

Fortress Dover and the First World War

Introduction

Dover is the shortest crossing point to the Continent and has been militarily and strategically important since Roman times – and possibly earlier. Before the First World War, Dover had been designated as a Defended Port, with an army garrison to protect it from land and sea attacks. Admiralty Harbour, designed as a large and important port of refuge for ships of the Royal Navy, had been completed in 1909.

The Fortress

When war was declared in August 1914, Dover was already a military town, with peacetime garrisons at the Castle and on the Western Heights. A pre-prepared defence plan saw the arrival of thousands of soldiers and sailors to the Castle, the Western Heights, the harbour, town and surrounding area. The number of soldiers increased from 3,000 to between 10,000 and 16,000, varying over the war years.

The Dover area became a huge fortress. Detached earthworks, trenches, barbed wire entanglements and strongpoints on high points around the town were built to protect the town and port from attack. Within this secure area, thousands of recruits were trained for war, mainly for infantry and artillery units.

Permanent barracks already existed in Dover Castle, on the Western Heights and at Fort Burgoyne. Many new camps were established in and around Dover. Including extended provision at Archcliffe Fort (which had for long been the HQ of the Dover contingents of the Royal Engineers), Guston Aerodrome, Swingate Aviation Camp, Northfall Huts, Long Hill Huts (the Danes), Broad Lees, Langdon Prison and Maxton. Also, there were Rest Camps at the Oil Mills, Victoria Park and the South Front Barracks, while Connaught Barracks were newly built during the war. The Duke of York's school was used as the depot of the Royal Fusiliers.

Dover was defended from seaborne and air attack by men from 41 and 46 companies Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) who worked both coast defence guns and anti-aircraft guns, while searchlights were manned by the Royal Engineers (coast defence) and the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (anti-aircraft, until mid-1916, thereafter by the Royal Engineers) .

The Royal Navy Base

From 1914, the Dover Command of the Royal Navy was established to maintain Allied control of the vital Straits of Dover, both for effective and safe sea communications to and from the Army fighting in France and Flanders, and for merchant ships bringing food and essential supplies to Britain. It was one of the most important naval commands of the war.

It grew to comprise several hundred ships known as the Dover Patrol, including destroyers, submarines, monitors and motor launches. Fishing trawlers and drifters were also adapted for clearing mines, laying mines and hunting U Boats, with many of the crews raised among fishermen and merchant seaman who enrolled in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

History of the Fire Command Post (FC Post) Port War Signal Station (PWSS)

The building which later housed the Fire Command Post and the Port War Signal Station originated in 1874 as a gun battery to defend Dover from attack by enemy ships. The battery had been

decommissioned by 1891 when Position-Finding Cells (small structures containing equipment for accurately locating enemy ships) were built in the old gun emplacements. The old battery was further adapted in 1905 for a Fire Command Post, and again in 1913-14 for a Port War Signal Station. On the outbreak of the First World War, the building had four main functions:

- The F C Post controlled the coast artillery that protected Dover Harbour and the Straits of Dover from enemy ships
- The PWSS controlled Royal Navy ships entering and leaving the harbour.
- The Royal Navy used signalling and wireless communication to contact ships and other signal stations as part of its chain of command
- The PWSS and F C Post provided early warning of attack by ships and aircraft.

The large central concrete cover building that so dominates the site today was added in 1941 to protect the building from attack by aircraft. It conceals the Fire Command Post of 1905 and part of the PWSS of 1914. Some of the PWSS is still exposed to the left of the cover building while partial remains of the original gun battery are visible to the right of the cover building.

