

Peterborough Petty Sessions in WWI – by David Gray

The Petty Sessions was the equivalent of our modern-day Magistrate's Court. These Sessions dealt with all manner of transgression whether committed by civilians, children or military personnel. Some of these examples from WWI do not relate to the war specifically, but they were all committed when there was a war on, and they indicate the minds of city people from that period and are no less interesting on a social level for that. All of these examples come from the pages of the *Peterborough Advertiser* in circulation at the time.

1914

Soldier Absent Without Leave



On a less patriotic note, Private Henry Bellamy Drakenfield, 'B' Company, Service Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment, stationed at Shorncliffe, made an appearance at the Petty Sessions at Peterborough, charged with being an absentee from his regiment since October 5th approximately ten days earlier. Drakenfield admitted the offence. The Chief Constable asked that the defendant be remanded until the arrival of a military escort. Drakenfield said he would rather go back, and he honestly meant it! The Chief Constable also said he had received a wire from the commanding officer stating that a military escort was being sent to take Drakenfield back to Shorncliffe. He was remanded.

More Trouble at the Butcher's

There were disturbances in Peterborough town centre on the night of Friday 14th May, when Mr. Frank's Butcher's shop in Westgate, which had already suffered considerable damage in the Peterborough riots some months earlier, was again attacked. The crowd, of which the majority were soldiers, began to gather soon after nine o'clock and in a very short time soon grew to an unmanageable size. A volley of stones, indicating that the attack had been organized, shattered the windows of the shop and it was said that the excitement was intense. A force consisting of the police and military commanded by Major Bains, acted with considerable restraint, while the Mayor, Mr. J. W. Williamson, went among the crowd and pleaded with them to behave with "traditional English justice." This policy eventually succeeded and the excitement died down. The soldiers went to their billets and the street was quiet by eleven o'clock.

The damage amounted to about £30.00 which was paid for out of the rates. On the Saturday morning, a soldier of the Essex Regiment, only sixteen years old, pleaded guilty to throwing a stone, and having been reprimanded by the Bench, was bound over. Other cases were dealt with at the Petty Sessions on Wednesday 19th. On Saturday 15th May, a repetition of the disturbances was prevented by military pickets patrolling the streets until nearly midnight. It can readily be assumed that this disturbance was initiated by the news coming back from Auber's Ridge, France, where hundreds of British soldiers, many from the Peterborough area, had been killed and wounded and a failed attack.

1915

Much Ado about Nothing

Nothing much seemed to happen in Peterborough. It was a small market town and if it hadn't been for the war, the newspapers would have been hard pressed to find much news to excite many of their readers. It is not surprising that the main items of interest usually revolved around farming, and news of a new fertilizer for use on the mangold crop for instance, was a real "page turner." Other 'items of interest' centred on the Magistrate's Court, or 'Petty Sessions,' where local people were brought to account for their transgressions. The Fitzwilliam Hunt was always reported in full, covering every field and hedge that the horses and hounds traversed, and inevitably, the local council meetings were also diligently reported. There was a strange fascination with the great age that some people managed to live to, and often the weekly issues carried a grainy picture of one or more old ladies in mourning clothes, looking like Queen Victoria, with their life story spread out below, sometimes interesting, often not. There was also a proliferation of advertisements from top to bottom, for goods such as pills and remedies, bicycles, corsets, collars and shoes. Strangely enough, this was often on the front page, completely filling it.

The war had not visited Peterborough, only the soldiers who were going to war. There were no civil defence services, no air raid precautions, no ration books, clothing coupons, or I.D. cards. People sometimes had accidents, but the law courts were the only real source of civilian interest. Causing a stir in front of the magistrates at this time we find the following:

Two brothers, Percy and James Egghoro, fishmongers of 16, Percival Street, Peterborough, were charged with being drunk and incapable in Narrow Street on 31st May. They were each fined 6s. and 1s. 6d. costs.



John Neaveson of Eye, found himself at the Peterborough Petty Sessions, summoned for moving 14 swine to premises at Newborough, when he had only been authorised to move them from Tallington to Eye. Mr. Neaveson said he had viewed the pigs with a certain amount of suspicion and had left them at Newborough to isolate them. He was fined 15s.

