

## The Lamps Go Out

Tucked away in the stop press of the *Birkenhead News* of 5 August 1914 were several late snippets, slightly different from the usual last minute missives urgently informing readers that a horse had collided with a market stall or a couple of drunks had been arrested for contretemps on the dock road. This time the column reported that a Cheshire company of Royal Engineers had been urgently recalled from camp in Aberystwyth; further, there were reports of a British mine layer having been sunk by the German fleet; and there was a glimmer of hope in the line 'Ultimatum to Germany' which headed the brief update; 'The Prime Minister announced, in the House of Commons yesterday that the Government have given Germany up to midnight to give satisfactory assurances with regard to Belgium neutrality'. The Press Association telegraphed the local paper at a quarter past one in the morning, just in time to add the latest update before the presses rolled into action;—

### **'Reply Unsatisfactory – War Declared?'**

We have received early this morning this brief wire:- Reuter's Agency learns Germany declared war at seven o'clock last night. The German answer to the ultimatum has been received, and is unsatisfactory. The council which the King had arranged to hold at midnight was held in consequence at an earlier hour, and certain proclamations which followed the note of war were disposed of.'

This was followed by a message from the King to the fleet, addressed to Sir John Jellicoe:

'At this grave moment in our national history I send to you and through to you the officers and men of the fleet of which you have assumed command, the assurance of my confidence that under your direction they will revive and renew the old glories of the Royal Navy and prove once again the sure shield of Britain and her Empire in the hour of trial.'

So in these very brief press statements, carried in a last minute addition to the paper - alongside a report of an inquest into a local house fire and a story about a 'Poor Children's River Cruise' - the lives of local men and women were to be turned upside down like never before, and would have a permanent effect on the region, as they would across Europe and even further afield.

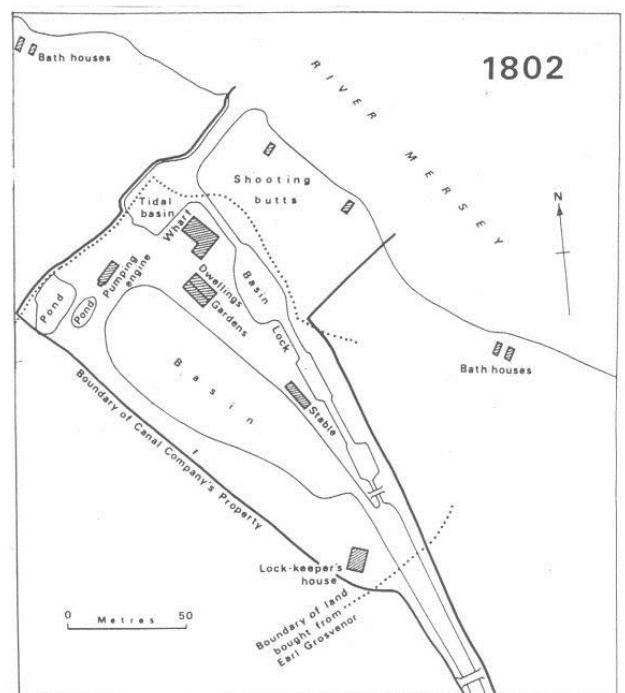
The circulation of the *Birkenhead News* also covered Ellesmere Port in South Wirral, which in 1914 was a very small town, little more than a village, and was centred between the small dock complex (now occupied by the National Waterways Museum) and the expanding industrial area to the south of the main thoroughfare to Chester. It was a relatively young development, and although many date its inception from the coming of the Chester Canal to the area in the 1790s, growth was initially slow, and it only really gained impetus with the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal

in the 1890s. In fact, before the development of the original canal terminus in the late eighteenth century, Ellesmere Port did not exist at all, the nearest settlement being the village of Whitby, a mile away from the Mersey shore, on the road to Chester. Such early roots of the town actually lie with forces acting over 30 miles away on the northern borders of Shropshire, and the phenomena known as ‘*Canal Mania*’ that was sweeping the country.

It was in the small market town of Ellesmere in Shropshire that several like minded individuals were keen to ensure that their town and locality would not remain land-locked, while neighbouring industrial and agricultural areas were gaining a march by improving their local communications. Ellesmere and its hinterland in the northern Shropshire countryside were poorly connected to the main trading outlets such as Liverpool and Bristol, nor were there suitable rivers close enough to take advantage of water transport. This period of *Canal Mania* was one where investors, entrepreneurs, and merchants fell over themselves in the scramble to secure a share in the new transport network that would bring profit to anyone prepared to take a risk. The opening up of the salt fields of Cheshire and coal fields of south west Lancashire, following the construction of the Weaver Navigation and Sankey Canal, had already been the catalyst in the development of Liverpool. Trade and economy grew further in the Mersey Basin following the completion of the Bridgewater extension to Runcorn in 1773 and the Trent and Mersey in 1777, linking the Potteries with the Mersey. Although, it was the opening of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal with its terminal close to the central docks in the town which gave a significant boost to the trade and economy of Liverpool.

