

# ZEPPELINS Ow'er Our House

By Mrs Patricia Mary Rigg

"Eh up" said our Mam  
"What's that whirry noise going overhead?  
I got such a freet, I jumped reet out of bed"  
I was laid up in me bed with our Sam  
He's hard asleep and don't care a damn  
Two seconds later there's a terrible crash  
Me Mam and Dad in their nighties, out of bed made a dash  
"What the heck is it" said our Dad, in some freet  
Two seconds later a great light lit in the neet  
There's pandemonium outside as an explosive rips the air  
There's crying and shouting and lots of despair  
I geet out of bed and had a long stare  
The row of houses are gone up into thin air  
There's now't left but rubble and smoke, fire and stuff  
My best mate Jamie's house opposite, has gone up in a puff  
Mam says he was lucky and managed to scramble out  
I was glad to see him and gave a great shout  
"I'm glad your alive, if sooty and black  
I'd have no one to play with, if you hadn't come back"  
Mam and Dad have gone out to help, if they can  
There's lots of helpers and a big van  
Dad says "Lad, t'was a Zeppelin, a great jerry airship  
to boot  
Those bloody Germans are 'Cocking a snoot'"  
They was trying for Kirkless Steel works, which was a fair do  
But they must have got lost and hit Cecil Street on their  
way through  
The bobby said Harper Street was very bad  
Mum started to cry, and I said "why you're so sad"  
Mr and Mrs Tomlinson were blown reet out of their beds  
There's a lot of chaos and when found were quite dead  
Well what an exciting neet, with people all ow't street  
Some in their night cloths with now't on their feet  
Dad said if those Germans had come back with the Zeppelin  
There'd have been lots more damage and more folks  
to teck in  
Well I have never seen a Zeppelin but one flew over our roof  
I wish I had seen it and gathered some proof  
At school next day the whole school was excited  
Asking lots of questions and asked was I frighted  
I said "No" but I was really 'cause, it could have been  
our house  
And I might have been dead and quiet as a mouse  
I hope they don't come back dropping some more  
Were all going to air raid shelters, keeping safe that's for sure  
But I must admit, t'was a most exciting neet  
It gave Mam and Dad a horrible freet

So now I kneel down each night and say a nice prayer  
And say 'Thank you' to god. 'Cause me families still there  
Some families weren't so lucky and are gone now forever  
I bet those darned Germans think they are so clever  
But I heard that our army took exception to that  
And went and attacked Messines, its now just quite flat  
So don't mess with our country, leave us well alone  
Or we'll come and get you; we've our King on the throne  
Those Jerry's won't win cause we'll knock them for six  
And those bloody Germans will get a good kick  
We've got the best navy and soldiers and army  
We've got to win or my Dad will go balmy  
He says Lord Kitchener will sort out those Hun  
And back to Germany, the Jerry's will run  
He's our local hero, and a leader of men,  
My Dad says he gives him ten out of ten  
He's got it sorted and we really must win  
He'll defend England and we'll take it on't chin!  
So hurrah for Lord Kitchener we'll win if we try  
So mop up your tears Mam, there's no need to cry!

*Cecil Street, Wigan after a First World War Zeppelin raid. The raid happened on 12 March 1918 at 11pm. Seven people died as bombs were dropped on Wigan, Ince and Aspull. Wigan Council sent a letter to the Secretary of State complaining about the lack of warning and defence systems. This image shows local children standing and playing amongst the rubble and the hole created by the bomb.*



Damage following the Zeppelin raid, Harper Street, Wigan

BY DENNIS HOLLAND

# War Time Friends: Zeppelins over Wigan

Recently my mother, born 1921 in Wigan, met a friend with whom she worked at the ROF Chorley (Euxton) during the Second World War. She had not seen her friend Megan, now aged 91, for around 50 years but they had corresponded by letter and had spoken on the telephone. They had both worked in the wages department at Euxton calculating pay by hand, making up wage packets in cash and distributing them to workers on the ammunition sections.

The reunion brought back memories of a letter sent to mother by Megan, from one of

her friends with the name of Carson who had lived in Wigan. Megan originated from Walton-le-Dale and the letter recounted a visit to Friedrichshafen by the Carson's whilst on a holiday in 1976.

The letter from Mrs Carson relates to an air raid on Wigan by a Zeppelin in 1918. It reads: 'At about this time our interests had turned to family history research. My husband had been born in Wigan, on 11 April 1918 prior to a Zeppelin raid on the town during the night of 12/13 April when a bomb had fallen on land adjacent to his uncle's

farmhouse... thankfully there were no serious injuries to any members of the family, but others less fortunate, in Wigan were killed.'

The visit to Friedrichshafen by the Carson's included the Zeppelin Museum where they discovered the following about the raid: 'Five Zeppelins based at Wittmundhaven were ordered to attack England on 4 April but bad weather forced this raid to be cancelled; then on the night of 12 April with more favourable conditions forecast the raid was given the "go ahead".'

