

The Gathering Storm

ON THAT CRISIS-RIDDEN Monday evening of 26 September 1938, the atmosphere in Scunthorpe Congregational Church hall was heavy with tobacco smoke and foreboding. The audience, jammed almost up to the stage with many standing, was grim-faced as it listened without much interest to a young man with a guitar. He was singing a somewhat boring ditty with the chorus line "He's the boss!" and the burden of its message was that however nice a guy your employer might be, he was really a capitalist exploiter of the working class and you should loathe him. Why such a musical prelude to a public meeting about Air Raid Precautions escapes me.

The star turn, in fact, was the British Communist Party's main asset, a giant in physique and intellect, Professor J. B. S. Haldane. He was to quit nearly 20 years later because of Stalin's meddling with Soviet science, but there was little sign of dissidence in his speech that night. He had recently returned from Civil-war-torn Spain, an honoured guest of the Republican side, and gave a grim account of what Fascist bombers could accomplish once unleashed. He criticised the British Government's approach to ARP (with the exception of anti-gas measures) and drew on the Spaniards' experience that safety lay underground.

He propounded a fantastic plan for miles of tunnels, 50 feet deep, with entrances not more than a thousand yards apart, which he claimed could protect the whole population at a cost of under £10 a head, a total of about £400m. Land in the Scunthorpe area, he said, was ideally suited to such a project, having a layer of clay

between two layers of rock. For the steelworks, he envisaged galleries of steel, cast iron or concrete arches, which he estimated would cost about £5 per worker. The town, he thought, would be in less danger from gas than from bombs, as it was fairly high up, but he advocated that all old people, invalids and children should be evacuated before war broke out. The sheer magnitude of Haldane's shelter concept, which would surely take years to fructify, left a sense of unreality and hopelessness.

But trust burly, down-to-earth David Quibell MP, presiding at the meeting, to stick to practicalities. The local Territorials, he announced, had received their call-up papers. And he had that day seen the Scunthorpe hospital authorities to ensure that beds would be ready in the basement should war come. The audience, subdued and silent, went home.

Meanwhile, in its chamber in the converted bank at the east end of High Street, the Borough Council's monthly meeting had turned virtually into a council of war as members debated ARP plans through midnight. The Surveyor's Department, using flares at night, would work round the clock with hired excavators to dig 13 public trenches, each 640 feet long, on the site reserved for a new town hall at the end of Laneham Street. Others would go on the Central Park off Ashby Road and on the Ashby Jubilee playing fields, with more to follow elsewhere.

Distribution of gas masks which had arrived in the town that day would begin next morning. Church bells and works buzzers would be used as air raid warnings.

Scunthorpe High Street in the 1930s.



And normal administration of the Corporation would be suspended the following day, to put the town virtually on a war footing. Key men at the top at that time were two contrasting personalities—the Mayor, Alderman Edward Kennedy, a forceful and first-rate organiser, and the ARP Committee chairman, Alderman John Tomlinson, whose reserved manner and quiet speech concealed a sharp brain and practical competence. After the meeting, Alderman Tomlinson appealed to the public to remain calm, dig garden trenches and make gas-proof rooms.

Next day, a town ill-prepared for war got its makeshift plans under way and on the *Scunthorpe Star* we prepared a special ARP edition, to appear on Wednesday 28 September, filled with official instructions and advice. The 'special' put to bed, I walked home to Old Brumby through the oppressive blackness in the small hours. Passing the end of Station Road, I could see the weird light of flares on the town hall site and hear men and excavators getting ready for the Luftwaffe.

The following day was spent catching up on the normal weekly edition of the paper. Another walk home long after midnight, past the noise and lights as the trench-digging went on. I arrived to find that my father had left a note on the kitchen table (his custom when I was working late and important news had come over the wireless). In the familiar bold handwriting, it read: CHAMBERLAIN FLYING TO SEE HITLER.