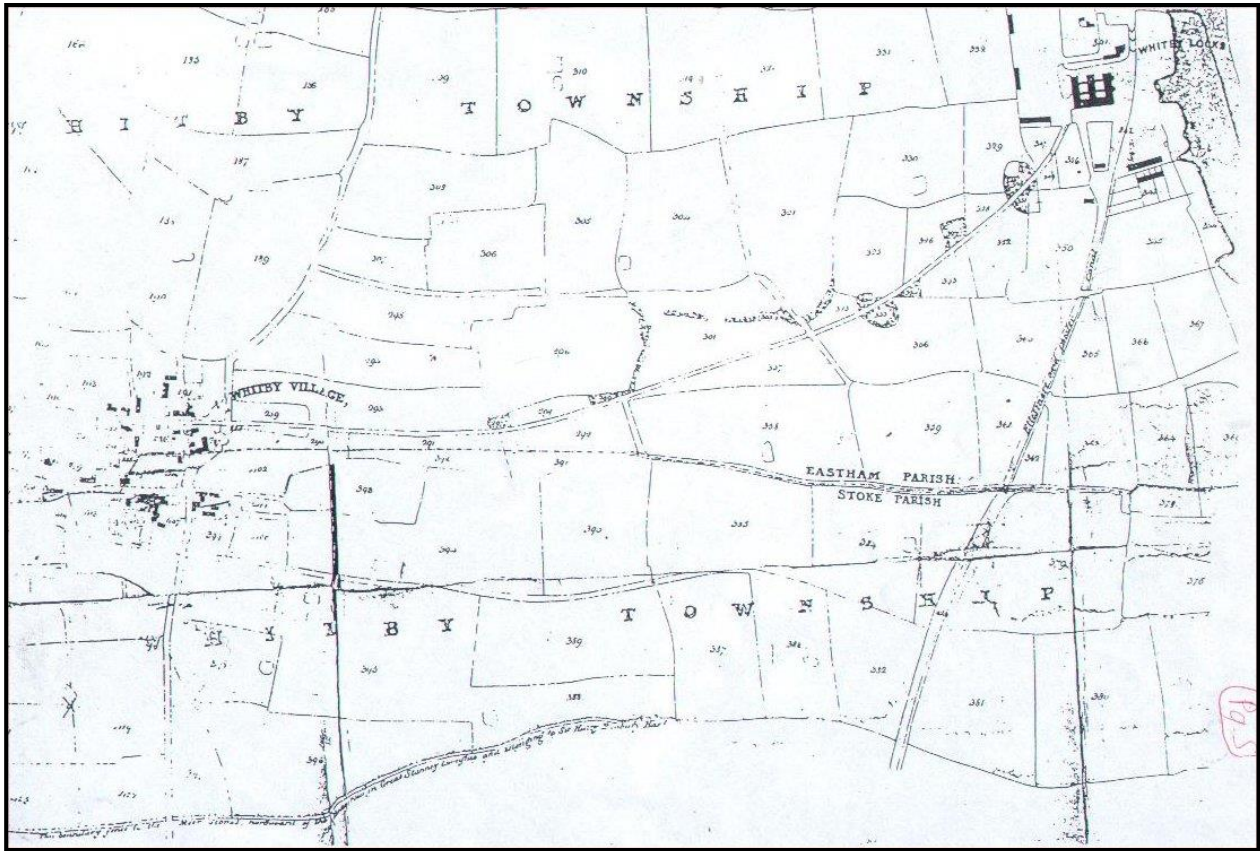
It was in this atmosphere of adventurous entrepreneurialism that a meeting was called on the 1 September 1790 in the Red Lion Inn in Ellesmere. Investors, merchants and other interested parties gathered, keen to engage experts, and to secure funding which would see their plans to fruition. It was agreed to meet in the same place exactly one year later, to assess progress and to discuss future plans. By 1 September 1791, over £400,000 had been raised, an incredible sum, which goes some way to indicate the determination and interest of the protagonists. William Jessop, who was regarded as one of Britain's leading engineers, was appointed to lead the project. He took as his assistant the young Thomas Telford. An Act of Parliament was secured in 1793 and work commenced within weeks. Water from the Dee supplied the Llangollen terminus, and this section skirted the Welsh Dee valley towards Ellesmere and Whitchurch, not before it crossed the river on Telford’s spectacular aqueduct at Pontyscyltte. The junction with the Dee at Chester had been opened years earlier in 1776, while the northern most leg from Chester to the hamlet of Netherpool was completed in 1796. The Ellesmere investors had achieved their aim. The town was now linked to the Dee and the Mersey in the north and further sections to the south connected to the growing national network and unlimited trading destinations.

Netherpool was a small tidal inlet on the Mersey near the village of Whitby, and a couple of miles south of Eastham on the Wirral shore. This was an unrecognisably idyllic scene in the 1790s. Apart from a few fisherman’s cottages there was little to spoil the view, apart from a couple of bathing huts and the nearby shooting butts. These were unsettled times – there was the constant fear of Napoleonic invasion and it was a requirement that local militia



The canal terminal, Ellesmere Port, 1802.

men were trained and ready should they be required. It was here that the northern most terminus of the canal was constructed with a set of lock gates linking it to the inlet and the River Mersey below. It would then be a short journey to Liverpool docks to tranship cargo.



