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A War in the Air and on the Coast: Civilian 'Night Patrols' and the Defence of Hull during the First World War

When people think of wartime bombing raids and attacks on civilians, they often conjure up images of ruined public buildings and homes during the Blitz of the Second World War. Indeed, as is well documented, Hull suffered more than any city outside of London during the conflict, at the hands of Luftwaffe bombers. However, Hull was also deemed a legitimate military target during the First World War, owing to its industrial facilities and docks. The city was hit in attacks by Zeppelin airships on eight occasions between June 1915 and August 1918, resulting in the deaths of 57 people. A further 151 were injured.



An image depicting damage to Market Place and Holy Trinity Church following a Zeppelin raid in June 1915.

Following the naval bombardment of Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool on 16 December 1914, the north-east coast became, in many ways, a militarised space. Scarborough, in particular, became a primary site for the projection of invasion fears: the beaches of the popular seaside resort town were strewn with barbed wire and sandbag

roadblocks were installed on shopping streets. Hull local government officials and businesses played an important role in the development of early-warning systems for the region. January 1915 saw the installation of steam-whistle alarms, known as 'buzzers', in Hull. On hearing the alarm – which could sound for as long as five minutes at a time – citizens were advised to find shelter away from the city streets and 'extinguish all lights under their control which can be seen from outside'. Working with the Hull city engineer, Hull brassfounders G. Clark & Sons Ltd. (based on Waterhouse Lane) provided Scarborough with a similar system later in the month, with experiments with sound levels and position taking place until early February. According to Scarborough's borough engineer, the new siren was so loud, it was 'sufficient to awaken the dead'. Hull experimented with different versions of the early warning alarm throughout 1915. The effect of such experiments, and the sounding of the alarms in earnest, was a cause of consternation and anxiety for some residents.

Despite there being only eight air raids on Hull during 1915-18, there could be as many as ten 'buzzer nights' in a single month. An alarm on 3 July 1915 was the tenth since early April of the same year. The only 'successful' raid had been on 6-7 June, when more than twenty people were killed. Anxiety that another raid could happen any time due to the frequency of alarms led some to panic. 'Nervousness caused by the recent alarms in Hull' was marked by the courts as the cause for an attempted suicide in July 1915. In the case of Dorothy L. Sayers, now famous as a crime writer but a young modern languages teacher at Hull High School for Girls during 1915-17, doctors diagnosed her with a 'nervous disease, resulting from nervous strain or shock... Eventually put down to shock of Zeppelin raids'.

Hull's maritime character factored into some complaints regarding 'false' alarms and confusion during actual alarms. The buzzers were not always audible above the everyday maritime traffic and dockside noise, thus heightening tension around the usefulness of early warning signals, apart from causing 'needless alarm'. Such conditions were not easy for civilians, who had to endure the death and destruction meted out by air raids, alongside the anxiety-inducing expectation of attack at any moment. Given these unpredictable and often frightening circumstances, some local men in largely working-class districts of the city started 'night patrols', whose intent was to encourage the vigilance and resilience of their friends and neighbours in advance of potential enemy attacks. Hull appears to have been unique in this regard, with most towns and cities on the coast deferring such duties to the armed forces and the Special Constabulary.

In the context of emergency legislation introduced at the onset of war in August 1914 – the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) – an early form of civil defence was introduced. A blackout was imposed on towns and cities all over the country, with particular impetus being placed on coastal areas, including Hull. This meant that the local police, specifically the voluntary Special Constables, were empowered to keep order during air raid warnings and ensure all lights were extinguished. Hull recruited around 3,000 'Specials' during the conflict, with many men replacing regular officers lost to the armed forces. However, in some areas of the city, this force was not deemed to be enough. Indeed, much like in other wartime industries, there were fluctuations in recruitment and shifting priorities in where officers were placed.

The first voluntary 'night patrols' were formed shortly after the first Zeppelin raid on the city in June 1915. These men, many of them too old or too young to be eligible to fight at the front, took it upon themselves to unofficially police the darkened streets, waking up sleeping neighbours during alarms, ensuring lights were shaded and keeping a sharp lookout

for Zeppelins in the skies above. The patrols were organised on a street-by-street basis, with the volunteers generally focusing on their own neighbourhood. For those in areas close to docks – legitimate military targets in international law – the volunteers were seen to provide a source of reassurance. As a member of the Walker Street and Adelaide Street night patrol put it in July 1915: '[Previous] to our patrol commencing their duty (just now a week old) it was noticed that scores of women and children would not go to bed... After the patrol is on duty, the general cry is "I'll go to bed now."'

For the men, it was a chance to provide a patriotic, manly service to the war effort, with very real implications for their friends and neighbours. This was evidenced by their hard work and commitment to working at unsociable hours in often inclement conditions. A member of the Craven Street patrol wrote to the *Hull Daily Mail* on 14 July 1915 with this in mind: 'I suppose that last week-end one of them spent most of his time in bed – he was thoroughly run down. Can it be wondered at; think, three or four nights every week? It is enough to kill horses, never mind men'. The volunteers were also seen to embody a spirit of mutual aid and neighbourliness, a source of working-class pride:

[The] whole success of the scheme is in its voluntary nature and local character. We are finding the true meaning of "neighbourliness," and men who never previously spoke to one another now find in a walk and talk while on patrol that Mr So-and-So is a genial fellow, and not the unsociable chap we thought him. The whole street trusts the neighbour appointed for duty, and, as a fellow resident, that person naturally honours the trust (*Hull Daily Mail*, 16 July 1915).

The patrols could even provoke a degree of class conflict, with detractors – including the Bishop of Hull, Francis Gurdon – seen as overlooking the good, patriotic intentions demonstrated by the patrolmen. Given that local elites had access to motor cars, they could escape the danger of Zeppelins by leaving the city. As a patrolman put it in September 1915:

You must remember that we cannot afford motor-cars to be able to clear out of it in case of danger. Oh, no, it's the same thing over and over again – it's the poor that helps the poor... Think of the poor souls who may be asleep and murdered in bed. What harm is done patrolling? (*Hull Daily Mail*, 9 September 1915).

The geography of the night patrols is particularly interesting, as they were clustered around the principle bomb sites that followed air raids, which tended to be close to the city centre, docks, timber yards and factories. The night patrols in the working-class residential areas of Porter Street, Walker Street and Campbell Street operated around the site of a number of civilian deaths and serious injuries, while Courtney Street was situated close to the Albert Dock.

Clearly, Hull's status as an important international port during the war was central to the experience of civilians. The atmosphere of the city, defined by the dockside sounds of workers and ship's hooters, could crowd out the vital air raid sirens introduced early in 1915. Coming increasingly under fire from Zeppelins, ordinary people sought reassurance and a source of resilience which, when police numbers were lacking, took the form of self-organised civil defence 'from below'. Voluntary night patrols present us with a startling example of civilian agency during the First World War, where primarily working-class people looked out for their neighbours. Though their intentions were often defined in highly

gendered terms, we can see such schemes as examples of a local form of patriotism, where the defence of the city and its citizens was stressed above that of nation and empire.

Biography (should you need it)

Dr Michael Reeve completed his doctorate in History at the Blaydes Maritime Centre in June 2019. He now works as a Lecturer in History and Academic Skills Tutor at Leeds Beckett University.

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