

## WW1 REMEMBERED

In the Tyne Improvement Commission (predecessors of the Port of Tyne), board minutes dated September 10 September 1914 at the outset of World War I – it is noted that a large number of the Commissioner's officials and employees had been called up for active navel or military service and many more enlisted. The board agreed from the onset to continue to pay all employees during active service in addition to the Government allowances and made a commitment to guarantee reinstatement on their return.

In the same board meeting much was discussed regarding the defences of the Port of Tyne and the request made from the War Office on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1914 to examine every aspect of the Port's defences carefully.

The Commissioners began their inspection on the 1<sup>st</sup> August by making the Harbour Master Chief Examining Officer and at the disposal of the Military Authorities.

Torpedo nets supplied by the Government were at the instance of the Military Authorities on the night of 29<sup>th</sup> July placed in readiness for attaching in position in front of the Northumberland and Albert Edward Dock Gates.

Moorings were cleared of 45 vessels and made ready for the reception of warships – in many cases there were already no crew on-board prevailing to conscription – it was no mean feat to clear a large amount of moorings within 24 hours – working day and night.

On hearing this, the Chairman noted "It says a good deal for the staff of the Commission that that was possible".

The Commissioner's River Police were tasked with patrolling the internal waterways of the Port – this important work made the Commissioners engage motor boats as the River Police were also tasked with co-operating with the Customs Authorities in regard to inspecting a special form of clearance by all vessels leaving Port.

The North Pier Light was screened and the North and South Piers closed to the Public since 30<sup>th</sup> July 1914.

The Commissioner's Docks, Howdon Yard and both Piers had to be specially watched by men expressly employed by the Commissioner's to undertake this watch keeping job.

Accommodation was provided on the Commissioner's Dock Estate and at the South Pier Works for the housing of soldiers who were detailed as guards.

The Military Authorities took possession of building belonging to the Commissioner's which were necessary for defensive measures.

In the North Pier visitors book which still survives today, there are a number of entries dated throughout the War documenting the many visits from the Military organisations in connection with the installation of signals for the examination of vessels.

At Bewick House the Port's former Head Office building opposite Central Station in Newcastle – office accommodation was given to Captain Crawford one of HRH Naval Transport Officers – and a clerk specially provided by the Commissioner's.

And arrangements were made for the Commission's boats to be made available as and when – day and night for the transportation of bodies of troops.

In order to meet the demands of the War it was found to be necessary to keep Bewick House open day and night for five weeks (since 28 July 1914) and divide the number of staff into three shifts for the purposes of expediting these matters.

On leaving having been ordered to take up transport duties in France Captain Crawford wrote to the Commissioner's General Manager Mr Manson, to thank him for his kindness and courtesy extended by all employees, especially during great pressure - adding that he was ever able to return to Newcastle that he would be privileged to renew his acquaintance with the Tyne Improvement Commission.

At the outbreak of war, the Commissioner's account at the bank was in credit to the extent of £57,229. During the first month of the War the weekly revenue of the Port was £7,100 only £2,000 below average. Fortunately the Commissioner's had no large Capital Works in hand and a tight hand was kept upon unnecessary expenses on materials and stores – all employees were able to be kept on by adopting as far as possible shorter hours rather than resorting to any wholesale throwing out of employment – noticed a many organisations in 1914.

By September 1914, 4 Clerical Staff in the General Manager's Office were called up and had 17 volunteered, making 21 men. 4 members of the Traffic Manager's Office had volunteered and 1 in Howdon Yard's Clerical staff. Whilst amongst the Dock Master's, Ferries and Harbour Master's Office 47 had been called up or enlisted. And in the Engineering Howdon and Coble Dene Yards and South Pier Works 25 men had been called up – making 98 men from the Commissioner's service within five weeks of the War.

Soon after the outbreak of War - the General Manager's Office voluntarily organised a monthly subscription. The Engineers' Office instituted a similar scheme – and at the end of August 1914 a sum of £16 18s 0d was sent to the Newcastle upon Tyne War Fund to help families less fortunate subscribing to local relief funds.

In the first seven months of 2014 before War broke out the Commissioners reported a significant increase in revenue compared to the same period the previous year. Yet in the first five months following the War revenues fell by 33% and exports of coal and coke breeze fell by 56% in the immediate months following the War.

By the end of 1914 14% of the Commissioner's workforce had left to fight for their country and the impact of agreeing to pay their wages was starting to impact the Port's revenues but the Commissioners were steadfast that this would without hesitation continue for as long as the War continued.

The Commissioner's considered their position at the end of 1914 and decided that with careful cost saving and letting out of what resources they could, that if War was to continue during 1915 that

they saw no reason why they could not pay their own. And whereas other Ports notably Hull and London had hiked up charges the Commissioners of the Port of Tyne were proud to say that for those who came to the River Tyne, there was no reason to suppose that they should have to make any increases at all.

In the board meeting of April 1915 – the canny Commissioner's even included in their minutes that – if hence forward any future generation was to investigate their actions in 1915, it would be something to their credit that they were able to pass through the biggest war that the world has ever seen and do so without increasing charges (To which there was criers of Hear, Hear!)

The Commissioner's also applauded their staff – during a period of great strain owing not only to the diminished workforce but because of an immense amount of work thrown on them by the War Office and the Admiralty - the Chairman, said: "I dare say it would be impossible to find a body of men more determined, more active, more zealous in the work they do for the Commission than those gentleman who constitute the staff of the Tyne Improvement Commission (Hear, Hear). "I sincerely hope that our position may be taken as a sample of this Country, and we need not fear the efforts of our enemy". (Hear Hear).

When the War ended 11 November 1918 a total of 56 men from the Tyne Improvement Commission had laid down their lives. In memory of their great sacrifice a memorial was erected in their glory. More than likely made by the Commissioner's own craftsman the wooden memorial was originally displayed in Bewick House above a great marble fireplace. Following the move from Newcastle in 1997 the memorial is now displayed in Navigation House.

The inscription reads: 'In honoured memory of the men in the service of the Commission who gave their lives in the Great War 1914 – 1919 erected by their colleagues'.