The role of the FC Post and PWSS during the First World War

a) FC Post: Sixteen big guns and seven searchlights of the Royal Garrison Artillery defended the seaward approach to the port, firing where necessary of hostile or suspect ships at sea. This firing was co-ordinated and controlled by a high-ranking artillery officer, the Fire Commander, who was based in the Fire Command Post.

b) PWSS: In the years prior to 1914, the Royal Navy was developing a worldwide network of War Signal Stations. They were primarily concerned with the safe entry and exit to port of all Royal Navy ships. Their movement was strictly controlled and staff in the PWSS identified Royal Navy warships visually and by exchanging signals. Ships had to wait outside the harbour until they were given permission by signal to enter the port.

c) Examination Service: The PWSS closely co-operated with the King's Harbourmaster, a civilian officer who was responsible for the safe entry and exit to port of merchant ships. He worked closely with the F C Post and PWSS. The King's Harbourmaster was allowed to inspect any merchant vessel outside and inside in the harbour and if necessary, he would be covered by the Fire Commander's guns.

The roof of the PWSS was used as a signalling platform during the First World War. Signallers sent messages (signals) to Royal Navy ships in the harbour and Channel, using flags and flashing lamps. They also noted incoming messages. Flags were either used 'live' by a signaller or placed in a sequence on the signal mast. The PWSS had a visual signalling crew of ten, made up of men from the Coast Guard, the General Post Office, and the Royal Navy and its reserve forces (the roof was also used for signalling in the Second World War).

The PWSS was connected to the FC Post and roof signalling platform by speaking tubes which enabled quick communication (a speaking tube is a metal pipe with a cone at each end. Whistles attached to the cones could be used to attract attention).

The army and navy in Dover used military and civilian telephone exchanges to relay orders and gather and share information. Most importantly, the PWSS contained a Royal Navy Wireless Telegraph (W/T) station which was completed on 3rd September 1914. It sent and received messages (signals) between Royal Navy ships and the Royal Navy shore base in Dover.

There was another War Signal Station at the end of Admiralty Pier on the west side of Dover harbour. This station took on the work of the castle PWSS when poor weather hampered visibility. Both stations were used during both the First and Second World Wars.

d) The Position Finding Cell (PFCell): was used from 1891 until 1918. It pinpointed the position of enemy ships and relayed that information to the coast defence guns at Langdon Battery (1km to the east of the PWSS). An observer used an instrument with a telescope to calculate the bearing to a suspect ship. The observer also received bearings transmitted electronically from an identical cell some distance away – as the distance between the two cells was known, the position of the ship could be fixed by triangulation. The complete data were then transferred electronically to dials next to the guns, which allowed the gun crews to aim accurately at the ship. Repeated readings from both PF cells allowed the course and speed of the ship to be calculated and the guns to be aimed at the predicted position of the ship, firing at precisely the right moment to hit it.

Impact of the war on life in Dover

a) On 4th August 1914, the day that war was declared, cross-channel services between Dover and Calais, and Dover and Ostend, were suspended. One steamer a day ran from Folkestone to Ostend and two outward steamers and one inbound ran from Folkestone to Boulogne. The Dover-Ostend service was not resumed until January 18th, 1919.

On August 5th, proclamations were issued that entrance into Dover would only be allowed under severe restrictions, everyone was liable to be searched and letters could be opened, if censorship was established. Entrance and exit to Dover was only allowed by railway and along the main Canterbury, Deal and Folkestone roads. Foreigners had to report to the authorities and register.

People in Dover were warned not to approach defensive works or sentries, especially at night, advised to use field paths as little as possible and to stick to main roads. For the first few months of the war, some roads were completely closed to members of the public, although most of these restrictions were later relaxed. The cliff paths to St Margaret's Bay and Shakespeare Cliff remained closed. Access was forbidden to Swingate Downs and the land next to Fort Burgoyne and the Duke of York's School.

The authorities at the time were convinced that the Germans were planning to invade Dover, and so large numbers of soldiers were stationed along the coast. Local Emergency Committees were set up to oversee the evacuation of districts. The Home Office drew up a series of regulations that were to be followed in the event of an invasion, including advice to farmers on what to do with their livestock.

