Resources

100 YEARS AGO AUGUST 1914

Casualties of war

Zeppelin raids, mines off the coast and the fear of plague kept Hull busy in the First World War.
Roy Kaye reports

The ST *Viola*: the only armed trawler to survive the First World War

The citizens of Hull must have felt particularly anxious when Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914. Their port, the country's third largest, was likely to be in the firing line.

The town's MP, diplomat and foreign advisor Sir Mark Sykes, had already expressed his concern about the vulnerability of the East Riding of Yorkshire should war break out. When war was declared, the Lancashire Fusiliers and East Yorkshire Regiment were dispatched to protect the Yorkshire coast. Hull, with a population of 300,000, was to have a proud record of soldiers enlisting. Half the city's male population would serve, including four 'pals battalions'.

The danger of attack was graphically highlighted in December 1914, when the German navy shelled Scarborough and Hartlepool, resulting in the death of 140 civilians and seven soldiers. The following June, a Zeppelin raid on Hull city centre killed 25 civilians.

By now, the Germans were laying mines in the North Sea. Hull responded by clearing them using armed trawlers and minesweepers, crewed by 9,000 local sailors and fishermen. Between Scarborough and Whitby, 70 mines were cleared by the summer of 1915, with a loss of 20 ships.

The Wilson liner SS *Runo* had been sunk by a mine in September 1914. The trawlers ST *Silanion* and *Euripides* rescued 270 passengers and crew but 29 lives were lost.

The medical officer of health for Hull and Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authority, John Wright Mason, had difficulties. By the end of 1914, almost half his staff were serving in the forces. His annual report still records 942 inspections of seaman's lodging houses The city's disinfecting station disinfected 6,000 military blankets and gave baths to 196 soldiers.

Hull's veterinary department was led by James McPhail. It was responsible in 1914 for almost 1,000 visits to stables. Vets also checked privately-owned horses for cruelty. Seven cases were found.

Inspectors working for the port sanitary authority encountered problems with the importation of unskinned calves' heads and feet, which could potentially bring foot and mouth diseases into the country.

Chief port inspector of nuisances Richard Broughton was also fully occupied. Drinking water from 15 vessels was suspect and many dirty ships had to be cleaned; 1,189 beds found on ships were filthy and had to be burned.

During July and August, 3,860 emigrants came into Hull on ships, on their way to either settle in the UK or travel on to the US. Almost 1,000 inspections were carried out. As a result, hundreds of rats were killed on the docks or on ships and seven were sent for bacteriological examination to check for plague. This had been of particular concern for British ports since 1912 – detected on a shop from Argentina docking in Newcastle, it had caused the deaths of four apprentice sailors (*EHN, April 2011, page 36*).

On the outbreak of war, 400 Hull trawlers were ordered home and moored in the Humber. There was concern about a shortage of sugar, as a Wilson liner containing sugar was detained in Danzig. Fresh fruit was also running short, as vessels were not arriving. The NE Railway cancelled all excursions. Even the city's music hall was affected: the Three Aeros trapeze artists were called up, so the show could not go on. And alleged spies were observed near the Admiralty Radio Station at Waltham. One was apprehended and found highly suspiciously to speak 'several languages'.

The *Hull Daily Mail Index to the Great War* makes interesting reading. The city's first casualty was the second son of a former Lord Mayor, the second a lady and the third was serving as a hand on a trawler, which was blown up by a mine. Another sailor was killed in action on HMS *Good Hope* off Chile.

One armed trawler from the First World War survives. ST *Viola* is berthed in South Georgia in the Falklands next to a ship called *The Albatross*. **E**

The author is indebted to Remembering Hull in the Great War *by Simon D Dinsdale and the website Hull Remembers www.hull-peoples-memorial.co.uk*
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