

## Spy Fever in Peterborough During WWI – By David Gray

At the beginning of the war especially, the country was gripped with ‘Spy Fever’. Nerves were becoming a little frayed at Messrs. Werner, Pfleiderer and Co. due to their Teutonic name and they wished to make it known through the local press that the whole Board of Directors were British born, and no foreign influence or control existed over the company. The company was incorporated in 1893, but the original concern, namely A. M. Perkins and Son, was established in London in the year 1831.



A sentry guarding a railway bridge

People were beginning to see ‘spies’ everywhere; on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> August 1914, just four days after war was declared, two travellers from Filey were arrested as spies at the Peterborough G.N. Station. They were eventually released when they were proved to be two harmless English gentlemen. There were many stories of spies in the Peterborough neighbourhood, and it was assumed that railway movements were being watched closely by foreign agents. Many of the stories however were attributed to excited imaginations. There was the story of a couple of women watching the passage of Government Specials on the Great Northern line being eyed closely by a sentry. Also, it was said a man was seen, “furtively”, leaving a closed truck which was standing on a siding at New England, Peterborough, and who was detained. These spy stories were to become more outrageous as the war went on.

Over one hundred Special Constables had been sworn in at Peterborough ready to be called on in an emergency. The firms of Werner, Pfleiderer and Co., Aublet, Harry and Co., and Peter Brotherhood’s were all guarded day and night. The official figures were: City Special Constables 74, Werner and Co. 20, Aublet and Co. 8, and G.N.R. 6.

### The Editor’s Dilemma

On Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> October 1914, the ‘*Peterborough Advertiser*’ had to publish a justification for something that it did not believe in. More than that, something that it had not long before preached against. This was the oppression of German born citizens living in the district. It is clear that the editor was not happy with the situation and he dedicated an enormous column to an explanation in which he struggled with his conscience on one hand, and his patriotic duty on the other. The new rules were brought in by the government with foreign spies in mind, plus the desire to quell the riots that were taking place around the country, prompted by the presence of ‘enemy aliens’, such as those that occurred in Peterborough in August 1914. The column is printed in full below:

### ‘WHY WE SHED THEM

Perhaps amongst the more surprising reading in our columns today may be included the rounding-up and banishment to a concentration centre at York of eight residents in the City of Peterborough. With one exception – Hungarian – they were all born Teutons. The Chief Constable of Peterborough, who has acted throughout with care and restraint, was impelled to take this extreme course under the special orders and powers of last September in order to maintain the peace of the city and its property inviolate.

Everyone agreed that for the borough to have to go through the riots, turmoil, apprehension and expense of last August soon after the outbreak of war was an intolerable thought. Some of the German residents now interned at York appear to have been the especial objectives of the rioters, whilst others had since been associated with untoward rumblings of coming disturbances which were undoubtedly developing, for the main reason that these Teutons, although apparently good residents and of long domicile, were German born and unnaturalised aliens. Their presence was, therefore a menace to the peace of the city and to the security of property, and for their safety and the safety of life and property their removal from the sons of local wrath became an absolute necessity.



Riot in Westgate, Peterborough, 1914

We all had hoped that the incendiary spirit of some portion of the population had evaporated. The continued arrival of the dispossessed Belgian refugees in our midst – in itself a pitiful sight and enough to harden the hearts of all who see them against their adversaries – and the very acute cry against the continued presence of spies of the Kaiser in the United Kingdom – both real and imaginary – once again fanned the flame of indignation and in Peterborough led to deepening designs

amongst sections of the people which could have eventuated one way only. A renewal of the rioting was not to be thought of for one moment. And that is why we shed the Germans in our midst.

The peace of the individual and the peace of the city were in the balance. The authorities had to decide for the peace of the city. In several cases those we shed this week were quite young people who, in the ordinary way, would have been in the fighting line of the enemy but were unable at the time to get a passage or exemption. Therefore, had they been successful in their prospective national responsibilities they would have been away from Peterborough as they are now. So that the hardships of their business and social disruption are in that light minimised. In one or two cases where individuals had been rounded up in the city, they were able to produce naturalisation papers, and were exempted. A naturalised alien, we need scarcely remind our readers, has acquired exactly the same rights of citizenship as any other British citizen, and has acquired them as a result of a solemn contract between himself and this country.

