

WORLD WAR I



The Estate Office, Sandringham, Norfolk PE35 6EN

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Outbreak of War

On 26 June 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by Prinzip, a Serbian. This was the start of the First World War. England became involved when Germany marched through Belgium, a neutral country. England was entering the war not for conquest but for liberty.

The English Fleet was recalled from manoeuvres at the annual review at Spithead and moved to its battle station. The Territorials were actively engaged in training and the Naval Reserves were also called up. The Royal Flying Corps had only come into existence 2 years before and went into action in 1914. Aircraft were to take a more important part in the fighting as the war went on.

On August 4 1914 war was officially declared and hundreds of men enlisted. War had in fact been imminent for some months but the general public had never believed that it would really happen.

The King and Queen at War

War with Germany and Austria-Hungary placed King George V in a particularly difficult situation as the German Emperor was the eldest son of the King's Aunt and the Royal and Imperial Families of Great Britain and Germany were closely linked. When the King found it was impossible to keep the peace he swept his family considerations to one side and before the war was over, he and all those who remained with him, renounced German names, German titles and hereditary German dignities and honours. The King adopted the title of "Windsor" which has been used by the Royal Family ever since. This underlined and emphasised the fact that the British Monarchy was the most British, and most ancient, institution in the realm.

King George did not assume the position of military leader of his nation as was the case with the Kaiser, but instead left his ministers and military and naval leaders unhampered although he kept in close touch with their every move. He and Queen Mary devoted their time to strengthening the Empire, comforting the wounded, encouraging the workers and standing by the fighting men. He set a fine example in his personal life by getting rid of all display from the Royal Palaces and giving many of his horses for ambulance work, encouraging his footmen to enlist, cutting down on extravagant food and growing plots of vegetables in front of Buckingham Palace. Two of the King's sons, Prince Edward, later King Edward VIII and Prince Albert, later King George VI, still little more than boys, joined the Services.

The Queen visited hospitals and supervised the details of provisions. She also took active steps to see that women should not lose their jobs unnecessarily by others offering voluntary work and formed a committee to raise funds to find employment for women who had been thrown out of work by the war.

When war broke out, Prince Albert, known as Bertie, went down with appendicitis and was operated upon. He convalesced at Sandringham but his gastric problems continued and he was declared unfit for sea. After sometime spent in the War Room, he managed to return to the ship where he continued despite frequent attacks of illness. Eventually a duodenal ulcer was

diagnosed and after another operation he transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service where he learned to fly and was to become Squadron Leader.

Continuing Warfare

In early 1915, a new type of warfare was introduced by the Germans - this was liquid fire, a terrifying flame-throwing apparatus. Then, in April, gas was introduced for the first time and gas-masks came into use. The earliest ones were made of pads of cotton-wool soaked in a solution of common washing soda.

The first Zeppelin raid was made on 19 January 1915 and several bombs landed on the Sandringham Estate. Zeppelins were used until 1917 but were proving rather ineffectual against attacks from aeroplanes and anti-aircraft guns.

On June 23 1915, Prince Edward, the Prince of Wales, reached his 21st birthday. He was then serving in the forces. The following year, he was sent to the Middle East to inspect the defences at Suez and he met the troops from Australia and New Zealand who had been evacuated from Gallipoli. The following year he went to Italy to boost morale there and then towards the end of the war he travelled through France, Germany and Belgium visiting troops.

The Home Front

Women's organisations sprang up including the "WAACS" (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) and the "WRENS" (Women's Royal Naval Reserve). Clothing became more restrained as overdressing was regarded as disloyal and posters stated "To dress extravagantly in war time is worse than bad form - it is unpatriotic".

The constant call for more and more men meant an increasing number of job vacancies at home that were filled by women. In 1916, the land-girls first appeared. By 1918, food was being rationed and had become expensive and the shops seemed empty. Even the King and Queen were issued with ration cards.

Periodically during the war, Investitures were held by the King (George V). Troops were drawn up in ceremonial parade and men of all ranks received decorations for service to their country.

The King's Company

The Sandringham Company or "King's Company" were incorporated in with the Norfolk Regiment. The men and their families lived in estate-owned houses around the Royal Estate. The Company Commander, Captain Francis Beck, had been King George V's Land Agent. In the years before the first world war, these men, and the others of the Norfolk Regiment, underwent special instruction and training twice a week to become good soldiers.

Then came the time to report for active service. It was a sunny day in August 1914 when the young Norfolk territorials were ordered to report to their arms depots and be issued with rifles

and ammunition. During the next few months they trained hard, and at Colchester they were inspected by King George V who was especially interested in the Norfolk Regiment because it contained the Sandringham Company who were recruited from staff and workers on the Sandringham Estate.

In 1915 tragedy struck at Gallipoli. The men had first landed in April and had been exposed to Turkish gun fire. Despite heroic efforts to get control of the Dardanelles from the Turks, evacuation had to begin in December. Over 31,000 were killed, 78,000 wounded and 9,500 were missing. Amongst the missing were the entire Sandringham Company.

Lance-Corporal T Williamson described what he had seen: "The Sandringham Company were sheltering in a barn in a scrub-like area and the [grass] fires had spread all around them. I saw the Sergeant of the Sandringham Company trying to rally his men around him. Many were already wounded and killed, but those who could not work were destroyed by the fire, and others, who were actually inside the Turkish defences, were outnumbered and overpowered and in any case were never heard of again."

In 1919 remains of some of the 1/5th Norfolks were believed to have been discovered. Only two men could be identified.

In 1920, the Sandringham Memorial was unveiled by King George V, Queen Alexandra and Queen Mary. It bears the names of those heroic men who fought and died for King and Country.

The End of the War

By Summer 1918, the Germans began to retreat. On 11 November 1918, hostilities ceased and at last peace was officially declared. There were huge celebrations and public rejoicing.

On Armistice Day, November 11 1920, an impressive ceremony took place when the King unveiled the permanent Cenotaph - The Empty Tomb - in Whitehall. This was followed by the ceremony of the burial in State of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. This memorial and ceremony represented the million men who laid down their lives for their country in the Great War.