Development of the area around the Netherpool dock was rather slow. In fact, the terminus was known as 'Whitby Locks' well in to the second half of the nineteenth century, with little development between the canal terminus and Whitby over a mile away. In between lay farmland, and this would remain so until the later 1800s. Nevertheless, by the 1840s, a new dock extension had been constructed, with a new warehouse and a second set of lock gates. The revitalised terminus was now being referred to as the 'Port for Ellesmere' or 'Ellesmere's Port' (ie. the port for the Shropshire Ellesmere).

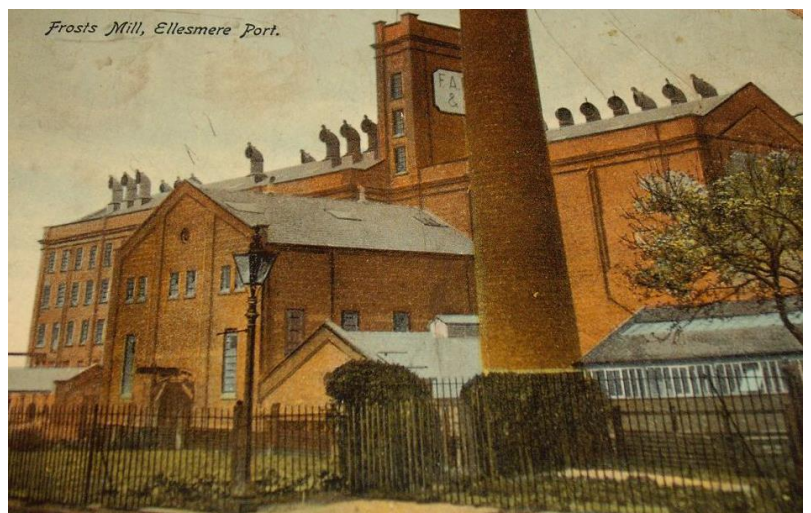
The railway was slow to arrive in this remote part of South Wirral, and when it did in 1863 it bypassed the Port. In fact this too was originally named Whitby Locks, as this was still the name applied to the dock site until the new name of Ellesmere Port gradually came into more widespread use. The new line which ran from Birkenhead in the north of the peninsula curved around Ellesmere Port on its route to Manchester via nearby Helsby. Today the Ellesmere Port station is central to the urban development, but in the late nineteenth century tramways had to be constructed to link the railway with the expanding dock area. This was to be no Earlestown, which expanded as Newton-le-Willows, or Monks Coppenthal, which grew into Crewe, where the arrival of the railway changed sleepy agricultural areas into railway towns of bustling activity. Rather, it was the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal which was to kick-start the industrial and urban development of this canal town.

There was a steady growth in small scale industry attracted by the terminus on the Mersey, its warehousing facilities, close proximity to Liverpool and the locally expanding workforce. A company that was eventually going to become one of the largest pre-First World War local





employers opened in 1883. Nicholas Burnell owned a small galvanising business in Liverpool and decided to open a new factory near the Ellesmere Port stretch of the Shropshire Union Canal near Pickering's Bridge. Initially it was a small concern, but the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal in the 1890s was to be the catalyst to bring further industry to the town and enable further expansion. The Manchester Dry Docks Company was the first business to be attracted, which opened a floating dry dock for ship repair (a pontoon) and associated workshops. The workers – many of whom came from Newcastle, which is where the business originated – were housed in adjacent terraces called Sunnyside Pontoon. A grain warehouse opened in 1899, together with a short lived smelting corporation. As large grain ships could now berth alongside, several large flour mills opened on the Dockside – the Imperial Flour Mill in 1904, the Kings Flour Mill in 1905 and Frost's Mill in 1906. Another large employer, the Wolverhampton Corrugated Iron Company Limited, opened their Mersey Ironworks on the banks of the Shropshire Union Canal in 1905. Together with Burnell's, and despite a few ups and downs, the Mersey Ironworks remained the Port's largest employers well into the 1940s. Investment came from further afield when in 1908 a dye works was established in the town. The German company of Meister, Lucius and Bruning Limited produced indigo dyes for the textile factories of the north. However, the company's presence would be short-lived, finding itself in the wrong place at the wrong time in 1914.



So by the end of the first decade of the new century, Ellesmere Port had become a small industrial town, with around 90% who were 'incomers', attracted by the new factories and other employment. Around a quarter of the working population were employed in the steel industry. What had originally been a small close knit community was now an expanding industrial town with a rapidly expanding population, and not merely a port, but also a manufacturing base. The port itself had a double function – barges still tramped the Shropshire Union inland canal to the terminus on the Mersey, while on the riverside, new wharves were serving the larger Manchester Ship Canal and its coastal steamers. The flour and steel mills, together with the growing chemical factories were attracting workers from the surrounding towns and villages. All the signs were positive, as the small canal village of Ellesmere Port was continuing to grow at a significant rate with expanding industry, workers, housing and local facilities. A small park was opened, plus civic amenities centred around the main high street, which in those days was parallel to the docks. A community hall, library, schools, churches of numerous denominations, and pubs all formed the infrastructure of this new town.

