

Resources

Contribute
send your
articles to
ehn@cieh.org

100 YEARS AGO JULY 1916

Port health at war

By 1916, the resources of the Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authority were stretched thinly. July brought a new and unexpected threat to health – bubonic plague. **Roy Kaye** explains

One of Britain's largest and most important ports, Hull was one of the first places in Britain to experience the First World War. In 1914, the city's German population were rounded up and placed in custody on a Wilson liner, SS *Borodino*. Positioned in a vulnerable location, the city faced a zeppelin raid in June 1915 that killed 25 civilians. It also suffered greatly from the cessation of its traditional trade with Germany, which had made up 11 per cent of imports and exports. By the end of the war, 70,000 of Hull's men would have served – almost half the male population – many of them in the city's four 'pals' battalions.

Military hospitals had to be provided or adapted in the city. Two wings of the Royal Infirmary were pressed into use as a naval hospital, staffed by nurses from the voluntary aid department. The Reckitt's Company, which made gas masks, converted its social hall into a hospital. The Metropole Hall became the Lady Sykes Hospital and the Brooklands officers' hospital was run by the East Riding Branch of the Red Cross society. The author JRR Tolkien was treated at this hospital for trench fever.

By 1916, the situation was bleak, with the demands of the First World War placing huge strains on the city. From 31 May to 1 June, 58 Hull men were lost at the Battle of Jutland. During the year, the Hull-based Wilson Fleet lost seven ships to mines, torpedoes or gunfire. Twenty-six trawlers were used as mine sweepers. The city endured four air raids by Zeppelins. Ninety-one Hull men died on 1 July – the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

In March 1916, following the failure of the 'Derby scheme' (EHN, October 2015, page 44) all single men between 18 and 41 years old, excluding those in essential occupations, were called up. In the summer, the Lord Mayor made an appeal: 'Hull has done so well in the past,

Hull was
placed 'out
of bounds'



Departed: nearly half of Hull's men served in the Great War (inset); ships brought food... and diseases (main pic)



Roy Kaye was formerly chief port health inspector to the Hull and Goole Port Health Authority. The author is indebted to Hull in the Great War by David Bilton



I am anxious that its reputation should not be spoiled by it being found out later that a large number of young men have had to be fetched under compulsory systems – over 30,000 men have gone from Hull: WON'T YOU JOIN THEM?

Concerned that he would lose valuable men to the front, the port and city medical officer of health, Dr John Wright Mason, requested that the Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authority pass a resolution asking that port health staff be classified as working in a reserved occupation. He argued, echoing the official view of the Sanitary Inspectors' Association, that the country needed ever-greater protection from infectious diseases entering through the seaways and that inspecting imported food had become more difficult because of attacks on shipping.

For example, the SS *Francisco* arrived in port from New York, damaged and containing apples and pears. As food was in short supply, it was necessary to sort through the cargo to determine what could be saved. In another case, the SS *Sutherland Grange* docked bearing

frozen beef. The meat was rejected by the army and condemned. However, on examination, a considerable amount was found to be sound, so it was put into cold storage to be sold.

In July, the dire forebodings of Dr Mason came true. SS *Jeneh* came into the Sir William Wright Dock for repairs after loading at Alexandria in Egypt. A 17 year-old, Joseph Bennett, became ill after working on the vessel as a rust scraper and died. A post-mortem carried out by Dr Mason confirmed an alarming cause – bubonic plague. The crew of the ship had been paid off.

The ship was disinfected and rodent control was carried out on the dock estate. Twenty contacts were vaccinated and isolated. No dead rats were found to be infected but Hull was placed 'out of bounds' until the the port was declared free of infection.

Incidentally, the cadaver was cremated in the municipal crematorium (the first in the country), where a memorial can still be seen. It was the last case of human plague in Hull. ■

IN THE
AUGUST
ISSUE
OF EHN

NETWORK news, views and moves

PRACTICE Cornwall's service revolution

RESOURCES latest prosecutions and legal analysis



Published
on
29 July