

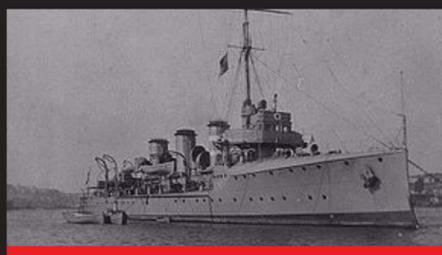
A fanciful image of the bombardment used as propaganda. The picture is a montage of other photos. The ships are not only portrayed too close, but they are of the wrong type.



The Bombardment: Hartlepool's 9/11?

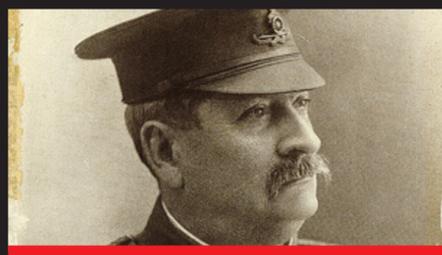
A Target with Teeth - Hartlepool's Defences

On December 16th 1914 German warships launched synchronised attacks on the Hartlepoons (at the time there were two towns, the original Hartlepool and the Victorian-settled West Hartlepool) and Scarborough and Whitby further down the coast. At 8am the SMS Derfflinger and Von der Tann, supported by SMS Kolberg laying mines, began shelling Scarborough and an hour later Whitby, while the SMS Seydlitz, Blücher and Moltke commenced the shelling of the Hartlepoons at 8.10am. As the day was misty they had to fire from a much closer distance than usual to make visual contact, around 4,000 yards. The first shell, intended to find range, hit between the two defensive batteries installed on Hartlepool's headland, the Heugh and the Lighthouse, a measure of the superb training and discipline of the German gun crews. Despite being significantly outgunned the Hartlepool batteries engaged the enemy ferociously, though they quickly found their shells had no effect on the armoured sides of the ships. They instead targeted masts and rigging, and fired with such accuracy that the Blücher was forced to move out of the line of the guns to prevent further damage. At 8:52am the German ships departed, around 20 minutes earlier than planned, which some attribute to the level of resistance they encountered. 1,150 shells were fired at the town, killing over 100, including around a third of them children, and wounding nearly 500, though exact death figures remain disputed by various historians and vary between 112 and 120.



Naval Gazing

A number of smaller Royal Navy vessels were stationed to defend Hartlepool, but poor weather meant that only four destroyers were out on patrol. As the much larger German vessels approached these ships, HMS Doon, Test, Waveney and Moy, were fired upon. The destroyers' guns were useless, and three of them withdrew. Doon, however, closed to 5,000 yards and fired one torpedo, which missed, before herself retreating. In Hartlepool harbour the light cruiser HMS Patrol (above) attempted to get to sea but was struck by two 8 inch shells, forcing the captain to run her aground and block the channel, hampering a second cruiser, HMS Forward, which was desperately preparing to sail. The submarine C9, abreast of Patrol, was forced to dive when she too came under fire, scraping the bottom of the channel. By the time she worked loose the enemy had gone.



Fighting Back

Unlike Scarborough and Whitby, both "soft" civilian targets, Hartlepool was militarily valuable. It had extensive docks, shipyards and factories and as such was defended by three BL 6 inch Mk VII naval guns on the headland, two at Heugh Battery and one at Lighthouse Battery. The guns were manned by 11 officers and 155 local men of the Durham Royal Garrison Artillery, territorials commanded by Lt. Col. Lancelot Robson (above), a doctor and former mayor of Hartlepool. As was common practice the Batteries had "stood to" at 6.30am, and were ready to return fire when the German shelling started. The German plan was to fire on the batteries for 15 minutes to knock them out, though in this they failed. The Durham RGA suffered two killed and fired 123 rounds.



First of Many

The official first victim of the bombardment was a soldier, Private Theophilus Jones of the 18th Battalion Durham Light Infantry. Private Jones also had the sad distinction of being recorded as the first British soldier to be killed by enemy action on mainland Britain in two centuries. Born in West Hartlepool, Jones was headmaster at Thringstone village school, but gave up his job when war was declared to volunteer for the army. He was on sentry duty near to the Heugh Battery when the first shell struck exactly where he was standing. Although in actuality it also killed three others Jones was listed as the first, possibly with propaganda in mind because of his respected status. His grave can still be found at Stranton Cemetery, where he was buried with military honours in the presence of 500 members of the DLI.



Catch of the Day

Hartlepool had for many centuries been a fishing town, and so naturally its fishing boats became embroiled in the action. Skipper John Horsley of the Children's Friend witnessed the start of the engagement, as the three approaching German ships opened fire on the quartet of destroyers and deafened the fishermen on board. He also reported that as they approached they were flying the White Ensign of the Royal Navy, only swapping them for the flag of the Imperial German Navy as they commenced fire. The fishing vessel then ran for safety, as did other boats ahead of the German ships. Several headed for the long beach of the North Sands, and ran aground. Fisherman Tommy Coulson broke his leg and had to be helped ashore by soldiers of the DLI entrenched on the ridge overlooking the beach, named Spion Kop for the famous battle of the Boer War.