

INTRODUCTION

LINCOLNSHIRE HOME FRONT INTRODUCTION

Lincolnshire's Great War experience and its work as part of the Home Front is explored in these thematic essays. Each one is chronological and starts pre-war. It is my aim to restore a forgotten part of Great War history, revealing the lives of civilians. By examining one county as a case study we can begin to try to understand how the War was experienced by people living in the east of England where hardship was usual and invasion became a constant threat. The first and last essays describe the first and last months of the war as experienced by 'ordinary' Lincolnshire people. Readers with particular interests – enlistment, fishing, nursing and so on, can continue with whichever essay they choose.

The concept of a 'Home Front' - when civilians are mobilized en masse to support the war effort during a conflict - dates from World War One. It indicates all those activities necessary to support the armed forces and includes the supply of men, munitions, food (including food for the horses), and hospitals. Since it was impossible for this to be done if the Home Front could not support itself, Lincolnshire's work included keeping the home population fed.

The idea of a 'Front' relates to confrontation with the enemy and the use of weapons. By 1914 there were already balloon and aircraft stations on Lincolnshire's coastline. During the first week of hostilities Grimsby rescued people whose boats were blown up by mines. The booming of the guns across the water could be heard by people on the East coast. Lincolnshire became a war zone with Zeppelin raids, warnings issued by a buzzer and bombing. New types of armaments, such as submarines and aircraft were manufactured in the county which also provided the right type of environment for airfields. Land was requisitioned and some was never returned to the owners. For example, Waddington and Cranwell both date from the Great War.

One of the war's first effects was unemployment for both men and women. Many semi-skilled men in agricultural engineering earned only 23s – 25s a week, and could be laid off when times were hard. Even in peace-time Lincolnshire unemployment was a cause of disorder. In August 1911 two men were killed in riots in Lincoln and the actions of the city mayor, Mr Newsum, and the city's Chief Constable, Mr Coleman were seriously brought into question. Now, Employment Exchanges encouraged enlistment and work in munitions. The central theme is the struggle for resources by various military and civil authorities and the impact of this on Lincolnshire people's lives. The state tightened its hold on the population through Defence of the Realm Acts (DORAs) passed to prevent dissent. The war was, therefore, not merely a battle between opposing armed forces, but a time of conflict throughout society, which was already divided by religion, class, wealth, nationality and gender.

In the early months of the war, recruitment meetings were held by the rural elite who 'used both their control of the pre-war Territorial Forces, through their roles as officers and honorary patrons, and their position as landowners, parsons, and even farmers to urge men into the ranks.'¹ A certain amount of competitiveness ensued as to which county enrolled the greatest number of men. Grantham became a garrison town and the social impact of having large numbers of troops stationed in one place had both positive and negative results. For a county where one village could not always understand the accent of people from another village, it widened Lincolnshire's awareness of what occurred beyond their local community, but caused concern about the perceived increased consumption of alcohol and sexual promiscuity. Especially when conscription was introduced, enrolment in the armed forces caused considerable suffering for families as men were drafted away, leaving wives, children, and elderly relatives to cope on their own, financially, practically and with the emotional trauma this engendered. This study shows how men reacted to conscription when killing was against their consciences. Conscientious objection to military service was, and still is, taken to imply cowardice and lack of patriotism, but events in Lincolnshire, and especially in Cleethorpes question this interpretation.

Agriculture, fishing and engineering were Lincolnshire's main industries and are three topics considered. There was a higher than average dependence on agriculture with a large agricultural population and few large towns or alternative employment. However, farming was also a declining industry. In 1907 the average weekly wage of an unskilled farm labourer was 15s 4d but to be free from poverty a family needed a regular income of