Cecil Frampton, a sergeant in the Army Service Corps based at Peterborough, was summoned for riding a motorcycle without a license. When stopped he told the policeman he didn't think it was necessary for a soldier to have a licence. He was fined 4s. and 6d.

Alfred Allen, labourer, his wife, Sarah Jane Allen and their daughter Beatrice Allen, all of 93, Westwood Street, Peterborough, were summoned for assaulting and beating Charles Henry Walker at Peterborough on 25th May. Charles Henry Walker, goods guard, 92, Westwood Street, was summoned for assaulting and beating Sarah Jane Allen at Peterborough on 25th May. Alfred Allen pleaded guilty, "in defence of my wife." The others pleaded not guilty. The cause of this scuffle, involving punches and the throwing of water was an argument over children and a ball. Some things, it appears, never change. All defendants were bound over for the sum of £10 to keep the peace for twelve months, and

each had to pay their costs.

Also in court were three more soldiers, all charged with being absent without leave. They were remanded until a military escort could take charge of them and return them to their units.

Another soldier, William Alfred Shafto, from Knarr Cross Farm, Thorney Dyke, was remanded on a charge of obtaining by false pretences from Mr. H. B. Vergette, Peterborough, one pair of thatcher's shears, one pair of pliers, and two whetstones, on the 2nd June.



In the same week there were fifty-five names on the casualty list published in the newspaper. These were Killed in Action, Died of Wounds, Wounded, Prisoners and Missing. Not all were from Peterborough, many were from the rural district, but no doubt there would have been many names that had been omitted due to lack of information about them. The 'Advertiser' stated rather coldly:

"We shall be obliged if friends of the killed or wounded will kindly notify us on receipt of their War Office communication so that this weekly list may be made as complete as possible up to the time of going to press. Photos of the slain must be plainly endorsed with rank, number and regiment, and to whom the picture is to be returned, whether used or not." This really was the news that everyone wanted.

1916

Petty Sessions

The Petty Sessional Courts took place at the Sessions House in Thorpe Road, Peterborough, each week and heard cases regarding minor misdemeanours, referring more serious ones to the higher court. On Wednesday 2nd February, Harriet Babcock was summoned for allowing her chimney to be on fire on 26th January. She pleaded guilty and P.C. Ball gave evidence that there were a number of thatched houses in the vicinity which could have been endangered. She was fined one shilling.

Harry Farrington, Horsekeeper, of Queen Street, Peterborough, was summoned for impropriety in Queens Street on 29th January. He pleaded guilty and said he was very sorry after P.C. Summerlin gave evidence. The Chief Constable said that there had been a great many complaints concerning the nuisance, Mr. Farrington was fined six shillings for what we now call anti-social behaviour.

Walter Lord, Fruiterer of 105, Eastfield Road, Peterborough, was summoned for employing a child; Fred Hunter aged 12 years, at 11pm on Saturday 29th January. He pleaded guilty and Sergeant Hare said that he saw the child in charge of a horse and trolley in Cumbergate at eleven o'clock at night. The boy said he had been at work since eight o'clock that morning. Mr. Lord said he honestly didn't think the boy was still out with the trolley. The Chief Constable said the hours of employment were so out of reason that he was compelled to take action and the defendant was fined ten shillings.

John Thomas Wilson of 21, Henry Street, Peterborough, was summoned for not extinguishing an external lamp in his stables and yard at Wentworth Street, at 8pm on 29th January. He pleaded guilty and P.C. Brooks, gave evidence of the incandescent light that he had seen. Not unreasonably Mr. Wilson said the light had been necessary for him to see as he put away his trolley. The Chairman said it was no excuse on a dark night and the Lighting Order had to be obeyed. The Chief Constable said he could see the light from Goodyer's Yard and was surprised that anyone would do such a thing knowing the regulations. The Chairman said "If you are careless yourself, we must see that other people are not endangered. You are fined ten shillings [although] you are liable to a fine of £100." The enforcement of these regulations, particularly in a market town like Peterborough that was never bombed throughout the whole of the war, seems at odds with the practical necessities of winning the war. Tradesmen were trying to carry out their business of supplying people with goods and services and at the same time were expected to see in the dark! Long working hours and short periods of daylight in the winter months were always going to make criminals of innocent people. This same problem would be seen in the Second World War, when more city people would be fined for "allowing your chimney to be on fire," although during that period the city did see some bombs being dropped.

