



Basildon Council
BASILDON • BILLERICAY • WICKFORD



ZEPPELINS OVER ESSEX (L32-L33)



Registered Charity No. 117603
Registered address: The green Centre, Wat Tyler Country Park, Pitsea Hall Lane, Pitsea, Essex
SS16 4UH

Zeppelin – Terror Weapon

The Zeppelin was a type of rigid airship named after the German Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin who pioneered rigid airship development at the beginning of the 20th century. Initially they were used commercially and were first flown in 1910 but with the coming of the First World War the German Military made extensive use of Zeppelins as bombers and scouts – they became known as the ‘Terror Weapon’.

The Zeppelin therefore became a weapon of mass destruction to our communities, silently arriving, sometimes at night time, dropping bombs on various Essex towns and London.

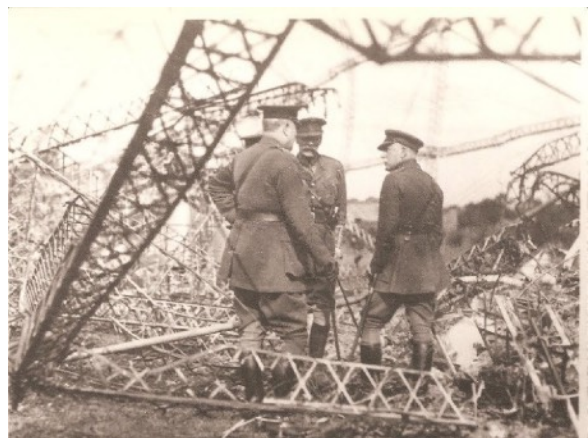
The German Military (German the Imperial Navy) recommended an all-out bombing campaign against Britain. Wilhelm II the German Kaiser, initially insisted only military targets were attacked but later reversed his objection and approved unrestricted air raids. Throughout 1915 and 1916 raids into England increased considerably with often as many as 16 airships at any one time converging on English cities and Towns.

London and Essex were in the forefront of many of these attacks. The following is the story of two Zeppelins that came crashing down in Essex. One near Billericay and the other at Little Wigborough, near Colchester.

On the 23 September, 1916 twelve ships left Germany, four of them L30, L31, L32 and L33 were of the latest design headed for southern Britain via Belgium. These four were the latest super-Zeppelin. They were 650ft in length, 78ft in diameter and around 92ft in height including the gondolas of which there were four. They required 2,000,000 cubic feet of high volatile hydrogen gas. Their bomb capacity was approximately five tons and they had four machine-guns. Their three engines could drive the airship between forty-five and sixty-five miles per hour.

It would appear that the L30 and L31 made their way to London. The course of the L30 remains a mystery but the L31 made landfall at Dungeness, Kent, dropped bombs on the Lighthouse and then followed the railway line into London. It received a hot reception so the its commander responded by motoring at high speed across the city skies, scattering its bombs before escaping back home unscathed.

This left the L32 and the L33. The L32 also crossed over the channel to Dungeness and initially started to head towards London, but probing searchlights followed by heavy gunfire forced the captain of the Zeppelin, Oberleutnant zur See Werner Peterson to abandon his run to London, so he turned eastward and fled for the coast, and home. The Zeppelin at full speed, soared to her 13,000 feet ceiling, dropping her bombs in the Thames area around Aveley and South Ockenden, but suddenly two hostile aircraft appeared towards the stern of the ship. BE2c piloted by Second Lieutenant Frederick Sowrey of the Royal Flying Corps pumped a hail of bullets into the lower mid-ships section of her hull, a small glow appeared which suddenly exploded into a crimson flash and within seconds the whole airship was a blazing inferno. The Zeppelin just missed Sowrey as the burning wreck headed to the ground.



Thousands of people from London, and the home counties were out shouting and going completely wild as it crashed to the ground, landing in a beet field at John Maryon's Snail's Hall Farm, South Green, Great Burstead, Billericay. It had stripped the branches from a large oak tree as the hulk smashed to the ground. It burnt for over an hour and there were no survivors among the 22-man crew. As it was tumbling to the ground it had broken up in mid-air with the wreckage being distributed over a wide area and yielded a harvest for souvenir hunters over the weeks that followed.