The time-buying surrender was signed in the first few minutes of September 30, and on October 1, the Mayor announced that, except for the hospital's emergency scheme, Scunthorpe's ARP plans had been suspended. The town shared the transient euphoria which flowed from Munich and Chamberlain's piece of 'peace-in-our-time' paper, but just one week later the ARP drive was resumed with new urgency.

Captain H. E. V. Kynaston MC, from Staffordshire, was appointed assistant ARP executive officer (later succeeded by Major F. H. Lewis, who became staff officer) and Mr L. Garside came from Sheffield to organise the Auxiliary Fire Service. Plans were pressed forward for sandbagged shelters at Britannia Corner, Scunthorpe Church square, Frodingham Road and Ashby, and for strategically-placed stocks of sand throughout the town. Appeals went out for ARP wardens, auxiliary fire-fighters, women to drive



ambulances and other duties. Mobile first-aid squads, repair parties and equipment were organised.

The first meeting for air raid wardens was called and posts established in houses pending the building of permanent ward HQs. Decontamination centres were set up at Scunthorpe Hospital and at Scunthorpe Laundry, owned by Alderman L. H. Goundry, but this was gutted by fire about a month before war broke out, with £15,000 damage and destruction of (among other things) a thousand blankets for Territorial Army camps.

For all the apparent concentration on protection of the townsfolk, particular anxiety was focussed on the steelworks, with 13,000 employees, where unpublicised ARP preparations had been going on at the same time as major plant developments. Four men—W. B. (Billy) Baxter (Appleby-Frodingham) W. J. Brooke (Lysaghts) J. N. (Joe) Kilby (Redbourn) and C. W. D. Townsend (Firth Browns)—carried the ultimate responsibility for acres of plant producing 14% of the nation's pig iron and 10% of its steel. Easy targets, separated as they were from the urban area, it was taken for granted that Scunthorpe's steelworks would rank high on Hitler's hit-list.

The Borough's proud motto, *Refulgit Labores Nostros Coelum*, must be reversed; for the heavens to reflect our labours could bring death and destruction. The vast 'shops' must be blacked out and those spectacular cascades of molten slag, up to 2,500 tons of it nightly flooding the dark skies with a golden-red glare visible to trawlermen on the North Sea, had to be dammed until daylight. By October, thanks to joint planning by the companies, the works could be blacked out in four minutes.

That month, Scunthorpe learned of the behind-the-scenes drama which preceded the midnight Council meeting of 26 September. It came to light at a dinner, at which one of the speakers was Captain Martin Lindsay, the distinguished soldier, Arctic explorer and author, chosen by the Tories to fight the Brigg division at the next election. Lindsay, an urbane and elegant man who





Above: Harry Tombs, ARP Controller for most of the war

Opposite: Ted Kennedy, Mayor of Scunthorpe in 1938. First ARP Controller and instigator of the air raid warning 'units'.

Opposite below: Mrs Howatt W.V.S. Organiser. (Photo courtesy Scunthorpe Star).

Below: Air raid shelter being dug on Station Road, September 1938. (Photo courtesy Scunthorpe Star).

was also Chief Air Raid Warden for the Brigg area, criticised the inadequacy of Scunthorpe's ARP plans as revealed by the Munich crisis. Alarming, he called it.

Ted Kennedy replied in characteristic, rapid-fire style. He minced no mayoral words in castigating Lindsey County Council, which had been statutorily responsible for air raid precautions throughout its area, including Scunthorpe. Lindsey, he said in so many words, had treated Scunthorpe in the context of the mainly rural nature of the county, without regard to its position as a target area. Scunthorpe had therefore prepared its own scheme, which was opposed by Lindsey (history was to repeat itself in education after the war). Representatives of the two authorities went to the Home Office to argue it out, and Kennedy told of a four-hour battle before a Government official, in which Lindsey fought every inch of the way. The Government line was that no non-county borough should have its own scheme. It was conceded, however, that Scunthorpe should make separate plans, but within the county framework.