*(Towards the end of the twentieth century, many of these buildings, plus the main street itself were swept aside to make way for the M53 motorway, while the town centre had shifted away from the Dock Street village to the area around the civic hall/port arcades shopping development half a mile away).*



So what was the effect of the war on local areas? This can be studied at a variety of levels. This was to be the last time a war would be greeted with such an outpouring of local and national rejoicing. While not universal, there was certainly an attitude that this was to be a glorious experience, swiftly reflected by the speed in which many young men rushed to answer the voluntary call up - the desire for such ardent glory to be so cynically deplored by local Wirral man Wilfred Owen in *Dulce et Decorum est*, once the true horrors were realised.

In the days just before war was declared, life had become rather uneasy for some of the German residents in the town. On Sunday morning, 2 August, two days before the war was declared, a local man, a German reservist, heeded his nation's call to return home to Germany. He worked at the German owned dyeworks, but whether he made it back was unlikely, as he was probably picked up later in his journey and interned. Nevertheless, he was someone who was a neighbour and work colleague, but was now the enemy overnight, prepared to go home and fight against his former pals.

One can imagine the reaction and the chatter along the main street and in the local pubs. Most would have thought he was a good sort, not bad for a German, but war was war and he had to go. But this would have been a brief distraction, for by Tuesday night local army reservists were called out and left by several night trains. The following morning, Wednesday 5 August, more men left on the 10.10 train. They were well known in the area, this was still a relatively small town, rather insular, well before the age of the pop star, and besides footballers, soldiers were the local heroes even before shots were fired. The scenes of departing soldiers witnessed in photographs and film shown so often on TV and cinema since those early optimistic hours, could easily have been shot in Birkenhead, Chester, Liverpool and Ellesmere Port. Their departing men folk were given a rousing send off with marching bands, church services, and cheering onlookers at crowded stations.



In Ellesmere Port that Wednesday morning, newspapers reported how the streets were impassable, while the local Salvation Army band gathered at the entrance to the station and played selections of popular music and stirring hymns – and this was for just four local men who were leaving! The following morning, the town was up early again – the Territorials were leaving their headquarters at 8 o'clock, and amid cheering and scenes of the greatest enthusiasm they marched, under the command of Lieutenant Dr. Gerrard and headed by the public band, to the nearby Church of St. Thomas in Whitby (a neighbouring older village on the Chester road, now becoming part of the expanding Port), where a brief service was held. To the accompaniment of deafening cheers, the



Territorials left direct by road for Chester (a march of about six miles), where they were to receive further orders and to be put on trains for their camps.

A more relaxed send-off was given at a 'smoking concert' at the local Liberal Club on the previous Tuesday evening to two of their members, Corporal Green and Private Newnes, who were to leave the following morning to join the Colours (the local Colours was the Cheshire Regiment, based at Chester, with a northern HQ in Birkenhead). The local press reported that 'one or two interesting speeches dealing with the situation in Europe' were given and that harmony was provided by a five-man group including Private Newnes. The concert concluded with the singing of patriotic songs, including the National Anthem and '*Auld Lang Syne*'. (The following week it was announced that Corporal Green, who was in Grenadier Guards, had been promoted to Sergeant for meritorious service. He had made a special study of the laying and removal of mines at sea).

The momentum for local mobilisation began to pick up over the following days. Repeated in a similar fashion across the country, on Saturday 8 August, the local press carried the prominent front page announcement from the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Cheshire Regiment, calling for the mobilisation of their men;

**MOBILIZATION**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Cheshire Regiment**

'All members of the Battalion are hereby warned to report themselves at once at their Company Headquarters in Marching Order with Kit Bags packed. Any man who fails to appear will be treated as a deserter and proceeded against according to the ARMY ACT.

H.E.Patersall, Captain and Adjutant, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Cheshire Regiment,  
Headquarters, Grange Road West, Birkenhead'.

At the outbreak of the war, the British professional army was badly equipped and tiny compared to the conscripted armies on the continent. It comprised just 450,000 men - including only around 900 trained staff officers - and some 250,000 reservists. While there were confident predictions that the war would be 'over by Christmas', Lord Kitchener, the newly appointed Secretary of State for War, was unconvinced. He warned the government that the war would be decided by the last million men that Britain could throw into battle. Conscription was out of the question so Kitchener decided to raise a new army of volunteers. On 6 August, Parliament sanctioned an increase in Army strength of 500,000 men; days later Kitchener issued his first call to arms. This was for 100,000 volunteers, aged between 19 and 30, at least 1.6m (5'3") tall and with a chest size greater than 86cm (34 inches). General Henry Rawlinson initially suggested that men would be more willing to join up if they could serve with people they already knew - people they worked with, or friends and neighbours. This idea was to develop into the units that became known as Pals Battalions. Lord Derby was the first to put the idea into practice and announced in late August that he would try to raise a battalion in Liverpool, comprised solely of local men. Within days, Liverpool had enlisted enough men to form three battalions, and by November it was four. So effective was Lord Derby's input that he was nicknamed 'England's best recruiting sergeant'. He even wrote to local businesses appealing to local employers to let their workers enlist.

