

The Hillfoots and **World War I**

By
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Drive along the Hillfoots and you will see some of the last remnants of a once bustling centre of industry during the Great War. There will always be war memorials; some well preserved, others in a desperate state of disrepair, and others maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Association. Sadly there are no local memorials or tributes for the men and women whose war effort and sacrifice included working long hours, often under harsh conditions to keep the armed forces fighting at the front supplied and clothed.

Miners played an essential part in the war and had a major impact locally. It was not a safe occupation as mines were prone to collapsing or flooding. Many communities were born out of a need for coal; Coalsnaughton is a classic example which at its peak had several working pits contributing to the war effort. Coal was a vital resource as it fuelled warships and large industrial furnaces necessary for shipbuilding and even by farriers re-shoeing horses for the yeomanry and cavalry regiments. Coal mining was classed as an essential war time occupation, which allowed men to be exempt from the drafts into the army but this did not prevent many from signing up, feeling it was their patriotic duty to do so. Interestingly, many miners from the Allied and Axis forces would be called into action later in the deadlock of trench warfare on the Western Front. These professionals were called to dig under each side's trench system, to attack from underneath.

Another highly sought after material was wool. This was cleaned, dyed, spun and balled for generations along the Hillfoots and now had a combat application. Local factories would be called on to produce wool for the service uniforms of the fighting men, such as the colourful kilts of the Highland regiments of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (garrisoned at Stirling castle), Seaforths, Gordons, Cameronians and the Black Watch. A company which used to be based here and still produces wool elsewhere is Patons. They made kilts for the British Army as well as supplying wool for other uses. The wool was used in all of the service dress uniforms, which were most uncomfortable by modern standards. While the wool was warm and hardwearing, when wet it became extremely heavy and, under the conditions in the trenches, a favourite for lice, which caused itching, biting and infection. The soldiers thus had to rid their uniforms of lice by running a flame along the seams, a practice known as 'burning out'.

These are only two essential parts of the war production seen locally, however. Other raw materials which were produced locally were paper, glass, steel and leather. The old paper mill which is now Sterling Furniture was actually used during the war as a barracks and stables for 'eight hundred horses' (Adam Swan, *Clackmannan and The Ochils: An Illustrated Architectural Guide*).

Cargo left from Alloa docks to go to foreign shores with vital supplies for the troops. Until 1916 Britain still imported many of its goods via America and Canada, but Germany's U-boat campaign disrupted this by attacking merchant ships (including *RMS Lusitania*, a contributing factor in the USA declaring war on Germany in 1917). The German naval campaign in the North Sea was designed to starve Britain into submission, attacking vital food supplies to the country and limiting munitions and supplies reaching Western Europe and the troops in the trenches. Another obvious intention of this tactic was to starve the manufacturing home population into submission. If workers were malnourished, the war effort back home would suffer. All above manufacture and

production was carried out on a modest rationed diet. The main civilian ration was as follows:

- Bacon and Ham 4oz
- Cheese 4oz
- Margarine 4oz
- Butter 2oz
- Milk 2-3 pints
- Sugar 8oz
- Jam 1lb every two months
- Tea 2oz
- Eggs 1 fresh each week, if possible usually every two
- Dried eggs 1 packet every 4 weeks
- Sweets 12oz every 4 weeks

Tobacco, coffee, chocolate and fruit were also rationed.

The Women's Land Army came into being in 1915 to compensate for the reduced manpower on the Home Front. Many communities were left with only the very old and young men, so women accepted the role of manufacturers and producers. Women took on many of the roles in and around the lands close to the River Forth and the River Devon, which had fertile soil making them ideal for crops. The government brought into force The Defence of the Realm (Acquisition of Land) Act in 1916, which would turn many of the green open spaces into agricultural land. This was to ensure there would be ample food for the population and fighting forces abroad. Women also contributed in the auxiliary hospitals, such as Arnsbrae Auxiliary Hospital which was located in Cambus and was used to treat men wounded in action. Auxiliary hospitals were set up to help relieve the tension on mainstream hospitals caused by returning injured troops from the front. Auxiliary nurses were women from all walks of life who joined up to aid the hospitals and do their bit in the war. Their duties included bed making and washing as well as offering general help to nurses, doctors and surgeons.

The Hillfoots were also home to a Volunteer Training Corps, a forerunner for what we have come to know as the Home Guard which served during World War II. The VTC which came into being was a voluntary organisation tasked with the defence of the state, German invasion being a tangible fear of the time. Membership was open to men who had a genuine reason not to fight in the army, such as age, medical grounds or essential war time occupation such as miners. There are still some reminders of them littered throughout the county, such as the Army Cadet Force hall in Alva which was used as a drill hall and The Whins in Alloa which was once the site of an armoury used by the VTC. Many more of these forgotten locations can be found on *Secret Scotland's* website.

It wasn't just adults who were affected by the horrors of war; children's lives were also changed dramatically during this period. As well as many lost fathers, grandfathers, brothers and uncles, many survivors returned changed in differing ways. Some came back with physical reminders of war - such as amputees but, as we know, not all scars are physical. Many men suffered mentally and emotionally due to the horrors experienced. Some men after four years of brutal bloodshed and trench warfare became distant, removed and vacant, often suffering from a little known illness referred to then simply as 'Shell Shock' and which modern psychology would more likely label Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

But, thankfully, for children it was not all doom and gloom, though even their toys were affected by the war. In 1910 toys mainly consisted of wooden hoops, footballs and marbles but by Christmas 1914 crackers with British dreadnought toys were popular. Shops started to sell toy machine guns and a new board game, *Kill Keil*, that allowed players to fight German U-boats. Formal education and schooling continued the way they had before the war and was compulsory until the age of fourteen. Evacuations did occur but not to the extent conjured by images of evacuees during World War II. Many were evacuated from large cities like London to wealthy homes in the country. However, many working class children were used much like indentured labour for domestic duties like servants and cleaners, not as guests like we would perhaps imagine.

As we approach the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, perhaps we should also take a moment to remember those who helped and were affected on the Home Front.