Other businesses were thriving, and for some people, money was coming in rather than being paid out. On the same day that the Petty Sessions were taking place, Messrs. Sexton, Grimwade and Beck auctioned off 37 shire horses at their Horse Repository in Lincoln Road, Peterborough, belonging to His Majesty the King from his Sandringham stud. The King received a grand total of £4,477 from this sale.

School Cases

At the Petty Sessions on Wednesday 23rd February, there were a number of cases of neglect heard regarding children. Alexander Collier, timber porter of 15, Chapel Street, Peterborough, was summoned for not sending his daughter Ada, aged 13, regularly to school. Mrs. Collier said she kept the child at home because she herself had to go out to work. Mr. Collier was fined three shillings.

Samuel Sharpe of 64, St. John's Street, Peterborough, was similarly summoned and fined two shillings in respect of his daughter, Susan.



Florence Weston, 36, Goodyer's Yard, Peterborough, was summoned respecting her child Ivy. She had said to the attendance officer when he visited her home that he could "do what he liked about it." There hadn't been one full attendance for thirteen weeks; she was fined four shillings and sixpence.

John Spinks, Labourer, of 7, Wellington Street, Peterborough, was summoned for habitually neglecting to provide sufficient elementary instruction for his child Lawrence. Although Mrs. Spinks said she had sent the boy to school, he had only made seven attendances in eight weeks. The Education Committee asked for an Order to be made.

In the same session another batch of summonses were dealt with regarding breaches of the lighting order. More citizens had left un-shaded lights burning.

Lighting Order



Every week city people were coming up before the magistrates at the Petty Sessions because they had done something to contravene the lighting restrictions. Perhaps as a way of preventing otherwise innocent people from getting in trouble through making silly mistakes, or maybe because the risks were very real, the Chief Constable of Peterborough issued the following letter at the beginning of September: "Sir or Madam – I have to inform you that I am instructed to strictly enforce the lighting restrictions. There seems every reason

to anticipate enemy aircraft raids during the coming months, and whilst I appreciate the difficulty and inconvenience caused especially to shopkeepers, I do most earnestly ask for the co-operation of the inhabitants in carrying out this Order.

I am most anxious to avoid any proceedings, if the desired effect can be attained by other means, but any continued neglect to comply with the requirements of this regulation leaves me no option but to prosecute persons so offending. I am your obedient servant, Thomas Danby (Chief Constable)."

Among the many people summoned during the same week was William Curtis, a moulder, of 26, Padholme Road, Peterborough. He was summoned for riding a bicycle at 10.15 pm, on 25th August, and failing to obscure the front glass of an acetylene lamp. P.C. Stevenson proved the case and said the defendant said it was his first time out with the lamp that year. The lamp shone a distance of 50 yards up Broad Bridge Street. He was fined 7s. 6d. No doubt if he had obscured the lamp, he would have been prosecuted for having no light on his bicycle after dark!

At the same Session, Herbert Austwick, dairyman, North Street, Peterborough, was summoned for neglecting to shade the light from a skylight at his premises at 11.05pm, on 25th August. P.C. Sharman proved the case and Mr. Austwick was fined £1.

Edward Taylor, Sugar Boiler, 32, Padholme Road, Peterborough, was summoned for a similar offence at 10.40 pm on 24th August. P.C. Walker, who proved the case said the defendant asked him his name and number, and he replied "Walker No. 20," The defendant said "Walk off then." After some laughter Mr. Taylor was fined 25s.

Una Gilbert, Photographer's Assistant, Park Road, Peterborough, was summoned for neglecting to shade the lights at a photographic studio at 10.20pm on 22nd August. P.C. Ball said the light was coming from the studio in the Market Place. She was fined £3 after it was stated that there had been a previous conviction in connection with the same premises. Many other cases were heard.

Taking such a tough line amounting almost to a persecution of local people may have been happening in areas all over the country. However, the market town of Peterborough was never a target of the

Zeppelins and was never likely to be. Bombs had occasionally landed in rural areas but these were random occurrences. The police were 'keen' to prosecute and the magistrates 'keen' to hear the cases. Surely a little leniency was called for?