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about 40s a week. Therefore hardship was usual and pauperism not infrequent. Hours averaged 58 per week, and could be longer. Such workers probably had more incentive to enlist than other groups. In 1909 the National Union of Agricultural Workers was founded with some support from Lincolnshire, but there was little union activity in the county during the war with membership only approaching 5,000 in 1918.² The impact of this existence was reticence and lack of confidence at many levels of society. Women's subordinate position also had the same effect. When the Bishop of Lincoln wanted to organize a Conference of Churchwomen on the place of women in the Church he was warned that 'the ladies & Churchwomen of Lincolnshire ... are too shy ... too fearful of novelties'.³ The approach of winter brought the threat of unemployment, but in 1914 voluntary enlistment and then in 1916 conscription increased the shortage of agricultural workers. This was a period when 'Country' felt increasingly that 'Town' failed to understand its problems. However, farmers' profits increased, particularly after the introduction of the Corn Production Act, when prices were guaranteed and workers' pay fixed.

Lincolnshire's long coastline meant that fishing was an important industry. Grimsby was the greatest fishing port in the world having attained that position when the industry was transformed by the steam trawler. However, there was danger of serious over-fishing and a history of extremely poor industrial relations. Austen Chamberlain said trawler owners, men like Harrison Mudd, Henry Smethurst, and G.F. Sleight, known as the 'fishocracy,' wanted to reduce 'matters to a state of serfdom'.⁴ Grimsby industry was concentrated in the hands of a few powerful men including George Doughty, Grimsby's MP from 1896. It was difficult to find a magistrate who had no connection with the fishing industry.⁵ This was relevant when fishermen came before conscription tribunals. By Tuesday, 4 August 1914 the Royal Naval Reserve was already formed but the fishing industry almost collapsed when boats as well as men were requisitioned and seas were mined. Fishermen's families and the ancillary industries suffered as a result. Some towns, including Skegness, Cleethorpes and Grimsby also suffered a serious loss of their tourist trade and sent a deputation to the Local Government Board asking it to alleviate their severe hardship.

Many of Lincolnshire's engineering firms lost their overseas trade before war was declared, but shifted into increased profitability once they were engaged in munitions manufacture for the Government which itself moved from *laissez-faire* to increasingly centralized control of supply, output, labour, pay and conditions across many industries. There was evidence of cheating, exploitation and corruption by employers, and workers struggled to retain their hard-won rights and individual freedoms, Unions conceding to the employment of refugees and women as 'dilutees'. There were 'unofficial' strikes across the county. As an employer in Controlled and National Factories, the Government was involved in management/labour disputes that were taken to arbitration, sometimes having results beyond the county boundaries. From 1916, employment in munitions gave workers a legal means of avoiding military conscription but civilian labour was directed and workers were not allowed to move where and when they chose. Conscription revealed the delicate balance between military needs and those of other industries. August Bornemann of Ruston, Proctor & Co. Ltd in Lincoln, and Belgian Roman Catholic priests already in the county who invited refugees to come, may have contributed to foreigners' acceptance by British workers. Mr Bornemann was of Dutch extraction.

Care of the military sick and wounded is another topic. One of the myths of this war is that it was unexpected; study of Lincolnshire shows this to be untrue. For example, huts to provide extra hospital accommodation were prepared prior to August 1914; buildings were identified as auxiliaries to Central Army hospitals and various 'stately homes' including Brocklesby Park and Boulton Hall were offered to the War Office, the owners to pay the expenses. Many temporary hospitals, created after 4 August needed to raise money via the Red Cross and St John's and local people also provided food and equipment. Gradually the authorities became better organized and the most seriously injured men were nursed closer to the ports of embarkation. Convalescence and care of servicemen who had lost limbs began to be officially organised in 1915, so some temporary hospitals closed. Women already served in the Queen Alexandra Imperial Nursing Service, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and the Territorial Force Nursing Service, supplemented by members of Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs). Nevertheless, overwhelmingly care of the wounded was a voluntary effort. Civilian medical officers gave their time free to the wounded as well as running their normal civilian practices and both men and women VADs gave their services without pay. This situation was not one that could be sustained in the longer term and the Government was forced to help finance hospitals according to the number of patients. The question of paying women for something which was seen as a vocation caused concern at the highest

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levels and in 1917 more hospitals and VADs were urgently needed throughout the country. This was part of the process by which nursing was becoming a profession. Men suffered from a variety of illnesses including pneumonia, pleurisy, hernia, and appendicitis as well as having wounds such as fractures, loss of limbs, gunshot and other wounds. Some patients were gassed and others lost their sight. There were also 'Shell-shock' victims. How Lincolnshire people reacted to these men is important in understanding the lasting effects of this War.

