

# Where They Burnt The Town Hall Down

Luton, the First World War and  
the Peace Day Riots of 1919

The UK held a Peace Day on July 19th, 1919 to celebrate the end of the First World War. In Luton the day ended with the mayor fleeing in disguise and the town hall burned down. The council had organised festivities - including a banquet that most former servicemen could not afford, while councillors dined free at ratepayer's expense. Former servicemen's groups boycotted the events to protest against unemployment and high food prices - councillors were accused of profiteering. The mayor, Henry Impey, read a message from the king at the town hall but was jeered and booed. He retreated inside with council officers and fled through a back door disguised as a police special constable. Rioters set the town hall on fire that night and stopped the fire brigade reaching it. People dragged pianos from a music store into the street, singing, dancing and allegedly playing Keep The Home Fires Burning. Stories of the riots, and the people involved, have lived on in families' memories.

The Cultural History CIC have reprinted "Where They Burnt the Town Hall Down" by Dave Craddock, which tells the story of the Luton peace riots. Copies can be purchased by emailing: [mike.mcmahon@culturalhistories.org](mailto:mike.mcmahon@culturalhistories.org) or via the website: [culturalhistories.org](http://culturalhistories.org)

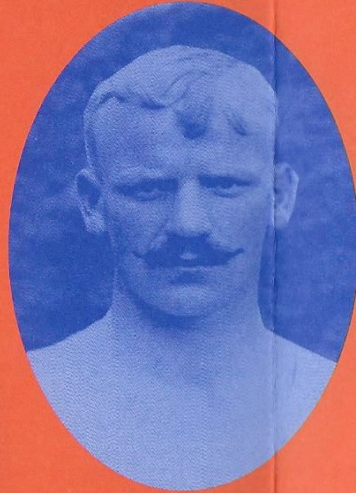
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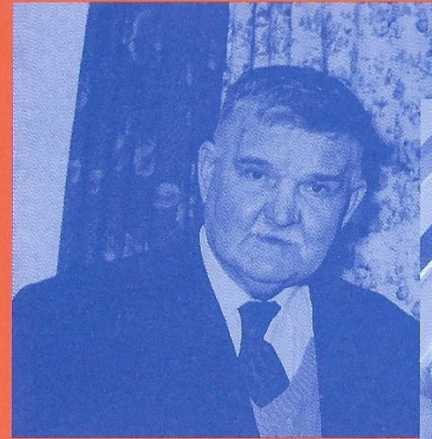
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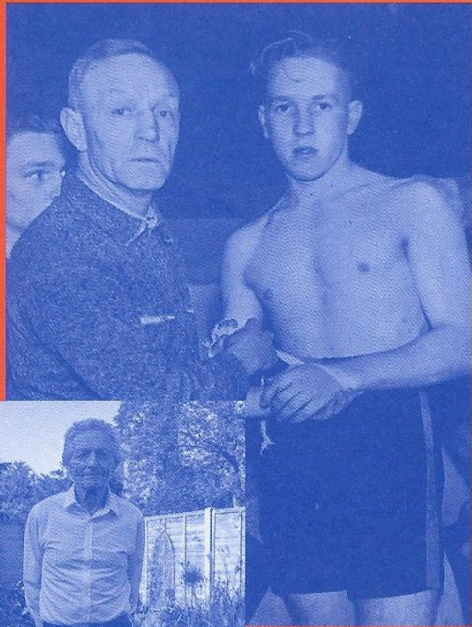
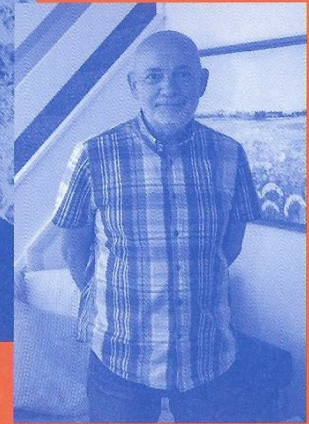
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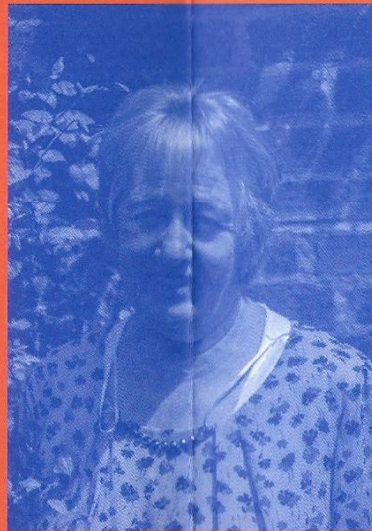
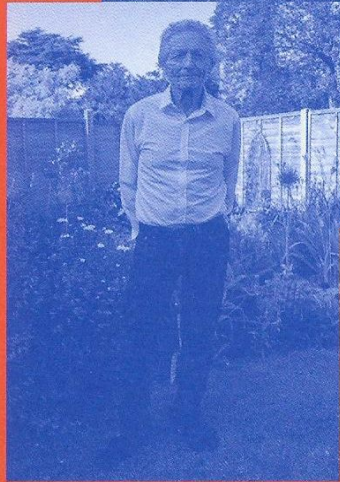
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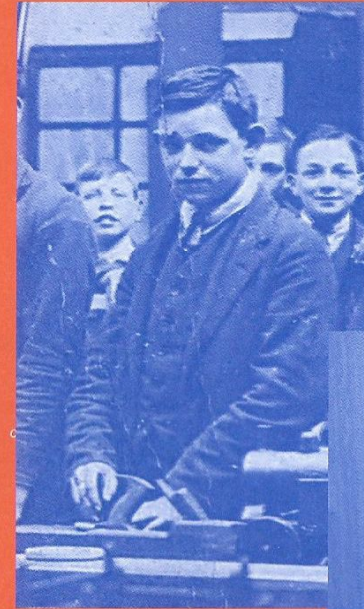
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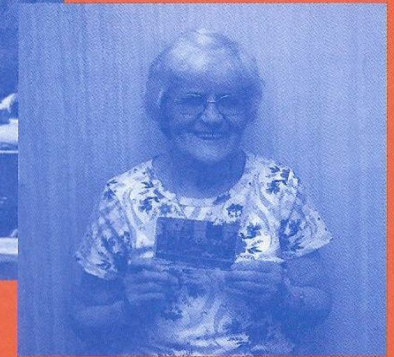
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### Born to Riot

