



Devon Family History Society
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CHRISTMAS GIFTS FOR EXMOUTH CHILDREN

1914

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Towards the end of 1914, Princess Mary started a fund to provide Christmas gifts for the troops at the front. The money, donated by people throughout Britain, was used to send a brass gift box to every service man and to nurses who were away from home, caring for the wounded.

Other, similar, funds were set up to provide gifts for service men and their families. The document indexed here has survived in the records of the Exmouth Seamen's Mission and lists local children who qualified to benefit from a fund to provide a Christmas present for the children of men in active service and primarily for those children who had been orphaned by the war. Conscription was not introduced until 1916, so these are men who were already in the forces or who had volunteered to serve at the outbreak of war. The document is a printed form which has been filled in with a list of the children in Exmouth whose fathers were away in the services. Only one man had been killed in action. The children are listed by family and there are twenty families in the list. Each child's name is given, their age in years and months, their address, their father's name and his ship or regiment.

The document is unusual as few records survive from this period listing such details about families. It can be particularly difficult to trace people during the First World War when there are no electoral registers or census returns to help. Families were mobile and serving soldiers were being sent overseas to countries which they could never have imagined visiting in peace time. When the war ended, the pattern of people's lives had changed and the children listed here would have had quite a different way of life to that of their grandparents' generation.

For family historians, the document is useful in providing an unexpected description of a small number of families in a Devon seaside town at the beginning of the war. The information about fathers' regiments and ships could lead to a search in army and naval records in The National Archives and the details of the children's ages and addresses could help to identify births in the General Register Office indexes and lead to searches in school records, such as admission registers and log books, for information on a child's education. Some of the Exmouth school records are held at the Devon Record Office, while others remain in the custody of the schools.