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# Quentin Blake & John Yeoman

50 years of Children's Books

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to 3 March 2019**

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**Lady Lever**  
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All the Year Round © Quentin Blake

height and a soldier I became." Other recruits told of being under 5 feet tall and some being under 18 years of age, including Graham Carr, a clerk, 4 foot 10 inches, Nobby Streeter, a foundryman 4 foot 9½ inches. John Jones of Warrington gave his age as 19 years 2 months but he was just 16 years old. Harry Hurst recalled: "As for being in France at the age of fourteen – my parents were dead and of course I falsified my age when enlisting." His AB 64 paybook showed his age on enlistment as 19. "Being tall for my age and the recruiting sergeant being presumably blind, I found myself on the Somme in July 1916." George Embley who stood at 5 foot 2 inches, was a 17-year-old miner who worked down Berwick Main pit. He went to Newcastle barracks to join up, but was rejected because he was under age and too small. On his way home, George saw a notice on a bridge 'Join Bigland's Birkenhead Bantams', so he travelled to Birkenhead the next day and managed to sign up in Rock Ferry. Jeff Pritchard who stood at just 4 foot 11 inches, recalled: "I was very keen to get into the army, the only problem was my age of fourteen and a half. My mother was poorly in a county home and my father had six other mouths to feed. So one morning, I just walked away from my job as a cart handler down the mine and went to the recruiting office." "How old are you lad?" the doctor said. I looked him in the eye and said "Eighteen, sir." "Hmm," he said, "and what does your mother think of you going for a soldier?" I told him she was dying and he just patted me on the shoulder and signed my acceptance without another word.



The funeral cortege of Private Tinsley of the Birkenhead Bantams who was killed in Bebington, as it proceeded down Livingstone Street, Birkenhead, flanked by a guard of honour.

Lieutenant McArthur was heavily involved in the training of the Bantams and gently 'knocking them into shape' as a confident disciplined infantry fighting force and he became an extremely popular young officer. The Bantams were formed into the 1st and 2nd Birkenhead Battalions, The Cheshire Regiment, then renamed the 15th and 16th Cheshires and were paraded for review by Staff Officers and viewed by several dignitaries including Lord Derby, on Bebington Agricultural Show Grounds. Although they were dressed in an assortment of uniforms, by all accounts people were impressed. On Sunday 21st of March 1915, the Cheshires and other Army units were reviewed by amongst others, the tremendously proud Alfred Bigland and Lord Kitchener as they marched past the crowded steps of St Georges Hall, Liverpool. Many Bantams were billeted in the stock sheds at the Bebington Showgrounds (now the Oval) for quite some time. Tragically, on 1st January 1916, a fierce gale blew the building down killing Private Tinsley and injuring 11 other men.

The Bantams of 15th and 16th Cheshire Regiment were sent to Yorkshire for further intensive training. When they were ready for combat they took ship to France, where, as they marched to the front, French civilians laughed at them and called them 'piccaninny soldiers'. In 1916, the Birkenhead Bantams were proudly led into the battle of the Somme by the highly respected 20-year-old Captain Theodore Hunter McArthur. They proved to be first class infantrymen and won scores of decorations. Unfortunately, a great many of these brave young lads were killed and wounded before the war ended in 1918. One local Bantam who did survive the war was John Gilbert Williams, a roofer by trade from Warwick Street, Birkenhead. Bert, as he was known, was in the Territorial Army before the War. In 1914 he married 17-year-old Charlotte Jones, his childhood sweetheart who lived next door. When war was declared on the 4th August 1914, the Territorials, including 19-year-old Bert were mobilised. When the Bantams were formed he was transferred to them as he was 5 foot 3 inches tall. His proud grandson, Geoff Power of Irby Road, works as a gardener and is a nice bloke to have a pint with. This year marks 100 years since Biglands Birkenhead Bantams were stood down after serving our country with valour until the end of the War and losing 900 men.

Footnote: Tragically, Fly and Bantamweight boxer Jimmy Wilde never recovered from being badly beaten by a gang of yobs and died four years later aged 76.