Kept waiting in a shed without seats for some time (& we were amongst the first of the line of passengers) then we went through the customs. Asked if we had any English gold or silver or any letters to post. A French woman just in front of me was taken away to be searched. I heard them calling for Madame somebody, so I presume the poor creature had one of her sex to search her. We got through alright.

In the waiting room, very similar to Birtley station waiting room - a peasant woman had hot coffee & rolls on the table which we enjoyed. When our luggage came up for examination at another station - Vallorbe - everyone's luggage appeared to be opened but ours, after I had made them understand we were Red Cross.

We were at last in Switzerland - what scenery - from Lausanne to Montreux we ran along the edge of the Lake. We were both a bit depressed when we found no one to meet us at Montreux - as we had wired - but concluded they had met a previous train - that we should have been on if we hadn't got lost off.



At Montreux we changed into a little electric train that zig-zagged up the mountain side, we rushed like school children from one side of the train to the other, as the view changed sides or appeared to do, in reality it was our train that turned round. As we climbed higher we saw the people tobogganing & skating and about half way up the mountain a crowd, watching the finish of some bobsleigh races, and there, there was Angus, watching for me, he had just finished his race, & had come on to the platform (or rather there is no real platform) to see if I was there. As he had been doing this for 3 days he didn't hold out much hope of seeing me on this train, my second wire had not arrived, & when enquiring about the Red Cross wives party they were told none were expected (but that was because our Red Cross lot were bound for Murren this time).

I got out quickly, Miss Selby promising to put my luggage out at Rossinières. I cannot give my reactions to the life that greeted me at Les Avants. All were in holiday mood, winter sporting except for the khaki and the men who were wounded, armless or legless, or crippled, it was pre-war winter sports holiday scene.

I felt shy at being introduced, not feeling my best after travelling for 3 days & nights. Angus was in the next race, & when I saw his team of 4 coming down the run, iced, banked high at an angle of 45° at the corners, with a yell that echoed round the hills as each corner was safely manoeuvred, and the final flash past the winning post out of a narrow avenue of pines, my heart stood still, but oh it was great, and the English team won! We have the little silver cup Angus got to this day.

We then boarded the next train coming up the mountain side from Montreux along with the other English interned soldiers and their friends Swiss (or English if they were lucky enough to have them out in Switz). We both felt very self conscious, as they all went to the other end of the long compartment to leave us to ourselves. We arrived about ½ hour later at Rossinières, the train here was along a valley only rising slightly from the tiny station. We had to climb up a narrow path in the deep



snow to the chalet or hotel where Angus, his mother & sister were staying, rather like a slanting climb from the main road up Peggy's Bank, with the hotel at the top.

I felt all eyes were on me, the fiancée from England who had taken so long to get here. Mrs L[eybourne] & Muriel gave me a grand welcome. They told me later that they had had a terrific scramble to change the tea cloth, as little Bernard Reynolds had upset his tea in the excitement of the news of our arrival. His mother had chastised him & banished him to his bedroom & helped to put everything ready to welcome me, then she & Captain R very kindly disappeared too, leaving me only the family to meet.

The salon that Mrs L[eybourne] had was typical of all the other rooms, panelled in wood, polished wood floor, with rugs, casement windows, one a French window leading on to a wood balcony running the full length of the chalet. In the corner of the room there was an enormous stove, no fire to be seen, which looked like a miniature house built of white & blue tiles. I missed the open fires of England, but these stoves are very efficient & in addition they had central heating all over the hotel.

