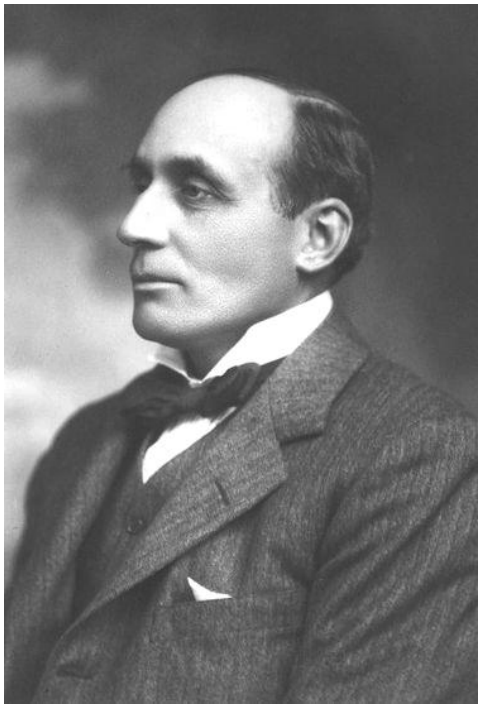
Sir Richard Winfrey M.P. (1858-1944) – David Gray



Sir Richard Winfrey M.P.

Thanks to Andy Flindall for giving me a copy of a reprint of Sir Richard Winfrey's autobiography which was published in 1938. Sir Richard was the Liberal M.P. for South West Norfolk from 1906 to 1923, then Gainsborough 1923 to 1924. He was also Mayor of Peterborough in 1914 when the First World War broke out. His son reprinted the book in 1983. Some of the details regarding Sir Richard's activities during WWI and those of others he recorded in his account are well worth looking at as they covered aspects of the war that we very seldom hear about.

Parliament reassembled in November 1914 and a lot of time was taken up voting for vast sums of money for the war and for loans to Belgium, Serbia and the British Dominions. That was just the beginning, later came loans to Russia, France, Italy, in fact eventually Britain was to arrange loans to help finance all the Allies at one time or another. In March 1915 the Prime Minister asked for another vote of credit this time for £250,000,000, the largest vote of credit ever asked of parliament by any minister in this or any other country. After only 100 days later Britain had spent the equivalent of the cost of fighting the Napoleonic wars for ten years.

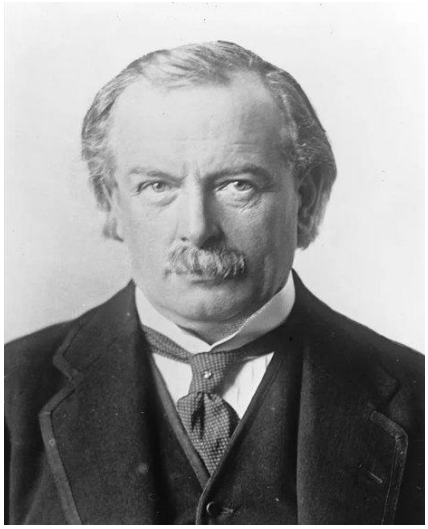
Now began a serious rise in food prices and Sir Richard noted there was some hoarding of food by citizens in Peterborough "*who ought to have known better*." This of course was happening elsewhere in the country too. There was also now a drink problem in parts of the country due to "*men earning much more money now than they know what to do with*," and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, had to introduce the Defence of the Realm Amendment No. 3, to give the Government special powers to deal with the problem. One example of the problem was quoted:

"*In a shipyard last week where a warship is under repair, work on the inner bottom of the ship was so badly carried out as to suggest at once on inspection that it could not have been done by men who are sober. It was dangerous and had to be condemned. In the same yard (and it is common in most others) drunken men, nominally at work, have had to be removed. Men are bringing or smuggling liquor into the yards in bottles, and facilities for buying spirits in bulk at public houses and at licensed premises must be stopped*."

Drastic restrictions were necessary. The result was shortening of the hours of supply and a large increase of taxation on drink.

In May 1915 a coalition Government was formed. Lloyd George left the Exchequer and became Minister of Munitions. After this, there were no further complaints of a shortage of shells during the whole war. More votes of credit were passed with a daily expenditure of £2,660,000, "*The biggest financial operation in the history of the world*."