In Dover, the instructions were never published in order to avoid alarming the local community, but in October 1914, a notice of warning was issued to almost every household. This notice told people the place that they should evacuate to, if the military ordered them to do so. The ten places for evacuation were Near Packet Yard, Elms Vale Road, Market Square, Charlton Green, Castle Place,

East Street, Pencester Road, Crabble Athletic Ground, Saxon Street and the Railway Hotel at Kearsney.

If evacuation took place, people were to leave for the country on foot. Vehicles would be provided for those unable to walk and people were told to bring warm clothing and food and drink for twelve hours. Every horse, pony, donkey and vehicle was scheduled by the Chief Constable. In the event of an evacuation, the owners of animals/vehicles were expected to take them to the evacuation points.

Acrise Park, 1.5 miles from Elham, had been identified as the most suitable place for a large gathering of refugees. They would then have been moved on to Brabourne and Ham Street, before going to the West of England.

b) A system of air raid warnings was set up. Four short and one long shrill blast of the siren (known as Mournful Lizzie) at the Electricity Works warned people to make their way to shelters. The back of the Old Oil Mills in Snargate Street had large caverns excavated out of the chalk under the Western Heights. There were separate caves for men and women. Voluntary helpers and soldiers from the rest barracks nearby kept order. Another shelter was the cells of Dover Police Station, under the Town Hall. Once the siren sounded they were opened to the public. Sandbags closed the outside windows. A maximum of 800 people sheltered here in one evening. There were further shelters at the Phoenix Brewery, caves in Trevanion Street and the North Entrance tunnel in the Western Heights.

During the war, 185 bombs were dropped by aircraft on Dover and 23 shells fired into the town from ships. 14 civilians were killed and 46 injured. Nine servicemen were killed and 25 injured.

c) Security, aliens and spy mania in Dover 1914-18

For the first year of the war, all newspapers published in Dover had to be submitted to the General Officer Commanding four hours before publication until it was established that there was no legal authority to do this.

On October 15th 1914 a man arrived in Belgian Red Cross uniform. He was taken to Dover Castle for security and a few days later it was reported that 20 spies, disguised as refugees, had arrived. General Crampton issued an order that foreigners should be excluded from the town and by November 14th only one or two, who had been given permission to stay, remained. Dover was declared a special military area and special passes were needed to anyone entering the town by road or train.

Civilian passes were issued by the Chief Constable of Dover for people to enter/leave the town. 22,000 were issued during the time these regulations were in force. Similar passes had to be obtained before anyone could pass the examining guards who were stationed on the high roads around the town. It was forbidden to enter Dover with a vehicle between 8pm and 5am.

From October 11th, 1915, all civilians entering Dover had to produce their National Registration Cards (National Registration Act had been passed the previous summer). People could only enter by certain roads. Military and naval officers stationed in Dover had to produce a special pass.

A year later, on October 6th, 1916, it was decreed that no-one was allowed to enter Dover without a Permit Book, which contained a full description and photograph of the person concerned, stamped

by the police and signed by the 'Competent Naval or Military Authority'. To gain a permit, people had to apply to the Authority stating the nature and urgency of the visit. Around 27,000 Permit Books were issued over the next two years and the system was in force until a month after the signing of the Armistice on 11th November 1918.

During the war, the firm of A Leney & Co made arrangements for telegrams, with the latest war news, to be published in their office windows on their premises in Castle Street. As soon as a telegram was received from London it was posted on the window. A total of 4,500 telegrams were received during the war.

d) Shortages and rationing

Early in 1917 there was great shortage of vegetables but later in the year general food conditions became much more difficult as a result of the impact of U-Boat sinking hundreds of vessels destined for Britain. A Food Control Committee was formed by the Town Council and the number of allotments in Dover was increased. Meat, fats and sugar were controlled and in 1918 a rationing scheme was introduced.