People were required to support the war. Being patriotic demanded awareness of spies, complying with regulations and buying War Bonds. This was a time of almost continuous fund-raising to help local regiments, PoWs, Returned Prisoners, Belgian refugees and many others. Women, whose role in the war is a major theme, were first exhorted to show their patriotism through continuing their domestic duties as wives and mothers. As the war dragged on, civilians were urged to find ways to cope with shortages of food, paper, petrol and other essentials. Many people were also in mourning as their men were killed far away from home; some were enduring the anguish of not knowing if their men were alive. Study of the Home Front indicates that warfare was undertaken not only through direct killing of the armed forces, but through civilian deprivation. In fact, the Government deliberately sacrificed the civilian economy by the rapid withdrawal of labour to the Army in the hopes of bringing the war to a speedy end.⁶ Walter Long, President of the Local Government Board, told people that their two essential duties were to save more and to produce more, food shortages being largely caused by the German submarine blockade.⁷ In some areas there was malnutrition even to the point of starvation. Children's death rates rose in Wolverhampton.⁸ How bad was it in Lincolnshire? Children's lives were severely affected by the war. They 'did their bit', working in agriculture, making clothes for the forces, providing entertainments and contributing funds. Sometimes they had refugee children in their classes. They were taught to see why the war was just and Scouts frequently aided the war effort. This generation formed the military and home fronts twenty years later when the Second World War began.

Although the Great War is usually dated from 1914 to 1918, this is incorrect. Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, was the declaration of a temporary 36-day truce which was then extended. It is during the Armistice period that the cost of the war to the Home Front can begin to be assessed with the influenza epidemic devastating the exhausted, hungry nation. The peace treaty with Germany was not signed until 28 June 1919 and there was a National day of celebration on 19 July. This brought closure to the 'Home Front', although legally the state of war was not concluded until 31 August 1921, and the problems the war and especially the peace treaties created, continue to the present. However, the study closes with Peace Day, 19 July 1919. The Lincolnshire Home Front had done its work and could begin reconstruction but life continued with hunger, shortages, unemployment and strikes, implying that 'the war to end all war' had not served that purpose.

Finally, a personal note. My interest in the Great War started in childhood when a family friend, Percy Rowe, told me he fought at Ypres. My mother remembered ladies giving white feathers to men not in uniform, and that women felt insulted by the 1914 patriotic song 'Keep the Home Fires Burning,' 'as though,' she said, 'we were only capable of that!' My father remembered the Cuffley Zeppelin. Further, both my parents lost younger brothers in the 'flu epidemic. So in a way, this is the background to my family history.

¹ Alun Howkins. *The Death of Rural England*. Routledge. 2003. p.28

² B.A. Holderness. 'Agriculture' in Dennis R.Mills *Twentieth Century Lincolnshire*. History of Lincolnshire Committee. 1989. pp.59-60

³ Graham Neville, (ed). *Diaries of Edward Lee Hicks*, Bishop of Lincoln, 1910 - 1919. The Lincoln Record Society, 1993. 1315, 26.09.1918

⁴ Charles Ekberg. *Grimby Fish*. Barracuda Books. Buckingham. 1984. p.64.

⁵ Goddard & Spalding. *Fish 'n Ships*. pp.11-14, 24, 28.

⁶ John Turner. *British Politics and the Great War. Coalition and Conflict. 1915 - 1918*. Yale. 1992. p.109.

⁷ *Times*. 28.09.1917.

⁸ Stephen John Lawford Gower. *The Civilian Experience of World War 1: Aspects of Wolverhampton, 1914-1918*. Thesis Birmingham. D.Phil. July 2000. pp241, 244.