

Local History: Alton and The Great War

The First World War which claimed the lives of so many on the battlefield, also profoundly affected the character and everyday life of the nation back home, it was the first 'total war' and the whole country contributed to the War effort. The government was eventually forced to introduce conscription, while for those left behind, hardships through shortages were common and rationing was eventually imposed in 1916.

The War brought about a dramatic increase in government control over people's lives. From 8 August 1914 the Defence of the Realm Act (commonly known as DORA) was passed, putting Britain under martial law. In Alton, as elsewhere, the hours for the opening of public houses were controlled, but the local publicans had already decided to close one hour earlier on weekdays as many men had volunteered, thus reducing business. The Territorial Army guarded the local railway line, whilst there was concern over two-hundred German Nationals, formerly merchant seamen, kept in a camp at the Abbey, Beech. Small outbreaks of trouble resulted, which is not surprising as they were only guarded by local Boy Scouts and they were eventually removed in April 1915.

REFUGEES IN ALTON

The people of Alton responded to a request to send clothes to Belgium in August 1914 and the following month a scheme was introduced for offering hospitality to Belgian refugees. A house in the High Street, formerly Conduit's Hotel and



now occupied by TSB Bank, was taken over and at the end of September twenty Belgians arrived. In November 1914, the Assembly Rooms were turned into a Red Cross Hospital for Belgian wounded and the building stayed as a military hospital until January 1919.

SOLDIERS IN ALTON

The arrival of over 2,000 soldiers of the Royal Scots on 30 November 1914 was welcomed especially by the local shopkeepers who had lost trade due to the departure of local volunteers. Alton families were asked to help billet them and locals schools were closed and also used for soldiers.

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The New Year celebrations for 1915 were some of the most memorable in the town's history. The 'Lads from North of the Border' were highly thought of by Altonians and many lasting friendships were formed including James Mackay who returned in 1918 and married his sweetheart, Ellen Poore, and settled in the town.

The soldiers were replaced by the 7th Seaforths and the 8th Black Watch, who arrived in January 1915 and stayed until March before embarking for France where many were killed in fighting around Loos later that year.

THE ARMISTICE

The end of the War came almost as abruptly as it had begun. Turkey surrendered on 30 October 1918, Austria- Hungary on 3 November, and the Kaiser abdicated six days later and on 11 November the Armistice was signed. The loss of life accounted for nearly 10% of men under forty- five years of age in Britain, whilst in financial terms an inflation of 140% resulted.

The War did bring about some changes for the better. The salaried classes grew, wages and working conditions improved and the War also helped to liberate women who had replaced men in the factories and public services and joined the Armed Forces. The determination to look ahead and plan for the future was shown by the creation of a Ministry of Reconstruction in 1918. It was clear that the Government wanted to make post-war Britain 'a fit country for heroes to live in'.

LEST WE FORGET

A peace Carnival was held in Alton in July 1919 when all local children were presented with a Peace Mug. Later in the year there was a War Service Reception and dinner for Alton men returning from the front. The War Memorial was the subject of considerable discussion and the Cairn outside the Curtis Museum was eventually unveiled by Lord Selborne on Hospital Sunday, 19 September 1920.

More information on life in the Alton area during and after WWI can be found in the book '*Alton from 1914 to 1920*', which can be obtained from the Curtis Museum.