Items from the Courts



Various cases were heard at the Petty Sessions on Wednesday 13th September, one relating to a deserter. Private James Hyland, 8th Training Battalion, Australian Imperial Forces, was charged with being an absentee. P.C. Ball said he was on duty at 8.05 on the morning in question in Peterborough Park, when he saw the prisoner come out of one of the shelters. Noticing his untidy appearance, he became suspicious and questioned him. Hyland said he was on sick leave. P.C. Ball asked him to produce his pass, and he showed him a return railway ticket, dated 9th August, at the same time saying he had been robbed of his pass and money in Edinburgh. P.C. Ball was not satisfied and brought him to the police station where he admitted he had been absent from his regiment for more than a week.

When Hyland was charged at the station he said, "I will tell the whole story. An escort of twelve was taking me and eight others from Edinburgh to Salisbury Plain. Early this morning as we were approaching Peterborough we commenced to slow down. The escort was asleep so I thought I would take a chance. The door was locked and I climbed through the window and jumped off the train." Hyland suffered no injuries other than a graze to his chin and hand and he slept in the park all night. Hyland was remanded to await an escort. He said, "You see sir, I couldn't miss a chance like that. It was their duty to look after me. I bet there'll be a funeral when they get back."

There were the usual lighting cases, one in which Sarah Ann Morrilee, a married woman of 58, St. Mary's Street, Peterborough, was summoned for not shading a light with shutters, blinds or curtains on the night of 2nd September. She pleaded guilty saying she struck a match thinking it was time to get up for work. She was fined £1.

Alice Wing of 17, Cromwell Road, Peterborough, was summoned for a similar offence on September 10th. She said she knew nothing about the light being on, she thought her lodger had put out the gas as usual. She was fined 10s.

George Hutchings of no fixed abode was charged with begging in Orchard Street on 11th September. He was given one months' hard labour!

In the Children's Court a 13-year-old boy was charged with stealing three pairs of shoes, seven pairs of boots and four pairs of slippers to the total value of £4 14s. from his employer John William Thurlow Meehan, between 31st August and 7th September. The police took the boy to the police station for questioning and on the way, he admitted, "I have had some boots and sold them to my mother. I spent the money, but she didn't know I stole them." The stolen items were recovered from the boy's house. The boy pleaded guilty and his father was ordered to pay a fine of £4 2s. 6d. The boy was ordered to

receive four strokes with the birch rod and was bound over with his father in the sum of £5 to be of good behavior for two years.

Tough Justice at the Children's Court

A fifteen-year-old girl appeared before the Children's Court at the Petty Sessions at the end of October. She was appearing to receive a sentence for stealing a leather purse containing just over six shillings in cash, the property of Jane Stenson, at Peterborough on the 12th October. The girl's father pleaded for her to be given another chance. He did not want her sent away and he would do his best for her if she had another chance. He said he had a family of six children to look after including the girl, who no doubt helped to look after her brothers and sisters. The Bench decided to send the girl to a reform school until she was 18, and instructed the father to pay 2s. a week for her upkeep.

1917

Petty Sessions

Cases of people infringing the blackout were still being regularly heard at the Petty Sessions, although Mr. Harry Baker, of 221, Cromwell Road, Peterborough, who appeared before the court in the middle of April, was being summoned for riding a bicycle without either a front or rear light, which was a change to the normal proceedings. He was fined 2s. 6d.



More unusual was a case involving John Barnes, 18, Clarence Road; John Gripton, 218, Rogers Street; Harold Duncombe, 220, Walpole Street; and John T. P. Davis, 218, Walpole Street, Peterborough. All were summoned for, "Playing by way of gaming in the New England Recreation Ground, Peterborough, with certain cards and coins, at a game of chance called banker, on 7th April." All pleaded guilty. P.C. Chandler said the

lads were playing cards on a seat. When they saw him, they ran away, leaving the cards, twopence, and a pencil. Duncombe said they did not go into the recreation ground with the intention of playing and keeping each other's money, but they were each going to give the money they won back again. The Bench decided they had not been playing solely for the love of the game and fined them 4s. each.

