

EXTRACTS FROM “SOUTHEND AT WAR”

WW1

At midnight on August 4th, 1914, there were crowds outside the offices of the *Southend Standard* waiting for news of England’s declaration of war on Germany due to the unprovoked invasion of Belgium. One of the odder impacts of this declaration locally was the directive that Southend and Leigh-on-Sea pubs should close by 9 p.m. (some sources give as early as 6 p.m.) However, the evening trains to nearby Eastwood (to the West) or Rochford (to the North) carried more evening travellers than usual because the pubs there could remain open till 10 p.m.

Lord Kitchener’s famous recruitment campaign (Your Country Needs You) culminated in a grand rally at the Kursaal, and over 1,000 men were sent to France and over 400 others joined the territorial forces. By November, twenty-two Southenders had already been killed.

Women came to the fore during war-time, displaying hidden talents. Vital work included cultivating previously redundant land and pea-picking, as well as replacing men in offices, banks, the railway, Post Office and on the trams. Additionally, fifty women applied for employment when the local electricity works in London Road, near the town centre, was converted into a munitions factory.

Female messengers replaced telegraph boys at the Post Office in 1917, and were supplied with a smart blue uniform decorated with red piping and brass buttons, topped with a dark straw hat with black and red ribbons. The fifteen girls employed were expert cyclists.

Nurses were obviously in great demand, but few sacrificed their lives in the way Ellen Daly did when she set her clothes alight while cooking for patients at Southend Sanatorium in March 1915. Although she put out the flames unaided, and carried on with her duties although severely burned, she collapsed and died from her injuries and shock just a few hours later.

WW2

The first attack on the Pier, and perhaps most serious, was on the 22nd November 1939, but raids continued throughout the war years. Although convoys were regularly delayed by the presence of mines, by the end of the war, nearly 3,500 convoys (with over 84,000 vessels) sailed from Southend in one capacity or another. When one ship with a “Mohammedan” (Muslim) crew refused to sail on their designated day, a feast day, until they had sacrificed a sheep according to ritual, Naval Control duly secured the sheep from London and sent it aboard in a tug so that the ship could sail on time.

The train that runs to the end of the Pier as a tourist attraction in peace time was then used to carry over a million servicemen to and from the ships at the pier-head. Food, stores, ammunition and special equipment were also carried back and forth. The electric railway ran day and night, despite enemy action and the regularity of vessels colliding with the lengthy structure. The wounded were brought ashore – some in specially adapted carriages – and the able-bodied were taken to troop ships moored and ready at the end of the Pier.

Between June and November 1944, 2,715 wounded were treated on the naval sick bay on the Pier, from all the services, including the Merchant Services and the allies.

Yet again, in spite of the bombs dropped in and around Southend, the Pier was never hit, although there were a few near misses.

Richard Bunker's mother, living at 322 Sutton Road, received an unexpected letter from the Town Clerk in July 1941. Bearing in mind the noise overhead from both friendly and enemy aircraft, and the noise on the streets from Ack Ack guns, air raid sirens, troops and vehicles ... the letter points out to the unfortunate, and rather deaf, lady that complaints had been received about her "wireless set" being played in a "very loud manner" such as to be an annoyance to the neighbours. There is no record of her reply!