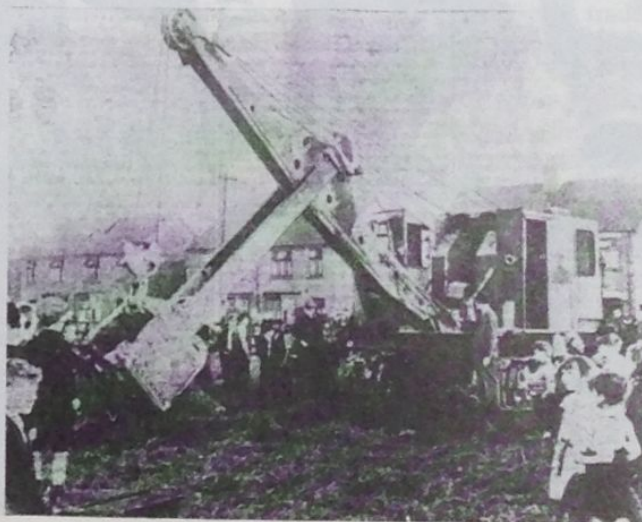
"We cut through red tape that Monday," the Mayor told his audience grimly, "and we made our own scheme." (Scunthorpe was believed to be the only municipal borough allowed to control its own ARP). The Mayor disclosed that in spite of earlier reports that 12,000 gasmasks in stock at Nottingham were coming to

Scunthorpe, there were none in the town until the afternoon of the Council meeting. After badgering the Home Office, 36,000 were allocated, to be assembled by volunteers by mid-Wednesday. It was then discovered that the supply was 9,000 short.

The drive for Civil Defence volunteers went on. November saw a weekend black-out exercise, and early in December the seeds were sown of the magnificent contribution which the women of Scunthorpe were to make on the home front. The new Mayoress, Mrs George Walshaw, called a public meeting to propagate the Women's Voluntary Services for ARP (later to become the Women's Royal Voluntary Services). Just a week later a branch was set up to embrace a wide range of activities, led by Mrs A. F. Howatt (centre organiser) with Mrs R. F. Eminson as organiser for first-aid, Mrs E. Kennedy for transport and Mrs W. E. Ramsden for training. Eventually some 1,500 Scunthorpe women were to render civilian service, in addition to those who went into the steelworks.

Looking back at that time of crisis which had been mounting since Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938, and to the temporary relief of Munich, one sees a Scunthorpe wishfully thinking itself into normal living, in the face of earnest efforts by those in authority to prepare the town for the worst. At Munich-time, certainly, the Scunthorpe Players announced the postponement of their performance of 'The Brontes' at the Empire Theatre (which was to be burned out by a non-blitz fire in 1942) but in October the show went on. At the same time Scunthorpe Operatic Society prepared for their next offering, 'Viktoria and her Hussar'.

In December the town got its first taste of London-style night life. The large High Street building which had housed Councillor J. R. Heslam's furniture emporium and later the grocery business of Captain W. E. Peacock, was converted into a glass-pillared Palais de Danse, which was crooned open by the charismatic Al Bowlly. It had a small but smart professional band, led by a well-known and well-groomed London drummer, Phil Watts. It still has a special place in my heart as the only professional band ever to wear my guitar-playing, when I deputised for its flu-stricken bassist. The Palais was nevertheless an ill-starred venture and the dancers were ere long to be replaced by the khaki-clad B (Horncastle) Company, 4th Bn Royal Lincolnshire





Above: Volunteers assembling gas masks September 1938, during the Munich crisis.

Opposite above: Tom Mix the cowboy film star in Cole Street, 1939.

(Photos courtesy Scunthorpe Star)

Below: Henderson Avenue school children doing gas mask drill, September 1939.

Opposite below: Demonstration of an Anderson shelter.



Regiment (TA) who drilled in the High Street outside. I was told that they were eventually bound for Norway, and some of them must have died by the time their Scunthorpe billet became the public library in January 1941.

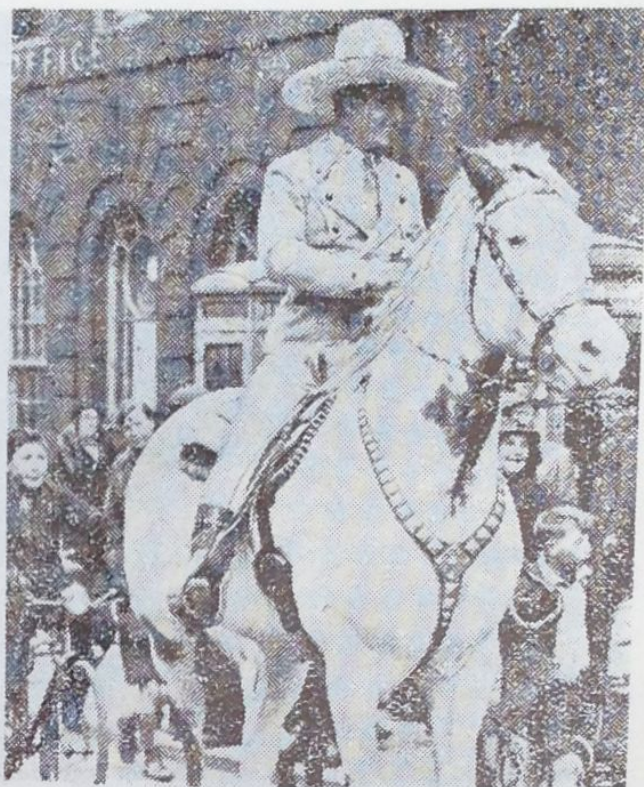
Scunthorpe saw ample portents of war long before the Czech affair. Earlier in the year the town's 'Terriers', 384 Anti-aircraft Company RE (TA) whose new drill hall was being built in Cottage Beck Road, had searchlight practice on Sawcliffe Hill. The company was among 700 men of the 46 (Lincolnshire Regiment) AA Battalion commanded by Colonel N. B. Hart, a Scunthorpe accountant, who took part in a big camp exercise in Northamptonshire in summer 1939.

The Regular Army showed its flag with a mechanised column sent to the town on a recruiting mission, and in a home defence exercise the area's blackout plans had their first real test by aircraft. At a national conference of allotment organisations, Councillor H. C. Coman represented Scunthorpe, and the local association pre-empted the 'Dig for Victory' campaign with a resolution calling for a drive to cultivate more allotments in the interests of national defence.

Of all my reporting assignments in that ominous year, none stands out in memory like the gathering at Scunthorpe Hospital on a sunny afternoon late in August. Alderman Bernard Holland was laying the foundation stone of a £100,000 extension for which, when mayor of the town, he had launched an appeal fund. It should have been an occasion full of hope. But as we stood on the concrete roof of the basement, thoughts were not so much on the healing structures which were to rise there, as on what lay below—first-aid post, shelters and wards for war casualties.

As 1939 came in, 'Happy New Year' had a ring of doubt about it and Civil Defence was never far from the news columns and public speeches. For those in authority it was a time of action and urgency.

Operations included the takeover for ARP purposes of the old TA drill hall in Cole Street, to house 116,000 sandbags, 130 stretchers, 600 respirators for wardens and 800 gumboots. Alderman Harry Tombs, Chief Air Raid Warden, was beginning to see results. In January there were 325 wardens among 500 recruits to the CD organisation, and another 300 were needed for the home front 'army', which was eventually to reach 2,000.



At a presentation of certificates to wardens, Martin Lindsey came back again with criticism of ARP progress. He accused the Home Office of delay in decision on matters of principle and Lindsey County Council of trying to run things on the cheap. The Mayor, Alderman G. R. Walshaw, added that the Home Office was slow in giving a lead. Sir John Anderson, Minister of Civilian Defence who gave his name to the family steel shelter, was more optimistic when he spoke in London at the end of January. He referred to Scunthorpe's highly important wartime industry and said he did not believe any serious difficulty would be found in securing adequate defence through the town's special scheme to meet local needs.

