

Hull and the two World Wars – 1914-1918 and 1939 to 1945

The tour guide at Stage 1 refers to the damage caused in the 2nd World War around Victoria Square, where you start the tour. This short section illustrates how Hull suffered in the wars and one of the many places that endured considerable damage was Queen Victoria Square.

World War 2 ended in 1945 and that is now some 70 years ago so perhaps unsurprisingly the evidence of the extensive bombing and damage has now largely disappeared. In the process many fine buildings were lost, including one in Queen Victoria Square called the Prudential Building, a structure including in a large tower. This building was virtually demolished by a bomb in the 2nd World War, leaving the tower intact but tottering in an unsafe manner and demolition was necessary to preserve safety.

From the World War Bombing in both wars Hull was hit on many occasions, but following the end of both wars, rose, phoenix like from the ashes. .

It was of course not too far from Germany, and easily found by using the Humber Estuary as a navigational aid.

In the 2nd world war Hull endured many and frequent aerial bombardments, indeed more so than anywhere else in the Country outside London and was the subject of the first daylight raid of this war and it also suffered the last manned bombing raid of the war on the 17th March 1945, less than 2 months before the end of the war. The first night bombing raid was on the 19th June 1940.

It also had the most casualties per head of population of anywhere, including London yet was only referred to as a “North Eastern Town”, for war time security purposes.

Two raids, one in March and one in May 1941 were particularly devastating.

To quote a citizen of Hull “It makes me so sad to see how badly my wonderful City was damaged, and I would love to be able to go back before the war and walk the streets looking at all the beautiful old buildings before they were destroyed.”

Some facts and figures

87,715 houses were damaged in Hull in WW 2

815 air raid alerts were sounded and lasted over 1000 hours.

1200 People died and over 3000 injured in Hull in that war.

250 private air raid shelters were destroyed and over 120 communal shelters were also destroyed.

On the 7th March 1941 the heaviest raid of the war took place. Two bombs landed on the Guildhall and the Hull Royal Infirmary was also badly damaged, together with homes, shops and alms-houses.

In other raids one building that was badly damaged, but now fully restored was the City Hall in Victoria Square. It was closed immediately after the war because of the bomb damage, including much of the interior including the organ, but all was made good and the building re-opened in 1950.

Another flattened building was a magnificent museum in Albion Street. The building and contents were lost, probably buried deep under what is now a car park but the original building had a "Greek Style" frontage that ran almost the length of Albion Street.

The deprivations of the City of Hull and its people in World War 2 were immense. Putting some reality to the bald facts and figures, large scale attacks happened in 1941, **Of the 1200 deaths in Hull 1000 of them occurred between March and July of that year.** The raids diminished between 1942 and the end of the war as hostilities moved East, the Nazi's invading Russia and the Luftwaffe's command of the air was greatly reduced through the success of the Royal Air Force.

Of a pre-war population of 320,000, almost half, 151,000 were made homeless.

Post war a plan called the Abercrombie plan was created to re-develop the City but only part of this came to fruition.

In the 1st world war bombs rained down from airships called Zeppelins – vast cigar shaped air balloons with an engine slung underneath, capable of being steered, to a degree, (but that could well be blown off course in strong winds).

Zeppelins were very large, about 300 meters end to end and a frightening sight to people unused to seeing such objects in the sky.

Bombs dropped from Zeppelins often started fires and people were burned to death in their homes. When I say dropped, I mean exactly that – dropped by hand.

The first raid was made on a defenceless Hull in June 1915 when some 3 tonnes of bombs were dropped causing devastation to the City. 24 people were killed outright, homes and streets flattened and one unfortunate department store called Edwin Davies was left a smoking ruin in the Market Place (near the existing statue of King Billy (William of Orange)). It was rebuilt elsewhere but flattened again in the 2nd world war and rebuilt again, but eventually was overcome by changing patterns of shopping and was closed.

The bombing of the First World War was against a City that tried to defend itself by maintaining a blackout and which tried to keep itself hidden. It was not until 1916 that the first anti air craft guns arrived in the City. Prior to that it had one pretend gun to defend it. (a non-firing wooden replicate intended to frighten off the pilot and crew of a Zeppelin.)

There were 7 more Zeppelin Raids after 1915. The reason for the 1915 attack was that the Zeppelin was blown off course from its original target of London by strong winds and Hull, sitting close to the mouth of the Humber Estuary, was a relatively easy target.

As you can see there was much death and injury, and large amounts of property damage in the First World War but Hull again was a prime target in the second and many of its citizens who had lived through the horrors of the first world war suffered again in the 2nd World War – and even more so this time.

In Whitefriargate, almost opposite Marks and Spencer is a small private museum dedicated to Hull in the World Wars, and if you have time you may wish to call in. The museum is free to enter, and sells war time memorabilia. If you have any relative with a military history anywhere in the Country, the most amazing records can be traced by the helpful staff. The proceeds of this shop/museum are dedicated to the creation of a permanent memorial, in addition to the existing war memorial to the East of the City Centre in Paragon Square (opposite the main transport interchange).