When the volunteers turned up at 7.30pm on 28 August, 1914 at The King's Regiment (Liverpool) HQ in St Anne Street, the response was so overwhelming that there was enough men to form more than one battalion on that first day. Addressing the men Lord Derby declared,

'This should be a Battalion of Pals, a battalion in which friends from the same office will fight shoulder to shoulder for the honour of Britain and the credit of Liverpool...I do thank you from

the bottom of my heart for coming here tonight and showing what is the spirit of Liverpool, a spirit that ought to spread through every city and every town in the kingdom.'

Three days later, St George's Plateau in Lime Street was swamped by the gathered throng of new recruits on parade, men that were taken from the offices and major companies across the city such as The Cunard Line, The Cotton Association and the dozens of banks, insurance firms and shipping offices in the commercial quarter. It took just a week for the enlisted figure to reach 3,000, and by November there were 4,000 - enough for four battalions, an incredible achievement in such a short time.



Winston Churchill also joined the local recruitment drive when he visited the city on 21 September 1914. Although he was the First Lord of the Admiralty, he was there to help encourage army enlistment and asserted that 'under the shield of the Navy this country could send an army which could settle the war. There need be no anxiety as to the result. In six or seven month's time they could put in the field a million men who could turn the scale in our favour'. He was well received by the hundreds of men gathered in the Tournament Hall to listen to him speak and many more signed on at the end of the meeting. (A rather patriotic local newspaper report over-estimated there were over 15,000 men in the building).

The majority of local men were drafted in to the King's Liverpool Regiment. There were many divisions within the KLR, some of them being the Liverpool Scottish, The Liverpool Rifles, The South Lancashire Regiment, The Cheshire Regiment, The Royal Army Medical Corps and, of course, The Pals. Officially, the Pals were named the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Service Battalions of the King's Liverpool Regiment, but to many they were known as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Pals. The Liverpool Pals Regiments were the first of all the Pal's Battalions to be formed in this country and they were also the last to be stood down. While many believe that the North of England's Pals battalions were wiped out on the 1st July, 1916, the Liverpool Pals took all their objectives on that day. From then on, they fought all through the Battle of the Somme, The Battle of Arras, the muddy hell of Passchendaele in 1917, and the desperate defence against the German offensive of March 1918.

This initial recruitment success inspired other towns to follow Liverpool's lead and form their own Pals regiments. Universities and schools formed old boys units, clerks formed units from their offices, and factories saw swathes of the shop floor sign up together. There was even a footballer's battalion which recruited many of the top stars of the day. These eager young men in their 'Pals' units rapidly swelled the army numbers. Whilst the War Office was pleased to see such a successful recruitment campaign, they were also quite happy to leave the City to resource its own troops. This was to be a massive undertaking to supply the men with food, clothing, and billeting. Training also had to be organised, and the new recruits would now be sent to a variety of local camps for rigorous preparation. Lord Derby arranged for temporary barracks in the old abandoned watch factory in Prescott, near his private estate (it was whitewashed throughout first, courtesy of the Cunard Line and White Star Line - many of their employees would benefit directly). Tents were erected on the Hooton Racecourse in the Wirral, a mile or so north of Ellesmere Port, in addition to the stables and barns already commandeered. Those assigned to train in Sefton Park either stayed in their own homes or were billeted in houses nearby. By late 1914, the grounds of Lord Derby's Knowsley estate were ready, with their new barracks and facilities to take all the men



of The Pals. This infantry brigade could now train together for the first time. Previously, many of these men had no physical fitness training whatsoever, never mind training for combat. They faced tough times even before they left these shores and little did these brave enthusiastic souls know what horrors would eventually await them. But of course, if these men were to fight together, they would also die together, and many battalions were quickly wiped out in the carnage that was to come. As the men of local streets, villages and towns became decimated, recruitment gradually shifted back to its traditional methods, splitting men from the same towns and villages, and spreading them across the regiments.

The men of Ellesmere Port were no different in their reaction to the commencement of hostilities and dozens were quick to sign up. Because of its young history as a town, its geography and size, Ellesmere Port had no particular 'allegiance' to recruiting centres. Numerous men from the Port joined up together, many with their close family ties opted for the Liverpool Pals, while others travelled to Birkenhead and signed on for the Cheshire Wirral Battalions, or to Chester to join the Cheshires or the Welsh regiments. Several men opted to join the battalion from their original home town, as many were recent migrants into this expanding port.