In the same year, a Fuel Control Committee was also set up, with gas and electricity being strictly rationed. Lighting regulations were strictly enforced and Dover's streets were in darkness.

e) Local volunteers in Dover

By the middle of September 1914, some of Kitchener's new volunteer army 'the First Hundred Thousand' came to Dover for their training. The Maison Dieu was prepared for their friends and relatives as a place to stay. Many benevolent organisations were set up to help care for the men stationed in Dover and to help the families of Dover men who had been called up.

Local War Relief Funds were started, and some people began to stockpile food in case famine struck.

A meeting was held at Dover's Council Chamber on November 19th, 1914, where it was resolved to form a Volunteer Training Corps. A public meeting was held in the town hall a few days later and 305 men signed up to join the Corps. Men of military age were not allowed to join. By early 1915, the Corps had 302 members, on February 20th formed as two companies then being trained in musketry and infantry drill. The first big muster for a special parade took place on Good Friday 1915 at Crabble Athletic Ground. In June 1916 Parliament sanctioned a new Volunteer Force and the whole Volunteer movement was put onto a regularised footing. Volunteers had to take an oath of allegiance to the King and were subject to mobilisation for certain duties in the UK if the country was invaded.

In Dover, about a hundred locals were sworn in as Special Constables (including local doctors). Each section had five men and a Commander. Two sections were on duty each weekday evening. Five other locals were sworn in for duty in the air-raid shelters. Specials received training in fire brigade duties. Whenever the siren sounded, the specials mustered at their respective posts. This happened on 113 occasions. They were provided with steel helmets for air raids, and a car was kept at the police station to provide first-aid if necessary.

On August 28th 1915, the Women's Volunteer Reserve was inaugurated at a public meeting in Dover. Sixty women met for their first drill in the grounds of Dover College on 1st September 1915.

Dover Boy Scouts guarded the telephone and telegraph routes during the beginning of the war and the tunnels of the Light Railway Company. A special troop of Sea Scouts was formed to work along the coast.

The Dover Red Cross Society was formed in 1915 and ran until 4th March 1919. The Red Cross Depot at Admiralty Pier looked after wounded soldiers. During the war the society made 325,715 articles. Dover was a principal port for transporting wounded soldiers. During the war, 3,166 ambulance ships were berthed at Dover and 7,515 trains carried 1,215,886 wounded soldiers from Dover. Up to twenty special hospital trains left the Marine Station in Dover every day.

Dover and WW1 timeline

This is not an exhaustive list but highlights just a few of the key events of WW1 and events that happened in Dover.

1914

June 28th Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated in Sarajevo.

July 1914 Dover was full of visitors and expecting a visit from the Sixth and Eighth destroyer flotillas that had been taking part in a naval assemblage at Portsmouth. Three scout ships were also in the Harbour – HMS *Pathfinder*, HMS *Adventurer* and HMS *Attentive*.

July 27th 4pm - the first serious warning anything unusual was happening, when HMS *Attentive* fired guns and displayed its Blue Peter flag – the signal for all men to return to the ship. Every sailor ashore hurried back to their ships. A train brought men from Portsmouth to bring the ships up to war strength. Seven submarines came in with HMS *Hazard* from Portsmouth.

July 28th - Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia

July 29th – In Dover, HMS *Attentive* fired its guns and raised the Blue Peter again. That evening, battleships and cruisers of the Grand Fleet passed through the Straits on their way to war stations in the North of Scotland, to anticipate any hostile move into the North Sea by the German fleet

July 30th – in Dover, all lights were extinguished on vessels in the Harbour in the evening.

During August, the Dover Patrol and Fortress Dover were established.

August 1st – Germany declares war on Russia. In Dover, searchlights began to sweep the harbour continuously all night.

August 3rd – Germany declares war on France. In Dover, the first group of army aeroplanes arrived on Swingate Downs. They had to be left in the open as nowhere had been prepared to house them.

August 4th – Germany marched into Belgium as part of its assault on France. Britain declared war on Germany for violating Belgian neutrality. Cross-channel services between Dover and Calais, and Dover and Ostend, were suspended.