But there was no complacency among the CD organisers. The WVS convened a recruiting meeting attended by 500 women, addressed by Violet Vanburgh, the famous actress, who at the age of 72 was chairman of the national organisation. A move was initiated by Alderman Tombs, himself a leading High Street trader, to bring shopkeepers together in their own mini-ARP scheme. I reported a meeting held above his shop. The afternoon was dark and oppressive as he reminded us of Stanley Baldwin's warning—"The bomber will always get through". But Tombs gave Scunthorpe traders a defiant slogan—"Business as usual, whatever happens!"

In March there was dismal response to another big recruiting bid. From 12,000 national service leaflets distributed in the town only 200 forms were returned. Then came a dramatic change. Hitler grabbed the rest of Czechoslovakia, and no shred of doubt remained that he was hell-bent on conquest unlimited.

Tom Mix, the cowboy film star, ex-U.S. Marshal and hero of 400 films, provided a brief diversion for the populace by appearing for a week at the Savoy Theatre, and as he arrived on his horse Tony, crowds lined



pavements and traffic halted to welcome the legendary pair. I spent a couple of hours with him in his dressing room. He was a tank of a man in white buckskin, with piercing eyes as black as his sleek hair. White stetson pushed back, he whittled wood and then sewed on buttons as he drawled intelligently and philosophically about Hitler, the world's troubles, films and family life. He told me he had been happily married for 25 years (but not, as I learned when he died in a car crash in 1940 at the age of 60, that he had been married five times!) I am not by nature a hero-worshipper, but there were moments in that interview when I had to convince myself that this really was my boyhood idol telling me of the myths and magic of Hollywood.

The CD chiefs had less glamorous matters on their minds. Plans were rushed through for a mass recruiting rally at the Ritz Cinema on Sunday 16 April, which brought together on the same platform two of the area's outstanding political 'characters': David Quibell (Lab, Brigg) who as a boy 'tented' crows for farmers at Messingham for coppers and finished up as Lord Quibell of Scunthorpe, to give a new dimension to the House of Lords; and Walter S. Liddall (Cons, Lincoln) who as a young man was a journalist and active in Scunthorpe local government, and was knighted in the same Honours List in 1945. These two weighty, extrovert political opposites—Liddall could threaten a snooker table with disintegration at a stroke—were patriots both and made common cause on the cinema platform. With them were Miss E. Walker, regional administrator of the Women's Voluntary Service Corps, and Mrs Howat, the local organiser.

I thought it an incongruous touch—reminding me of Haldane's minstrel—to put in between the speeches selections by Scunthorpe Male Voice Choir (conducted by Denman Leeman and accompanied by Charles Bramley) and by the new Ritz organist, Leslie Warcup, making his local debut a day early. But the combination of emergency and music certainly 'pulled 'em in'. A

thousand people packed the cinema and three thousand listened through loudspeakers in the car park.

They learned that 900 volunteers were now organised in the town's Civil Defence, and 700 were needed. There was drama to go with the music when the Mayor, Alderman Walshaw, able and kindly and the least war-like of men, announced that he had telephoned the Home Office the previous day to stress the importance of completing the town's ARP plans. He had been given approval for 14 underground shelters and for the immediate order of 30 steel refuges for 2,000 people who, it was estimated, could be caught in the streets in a day-time air raid. The meeting did its work. More than 400 new volunteers came forward.

A few days later, Scunthorpe's first "war cabinet" was set up by the Borough Council. Alderman Ted Kennedy was to be war-time Controller, sitting with the mayor for the year (then Alderman Walshaw) and the chairmen of the ARP and Finance Committees (at that time respectively Councillor F. H. B. Gough and Councillor E. V. Abraham) as the town's Emergency Committee. Kennedy, Walshaw and Gough had big jobs in the steelworks. Abraham was a busy pharmacist. They were typical of many who were prepared to add the heavy responsibility for CD administration to their commitments in industry and business.

In this context one thinks of Harry Tombs, who became ARP Controller when Kennedy, who had made his mark in high places, was appointed late in 1940 as Chief Labour Supply Officer for the north-east Midlands, based on Lincoln; of another alderman, Hamilton Spencer, who then became Chief Air Raid Warden with the added responsibility for fire-watching, and was one of the few civilians to be trained by the Army in bomb disposal.