The suggestion, remarks the 'Daily Chronicle,' made to intern even naturalised Germans, is nothing less than that 'we should deliberately dishonour the nation's signature, and plunge into precisely that 'scrap of paper' immorality which our whole national instinct has so honestly revolted against. The thing could not be done without Act of Parliament; and Parliament will never commit such an iniquity.

It may be said that the cleverest alien spies may have naturalised themselves as an obvious precaution. No doubt that is true; and it is also true that (as trials show) some of the most dangerous spies are British born of unimpeachable British parentage; yet no one proposes on that account to lock all Britishers up. Some precautions against persons recently naturalised (say in the last ten years) might be feasible, e.g. that they should be registered, or that they should be debarred living in naval towns. But it is very questionable how much would be gained thereby.

The spy peril has its very serious side, which we certainly do not underrate; but it is only a policy of active vigilance by the police, military and naval authorities that will avail much against it. Your really dangerous German spy is just as likely to be British, Dutch, Spanish or Scandinavian by nationality as German or ex-German; you will never stop him by locking up any given category of men; you need a constant official vigilance. In the case of Peterborough, the peace of the city was once again in peril, and that is why we had to shed those who in the ordinary way in the days of peace enjoyed the confidence and trust of their neighbours.'

It is clear that the editor had a very low opinion of certain elements of the population of the city and that they had forced the Chief Constable's hand. Also, he did not really think that the new restrictions were going to do a great deal to combat the spy situation.

### More Spy Scares

Spies were being hunted high and low. On Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> August, Mr Fred McSorley of Dogsthorpe Road, Peterborough, was arrested as a spy with two friends whilst driving near Bedford. They were taken to the barracks but released after their explanations were confirmed.



A lonely signal box

There was a scare on the London and North Western Railway at Water End, Woodston, Peterborough, on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> September. A signalman on duty in the box opposite the Peterborough bathing place, which was about 150 yards distant from a small wooden bridge at Water End, noticed two strangers engaged in looking up and down the railway line. Whilst one made observations the other appeared to be jotting down particulars which were being passed on to him. After a time, the strangers moved off and thinking

their actions were suspicious, as soon as the signalman was relieved, he passed the information on to one of his superiors. This news was deemed sufficiently important to warrant a man being placed at the spot the same evening to guard the bridge over which many troop trains had been passing.

Later in the evening there was a startling sequel. At about 8:50, whilst Signalman Woolley was on duty in the box, he heard the sound of a gun and in his own words: "it was not like an ordinary shot at a wild fowl, but a good businesslike crack of a revolver or gun." The shot appeared to have been fired from the Peterborough side of the river. To add to the puzzle, someone came along to the box and said that the man on duty had disappeared. He eventually turned up safe and sound not having heard the shot, which it was thought could have been aimed at him! The affair was reported to the police

but after due enquiries had been made, the two “foreign looking” men seen passing along the towpath were thought to have been innocent travellers and the shot probably a fog signal.

### Boy Scouts do their Bit

In order to release men for other duties, Boy Scouts in Peterborough were now guarding bridges and telegraph poles on the Great North Road, London Road and Lincoln Road. They were also taking the number of every car that passed while on duty at twelve hours a stretch!



Troop of boy scouts

A patrol of eight Boy Scouts from the Longthorpe Troop under Scoutmaster B. W. Ilott, were now off to guard a certain portion of the East Coast in Lincolnshire, and would take up their duties on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1914. It had also been found necessary to employ Boy Scouts to assist in guarding railway bridges in the Isle of Ely. It had been decided by the headquarters that a special War Service badge would be issued free to all Scouts who had performed twenty-eight days special voluntary service of at least three hours each day. The badge would be granted on the recommendation of the Scoutmaster, after approval by the Commissioner.