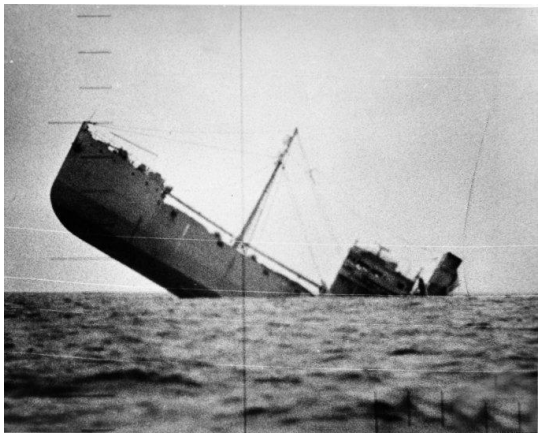
In September 1915 a sixth session passed another vote of credit. After thirteen months of war Britain had trebled its national debt and doubled national taxation. From then on Britain started borrowing from America; the first loan of £100,000,000 was for a period of 10 years at 5% interest. As an example of where the money went, separation allowances to dependents of soldiers and sailors was now amounting to £1,200,000 a day. In November the Prime Minister asked for £400,000,000 "*to carry us on to February 1916*."



David Lloyd George

At the end of 1915 beginning of 1916 the National War Savings scheme was started which continued throughout the war. In January 1916 compulsory service (conscription) came into operation and in February there was another vote of credit. Britain was now spending at the rate of £4,400,000,000 a day. The fleet had transported to different battle fronts 4,000,000 men, 1,000,000 horses, 2,500.000 tons of stores and 22,000,000 gallons of oil, not to mention munitions of war.

In the budget the estimated expenditure for 1916 was £1,825,000,000, £509,000,000 to be raised by taxation. Income tax rose to 5 shillings and there were new taxes on sugar, tea, coffee, entertainments, railway tickets, matches and table waters. The Daylight Saving Bill was passed and the Liquor Control Board formed. Food supplies were now being seriously threatened by German U-boats. In December 1916 Sir Richard Winfrey was asked by Lloyd George, who was now Prime Minister, to join the Government as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, which he agreed to do.



German submarines were now taking a terrible toll on ships bringing foodstuffs from abroad. Had his continued at the rate of the first six months of 1917 our population and the fighting forces might soon have been starved into submission. Fortunately our Navy found various methods of reducing this menace as the months went on [introducing the convoy system, better depth charges, early sonar, more aircraft patrols, ships fitted with rams and dazzle camouflage].

In 1915, 242 ships were sunk; in 1916, 338 ships; the figures jumped up in January 1917, to 44 in that month. The next two months were worse still, until in June the total was 101 for the month (407,270 tons). In July, 87 ships (353,185 tons) was the highest peak, from there, there was a steady decline in numbers.

Food prices were soaring and the question was: how could we ease the situation by legislation? We had to devise a means of producing more food at home and to ration the population. The greatest difficulty was that so many of the best agricultural labourers were serving at the front. Some were recalled and the women of the country responded to the Government's appeal for land workers.

The Corn Production Act was passed in early 1917 to encourage the growing of more corn. It guaranteed the farmers minimum prices for wheat and oats and a minimum wage for agricultural workers. Also, it restricted the raising of agricultural workers rents and increased cultivation by ploughing up grassland in all parts of the country. In 1917 some 975,000 acres of grassland was brought under the plough in England, Ireland and Scotland, whilst the programme for the 1918 harvest was 3,000,000 acres. For this work, 120,000 men were made available from the Home Forces and other sources. The women's land army was brought up to a strength of 25,000 which did not include the part time services of all the quarter of a million women locally available.

Land Girls

Implements had to be provided for the grassland farmers, tractors, ploughs etc. This required much organisation as the implement makers had turned their works into munitions factories. There were 5,000 new tractors purchased and an extra 60,000 horses either purchased or borrowed from the Home Army. A large order for tractors was placed with the Ford Company of America and the first consignment was sent straight to the bottom by a German submarine causing a wait of many weeks for the next delivery. Other arrangements were made for the supply of seed wheat and fertilisers. The outcome of all this effort was that in 1918 we increased the wheat area by 2,960,000 acres at a total cost to the country in the two years of £4,397,000.

Covering aircraft wings with linen

Another essential activity was the growing of flax. There were fears that there might be a shortage of linen for the building of aeroplanes [yes, the fuselages and wings of aircraft in WWI were mostly covered with linen]. New factories were erected and some 20,000 acres of land devoted to the growing of flax. All this took time and at the time of the Armistice the first crop of flax was only just coming in.

