# World War I: Bombardment

Europe's mainland saw the majority of the fighting during World War I, with British soldiers joining others from around the world in the bloody battlefields of Belgium and France. Early in the war, however, hundreds were killed when the German Navy bombarded towns on the east coast of England. The town of Hartlepool, in the north-east of England, took the worst hit. The attacks sparked a wave of anger in Britain and convinced many to support the war effort, scared that further attacks would occur.

**The attack**

Just after 8.00am on the morning of 16th December 1914, the coastal shipbuilding town of Hartlepool suffered the first major attack on British soil in World War I. Over the course of forty minutes, more than 1,100 shells rained down on the town, destroying buildings and injuring or killing hundreds. It is thought to have been a target partly due to its accessible location and partly due to the importance of its shipyards and engine works to the war effort.

The attacks, which included the use of battle cruisers Seydlitz and Moltke, and the armoured cruiser Blucher, began as people prepared to head to work or school. Survivors of the attack recall chaos on the streets as people attempted to gather their loved ones and flee. Those already at work raced home to find their families before trying to escape to the local countryside and villages.

The Hartlepool Headland, an area of the town on ground that reaches out into the sea, was among the most badly damaged areas during the attack. The area was home to the Heugh Battery guns, which fired back at the German ships – but the much larger weaponry of the warships outgunned them. Some of the worst damage in Hartlepool occurred on the nearby streets of Moor Terrace, Victoria Place and Cliff Terrace. Most houses in the area suffered some form of damage, and shrapnel from the attack can still be seen lodged in the walls of some buildings. The Heugh Battery itself is now a volunteer-led military museum.

Despite the majority of shells falling in the Headland area, several streets in the west side of Hartlepool were also hit. In the days following the attacks, many residents feared more of them, and stayed further inland.

**Hartlepool's victims**

In total, more than 130 people were killed in Hartlepool that day. Among the dead was Theophilus Jones, a private in the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Durham Light Infantry. Private Jones was a young school headteacher in Leicestershire but, when war broke out, he returned to Hartlepool to serve his country.

He was hit directly by a shell – and so is believed to have been the first soldier to be killed on British soil during the war. A number of other soldiers also lost their lives, although less directly, alongside him. Reports say that a shard of the shell that hit Private Jones's chest was found lodged in a prayer book given to him by pupils. Hundreds attended his funeral, and school children in Hartlepool are still taught about his – and his fellow troops' – bravery.

Hundreds of other victims are also remembered from the tragic day.

**The effect of the attack**

The attacks on Hartlepool – and, later, across England – had a significant and growing impact on the public's opinions of the war. The views of many people quickly changed, as they feared further and more severe attacks from the Germans.

Their fears were well founded. In 1915 and 1916, German airships called Zeppelins attacked mainland Britain. In 1917, the first true air raid took place, by huge Gotha bomber aircraft. Streetlights were dimmed in response, and huge searchlights across the country swept the sky instead.

The devastating attacks on home soil also helped to shape a publicity campaign of 'propaganda': information promoting a political cause or point of view. The British government used the attacks to encourage men to enlist in the military. It produced posters asking: 'Men of Britain! Will you stand this?'

The attacks created a surge in the number of people joining up to support the war effort, especially in Hartlepool. While some signed up for military roles, many more began working in the town's shipyards and munitions factories. The town's people played an important role in the nearly four years of war that followed.

World War I ended at 11am on the eleventh day of the eleventh month – 11 November – in 1918. Germany signed an armistice agreement – ensuring peace and no further fighting.