The following scheme for putting the Scouts in Peterborough and the county districts on a footing of instant readiness for any emergency, either in time of peace or war, had been submitted to Scoutmasters in the Soke and North Hunts. The Scoutmaster was asked to pick out no fewer than four Scouts and not more than nine of his troop, whose names and addresses would be put up on a board, kept permanently in his clubroom, and a copy kept by him. The list would be called ‘The Emergency Call List,’ and only those Scouts who were of exceptional merit were to find a place there, and only those who promised to do their utmost to answer immediately, either by day or night, an emergency call from him or the officer in command of the troop at the time.

To be on this list would be considered the greatest Troop honour accorded a Scout. The idea was that on a sudden emergency occurring in wartime, such as a panic on invasion; or in peace, such as an extensive fire, the Commissioner would only have to send a note or wire to the Scoutmaster stating: “Emergency Call, meet at Guildhall,” (or any other place required). The Scoutmaster would then collect his Scouts on the list who would be ready in sufficient numbers to deal with the initial stages of the emergency, and could also be sent out to collect the rest of the Troop.

The Scouts, as they had been right from the outbreak, were continuing with their war work. The Longthorpe Troop had supplied a patrol at the river entrance, Sutton Bridge, eight Scouts under their Scoutmaster. They went there on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1914 and returned on Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> December, to be relieved by the patrol from Woodston, under Mr. S. B. Collett. The Boy Scouts were serving under the Admiralty; they did three hours day and three hours night duty, and had, it was said, a cold but comfortable time. The admiralty supplied oil skins and sou’-westers, etc. and the local Red Cross helped with blankets. The people at the coast were very generous. The Scouts were under cover but

had to do all their own cooking. The boys were described as “plucky” for tackling the job; the nights were foggy and lonesome.

### **Sinking of HMS Bulwark**

Another reason for fearing the activities of spies occurred when the Royal Navy Battleship HMS BULWARK took a number of local men with her when she blew up and sank in harbour due to an internal explosion on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1914. It was now reported that among those killed were Leading Seaman Herbert Sydney Partridge, aged 33, of 52, Walpole Street, Peterborough, who had been employed at Werner’s, and was the son of John and Elizabeth Partridge. Also, Able Seaman John Alexander Stewart, aged 33, the son of Graham H. and Fanny Stewart, and husband of Mary F. Stewart, of ‘Llanberis, 85, Dogsthorpe Road, Peterborough.

There was a lot of talk at the time about spies and sabotage being connected with the destruction of the ship, but nothing was ever proven, and it is more likely that the explosion was caused by old and dangerously out of date shells in the ship’s magazine which exploded and ripped her apart. This was not the only occasion when this happened during the war. Another theory was the overheating of cordite charges that had been placed adjacent to a boiler-room bulkhead.

### **Boy Scouts**



Boy scout taking a message

In 1915 the Peterborough All Souls troop of Boy Scouts had been doing a fortnight of patrol duty at Sutton Bridge, under Scoutmaster and Acting-Assistant Commissioner P. C. Clarke. They had been accompanied by Father Heptonstall, and camping out and cooking and “fending for themselves, the whole troop were as brown as berries.” They returned on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> August.

On Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> August, a picked patrol of St. Mary’s Boy Scouts (6<sup>th</sup> Soke of Peterborough) under Scoutmaster A. G. Barley proceeded to the East Coast for a fortnight’s coast watching duty. The boys spent a strenuous fortnight taking their turn with other patrols of scout troops. Full watches were kept day and night, the station being situated on the lonely flats of the Fenland. They were housed in a hut, and between guard duties they were kept busy preparing meals and carrying out other orderly duties. The Scoutmaster directed the routine at the station in accordance with Admiralty orders, occasionally taking his turn at night duty.

### **Guarding the Peterborough Bridges**

The Mayor of Peterborough, Mr. J. W. Williamson, presided over a meeting of Special Constables of the City at the Guildhall on the night of Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> October 1915, in order to consider a request made by the Military Authorities that certain railway bridges in the Borough should be guarded by Special Constables voluntarily, as was being done in other parts of the country. “Failing this,” said the Chief Constable, in a circular addressed to the Special Constables, “it will mean a detachment of soldiers being taken from more important duties to guard these bridges.”