*Victor Samm* was born on the day of the riots. A newspaper headline the day after the riot was "Victory for the people" - and so his parents decided to call him Victor in honour of the rioters.

*Jan Ross, daughter.*

**2**

### Veteran, rioter and entertainer

*John Henry Goode* served at the Somme and Passchendaele. He led the rioters in the afternoon and was at the front when they broke down the town hall doors. In the evening he played a piano dragged into the street from Farmer's music shop. He was jailed for six weeks. He did many jobs after the war including window cleaning, paying children a penny to do the upper windows as he was scared of heights. Goode was known as Kissing Cup around town as he would recite poetry in pubs - in exchange for a pint.

*Steve Goodman*

**3**

### Fighter's story

*Henry Miles*, a prize fighter from east London who fought as Jack Daley, moved to Luton to work as a cinema projectionist. He fought at Ypres and was awarded the Military Medal for bravery at the Battle of St Julien. Instead of coming home to a land fit for heroes he found a council unsympathetic to old soldiers and allegedly mismanaging food rations. After the mayor fled the town hall Henry led a crowd of about 500 to his house but he was not there. Henry was arrested and made to walk from his home to the police station with his ankles and legs chained. Rich relatives paid for a lawyer who argued that Henry was suffering shell shock and he was cleared. He went on to work for the council and joined the Home Guard in the Second World War before being killed in an air raid on Luton.

*Keith Miles, grandson.*

**4**

### Pension protest

*Ephraim Gore* was prosecuted for climbing the town hall, pulling down electric lights, setting fire to decorative flags and making a speech. He said the speech was only about his pension and the workhouse. Gore was jailed for nine months. He was originally sentenced to hard labour but that was reduced after Gore pleaded that he would lose his army pension. He had more than 40 previous convictions including theft, poaching and fighting but was never in trouble with the police again after 1919.

*Gail Sidebotham, great, great-niece.*

**5**

### Up the hatters

*Charles Dillingham*, a hat maker who was mayor of Luton before Henry Impey, showed King George V round munitions works and Kents on his second day in office. He was on the Peace Day committee and his warehouse premises, opposite the town hall, were damaged in the riots. His relative, *Diane Cullen*, says her great aunt, *Rose Clark*, was at the riots and tried to stab the firemen's hoses with her hat pin.

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### Medal burner

*George Bodsworth* took part in the Retreat from Mons. After being invalided out of the army he returned for another year, finally leaving in 1920. He was outside the town hall between 1pm and 1am at the time of the riots and seen shouting and waving a stick. George was sentenced to three months in prison for hitting a police constable, which he denied. George later burned his war medals and set up a fruit and vegetable business. Martin Fensome, his grandson, says trial records show the rioters were "lovable rogues" who had good reasons for their actions.

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### Jolly fellow

*Eric Victor Thompson* was 13 when he went to see the Peace Day parade with his brother. He smashed some shop windows and came home with a pair of shoes, only to find they were both for left feet. He sung "We are the Jolly Fellows, yes we are, we come from Luton Town, where they burned the town hall down" to his daughter, *Shirley Hobbs*, and told her stories of seaside landladies banning Lutonians from their guest houses.

