

HOW DID THE WAR AFFECT THE TOWN?

When War was declared, the young men signed up for the great adventure. After all, they were pals together, joining together at the same time and into the same regiments – and not just the Kings Own Scottish Borderers. For instance, of the men employed in the Floors Castle gardens who joined the Seaforth Highlanders in 1917, five were reported in the same issue of the Kelso Chronicle in August 1918, as wounded in France. The mothers, wives and sweethearts as well as the older men waved them goodbye with pride and a belief that they could help and win. After all, they had been reading for weeks about ‘plucky little Belgium’ and the dreadful troubles in Serbia and anyway, the war was to be “over by Christmas”.

The pride in the soldiers remained, but soon reality began to bite as the German submarines began to take their toll of the British and allied merchant shipping from 1916. Gradually, and increasingly, over the next four years, foodstuffs, which had been part of the normal shopping basket, became scarcer and more expensive (rationing by price) – sugar from the West Indies, beef from Argentina, wheat to make bread flour from America and fruit (fresh and dried) from now war-torn Europe. In February 1918 rationing was finally introduced, with all its attendant bureaucratic orders and restrictions – apart from the actual rationing, you had to be registered at specified shops – and continued after the War. The shops lost their young male assistants, taking on more women and some, especially one-man businesses, closed.

The submarines also took their toll on the availability of raw materials such as cotton for clothing. The requirements of the forces came first. “Pure new wool” garments became increasingly scarce, and expensive. In 1918, the Government commandeered the entire Borders wool clip. As the years passed and the death toll rose, more and more in the town were wearing mourning as a grim reminder of the sacrifices by the young men. The Borders mill towns – Jedburgh, Hawick, Selkirk and Galashiels had full order books and many women took over jobs previously done by men in the mills, earning good wages (though lower than the men’s). Kelso had no equivalent industries and some women left the region for work in the munitions factories. Kelso’s main industry, farming, was absolutely vital and the Border Union Agricultural Society played an important role, not just in overseeing the needs and work on the farms, but also with their Free Gift Sales (where farmers donated items for sale to help, for instance, Belgian refugees). The churches, local organisations and groups of women got together to raise funds to send ‘comforts’ to the troops and to support refugees. The school children ran an ‘egg fund’, collecting eggs and donating them in turn, to the town’s hospitals.

The stringencies of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) became ever more intrusive, especially the imposition of black out. Kelso Rugby Football Club was closed during the war, but many sports were continued on a ‘friendly’ basis with quoiting extremely popular. Kelso’s July sports days were suspended for the duration.