Another important duty that fell to Sir Richard was to make preparations for those soldiers and sailors, fortunate enough to survive, who desired to settle on the land – the land they had fought for and for which many had died. Already in 1917 a large number of wounded men and men suffering from other disabilities had been dismissed from the service and desired to have outdoor occupations on the land. Sir Douglas Haig was asked to get some idea of how many men might have to be provided for. This could only be partially carried out, but 97,000 men drawn from a large number of units were asked and 17,000 said they wished to settle on the land. Forty percent of one Suffolk Regiment answering in the affirmative. The best calculation that could be made was

about 15% of the army of five million wanted to settle on the land, around 750,000. This was a massive problem and Sir Richard pushed through Parliament the Small Holdings Colonies Act, under which eventually some 25,000 acres of land was secured.

Many acres were donated to the Government by landowners who had lost sons in the war. Other land was bought and a considerable acreage of Crown Lands was also secured. The 'colony' that interested Sir Richard most, whose job it was to look at suitable sites, was the thousand acres of Crown Land (three large farms) at Holbeach, in Lincolnshire, because it was situated within five miles of is old home, and in the Spalding Division, where he had been active in promoting small holdings for the last thirty years. This colony was on some of the finest land in the country and extremely well adapted for intensive cultivation. He decided to adapt it for 10-acre holdings, feeling sure that a good living could be obtained if farmed on market garden lines. The farm houses and cottages were adapted, and the requisite number of new houses and buildings erected to accommodate 100 tenants.

Small-Holding

The cost was heavy, for building from 1918 to 1920 was excessively dear, but could not wait. There were scores of applicants clamouring for holdings. Sir Richard personally interviewed applicants at Whitehall for the colony in Lincolnshire. Most had been invalided out of the Army in the last months of the conflict and most had some disability. Writing years after Sir Richard confirmed that most of the original tenants made good. A few were remarkably successful with bulbs, flowers and fruit.

The best purchase under the Small-holdings Colonies Act was that of the Guy's Hospital estate at Sutton Bridge, South Lincolnshire, on the borders of the Wash. In 1919 the Ministry acquired the whole of the estate of 6,542 acres, a bargain for the Governors of the Hospital. By 1926, after farmhouses and other buildings were erected, there were 124 tenants. By the time Sir Richard had written his autobiography (1936) he could confirm that the estate had grown to 356 tenants. After the war, Parliament had to tackle the problem on a much larger scale by passing in 1920 the Land Settlement Act, and calling upon the County Councils to put it into operation. Altogether, no less than £17,000,000 was spent on the purchase of land and the building of houses and provision of equipment for ex-servicemen throughout the country.

Sir Richard Winfrey now goes on to tell about his year as Mayor of Peterborough in 1914.

In 1914 I accepted the Mayoralty and little did I think it would be such a strenuous year of office. Everything went quietly until the Great War came along. I was in my seat in Parliament to hear Sir Edward Grey's momentous statement on the night of August 4th and then I took the midnight train home.

The next day recruiting commenced in earnest and before many days the first batch of recruits assembled in the Cathedral Precincts. As Mayor it was my duty to address them, many alas, never

returned, but few, if any of us at that gathering realised that the manhood of the country would be almost drained to the utmost of its resources for four long and terrible years of bloody conflict.

Within a week I had called a town's meeting and started the ball rolling for the Prince of Wales' fund and money came almost without asking for it, it poured in from all classes rich and poor alike. In a very few days a sum of £3,910 was sent up to London. The whole country responded with alacrity. I know that later in the war we wished we had saved some of it for our own Red Cross and hospital purposes.

During those four years of effort and anxiety our local Red Cross committee by all sorts of efforts raised a total sum of £29,593. Out of this we sent £771 to the Serbian Relief Fund, £376 to the French Red Cross, £121 to Romania, £301 to the Y.M.C.A. at the front, £332 to St. George's Fund for Sailors, £390 to the Lifeboat and Mission to Sailors, £258 to Mrs. Fitzwilliam's hospital and several to other funds. In addition we raised several hundred pounds for the Belgian refugees at Peterborough.

Street Charity Collections

Then we had the V.A.D. staff that met all the trains night and day taking wounded soldiers to hospital and serving out refreshments and other comforts. We established a hostel near the station for soldiers on leave or returning to duty who could not reach their destination and had to break their journey at Peterborough for the night, and it was open all hours of the day and night.

When our public hospitals became full we helped Mrs. Fitzwilliam to establish Milton Hall for partly convalescent men. In the last year of the war the Bishop's Palace was placed at our disposal and we spent a considerable sum of money in fitting it up for the purpose.