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## Mayor scapegoated

*Henry Impey's* great great-niece, *Sandy Taylor* was told stories about the mayor by her mother. He worked for the council for 20 years before becoming mayor and said reading the king's proclamation of the Peace Day was one of the highlights of his life. He chaired the Board of Guardians that helped the town's children, belonged to the allotment association that allowed more than 1,500 people to lease council land to feed themselves and was a lay preacher. But newspapers wanted to blame someone for the riots and other councillors put his name forward. The town clerk, William Smith, and chief constable advised him to leave the town and he became a magistrate in Sutton on Sea, Lincolnshire, and chaired the council. Sandy says riots – across the country, not just in Luton – were a response to unemployment, poor housing and high food prices.

She accepts that the mayor was a target for the demonstrators' anger but feels attempts to put all the blame on Mr Impey have treated him unfairly.

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## Safe distance

*George Buggs* was a former soldier who had been captured and held as a prisoner of war. After rioters broke into Farmer's music shop and took pianos into the street he was arrested, accused of saying "and now for the safe". George was cleared after the court was told that he just watched the fire and never went near the shops.

*Catherine Howe, niece.*

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## Hard labour

*Freddie Plater* received the harshest sentence at Bedford crown court: three years' hard labour. He had served two years in France and been badly wounded. On the day of the riot he was dressed as a vicar and jumped on fire engines to stop firemen putting out the blaze. He was arrested the next day.

*Mike Allen, local historian*

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## Brothers in police

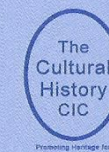
*Edmund James* joined the town police force in his early 20s. He weighed 20 stone and was put at the front of the town hall on Peace Day, holding back growing numbers of demonstrators. As the crowd grew his brother, Fred, a chief inspector arrived from Wardown Park with reinforcements. When a group went to the mayor's house Fred and another senior officer went with them and spoke with the demonstrators before they returned to the town hall. Edmund was badly injured in the riots and three years later retired from the force on medical grounds. Their great-grandsons, *Gavin Dadd* and *Tony Ireland*, said the family felt the rioters had some justified grievances. Indeed the police themselves went on strike in some parts of the country. There was no animosity towards police after the riots as they were seen as having done their job. Both brothers knew some of the rioters personally.

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## Riot police

*Albert Joseph Sear* was policing the demonstration at the town hall on his second day in the force. He joined the police after being wounded at Gallipoli – at the age of 80 a hospital X-ray showed he still had a bullet in his shoulder. He was injured in the rioting and had a scar on his ear for the rest of his life but his daughter, *Iris Purvis* believes her father had some sympathy for the demonstrators. He was awarded the George Medal in the Second World War for helping defuse an unexploded bomb and retired, as a chief superintendent, in 1953. Iris's mother told her about the crowd singing round a grand piano in the street. She said Lutonians kept quiet about where they were from after the riot because Luton became known as a lawless town.

The Cultural History CIC has publishing the pamphlet to mark the centenary of the riots and because of the renewed interest shown in Luton and nationally about the riots and the part they played in the Town's history. We are very grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Luton and Bedfordshire Community Trust as part of the London Luton Airport Ltd Community Fund and the Arts Council England for supporting this book and many other projects marking the centenary year. In particular we are very grateful to students and staff of the University of Bedfordshire School of Art and Design for redesigning the book and to Luton Culture and the Luton News for giving us permission to use the photographs and drawings. Also, thanks to our other partners for their support Luton Borough Council, the University of Hertfordshire, Chiltern Learning Trust, the Luton Music Service, Luton Mix and Luton Culture. Leaflet Design: Noel Douglas: [noeldouglas.net](mailto:noeldouglas.net) @ School of Art and Design, University of Bedfordshire.



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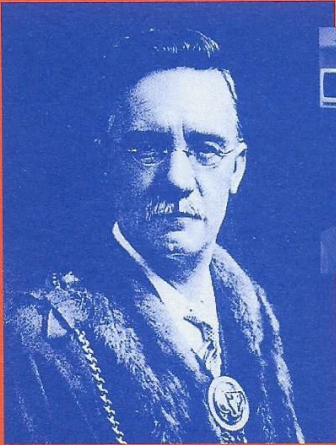
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The Singer Low's Darts team 1938

Back Row: C. Day, G. Coles, J. Peters, J. Webb, H. Bunker, G. Sweat, C. Moss, F. Plater  
Middle Row: S. Douglas, W. Turner, A. Hawkes, T. Robins, C. Barton, T. Green, F. Lowley, H. Gore  
A. Butterfield, C. Hodge, C. Philpott, B. James.  
Front Row: Mr. G. Green (Captain) Mrs. Arnold (Landlady)



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