

## Section 388

# Civil Defence

### Civil Defence

Apart from the formation of the Berks County Volunteer Regiment and later the Home Service Garrison Battalion of the Royal Berks, not much was done about Civil Defence. The main threat on the Home front was seen to be sabotage from German sympathisers, not that any evidence was ever produced of this, but apart from putting soldiers to guard key facilities not a lot of action was taken. Later however the threat from the air became apparant. In December 1914 a few raids were mounted by German aircraft and there some follow up raids into 1915, mainly on London and the east. In January 1915 the Kaiser gave permission for large scale raids to be made by Zeppelins which had the range to go almost anywhere in England. In the first raid on London on May 26th 1915 one airship dropped a ton of bombs and killed 7 people. It was not until September 1916 that British fighters were able to shoot one down.

The reaction was to set up searchlights and AA guns around vital targets and a blackout was established in coastal counties from Norfolk to Kent. This was extended to Berkshire by a Defence of the Realm Lighting Order dated 15/12/15, to come into effect in Reading a month later. People were forbidden to show a light after dark, although some lights could be deemed 'essential' by the Chief Constable. Cars could use headlights but size and power were closely prescribed. As they used the same text as had been used in East Anglia for the order for Berkshire, Reading motorists were enjoined not to park close to the sea with their lights pointing out to sea.

Sirens to warn of Air-raids were installed in early 1916. Details were given in the Reading Mercury of 12/2/16. When they sounded people had to switch off all lights and ensure that all gas and electricity was turned off at the main. Anyone not complying was '*subject to severe penalties.*'

### Military Control

Many buildings and pieces of land were taken under military control, usually donated free by their owners. These were use for all sorts of purposes from training through recreation to administrative offices. For example Sutton Seeds made the Corn Exchange available and many farmers provided camp sites.

A bitter dispute broke out in January 1916 when Reading Borough Council tried to levy rates on buildings at Reading School which had been taken into the control of the military. The School appealed to the War Office to either pay the rates themselves or increase the paltry payment but this was brusquely swept aside and the school told that it was their patriotic duty to continue paying the full rates.

The railways too were taken under Government supervision using an organisation known as the Railway Operating Division. As well as regulating affairs at home they also commandeered locomotives and rolling stock from the railways which were sent to France to supplement the French and Belgian railway systems.