The record shows that 579,395 articles of different kinds were sent to hospitals at home and at the front. Amongst them were: 4,580 pyjamas, 1,946 bed jackets, 8,245 day-shirts, 1,946 night-shirts, 678 blankets, rugs and quilts, 3,519 shell pads, 955 body belts, 28,346 dressings, 666 mosquito nets, 2,544 sun-shields, 27,250 roller bandages, 4,071 hospital bags, 9,197 many-tail bandages, 1,159 Capeline bandages [a bandage shaped like a cap, used to cover the head or an amputation stump], 2,993 tee-shaped bandages, 64,042 operation swabs, 11,315 mufflers, 9,099 mittens, 16,576 day-socks, 1,086 towels, 3,436 handkerchiefs, 1,678 gas-masks and many other items.

Food and shelter was given in the hostel to 270,238 soldiers on leave. In addition, 5,883 miscellaneous articles made up of civilian clothing were sent to France for the French destitute and hundreds of parcels of food to our men in prison camps in Germany, and soap, tooth-brushes, games, razors, shaving-brushes, sponges etc. Also, 15,816 hospital requisites to allied armies. It was a colossal effort for us during the four years [and] a glorious record of devoted and sustained effort.

Then there were the Belgian refugees. Within a month of the war starting I was called upon by Lord Buxton and his London Committee to form a local committee at Peterborough. We hastily

commandeered six or eight vacant houses in Peterborough, bought second-hand furniture for all of them and two ladies of the committee took charge of each house. Then I started for Alexandra Palace where these hundreds of refugees were huddled together to bring a first batch of about 50 to Peterborough.

In an hour I had my crowd gathered together and marched them off to the station. I wired Peterborough we were coming and the scene when we arrived at Peterborough station beggared description – a large crowd stretching across the road cheering, and indeed women with tears in their eyes, greeting those poor forlorn creatures.

Belgian Refugees

We sorted the out as best we could at first, some to one hostel, some to another until we had them all fed and housed for the night. Later, other parties arrived until we had about 160 to take care of. I had to make a special appeal for funds to carry on. Four long years they were with us, and long before the end they became self-supporting, which was a great triumph or our organisation. As time went on we got employment for many. We started a workshop for the cabinet-makers and they produced over £200 worth of furniture. We got allotments for them, for the most part cultivated by the women folk, and there was a school for the children.

During the four years we had births, deaths and marriages, and finally, when the war was over, we sent them back to Belgium, not empty-handed, but with all the furniture of the hostels and other gifts, several truck loads of their belongings and a little money to help them restart their lives on their native soil. Although twenty years have now passed away, I receive each year Christmas greetings from several of the families.

Reading the Riot Act

The war had not started many days before the Chief Constable of Peterborough rang me on the telephone one evening about 10 p.m., saying "*Mr. Mayor, I am sorry to disturb you, but there is a riot in Westgate. The police cannot control the mob and you must please come down and read the Riot Act, which will enable me to call upon the mounted soldiers billeted in the town to come to our aid*." [The soldiers the Chief Constable was referring to were a unit of the Northamptonshire Yeomanry which were based in the Corn Exchange in Cowgate at the time].

I may say that we had in town two or three pork butchers of German extraction and it was said that one of them had been heard to say in a public house something which was considered to be disloyal. This news had spread from public house to public house and it was also said that one of the Town Councillors had stirred up a hostile feeling and suggested an attack upon this German's shop.

I mounted my bicycle and rode down to Westgate. Had I not seen it with my own eyes I could never have believed that Peterborough possessed such a crowd of hooligans of both sexes. The windows

of the shop were smashed and the mob were looting the pork pies and sausages and other commodities.

Rioters ransacking a shop in WWI

The police put me on an empty box and I made an appeal – so far as my voice would carry in the shouting and turmoil – but it had no effect. Indeed, they began to throw missiles at me, so as quickly as I could I read the needful sections of the Riot Act, mounted my bicycle, which I had hidden in a passage some distance away, and made for home. The horse-soldiers, who were most fortunately in the town for a few days, then cleared the streets. That was not quite the end, for on the Saturday after, another attempt was made to repeat the riot.

The fact is, some of our people, and some who ought to have known better, lost their heads entirely. One Councillor, I remember, came to me and reported that one of our Nonconformist ministers, who had a German name, was suspected of signalling to the enemy aeroplanes because he had foolishly turned on the light in his study before drawing down the blinds!

Of course all our streets were in darkness and our special constables patrolled the town to see that no lights were shown at any windows. That was quite necessary. Fortunately we escaped air-raids all through the war, but bombs dropped at Lynn destroyed some houses and killed two or three people.

Leaves From My Life
Sir Richard Winfrey
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