Sage's Fined

William Tomlinson of Peterborough, appeared at the Petty Sessions at the beginning of November to answer a charge of being in charge of Messrs. Sage's engine room at Walton, Peterborough, where he did fail to screen lights at 9.55pm on the 19th October. Mr. R. Y. Norris appeared for the defendant and pleaded guilty. P.C. Goode said that in company with P.C. Hamps, he saw a bright light from a skylight at Messrs. Sage's. On going to the factory he found the defendant, who said he had been round with a hand-lamp. Mr. Norris said that on this particular evening the workmen had gone, and only two watchmen were there, with another man who was being instructed in the duties. Through some cause, no message was received at the works that an air raid was in progress. Superintendent Slaughter said the order was that someone should be constantly at the telephone. He tried to get the works on the

telephone at 8.10 that night, but failed to get a reply.

After retirement, the chairman stated that they had given a great deal of consideration to this case. It was extremely dangerous for any lights to be about a building when the warning for air raid action had been given. There would be a penalty of £20, and the court was of the opinion that it should be paid by the firm, for there appeared to have been negligence on the part of the firm in not providing for sufficient warning of their watchmen who had to go about the works with their lamps.

The air raid in question would have been in another district and a general warning would have been sent out. There were no direct air raids on Peterborough during the First World War.

Co-operative Stores Robbed

A case of shop breaking was reported to have taken place at the Park Road, Co-operative Society Stores on the night of Wednesday 13th March. About £32 was believed to have been taken along with other items. On the Wednesday night a whist drive and dance had taken place in the Co-operative Hall and as a result the premises was not locked up until the party broke up at around eleven thirty. When the caretaker arrived to unlock on the Thursday morning the break-in was discovered. It appeared that someone entered through a back window and found their way to the cash office of the grocery, drapery and furnishing departments. A sum of £32 was found to be missing from the tills along with a wristwatch, four boxes of cigarettes and a quantity of stamps.

It was surmised that the culprits entered by an unlocked window at the back, and hid themselves away until the store was locked up for the night. The tills had evidently been broken open with a chisel which had been found on the premises.



The thieves at the Co-op could expect a stiff sentence if they were caught, particularly if the case of Mary Deboo, who appeared at the Petty Sessions the previous week was anything to go by. Mary, a single woman from Paston, Peterborough, was charged with stealing a pair of boots from the property of Elizabeth Giddings on 1st February. Detective Sergeant Smith had gone to her house to question her about the missing boots and she denied taking them. He then told her he understood she had said she had a fresh pair of second-hand boots and he would like to see them. Mary went to her bedroom and brought down the boots, she then admitted taking them from Mrs. Giddings house on leaving.

Mrs. Giddings said she had employed Mary for three days before she left on her own accord. She had put the boots in a wardrobe and later noticed they were missing and reported the theft to the police. Mary was found guilty of stealing one pair of boots and was sentenced to one month's hard labour.

1918

Absent

Some men had their own way of avoiding the front, and the Petty Sessions heard from some of them at the beginning of July. Private John Suttleby, was charged with being a deserter from the Suffolk Regiment since 22nd May. The Chief Constable said that when the defendant was found at 16, Wellington Street, Peterborough, he had been dressed in civilian clothes and admitted he was a deserter. His uniform was in a bundle in the house. He was remanded for military escort.

John Edward Parker of Peterborough, was charged with being an absentee under the Military Service Act. He was handed over to the military authorities.

James Laving was also charged with being an absentee, the Chief Constable said he had worked in this country for a long time, but he thought he was an Irishman by birth. He was also handed over to the military authorities.

Later in the month Beatrice Rowlatt, 24, Percival Street, Peterborough, was summoned for aiding George Samworth, a deserter from the Royal Engineers in concealing himself in her house on 20th July. Mr. Sturton appeared for the defendant who pleaded guilty. The Chief Constable said the defendant admitted she knew the man was a deserter since September 1916. It was a serious offence, but he had not taken the case with a view to punishing her, but more as a warning.

Mr. Sturton pointed out to the court that the defendant was the wife of a soldier in France, and that the deserter was her own brother. He had been wounded and she did not want to turn him out of the house, though perhaps she wanted him to go. The Chief Constable said he took the case as a warning but if it occurred again, he should ask for more severe treatment. The Magistrates, taking into consideration what the Chief Constable and Mr. Sturton said, did not proceed to a conviction, but dismissed the case on payment of costs, but issued a warning that if another case of that kind came before them, it would be dealt with severely. It seems that someone else would pay for Mrs. Rowlatt's mistake!