August 5th - proclamations issued that entrance into Dover would only be allowed under severe restrictions.

August 13th – the army aeroplanes flew to France and Belgium from Swingate Down.

September 3rd - Port War Signal Station (PWSS) completed above the Fire Command (FC) Post with Royal Navy Wireless Telegraph (W/T) station

Mid September - some of Kitchener's First Hundred Thousand came to Dover for their training.

October 10th-13th - 13,000 refugees arrived in Dover from the Belgian coast, including 5,000 wounded Belgian soldiers, in any vessels they had been able to find. They continued to arrive for a few weeks.

October - a notice of warning was issued to almost every house in Dover, telling them the place that they should evacuate to, if the military ordered them to do so.

November 19th - Dover's Council Chamber resolved to form a Volunteer Training Corps. A public meeting was held in the town hall a few days later and 305 men signed up to join the Corps.

December 24th - First bomb dropped on England by German aircraft at Dover. It landed between Harold Road and the Castle. A man was blown out of a tree while he was collecting holly but he escaped with minor bruises.

1915

During 1915 severe lighting restrictions were introduced in Dover. The Fire Command Post was extended to form an office for the Fire Commander and the officer in command of coast defence searchlights.

January 2nd – first ambulance trains run from Dover's Marine Station.

February 1st – Dover's Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Anti- Aircraft Corps was in action, manning the aircraft searchlights, for the first time.

February 20th - two companies of Dover's Volunteer Training Corps were formed and men trained in musketry and infantry drill. The first big muster for a special parade took place on Good Friday 1915 at Crabble Athletic Ground.

April 25th – first landing at Gallipoli of British, French, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand troops. (Campaign runs until January 9th, 1916).

May 3rd – 'Mournful Lizzie' the air raid siren in Dover, sounded for the first time.

August 28th - The Women's Volunteer Reserve in Dover was inaugurated at a public meeting.

September 1st - Sixty women of the Women's Volunteer Reserve met for their first drill in the grounds of Dover College.

October – all places of amusement were closed by 10pm.

October 11th - All civilians entering Dover had to produce their National Registration Cards. Dover was the first town the system applied to. Military and naval officers stationed had to produce a special pass.

1916

During 1916, there were submarine attacks on Dover Harbour and Zeppelin attacks began.

January 10th – pubs were only allowed to open between 12 noon -2.30pm and 6pm-8pm.

January 24th – First Military Service Act passed making all single men aged 18-41 eligible for conscription.

February 10th – conscription began in Britain.

July 1st – Battle of the Somme. Battle continued until November 18th, 1916.

October 6th - no-one was allowed to enter Dover without a Permit Book.

1917

A Food Production Committee was formed by the Town Council and the number of allotments in Dover was increased. A Fuel Control was set up, with gas and electricity being strictly rationed.

March 17th – A Zeppelin dropped a 600lb bomb on Whinless Down, in a corner of Long Wood- the largest bomb dropped in the District during the war.

April 6th – America declared war on Germany.

July 31st – Passchendaele (third battle of Ypres) began (continued until 10th November 1917).

1918

Lighting regulations were strictly enforced and Dover's streets were in darkness.

February 6th – Right to vote extended in Britain to almost all men and women aged over 30

April 23rd – Zeebrugge raid, aimed at blocking the exits from the inland German submarine bases, undertaken from Dover and included ships of the Dover Patrol

May 19th – last night time air raid on Dover.

November 11th – Signing of the Armistice and First World War in Western Europe ended

After the First World War

1919 January 19th - Dover-Ostend service resumed.

1919 FC Post and PWSS closed.

1920 The Unknown Soldier passed through Dover en route to Westminster Abbey

1939 FC Post and PWSS re-opened as war declared on Germany.

1940 Concrete blast wall built behind the FC Post and PWSS

1941 Concrete cover building erected over FC Post and PWSS

1945 FC Post and PWSS closed down

Early 1950s W/T closed down.