Our particular interest centered on the airship that arrived over Wigan. This we discovered from museum records was the German Airship Number L61 which had been built at Friedrichshafen in Factory Shed 2. In length it measured 644ft 8ins; its diameter was 78ft 5ins, whilst its height was recorded as 91ft 1in. It had been powered by five Maybach engines. On the occasion of this raid it had been under the command of veteran flyer Herbert Ehrlich; it had carried a bomb load of 6,600 pounds, including four bombs of 660 pounds each, their intended target Sheffield.

Once over the English coast the weather took hold, squally rain, low cloud and later when flying at 20,000ft an east-north-east wind was encountered making it impossible to hold the correct course, and Sheffield, completely blacked out, was missed.

Eventually a well-lit area came into their sights and was assumed to be the correct target, but in fact was Wigan. The town had received no air raid warning and the blast furnaces from the Wigan Coal and Iron company were throwing up a glow into the night sky. Fifteen bombs were released on the town killing seven people injuring a further twelve and causing damage estimated at over £11,600. The last bomb dropped, the four 660 pounders fell in open fields, damaging cottages and causing further injuries.

Airship L61 made it back to Wittmundhaven and to shed 'Willie' in spite of engine trouble and an encounter with Flying Boat Number N4283 crewed by

Captains G. E. Livecock and 'Bob' Leckie. During hostilities it had been engaged in 'scouting'. It was finally decommissioned in August 1920. Commander Herbert Ehrlich died in December 1921 without knowing he had missed the most prized target in middle England.'

This Zeppelin raid and others over Lancashire are detailed by Peter J. C. Smith in his book *Zeppelins over Lancashire* published in 1991. The book confirms the raid and illustrates the route of the raid over Wigan. Smith writes: 'Continuing northwards, Ehrlich soon spotted a glare from the six blast furnaces of the Wigan Coal and Iron Company (known locally as 'Top Place') at Kirkless on the eastern out-skirts of Wigan, where no warning of an impending air raid was given. Ehrlich could perhaps be forgiven

for mistakenly entering in his log that he had bombed Sheffield rather than Wigan.'

Smith gives the tally of five dead and nine injured from local information. Was the discrepancy from the German accounts influenced by war time propaganda I wonder?

The reunion of two war-time friends after 50 years has certainly brought to light the bombing of Wigan and other recollections that I did not know about and made me conscious of the changing face of Wigan, of air power and of communications. It makes me realise how important our local industrial heritage and history is and that we should not forget it.

#### References:

*Peter J. C. Smith, Zeppelins Over Lancashire, 1991*



Damage following the Zeppelin raid, Cecil Street, Wigan

# The Bombing

IT WAS just before midnight on Friday 12 April 1918, and the streets of Wigan were fully lit and the tramcars still running. Suddenly, the drone of a Zeppelin was followed by a loud explosion. More bombs fell and the flashes lit up the darkness as people ran into the streets. After dropping a total of 27 bombs, the raider fled as quickly as he had come, leaving a trail of devastation in Lower Ince, Hardybutts, Scholes, Platt Lane, Whelley and New Springs.

The raid on Wigan took place in darkness because Zeppelins had become vulnerable to attack by defending aircraft. For this reason, Zeppelin captains began to choose dark or misty nights, and consequently some lost their bearings and dropped bombs in the wrong places - this, it was believed, was the case with Wigan. Because of wartime restrictions, only vague reference was made to "a northern town" at the time and, in fact, the first full account of the Zeppelin raids was not made known until four years later, when it was printed in *The Times*. At first it was believed that the raider intended bombing the steel works at Kirkless, but if so, the bombs were wide of their target. A police inspector on duty in the King Street police station told later of receiving the news from private sources that hostile aircraft had crossed the coast but no official preliminary warning was given. However, although Wigan was taken completely by surprise, special constables went around blowing whistles - there were no air raid wardens then - and urging people to take shelter in their cellars.

## Blown to bits

The tale is told of one lady who came out in her nightgown and was told to

go back and put something more on. She did so and emerged a little later, still in her nightgown but with a hat on! When the skies lit up, people got out of bed, dressed and came out into the streets looking on the raid as a novelty. In Birkett Bank there was a gas lamp with an iron base, around which locals sat discussing how the war should be conducted. The lamp was blown to bits and never replaced.

Sixty years later someone who signed himself "Old Pembertonian" wrote, "In 1916-17, the Pemberton Colliery Company formed what could be called an emergency team of tradesmen and labourers to be on hand to help if required in the event of enemy action. Tools of all kinds were placed in large wooden boxes and kept in the power house at the colliery, an electrical generating house which was the assembly point for the 20 men. The team was recognised by the police and specials and wore "Special Constable" badges. I was 16 and had the job of knocker-up, with a list of men in case a message came from the police. My area was from Pemberton Library to just beyond the Wigan Hall boundary. On the night of the raid I was called and went knocking-up. A policeman, Bobby Ship said to me, 'I believe some Zeps have gone over towards Top Place and dropped some bombs.' We were given orders to disperse and report at eight o'clock in the morning. Then, we loaded a wagon with rolls of hessian, and specials and wore "Special Constable" badges. I was 16 and had the job of knocker-up, with a list of men in case a message came from the police. My area was from Pemberton Library to just beyond the Wigan Hall boundary. On the night of the raid I was called and went knocking-up. A policeman, Bobby Ship said to me, 'I believe some Zeps have gone over towards Top Place and dropped some bombs.' We were given orders to disperse and report at eight o'clock in the morning. Then, we loaded a wagon with rolls of hessian-based felt and bundles of wooden lathes and ladders. We made our way to Birkett Bank and started to shore up windows that had been blasted. Most of the inhabitants were just sitting

# of Wigan, 12 April 1918

there or wandering about not knowing what to do. The bomb must have dropped on a privy-closet and destroyed about six."