About the same time the Borough's full-time Civil Defence Officer, Major Lewis, was recalled to the India Office, to be succeeded by his assistant, W. H. (Bill) Kendall, seconded from the Borough Treasurer's office.



B (Horncastle) Company 4th Bn Royal Lincolnshire Regiment (TA) Scunthorpe 1939.

Opposite: Marching along High Street from dinner to billet in the Palais de Danse.

Above and below: Filling sandbags for the Hospital, with a break for refreshment.
(Photos by courtesy Horncastle Local History Society).



Kendall, a local lad, had hitherto been best known as the smart bandmaster of the Ashby Public Subscription Band, and his war-time duties did not prevent a continuing contribution to the town's music.

Defence preparations put a heavy burden on the Council's chief officers, not least the Engineer and Surveyor, Walter Farrar, and his deputy and successor Cyril Cooper, who were answerable for rescue and repair work (not forgetting those early trenches and the planting of tank blocks against the invasion threat).

As Scunthorpe got ready for war, a famous voice for peace was heard at Trinity Methodist Church—that of 'Soper of Tower Hill', Dr Donald (now Lord) Soper. Flanked by local Methodist ministers and Canon Charles Steele, vicar of St John's, he declared his certainty that we were all God's family and went on: "Hitler is my brother. I don't like him, but Christ did not tell me to like him. He told me to love him."

I heard on another occasion a lesser-known but no less brave voice—that of the Revd Albert Hosier, the town's Congregational minister. Standing alone in his own church, he tried to defend his pacifism before a predominantly hostile audience. I have covered some noisy meetings in my time, but no political heckling to match the vituperation which was hurled at this slim, likeable parson. He stood his ground until he could no longer make himself heard.

There was no place for pacifism, however, and in July came Scunthorpe's biggest blitz and black-out test. As part of an exercise covering north-east and midlands, 'incidents' with simulated HE's and fires were spread across the town, to be handled by 500 CD personnel, while searchlights swept the skies and planes roared overhead. The services operated creditably, lessons were learned and inadequacies exposed (urgent need, for example, for permanent wardens' posts—sanctioned ten days later).

In August 8,500 Anderson shelters ordered months earlier arrived at the LNER goods station, and lorries began the distribution, expected to take seven weeks. So the big dig in the garden was under way, as families

worked against time to get the steel shells sunk and covered. A major worry at this time was the poor protection for schoolchildren in the Borough. Again the County Council (responsible as the education authority) was blamed. Again Scunthorpe put on the pressure and Lindsey decided to spend £30,000 on shelters for urban schools.

Against this background, Whitehall had also made a classic blunder. Early in the year, while some local families were already making plans to send their children to safer places, an incredulous borough council learned that Scunthorpe was scheduled to receive war-time evacuees. Obviously on the 'evacuation map' the town appeared as just another village in rural Lindsey. The powers-that-be insisted on the 'reception area' classification, but Scunthorpe fought again and secured re-designation as a neutral area.

But the mills of bureaucracy ground so exceedingly slow that by the end of August, with the Germans poised to strike at Poland, the change was not formally complete, and Scunthorpe was still due to add 11,000 children from danger areas to its 45,000 population in the shadow of some of Europe's biggest steelworks! A committee was hurriedly set up to cope with the influx. There was an acute shortage of billets and schools were to be used as distribution centres. Sanity prevailed in higher quarters and although it was too late to re-plan the first stages of the operation, it was decided that Scunthorpe's quota should go on to south Lincolnshire.

On September 2, the first trainload to arrive at Scunthorpe station numbered 120 out of an expected 400; the second contained half of the expected 700. So the trickle continued throughout the day and many of the children were taken to private houses. An old Brumby family had 12 in their garden playhouse.

On September 3, a total of about 2,000 youngsters from Hull, carrying gasmasks and attache cases and in moods varying from excitement to downright misery, began to leave Scunthorpe for safety.

And Chamberlain told us that Britain was at war with Germany.

Special Constabulary outside Police Station, High Street East, Scunthorpe. (Original loaned by Reg Cook).