A few miles to the north, a meeting was called for the Lever Brothers factory workers at Gladstone Hall, Port Sunlight, where it was announced;

In view of the present grave crisis, the directors desire to make it known to all employees that they hope and respect that all men between the ages of 19 and 35 will offer their services to their King and country. The situations of each will be kept open for them against their return. In the case of married men on weekly pay, the practice already adopted of making an allowance of half-wages will apply, and similarly in the case of unmarried men the present practice of considering any special case where immediate dependants are left behind also apply. The time during which employers are thus serving their King and country will be counted in calculating their length of service with the company for the purpose of co-partnership, long service

awards, employers' benefit fund etc. Time allowance will be made to those requiring to visit recruiting stations during working hours, provided application is made beforehand to the head of department”.

The news that General Sir Henry Mackinnon had sanctioned the raising of a Wirral battalion in which all the recruits from Port Sunlight would be kept together, was greeted with thunderous applause at this crowded meeting. Local MP Mr Gershom Stewart, who played an active part in the raising of the battalion, attended the meeting and delivered a rousing address. He spoke of the grave danger with which the nation was confronted and his desire to raise a battalion of a thousand Wirral men, whom he hoped ‘would do everything to uphold the glorious traditions of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshires’. He understood that from those works alone he could depend upon 500 men (a voice came from the crowd: “A thousand if necessary”), and with such a prospect in view he felt certain that the ranks would be full in no time. He hoped that by the time they were fit and ready, the Germans would have had enough of British pluck and determination, but whatever happened, he could rely upon them doing their duty and behaving like men and like British soldiers (more applause). He assured them that everything would be done to secure men being combined in one regiment so that they would drill, work, and if necessary, fight together. What wasn't mentioned in the euphoria of the moment of course, was that they would inevitably die together too.

At the close of the meeting, which was ‘characterised by scenes of unparalleled enthusiasm’, the Gladstone Hall was opened as a recruiting depot and well over 500 men - ‘most of them of sturdy stature and full of vim and vigour’, formed in a queue for the purpose of medical examination and enrolment. (*Birkenhead News 2 Sep 1914*)

[This battalion was known as the 13th (Service) Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment – the Wirral Battalion. The men were moved to Chester by October 1914 and attached to 74th Brigade in the 25th Division. By December 1914 they were in billets, training in Bournemouth. Following another move to Aldershot in May 1915 they landed in France on 25 September 1915. The Battalion was disbanded in France on 16 February 1918. At least eight Ellesmere Port men on the war memorial were in this Wirral battalion, many more would have signed on and survived the war.]

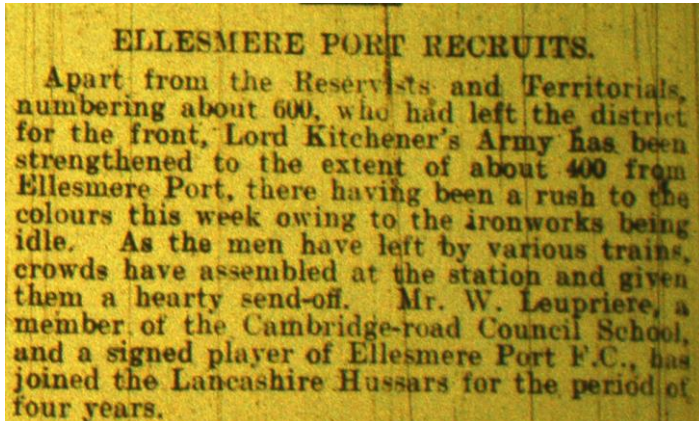
Ellesmere Port was not short of patriotism. Already creditable numbers had volunteered, but as was the case across the country, further recruitment drives continued to take place. It was only the first month of the war when a meeting was held in the Central Hall in Upper Mersey Street adjacent to the dock site. The hall was filled to capacity and still there were hundreds gathered outside unable to get in. As Gershom Stewart M.P. took to the stage with Mr A.J. Ashton K.C., there was a vociferous outburst of cheering which intensified following rousing renditions of *Soldiers of the King* and *Rule Britannia*. Stewart praised the local Cheshire Regiment



who they had recently heard were one of the first regiments to go into action against the Germans, and a telegram was read out from the General in their Chester base;

“Delighted that Wirral is coming forward so well in raising a regiment which I am certain will be a credit to their district. Wishing you every success.”

This was followed by more rousing speeches by local politicians, after which dozens of new recruits signed up. Newspapers refer more than once to the '*Glorious 514*' from Ellesmere Port. The reason for this name seems to be the numbers of the first batch of brave volunteers from the Port,



particularly the married men who volunteered in the initial phase, when the priority was for single men. The '*Glorious 514*' seems to have been the Port's own 'Pals'.

Of course, when reading the newspapers of the war, one must always be aware of the element of propaganda in the reportage, as recruitment meetings were not without opposition. In Birkenhead during a recruitment meeting, the speaker

was constantly heckled by Richard Henderson of nearby Conway Street. While those around him remonstrated with him regarding his outspoken behaviour, he protested, "It's all bloody fine for you to stand there asking us to go to the front, but who the bloody hell are going to keep our wives and families while we are out there?" Not all would have the guarantees and support offered by the directors at Lever Brothers. This outburst didn't go down well with those around him, and as they turned on him, he became 'violent and struck out right and left among the crowd'. The police moved in and escorted him away, later charging him with disorderly conduct.

