

A WELSH SEASIDE TOWN AT WAR

By Alun Robertson

Monday August 3rd, 1914, the last day of peace, was a bank holiday. On that warm sunny day an estimated 50,000 day trippers from Cardiff and the mining towns and villages of the Welsh valleys flocked to Barry Island. To most of these people the thought of war would be pushed to the back of their minds as they picnicked on the grass, strolled along the beach or bathed in the sea. The main attraction that day was a grand brass band competition on Nell's Point (the strip of land where the Barry Island Resort now stands). The best bands in Wales performed that day. In the Channel the steamers of the White Funnel Fleet could be seen packed with people bound for a day out at Weston or Ilfracombe, people who normally lived mundane lives were out to enjoy themselves that day. Before the week was out, all this would change. Instead of courting couples and people enjoying the brass bands, Nells point would be inhabited by soldiers manning the six inch guns of the Barry Fort (the fort situated on the tip of Nell's Point controlled a vital area of the Channel). The shouts of children playing on the sands at Whitmore Bay would be replaced by the crack of rifle fire as a musketry range would be set up there. The White Funnel Fleet steamers would disappear from the Channel and a huge searchlight would sweep the sea at night. The holiday season would finish early in 1914.

THE DOCKS AND SHIPPING

The two large docks at Barry had been constructed between the years of 1884 and 1898, the export of Welsh coal was its main function. The year 1913 had seen Barry Docks at their peak - 11,000,000 tons of coal passed through them that year. This was a record for the export of coal from one port. The events in Europe during July 1914 had alerted the Royal Navy to make sure it had adequate stocks of coal. The dockers and coal-trimmers of Barry were asked to work through their Bank Holiday weekend to help out in this national emergency. They responded by loading an estimated 200,000 tons of coal between the 1st and 4th of August.

During this period Barry had a small import trade. One regular visitor to the port was the small 1,030 ton German steamer 'Ulla Boog', which normally carried pit wood. On 4th August she entered the Bristol Channel blissfully unaware that war had been declared. The next day she was held as a war prize. The 'Ulla Boog' was

sold at auction later on in the war and renamed the 'Mary Baird', but she proved an unlucky ship and was sunk by a mine off the coast of Cornwall in 1917 with the loss of seven men. Another ship caught in the Channel on 4th August was the large Hamburg American liner the 'Belgia' and was stopped under the guns of Barry Fort and was escorted to Newport. The authorities in Barry now started a sweep of the ships in port to take into custody any German seamen. Around fifty were arrested and appeared at the local police court on Monday 10th August, where it was decided to remove them under military escort to Flat Holm, the small island in the Bristol Channel. The round up of German seamen would go on, ships sailing the Channel would be stopped off Barry and any Germans removed. Almost 200 Germans and some Austrian seamen would be caught in this manner by early September. The first week of the war had been hectic for Barry Docks, for it was the shape of things to come. The German Army would soon over-run most of the coal mining regions of France. Britain, and Wales especially, would have to supply almost all of France's coal for the duration of the war, with much of it shipped from Barry.

MILITARY MOVES, THE TOWN AND ITS PEOPLE

The town of Barry that sprang up around the docks could never be described as a typical Welsh town. The thousands of people who flocked to Barry to build and work the docks came from all parts of the British Isles. The original inhabitants of the three small villages that would be collectively called Barry numbered only 491 in 1881, by the 1911 census the population had risen to 33,767. When all foreign aliens had registered themselves in August 1914 it was found that almost a thousand of them lived in the Barry area. A look at the names on the Barry War Memorial shows what a melting pot the population of the town was in 1914.

The first signs of war throughout Britain was the recall of the reservists. Barry's Naval Reservists had gathered at the local shipping offices on August 2nd, they left that night for their war stations, the Army reserves following later. The local Territorial Force centre at Gladstone Road was the scene of much activity on August 4th.

The town's three territorial units, the Glamorgan Fortress Engineers. Number 5 Company Royal Garrison Artillery, and C Company of the Welsh Regiment Cyclists (7th Battalion) were mobilised. Most of the men were used to man the Severn Defences, a line of defence which stretched from the Severn Tunnel to the Barry fort. After the deployment of the Territorials many important installations were left unguarded and more troops were needed. They were soon found, the 4th battalion the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry (T.F.) were despatched from Shrewsbury and arrived at Barry on the night of the 5th August, they were billeted in local schools. Unfortunately, in their haste to get to Barry they left behind their

blankets and cooking utensils. At once the local people rallied around supplying the battalion with most of its needs until its baggage arrived five days later. The people of Barry seeing the movement of troops in the town were now aware they were at war. For the French the war was different; it was a crusade, an event they had been burning for since 1871. This showed itself in Barry on the 5th August when a group of French sailors from a ship anchored in the docks paraded up Holton Road, the main shopping area of Barry, carrying aloft a large Tricolour. They halted outside the Town Hall at Kings Square, where a large crowd had now gathered, and sang the marseillaise and other patriotic songs. Even the more reserved of the local population could not fail to have been impressed by the intense patriotism of the Frenchmen.

