

Zeppelins over the Black Country

The First World War could be called the first fully industrialised conflict in history. It was fought out on the battlefield, of course, but just as much in the factories and workshops that mass-produced the armaments and munitions, the tanks and transport vehicles, the mines and naval defences. Inevitably, then, the industrial heartland of England was the largest single contributor to that hardware.

The factories of the West Midlands contributed a bewildering range of products for the war effort, from hand-grenades and machine-guns to the motor-cycles they were mounted on. And the range was remarkably wide-ranging. Sunbeam in Wolverhampton delivered sea-planes to the Belgians on Lake Tanganyika; the Horseley Iron Works in Tipton sent out transporter bridges and steel barriers to Scapa Flow; Kenricks of West Bromwich made the enamelled mess-tins and water bottles for the soldiers on the Front.

It was also inevitable, then, that once they had the capability, the German war machine would seek to neutralise those factories. And since they were unlikely to be able to do so on the ground, they would do it by air instead.

In the first few months of 1916 the people of the West Midlands felt the war come to them in the shape – the very large shape – of the Zeppelin. Almost 600 feet in length, the Zeppelin remains the largest combat aircraft ever to have flown, and delivering the same heady cocktail of incendiaries and high explosives we would normally associate with the Second World War.

One particular night brought death and destruction to the Black Country. And if Birmingham was spared, then was more by luck than judgement.

On the evening of January 31 1916 nine airships headed across the English Channel to deal with the industrial centres of the Midlands and the North-West. Their primary target was Liverpool, but German navigational aids were not quite up to the standard of their aeronautics. From that high up, and especially to an untrained eye, a Black Country canal can look much the same as the River Mersey. Time to run for cover.

Travelling at around 50 miles an hour, Zeppelin L21 was the first to arrive at about 8.30 pm, and for Merseyside read Tipton. Three high explosive bombs dropped around Union Street, killing fourteen individuals, including three generations of the same family.

Lower Bradley was next to suffer, followed by Wednesbury, where a further fourteen deaths occurred in the vicinity of King Street. And so the pilot blundered blindly on towards Walsall, delivering his payload with random precision. The Congregational Church was hit first, then the grounds of the General Hospital. Once L21 was over the centre of Walsall, it claimed its most high-profile casualty. The Lady Mayoress – Mary Slater – was sitting on-board the No. 16 tram on Bradford Place when the explosion hit her. She died of her injuries several weeks later. The spot where the bomb landed is now marked by the Walsall cenotaph.

And with that the killing was over; L21 turned east and crossed over the Norfolk coast before landing safely at Nordholz.

If the exploits of L21 had been tragic, those of L19 were closer to farce. It was overhead by about 11.00 o'clock the same night, looking in vain for Birmingham. With the city concealed under black-out darkness, L21 wandered towards the Black

Country, following much the same route as its predecessor. The fires lit by L21 gave a rough indication of where to go. However, the bombs which fell on Tipton, Walsall and Birchills from L19 fell relatively harmlessly, destroying buildings, but causing no fatalities.

The clock in the Bush Inn in Tipton, blown up on the bomb run, was found the next day, frozen forever at 12.20. And after that failed midnight sortee, L21 likewise headed eastwards to Norfolk and the safety of the open sea. Fortune did not follow it. The Zeppelin was hit by Dutch sentries, puncturing its hydrogen tank, and the airship ditched into the North Sea. All sixteen of its crew were drowned.

The visit of L21 was one of 52 Zeppelin raids over Britain between 1915 and 1917, and one of the deadliest. Over the course of the war some 500 civilians lost their lives. Here too was an early indication of what war in the air might look like.

October 1917 saw the last raid to hit the West Midlands, though the bombs which fell on Halesowen did so largely harmlessly. Perhaps the final high explosive to fall did so on the golf course at the Leasowes; the local golfers treated the crater as a new bunker to negotiate.

It seems unlikely, this early into the history of air raids, that their impact upon civilian morale was part of the enemy strategy; that would come later. Nevertheless, the tighter domestic restrictions which followed, and the uncertainty the Zeppelins induced, undoubtedly had such an effect. The people of the West Midlands now found themselves part of the war effort in ways they could not have anticipated back in August 1914.

In such circumstances, it was deemed best to keep the full impact of the raids, and in particular the death toll, out of the local press. Keeping industrial noses to the grindstone was much more important.