In fact Henderson had gone purposely to the recruiting office at 8am that morning to see Major Strong, who he knew would be speaking later that evening at the Town Hall recruiting meeting. Henderson was later described as a 'strong able fellow', but he had lost his right eye and was rejected by the army. Later in court he protested that he was not the man heckling the speaker and was completely innocent. In his defence he declared "I was standing next to a bigger man than myself who started interrupting the meeting. Unfortunately, I got into conflict and could not hold my temper and I plugged him one – I hit him. It was not me who interrupted the meeting, it was the man I plugged. He interrupted the meeting and I plugged him." The arresting officer insisted he arrested the right man who he could see lashing out right and left while others were trying to hang on to him. The prisoner continued to protest his innocence, "Major Strong has gone to Chester, but I want him to clear me. I never asked about the families. I took my coat off and plugged the man who did'. As there were still doubts, he was remanded on bail until evidence could be brought forward to support his case. But nothing was brought forward and witnesses and the arresting officer testified he was the heckler and he was fined 20s plus costs.

In nearby Little Sutton a man was taken into custody for his own safety as a crowd gathered around a mission hall where he was speaking. Later he appeared in the County Police Court, charged with 'unlawfully using words calculated to create discontent or disaffection, or to incite people to turmoil or disorder and bring the Government into hatred and contempt'. The accused was George Dempsey, a local preacher, and while busy handing out his leaflets, he began to persuade anyone who would listen that 'Germany was justified in doing what she had done and the British deserved all they got', and, 'the war was caused by the wickedness going on in Paris and it was bound to be crushed; if Britain had a thousand more Dreadnoughts she could not win when Christ was on top'. As locals began to take more notice of him, he was now surrounded by around twenty bystanders and it seemed a riot was about to break out when he fled the scene. Later that Sunday evening he was speaking at the local mission house when a crowd of around 600 strong began to gather outside. There was a deafening sound of children banging tin cans and throwing stones, while the onlookers shouted 'Turn him out!' and sang the National Anthem and *Rule Britannia*. Dempsey

eventually appeared, but faced with such a hostile crowd he began to recant, all to no avail, while the incensed gathering threatened to lynch him. A policeman arrived on the scene in the nick of time, taking him into custody for his own safety. In court Dempsey sincerely apologised and claimed he had been 'misunderstood'. He was warned that such conduct could see him sent to the Assizes charged with sedition, but he was discharged with a caution and told to be more careful in the future. (NB. given the population of Little Sutton at the time, it is likely the local press added a zero to the numbers gathered outside the mission. The pro-war reportage was often blatant propaganda, especially after controls placed upon the press and proprietors under the Defence of the Realm Act).

The recruiting officers were now reaching out to the local villages throughout the Wirral 'scouring for volunteers'. After a series of village meetings, Bromborough sent 30 men, ten came from Willaston, and 51 from Little Sutton. Captain Field, who spoke at the meetings, commented that he was 'delighted with the physique of the men recruited'. The local news further reported that 'he intends to beat up the same places again shortly, and is confident of more good "bags"'. That Little Sutton should have sent 51 recruits has specially pleased and astonished Captain Field in view of so small a population'. A small but creditable number in relation to the tiny population, which adds to the theory of likely exaggeration in the Dempsey angry mob issue.

Yet not all was efficient in the early organisation of the recruits, as such huge numbers were clearly causing difficulties for the authorities as this article in the *Birkenhead Advertiser & Wallasey Guardian* on 16 September 1914 bears witness,

#### **BIRKENHEAD RECRUITS DEPART**

The town's meeting on Friday night yielded only 20 recruits. The raising of the standard height has all but stopped recruiting in Birkenhead. This is what the Government want, for there is not sufficient accommodation for all the volunteers, and fresh arrangements will have to be made for the half million who are coming on. On Monday afternoon 150 recruits left the town under Major Strachan for Chester. Some were men who had been previously at Chester and had had to return because there was no room for them; others were men who had recently joined and been passed into the Reserve, receiving 3s a day and being liable to be called up at ten days' notice. Instead of ten days the men only got one, and Major Strachan was the first to protest against the Government's breach of their own undertaking. Even the one day's notice was not posted to the men; they had to find out by calling at the recruiting offices, 76 Market Street, where the notice was posted on the window, and so suddenly was the call that the muster was rather disorderly and the attempt to call the roll and to form ranks in the public street was greatly impeded by a curious crowd and by wheeled traffic. The men evidently belonged to all classes, and some wore straw hats, others felt or caps, and one man a railway guard, had come off duty only a few minutes before, and had no time to change his uniform or to get rid of his 'bait' tin. Nevertheless, they were in the highest spirits, and marched gaily to Woodside Railway Station [near the Mersey Ferry] accompanied by wives, sweethearts, and friends, who clung to them and waved farewell, and among the spectators many raised their hats in salute to the brave fellows. The same scenes were repeated inside the railway station and the cheering kept up until the train was out of sight.