The infant Scout Movement had really taken off in Barry. The local Sea Scouts had only just returned home from their Summer Camp when war was declared. During their camp they had greatly impressed Admiralty officials with their signalling prowess and several of the older scouts had been asked to volunteer as signalmen to the coaling fleet and it appears that at least twelve of them served in that capacity. The local scouts were also doing their bit. Their job was to guard the Barry reservoir and protect the water supply. The first real warning to the people of Barry that the military presence was not just show and that the war was now a grim reality occurred on Friday 7th August when Edward Davies, a young schoolteacher from Hengoed, was caught sketching the sentries patrolling around the Barry Fort. He was seized and held on the suspicion of being a spy. It turned out that he was sketching for art classes at the Barry Summer School. His drawings were ordered to be destroyed and he got off with a severe reprimand. Capt. J.H. Cook of the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry, the officer in charge of the sentries at Barry Fort, stated that Barry Island was an important area and that his men went on duty carrying loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. Anyone else acting suspiciously might not be so lucky. The warning was clear, people could no longer walk unrestricted through the docks and along the coastal path. Barry was at war.

The following days and months of 1914 would be no less hectic. The round up of German seamen was followed up in November by a round up of Barry's small Turkish population, unlike the Germans they were not seen as a direct threat to security. When a pathetic group of them appeared before local magistrates they were simply told to leave the country.

As well as enemy aliens, the military authorities were busy rounding up many of the town's horses. These were needed for Britain's expanding army. Horses were not the only animals being commandeered. A St. Bernard dog, named Dan the pride and joy of Mr. C.B. Griffiths of the Royal Hotel, Cadoxton, was deemed useful to the war effort and was shipped out to Belgium, where, presumably, he did his bit. The first few days of war had seen a large number of troops descend on the town. They were to cause various problems. Many of the men had to be billeted in local schools so that when the children returned from the summer break the

classes had to be held in church buildings. During October construction began on a large hatted camp on the outskirts of the town. By the end of November when the newly formed 12th Battalion of the Welsh Regiment arrived at Barry, much of the camp had been erected for them. Even so, schools were used throughout the war to provide both barracks and hospitals. The general conduct of the men stationed in the area was the cause of concern to a few of the more sober minded local residents. One local JP went as far as charging the men with insobriety, seduction and general misconduct. These were harsh words but during October three women were attacked by a man in army uniform. The third victim was assaulted in the lane behind Clive Road on Barry Island. Witnesses who saw a man run from the scene recognised him as a Territorial serving at Barry Fort. He was soon arrested. Apart from these serious incidents there is little to suggest that the troops billeted in the town were generally unruly, but Colonel East, The C. in C. of the seventh defences, was taking no chances with the safety of the local female population and the morals of his men. He issued an order banning all women from licensed premises in the area.

On 14th August the first recruiting notices had appeared in local papers and after a slow start men began to come forward in numbers. According to the local press 1600 Barry men had enlisted by the end of 1914. Amongst the men leaving the town for the army were 19 members of Barry Male Voice Choir and over 60 members of the YMCA. Many other institutions would lose much of their memberships before the year was out. A fund was set up to provide toys and so on for the estimated 800 children who would be without their fathers that Christmas. During early September a town guard was set up with its members being drawn from the older men of the town who wanted to do their bit. They were drilled by Police sergeant Angus, formerly of the Grenadier Guards. Over 400 men joined the Great War 'Dads Army'! As many men were leaving Barry to join the services, another group of people were just arriving in the town -the Belgian refugees. Around 250,000 Belgians sought shelter in Britain during the course of the war and by October, 1914, about 100 of these unfortunate people were accommodated at Barry. Amongst them was the famous painter Emile Claus who lodged at a house at Porthkerry park. There was a lot of sympathy for the Belgians as they were seen as the victims of 'Hun' brutality.

The Bristol Channel was an extremely busy sea lane in those days. All ships sailing past the Barry Fort at Nell's Point (the site of a present-day holiday camp) were stopped and searched mainly to find any Germans among the crew. The first twenty four days of the war saw over a thousand vessels stopped off Barry. Many ships were reluctant to cut their engines, some totally ignored the signals to stop. The six inch guns of the Fort had to fire at vessels on several occasions. One ship had its funnel knocked out and another had its foremast taken away. The Belgian steamer 'Minister Beermngert' was hit three times before she came to a halt. The firing of the guns greatly alarmed the local population who, after the bombardment of Scarborough in December, 1914, must have thought the German fleet was

sailing up the channel. It is probably with this in mind that the guns remained silent on New Year's Eve when the Greek steamer 'Antonias' ignored repeated signals to stop. Instead, rifle fire was directed at the ship and one bullet smashed into the bridge seriously the chief officer in the thigh.

By the close of 1914 many Barry men had seen action on the continent and across the sea lanes of the world. These men were, of course, the regulars, reservists and merchant seamen of the town. The first reported local fatality was that of Royal navy reservist W. Cowling, a married man from Graving Dock Street. He was killed in action serving aboard the cruiser HMS 'Hawk' which was torpedoed in the North Sea on 15th October, 1914. When HMS 'Monmouth' was sunk with all hands on 1st November at the Battle of Coronel, she took with her five Barry men. The first street to feel the full effects of the war was Brook Street, a small street situated off the small shopping centre of Holton Road. On 29th October, John Durman, of number 37, a reservist of the 2nd Battalion Welsh regiment, was killed in action. Just eight days later, Bert Clements, who lived at number 30, was killed while serving in the Grenadier Guards. The saddest story of 1914 concerns the sons of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Whitty of Barry. On 21st November, Stanley junior died of wounds while serving with the 2nd Welsh. On Boxing Day his brother John was killed while serving with the Grenadier Guards, and a third brother was invalided home from the front at the end of the year. The war was just a few months old and already one family had given it all it could. This was a sign of things to come.