## Terrific bang

Another eye-witness wrote, "I was about 11 years old at the time and lived in Birkett Bank. We had a shop there and my father was a clogger and shoe repairer. I was sleeping with my brother in the back bedroom when we were awakened by a terrific

shouting. I remember seeing a big blaze at the top of Birkett Bank. The big gas lamp in the centre of the road had been demolished and I think the gas had been ignited. Next morning I went to look at the damage. All the window panes had been smashed and the floor was littered with glass, broken crockery and soot. The remarkable thing was that we had all walked barefoot over the broken glass and not one of us had a scratch."

A woman said she was writing a letter in her home in Northumberland Street,

fatalities. Five people - a husband and wife, a father and son, a mother in bed with a four-month-old baby - were killed outright. Mr. Tomlinson, a gas inspector, and his wife, of Harper Street, were asleep in bed when a bomb blast hurled them through the window and into a clay pit, killing them both instantly. William Harris of Whelley was carrying his two-year-old son downstairs when he was disembowelled, suffering terrible injuries from which he died. The child died instantly when a

attending to his equipment prior to going on duty. Mr. Walker died 20 minutes later.

## Visited by thousands

The bombed places were visited by thousands on the Saturday and Sunday following the raid. Collecting boxes were placed at strategic points to help the Distress Fund and over £300 was contributed. Some remarkable stories were reported after the bombing. Among the debris, the police found a fox terrier which could not be induced to come out. Investigations showed she had a litter of pups. In one house a bomb had dropped on a feather bed that had been slept in during the day by a miner working on night shift. The unexploded bomb was put under the stairs where the coal was kept. When the police arrived there was a long queue waiting to see the bomb. The householder had to be threatened by all the penalties of DORA (Defence of the Realm Act) before he could be persuaded to part with his dangerous souvenir.

A German communiqué from Amsterdam on Sunday 14 April stated: "On the night of 12 April 1918, Captain Strasser with one of our marine airship squadrons attacked important storage, manufacturing and shipment places of war in Central England. Birmingham, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and Grimsby were bombed. Despite the extremely strong gunfire and pursuit by airmen, all the airships returned safely."

This would seem to clearly indicate that Wigan had indeed been bombed accidentally.

James Fairhurst



Devastation in Whelley, Wigan, caused by a Zeppelin raid in 1918.

bang. Through the window I could see vivid flashes of light and I heard the smashing of glass. I had just covered my head with the bed clothes when the entire window frame fell across my bed. I heard my father shout 'It's the Germans! Get up!' We all got out of bed in great haste and went to my grandmother's house in Manchester Road, all of us looking like a troupe from Uncle Tom's Cabin, all covered with soot. Birkett Bank was crowded with people rushing about and

Whelley when a bomb dropped and she found a piece of shrapnel in her back gate. "The strangest thing was that when I went back into the house the pen I had been using had disappeared. I found it several years later embedded in the staircase wall - it had been blasted there by the bomb. Another thing was I found my canary dead in its cage the morning after the raid and could only assume it had died of shock."

But there were other

Cumberbatch of Scholes Lane died in the Infirmary from her injuries nine days after the raid. June Weston of Harper Street died in hospital on 19 April from pneumonia aggravated by shock. While the raid was in progress, Mr. George Walker of the Walmsley Arms went to the nearby police station to see if he could be of service in the emergency. He was shot in the stomach by the accidental discharge of the revolver of a mounted policeman who was

# REMEMBERING THE ZEPPELIN RAID ON WIGAN

Dear Editor,

I am a regular reader of *Past Forward* and although I have been an "exile" since 1936 I am still proud to be a Wiganer.

I remember distinctly the Zeppelin raid on Wigan in 1918. I was seven years old. My granny lived in Lorne Street behind St. Catherine's Church, and a bomb fell in her back garden, leaving a huge crater. Crowds of people came to see the damage and our Red Cross collecting box was soon filled.

I lived in Elizabeth Street at the time. My brother, sister and I were awakened by the bomb blast. We all

crowded into Mother's bed and pulled the covers over our heads. We were very frightened. Our Dad had been in the 5th Manchester Regiment and had been in the War from the beginning.

Thank you, James Fairhurst, for recalling the memory. It was not a happy one but very interesting. I am rather curious to know if many of my friends still remember that dreadful night.

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