

Dover 1917

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I have looked back 100 years to discover what was happening in Dover and in other East Kent towns as the "Great War" continued with the death of millions.

One hundred years ago, in 1917, the nation was in the fourth year of World War One with the population of East Kent pondering if the bloody conflict would ever end. The people of Dover suffered shelling from German destroyers, attacks from the air, were also running short of bread and other food until rationing was imposed.

Yet there was plenty of money sloshing around (boosted by the influx of the military) with little to spend it on.

During the year there were a series of German air raids on Kent's coastal towns, firstly by Zeppelins and then by Gotha bombers. Folkestone was the worst to suffer with a Gotha bombing raid in May when more than 80 were killed and 174 injured.

Other towns were bombed but anti-aircraft guns gave Dover some protection where, during the year, only a dozen people were killed in raids.

The worst tragedy of the year, in Dover, was on a Sunday afternoon in August when a tram overturned on Crabble Hill at River killing eleven passengers and injuring more than 50.

Dover, in 1917, was about to lose its Parliamentary borough status to become the Dover County division comprising Dover, Deal, Walmer, Dover Rural, and Eastry Rural areas. Another big change was that male voting rights were extended and the franchise was won by women-but only to those over 30 years of age! The House of Commons voted overwhelmingly for this change in June.

Yet another change in Dover was that in January the Privy Council approved a recommendation of splitting the town into six wards instead the three existing wards. Local elections were abandoned throughout the war years.

With so many soldiers and sailors based in Fortress Dover, trade in the town in 1917 was described as excellent. There was plenty of ready money about. Posters calling on Doverians to invest in War Loans appeared



Sea Front (showing skating rink) 1917



South Front Barracks from the Admiralty Pier

in the town in January. Five shillings deposits were suggested to "Help Win the War."

"The difficulty this year is not being able to afford to buy goods, but for traders to get the goods to sell," reported the Dover Express.

Later in the year, with enemy submarine warfare hitting imports, there was the start of food shortages in Dover. In the late spring the potato crop failed and imported wheat became more difficult to obtain. King George V in May called on his subjects to eat less bread because of the shortage of wheat. In the autumn the supply of butter ran out creating a heavy demand for margarine which became difficult to buy. For several months tea became scarce, followed by a shortage of sugar.

Dover, and other towns, established food control committees which brought into use rationing cards for sugar. As shortages continued the ration card system was extended to other foodstuffs. One result in the town was a big increase in the use of allotment grounds for the provision of vegetables. This, in turn, resulted eventually in a glut of potatoes!

An attempt was made in Dover, and elsewhere in East Kent, to persuade more men to join up for "Voluntary National Service" a campaign which proved a failure.

The shortage of some men willing to serve in the Forces contributed to the establishment in Dover, and elsewhere, of military tribunals which soon faced an enormous amount of unpleasant work.

Apart from the air raids, especially those on moonlight nights, the most dramatic wartime incident for Dover came in April 1917 when sections of the German navy ventured into the English Channel. Six



Dover Harbour 1918

German destroyers attacked and sank the small craft of The Dover Patrol and then fired more than sixty shells into the town of Dover, causing not a single casualty.

The Royal Navy attacked the enemy flotilla, sinking two of the German destroyers while the others fled. As a result of this engagement 105 German rescued prisoners were landed at Dover along with 22 dead British sailors and 28 dead German sailors. The bodies of the sailors, British and German, were rested in the Market Hall (now Dover Museum) in the Market Square before burial with full naval and military honours at St James' cemetery.

One of the biggest worries during the year was about the situation in Russia, one of the Allies fighting Germany. In March there were signs of revolution when the Czar abdicated.

But there was more hope in April when the USA declared war on Germany followed by the arrival in June, in France, of the first of millions of American troops.

In December there were celebrations in Dover when local East Kent troops were among the British force that beat the enemy's Turkish allies to capture Jerusalem.

In East Kent and throughout the nation the top musical hit in 1917 was: For Me and My Girl.