Frederick Rayner was the first man on the scene of the wreck. The following is an extract from the local newspaper the Echo by Tom King, journalist: -

'A young soldier on the first day of his leave was relaxing in his stepfather's cottage, No. 2 Jackson Lane, no doubt trying to put out of his mind the horrors of the Somme from which he had just returned.'

But for Frederick Rayner this was to be anything except a quiet leave. The war had followed him home to his cottage like a toy balloon bobbing along behind a child. The all too familiar sound of machine gun fire cracking through the Essex night sky brought him running into the open. As he emerged, the night changed to garish day. He was in time to catch the death throes of Zeppelin L32.

Thousands of people all over south Essex, on hilltops and other Vantage points, were already watching. They had followed the tormented lashings of the airship as it tried to escape the searchlights that, one after another, had picked it out. Now it was lit up like a fairground.

They had watched as Second Lieutenant Frederick Sowrey of the Royal Flying Corps, half frozen in the autumn night, perched in the open cockpit of a flimsy BE2c aircraft out of Hornchurch airfield, had engaged the airship and poured incendiary ammunition into its petrol tanks.

As the airship exploded into flames it dipped and began a long dive to earth in eerie, burning slow-motion. From miles around the descent was celebrated by a strange chorus of death – the blaring of car horns.

But none of the spectators who witness the gunfight was to have quite so intimate a contact with this dying sun as Frederick Rayner, who stepped into Jackson's Farm Road at the moment the airship exploded.

The L32 slid over the High Street and perilously near what was then the isolated cottage where Rayner lived.

As he watched, one of the occupants, his cloths in flames, flung himself from the gondola of the airship towards the kinder death offered by the soil of the enemy country.....Frederick Rayner raced into the field – the first man on the scene of the wreck, but not for long. The police and fire brigade soon followed, and as the fire began to wane, the young soldier helped to lay out the bodies of the crew in the old black farm building that was inevitably to become known as Dead men's Barn.

Then being a soldier billeted conveniently close to hand, he was posted on guard duty.

For a few days Billericay became the centre of England. Cockle stalls were set up to cater for the sightseers. Fragments of the Zeppelin changed hands for sixpence. Cyclists from far-off counties parked their mounts in the garden of No. 2.

When Frederick arrived on the scene, he took a half-charred belt from one of the dead men. This he repaired and wore for the rest of his life. He also regularly visited the Great Burstead Churchyard where the crew were originally buried and laid wreaths of holly. The crew were eventually exhumed and reburied at Cannock Chase, Germany Military Cemetery, Staffordshire in 1966.

As you would have gathered Frederick went back to the front, was gassed, shipped back to England and after the war became a bricklayer. He died in 1964.



Sergeant Wolverton of the Billericay Constabulary had been alerted at 9.15pm that airships were approaching and about 10.35pm he saw what was presumably the L.32 passing over on its way to London. He then saw it again at about 1.10am returning, under heavy anti-aircraft fire and being attacked by a solitary aircraft. He immediately drove to the crash site about a mile away, soon after his arrival other men of the Billericay Special Constabulary arrived and cordoned off the airship.

As you can gather they had difficulty in keeping sightseers and looters at bay and as you would expect there have been numerous eye witness reports of the Zeppelin coming down. For example, an elderly lady living in a pensioner flat in Laindon remembers as a six-year-old child witnessing the shooting down of the Zeppelin near her farm in Billericay. Hearing the noise, she ran out in the night and watched as the burning craft and hearing the airmen screaming as they fell burning – she found it very traumatic.

Conrad Noel and his fellow clergymen watched the Zeppelin come to ground at Snails Farm. Helen Dixon of Hutton heard screams of the crew as they were incinerated aboard the disintegrating airship, which crashed about two miles away from her home. Mary Blakeley of North Ockendon saw it pass directly over her

house, so close that she was aware of the “heat and the stench”. Catherine Brown and her workmates at Kynochtown also saw the blazing hulk slowly descend to earth.