The addition of three inches to the height is debarring many otherwise eligible candidates. Men have been rejected because they were an inch short who have been through the South African War and who were thought good enough for the Boers, though they had had no previous war experience, who are not thought good enough



and big enough for the Germans. Much also depends on the way volunteers are received at the recruiting offices whether they will join, and having been kicked about from pillar to post from the door in Market Street to the door in Argyle Street, they have been noticed to walk away disgusted, vowing they will never come again; but from Major Strachan himself, applicants receive the utmost courtesy, the difficulty being the he is often called away to Chester and having been deprived of his assistant, Captain Field, now at Tidworth [training camp], cannot always give personal attention to applicants.

This issue of height was taken very personally in the Wirral. The army may well have laid down the criteria of 5 feet 3 inches for minimum height, but this was causing a great deal of local disquiet from those men who felt they were fit enough and were being turned away for what they felt was an unjust reason. Crookenden, in his history of the Cheshire Regiment, tells the story of four Durham miners who had been rejected from every recruiting office, and had made their way to Birkenhead. They were put through the medical and found to be otherwise physically fit, but were again rejected being under the height limit. One of the miners became so incensed that he threw off his coat and offered to fight any man there as proof of his suitability as a soldier. It took six men to eventually calm him down and remove him from the premises. This story and those of local men turned away reached the ears of local MP Alfred Bigland who petitioned Kitchener and the War Office for permission to establish a unit for those under size. Permission was granted, and the first Bantam regiment in the country was established in Birkenhead. The story of the four miners is not recounted in Bigland's version when he published his memoirs in 1922, and instead he attributed the recruitment office rumpus to a rejected local man. But then, given how feelings ran high on rejection, both could be true. Whatever the catalyst, news spread across the country that a Bantam Regiment was now signing up recruits, and men from far and wide headed for Birkenhead. By the end of November 1914, 3,000 had signed on. They were taken to the hearts by locals and they were honoured with enamel badges – 'BBB' - Bigland's Birkenhead Bantams, then they too were entrained and despatched to their gruelling training camps before heading to join those who had already left for the Front.

Meanwhile, as the lamps were flickering and going out in Europe, in Ellesmere Port and the Wirral life was going to get very tough indeed.

## **Further research**

### **Ellesmere Port Local History**

**Roberts, T.W.** *Ellesmere Port 1795-1960*, 1999

**Jarvis, Adrian** *Ellesmere Port Canal Town* A concise booklet covering the history of the port by the keeper of Liverpool Maritime Museum

**Aspinall Peter.J.& Hudson, Daphne.M.** *Ellesmere Port, Industrial Borough*, 1982

Ellesmere Port Borough Council. An in depth book on the industry of Ellesmere Port and its surroundings

**O'Brien, Pat** *Looking Back at Ellesmere Port* 1986 Willow Publishing

**O'Brien, Pat** *Ellesmere Port (The Old Photos Series)* 1996 Alan Sutton Publishing

Two books by local man Pat O'Brien focusing on a commentary of late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs.

**The National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port** [www.nwm.org.uk/ellesmere](http://www.nwm.org.uk/ellesmere)

South Pier Road, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, CH65 4FW, Tel: 0151 355 5017  
**Royden, Mike,** *Ellesmere Port Local History Web Site* [www.eporthistory.org.uk](http://www.eporthistory.org.uk)

## **Canal History**

**Gray Edward** *Manchester Ship Canal* (1997) Sutton Publishing Limited

**Porteous, J.D.** *Canal Ports: the Urban Achievement of the Canal Age* Academic Press (1977) A very useful book covering most canal ports and docks in detail

**John Roberts' Waterway Index** contains the names of more than 9,500 men connected to the waterways (such as boatman, waterman, flatman, boatbuilder, lock-keeper, toll-collector, canal or river company clerk, canal agent, boat owner, navigator (navvies), wharfinger, etc.) - contact John Roberts 52 St Andrews Road, Sutton Coldfield B75 6UH

**Pellow, Thomas & Bowen, Paul, Canal to Llangollen (1988)** although this may seem to feature a branch arm of the Shropshire Union, the town of Ellesmere is on this section and the early history is inextricably linked with Ellesmere Port. A detailed summary of the founding of the canal project is contained here.

**Barker, T.C.** 'The Sankey Navigation - The First Lancashire Canal', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* vol.100 (1948)

**McIntyre, W.** 'The First Scheme for Docks at Birkenhead and the Proposed Canal Across Wirral' *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*. vol 124 (1972)

**Willan, T.S** 'The Navigation of the River Weaver in the Eighteenth Century', *Chetham Society Transactions* Vol 3. 3rd series (1951)

## **Military**

**Maddocks, Graham,** *The Liverpool Pals* (Pen & Sword 2008, first pub.1991)

**Allinson, Sidney,** *The Bantams: The untold story of World War One*

**McGreal, Stephen,** *Cheshire Bantams -15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> Battalions of the Cheshire Regiment* (Pen & Sword 2006)

**Crookenden, A.** *History of the Cheshire Regiment in the Great War* Naval & Military Press (2005)