

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Nick Sign, The Home Front in Suffolk 1914-1918

Nick Sign gave a very interesting talk to the November meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about life in Suffolk during the First World War.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 had a huge impact upon life in Suffolk. Within four days of the commencement of hostilities, the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was passed which gave the government significant powers to curtail individual freedoms and rights, and to censor publications which might spread 'disaffection or alarm.' Possibly its most visible impact was to limit pub opening hours.

There was a pressing need to recruit soldiers as the peace-time army was small. Canon Bignold of Carlton Colville was active in encouraging recruits from his parish. He helped recruit 50 men by the start of September 1914. The number of recruits from the area grew to 400 during 1915 but this was insufficient and so conscription was introduced in 1916 with men aged 18-41 liable for service. Unfortunately, the quality of recruits diminished, with considerable numbers deemed unfit for service. The age of recruits fell during 1917 and the size of the army was smaller in 1918 compared to the previous year.

The absence of men created opportunities for women. They drove trams and ambulances. They did local policing and worked on the post. Women were nurses, doctors, fire fighters and repaired roads. They were very active working in factories such as Garretts of Leiston where they built over 200 planes between 1917 and 1918. The company also made munitions, like Ransomes and Jefferies in Ipswich. 260,000 women joined the Land Army. Agriculture was very labour intensive, especially as many horses had been commandeered by the army. There was some mechanisation of agriculture but the hard work of women was vital in producing food. By the end of the war, 3 million extra acres of land were used for agriculture. Despite this, the rationing of sugar, meat, butter, cheese and margarine was introduced in 1918. The price of food rose but the diet of the people improved, especially for the poor. Women were paid 50% of the wages of men and were forced out of their jobs when the men were demobilised but granting the vote to women from 1918 was a recognition of their contribution during the war years.

Suffolk was vulnerable to attack by the Germans. Coastal defences were progressively improved after 1914. Batteries were placed along the coast and forts strengthened. Pill boxes were built and trenches were dug to resist invasion. Airfields were created at Covehithe and Elmswell. Felixstowe was a base for seaplanes and became a military base with civilian access to the town severely limited. Lowestoft had no defences and suffered from a surprise attack by a German naval force on 25 April 1916. The bombardment killed four people and demolished 40 houses. The raid traumatised the people and led to many sleeping in the countryside for weeks afterwards. However, the most frequent attacks came from the air. Zeppelin airships spread terror. Yarmouth was the focus of the first air raid on 19 January 1915 and was followed by Lowestoft and Ipswich in April. Butter Market in Bury St Edmunds was badly damaged by incendiary bombs in April 1915. Gradually, air defences improved with a Zeppelin shot down near Leiston in June 1917.

Some country houses, such as Hengrave Hall and Ampton Hall, became hospitals for wounded and convalescing soldiers. The Elveden estate and Hardwicke House were used for military training. The war affected all levels of society and had a profound impact on Suffolk. It was the first total war.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 23 January when Graham Higgins will give a presentation about The Real Robin Hood. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy