

***The Forest At War. Life in the Forest of Dean during World War One*, by members of the Forest of Dean Local History Society (Forest of Dean Local History Society, 2018). Editorial team: David Harris, Cecile Hunt, Cheryl Mayo and Keith Walker. 280pp. Originally £15.00, but now available for £10 from the Society's website, <https://www.forestofdeanhistory.org.uk>**

Before 2014, little had been written of how the Great War impacted local communities in Gloucestershire on the Home Front. Since 2014, many local societies and groups took the opportunity of the centenary of the Great War to research the life and lives of their communities – names on village war memorials became real people. Stories of extraordinary bravery were lifted out of the shadows and people's contributions to the history within their communities were recognised, many for the first time.

Of all of those accounts, this book is one of the finest. Bringing history to life is what historians strive to do. *The Forest at War* not only does this in an accessible and interesting way but also contributes a valuable insight into an area which is probably less well known than the typical Cotswold areas of Gloucestershire.

This book is a series of essays – the culmination of research from a project which was initiated in 2013 by the Forest of Dean Local History Society to study the Home Front in the area in WWI. After mounting an exhibition on the initial research the Society decided to expand the project. The book provided an opportunity for contributors to utilise their extensive research and expand some of their material which was originally published in the Society's journal, *The New Regard*.

But it is more than the story of an area. In seven relevant sections, the book gives an in depth and personal insight into what effect government legislation had on everyday life in the local communities. The material is well researched from Company Minute Books, newspaper reports, archive material and personal accounts. It is an interesting book one can dip into.

The writers do not assume you know the 'ins and outs' of WWI. For example, there is a concise explanatory text on DORA – the Defence Of the Realm Act. This Act consisted of a wide-ranging, fluctuating list of things you could no longer do. Amongst innumerable pieces of legislation, it became an offence to talk or spread rumours about military matters in public places, or buy binoculars, or melt down gold or silver, or give bread to horses or chickens once food rationing had been introduced. Coal mines, shipping, factories, railways, land, buildings could be requisitioned if necessary under government legislation.

One fascinating article outlines the effect of Liquor Control brought in under DORA in the Forest areas including Lydney, Coleford and Newnham. Pity the poor pub landlords trying to conform to the legislation, especially since pub opening hours were considerably curtailed to reduce the consumption of alcohol – a law that was only repealed in 2002! Soldiers could not be served before noon, wounded soldiers not at all (Lydney Town Hall had been converted into a Red Cross VAD hospital) and cigarettes, tobacco and cigars could not be sold without a meal after 9 p.m. Even more frustrating for Forest publicans was that the law applied to the Forest but not Herefordshire. One account tells of coal miners walking to pubs in Herefordshire which were allowed to open on a Sunday whereas Forest pubs had to be closed. The pub building at the Hawthorns, Drybrook straddled two counties, consequently they could sell beer on a Sunday in one room and outside but not in another.

It is no surprise that in a close community such as the Forest, that for the first and only time in its history, the Forest of Dean raised its own battalion to fight in a major war. Harry Webb, owner of the local newspapers and MP for the Forest, took a commission in the Gloucestershire Regiment and revised the 13th Battalion. It became known locally as 'The Forest battalion' just as the 9th and 10th battalions were informally known as 'The Cheltenham battalions'. Whilst on active service at the front, one sergeant, being unaware of the men's origins, observed that the men looked like they were born with a pick and shovel in their hands – not surprisingly trench digging was nothing new to men used to digging coal. However, the battalion lost 292 fine men during the war. In spite of more than 200 men from Lightmoor and Eastern United collieries enlisting up to February 1915, output of Forest coal throughout the war remained at around 1.2 million tons.

Casualties were not confined to the battlefield. Under DORA, land was requisitioned in the village of Beachley in 1917 for the building of a new National Dockyard. The land, owned by Colonel Sir Percival Marling, consisted of 25 farms and 5,000 acres. Sir Percival's tenant farmers and each villager of Beachley were given two weeks notice to leave their properties, The Colonel – the recipient of a Victoria Cross – was quite clear in a message to his estate workers about enlistment. They had a choice – 'Be Shot At Or Be Fired'!

This book should be required reading in every school in the county and in every public library. It provides an insight that vividly shows the impact of war on industry, agriculture, village life and so much more in the Forest of Dean.

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