There was a large turnout of more than 60 of the 120 Special Constables in attendance. The mayor said that when the request came the Watch Committee thought the best thing was to ask the Special Constables to volunteer; the duties would take place during the night, and would be unpaid, relying on their patriotic spirit. Until they knew how many would come forward, they could not say how the watches would be divided and how many hours would be required from each one. The more volunteers, the shorter the watches.



Special Constable acting as guard in WWI

The Corporation would place guard boxes on the bridges to sit in, and Mr. Walshaw would see that there was a fire so that in cold weather there would at least be some little comfort. He thought that every man should have a special badge showing that he was carrying out this service in addition to his Special Constable badge. Mr. Sturton said that he would be pleased to volunteer and hoped that he was setting a good example.

Adjutant Andrews said that there would be plenty of volunteers if they knew exactly what was expected of them. If a motor car came along, what were they to do? He was prepared to do his part on road or bridge, but he should like to know what he had to do.

The Chief Constable said that the thing to be guarded against was that some alien enemy should attempt to blow the bridges by explosives.

Mr. Whitsed asked if they could not have more light on these bridges. If the bridges were well lit, it would help more than anything else to prevent an attempt to blow them up, for a man could be seen coming. The lights could be turned on upon receiving a signal.

A constable present said that in another town the Special Constables were drilled with firearms once a week.

Mr. A. C. Ferrier suggested that all those who could pass an examination should be permitted to carry a revolver.

Mr. T. I. Slater said that if 56 men would volunteer, the bridges could be guarded by four pairs of constables each doing a six-hour shift. Mr. Sturton replied that six hours was too long.

Mr. Slater stated, "Personally, I don't think there is much danger. If spies had intended to do this work, they would have attempted it before now. Besides, to blow up a bridge takes a little time in preparation."

Mr. Grimes spoke of his experiences guarding a bridge the previous winter with the platelayers. He told the guards not to go on the bridge with an armed man as because of the way the bridge was constructed, they couldn't see right across it, and if the man with the gun shouted, they couldn't hear

him either, and then he was likely to shoot first and ask questions later.

Mr. Alan Ruddle thought that the Special Constables of Peterborough had been let off extremely lightly compared with Specials in other parts of the country. If they were now asked to guard the bridges they should do so. He had much pleasure in volunteering.

Mr. Sturton said he thought they should pledge at the meeting to obtain at least a hundred men, so that they should not need to be on duty for six hours at a stretch. Mr. Riseley said he was willing to do his part. Mr. Sturton went on, "If there are nightly squads of eight, let us have a whip round and buy eight or twelve revolvers, which could be passed round every night.

Mr. L. C. Pullan then grandly suggested that they should have rifles and bayonets, to which Mr. Turner added that they should have rifles, bayonets, ammunition and cloaks. Mr. Pullan saying that they should have twelve cloaks, "a large cloak would cover everybody."

Mr. A. E. Craig then said, "But it would be inconvenient in size. Imagine me wearing the same cloak that Mr. Charles Vergette had found comfortable!" Mr. Vergette added, "At any rate, you wouldn't find much in the pockets!" At which finally there was laughter.

Mr. Whitsed suggested that the Chairman of each Ward, with the Mayor and Chief Constable, should draw up a timetable of watches that should be worked each week. He hoped they would not have to watch more than three hours each time. Eventually it was decided that each watch would last four hours and practically everyone in the room volunteered for duty on one day or another. It was agreed that other volunteers would still be accepted.

By the end of 1915, which is when this last story appeared in the *Advertiser*, spy fever had died down. There were no more stories regarding spies, at least none I can find in the local press. Finally, it is hoped that the Boy Scots could look forward to nights spent sleeping in their own beds again, although they may have been used to the end of the war to guard bridges. These duties carried out by young boys in the defence of their country is not very well recorded and should be better known.