

MARCH MEETING

First Talk

Life in Dover in the First World War

A Talk by Derek Leach

Reported by Terry Sutton

Our chairman, Derek Leach, had a packed audience when in March he described at our public meeting what life was like in Dover during the First World War. Derek's well received talk was supported by his PowerPoint presentation that screened more than thirty photographs, some of which had never been shown before.

He told how Dover was poorly prepared for the war that broke out on August 4th in 1914 with the harbour and port lacking

defences against any attack by the German fleet. Soon attempts were made to make the harbour submarine and torpedo proof, partly by the sinking of blockships.

One of the earliest scares was a report that a spy, described as an intruder, had tried to poison the town's water supply when a sentry had fired a shot. As a result a warning was given to householders to boil all water received at their homes.

Dover borough police force, said Derek, was reinforced by one hundred special constables and another fifty were recruited to warden the town's air raid shelters. The police force, he reminded us, also operated the town's fire brigade.

In September 1914 hundreds of army volunteers arrived in Dover to be trained and the Maison Dieu was made available as a rest place for them. As more sailors and soldiers arrived in Dover there were not enough barracks for them so scores were billeted with Dover families.

In November 1914 a "home defence force" was formed with around 500 local recruits, commanded by Dover's many times mayor Sir William Crundall.

One of the busiest times at Dover's newly completed Marine Station was the arrival of 15,000 refugees (mostly women, children and wounded soldiers) as the enemy advanced and captured Ostend



HMS Vindictive after Zeebrugge Raid © Dover Museum



*Bomb damage Wesley Chapel Folkestone Road
© Dover Museum*



Sheltering in Leney's Basement © Dover Museum

and Dunkirk. The refugees, many barely clothed, were helped by generous Doverians.

The Marine Station was also very busy dealing with the landing of thousands of wounded from the Western Front. By the end of the war 1.25 million wounded had been landed at Dover with up to 20 hospital trains a day taking them from Dover to hospitals elsewhere.

Derek told of one problem in Dover which was the concern about the welfare of local

girls with so many soldiers and sailors in town. "Thousands of virile young men and hundreds of excited young women were thrown together. A fortress full of soldiers and a harbour full of sailors and a town full of evening-free flappers soon created a situation that had to be faced. Girls with long and bobbed hair, floppy hats on empty heads," was one description at the time.

An observer in Snargate Street, at the time, described "deplorable" sights with the girls rather more worse for wear than the men. To prevent too much trouble, in April 1915, a club for young girls was opened to keep them off the streets. The centre, over a grocer's shop, was called the Girls' Patriotic Club.

One of the photographs shown was of American troops, with their Boy Scout hats, marching through Dover's Market Square. They brought with them loaded ration wagons from which odd items would fall off-especially when young children were around.



The Yanks Arrive 1917 © Dover Museum