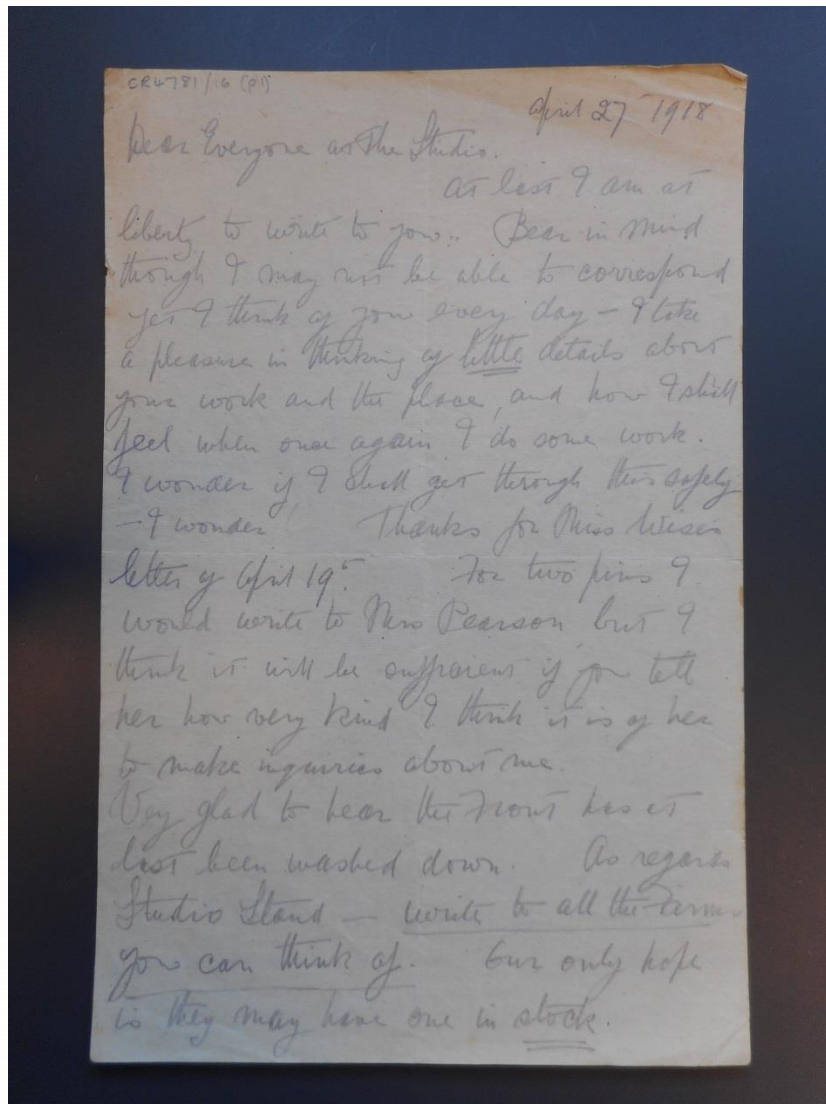


James Speight Writes to his Sutton Coldfield Studio **(CR4781/16)**

As it is the centenary of the end of the First World War this year, November's Document of the Month is this letter written by the photographer, James Speight. He wrote it whilst on active service during the First World War. He wrote a number of letters home to Warwickshire during his time away, the majority of which were to family and friends¹.

¹ James Speight letters, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4781



Letter written by James Speight to his photography studio, 1918, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4781/16

This particular letter is addressed to everyone at his photography studio in Sutton Coldfield. It is unusual to come across a letter sent to colleagues, and shows how much he must have thought of them all. The letter, written in pencil, is dated 27th April 1918. At this point during the war he was based in France, after spending time in Belgium and Italy. The exact place has been censored.

The document offers us an insight into his time spent on active service. He answers queries from his colleagues regarding items such as new

shutter pins and furniture. He plaintively asks, “I do hope you are getting some new furniture for the studio. You must have change.”² He also talks of building a dug-out and asks for his staff to, “please send me a bottle of “Sacharine” (spelt wrongly) Tablets. They are a substitute for sugar. And a bottle of “Horlicks Malted Milk Tablets.”³ He worries about making it back home safely, and whether one of his colleagues Mr Sheppy will be called up, and how that will affect “the dear old business.”⁴ He mentions a little of his surroundings, talking about going to see some old ruins but not making it, because “firstly, I had not permission, secondly one never knows when the next shell is going to drop, does one?”⁵

James Speight

James Speight was born on the 25th February 1879 and came from a family of photographers. His father, Edward Hall Speight, had a photography studio in Rugby and his siblings also ran their own photography studios. James set up his own studio in Sutton Coldfield in 1902. He was an avid diary keeper until he set up his studio, upon which the entries become less frequent⁶.

James Speight’s War

He joined up to fight in the First World War in 1916, after missing the initial conscription due to his age - he was 35 at the time. He joined the

² Letter from James Speight, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4781/16.

³ Letter from James Speight, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4781/16.

⁴ Letter from James Speight, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4781/16.

⁵ Letter from James Speight, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4781/16.

⁶ James Speight diaries, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR4453/1-10.

20th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry and served in France, Italy, and Belgium⁷. He was selected for officer training in the summer of 1918 and was undergoing training at the time of the Armistice. His unit suffered heavy losses throughout the First World War, but thankfully James Speight survived the war.



Image of Corporal James Speight, 20th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, Warwickshire County Record Office CR4781/7.

⁷ Durham County Council, <http://www.durhamatwar.org.uk/story/13135/> (accessed 5/10/2018)

James' life after Military Service

After finally being discharged from the Army in 1920, he married Cecelia Gertrude Hill. They went on to have three children together. He continued with his photography studio and he was one of the founder members of the Birmingham District Professional Photographers Association, which later became the Institution of British Photographers.⁸ He became the President of the association in the 1920's. He continued to work at the studio until his retirement in the 1950's.

He died in 1977 at the age of 97 at his home in Sutton Coldfield⁹.

⁸ Marsay, Rachael, <https://www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk/content/article/james-speight-war-years> (accessed 27/10/2018).

⁹ Information sourced from Jarman, Simon (2015) *Gentleman Jim of the 20 DLI 1916-1918*. Brighton: Menin House Publishers.