Ivy Powell (nee Hymas), who was only about six at the time, remembers quite clearly sitting next to the window of her classroom at Langdon Hills School hearing the local people ringing a bell to let people know that there was a Zeppelin raid ON. There was no air raid warning system in place like there was in the Second World War and people had to rely on the local ‘bobby’ to let them know. Looking out of the window she could clearly see a Zeppelin on its way to bomb London. This was a little time after the L32 was shot down.

One of the visitors to the site reported that some of the dead crew “only looked about fourteen” and years later recalled that, “We could not help but feel for their mothers in German.”

Zeppelin over Laindon – was it the L32?



German Military Cemetery, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire



Around August 1916 around 5,000 Australian engineers descended on Brightlingsea and it was not long before that these Australians and the locals heard the distant sound of war as in the early hours of the 24 September they could see and hear the dreaded Zeppelins as they passed over head on their way to London. There were twelve Zeppelins on the raid, eight of an older type heading for the Midlands and the four super zeppelins which included the L33 for London.

The Zeppelin was fired upon by a British Naval Vessel as she approached the British coast near Foulness. The defensive action was unsuccessful however and the L33 continued on course.



Around 10.40pm the L33 dropped incendiary flares over Upminster and bombs were dropped on Sutton's Farm Aerodrome, Hornchurch. The attack continued for over an hour and was continued in a zig-zag pattern over Woolwich and West Ham.

Shortly after midnight it turned to the East and attempted a run for the coast as she was now losing gas at an alarming rate. It has been suggested that with the L32 it passed over Langdon Hills and Laindon, where it was fired upon from gun in placements in Hawkesbury Bush, Langdon Hills. We know it was fired on again over Kelvedon Common and the commander Kapitan- Lieutenant Bocker was obliged to order all the water ballast to be discharged in an attempt to gain height. It was then attack by 2nd Lieutenant Alfred Brandon in his B.E.2c airplane but a gun malfunction and temporary engine failure force him to withdraw.

Whether he damaged the Zeppelin is unknown but the commander was desperately worried by the amount of gas lost, so he ordered all the loose equipment to be jettison. This resulted in residents in the Broomfield area and nearby surprisingly finding metal bars, tools, machine guns etc. in their gardens.



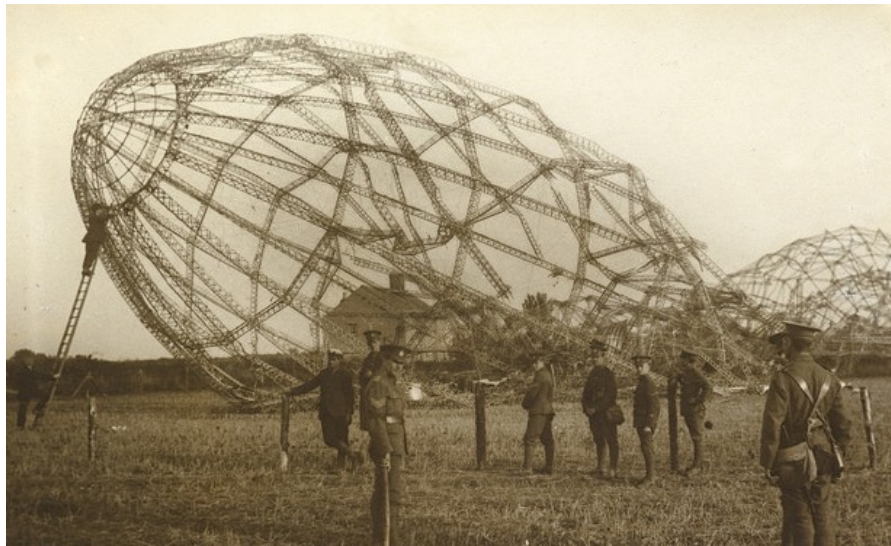
In the estuary at West Mersea the Zeppelin unloaded its remaining bombs into the sea and then turned back inland towards Mersea. It finally crashed landed on New Hall Farm land near Little Wigborough Church coming across two fields, completely blocking the lane to the church. It was also about twenty yards from a nearby house and the occupants of the house, the Lewis family, ran for their lives as the airship hit the ground. The crew ran from the craft as commander arranged for the craft to be set on fire, he did not want the rich prize to get in the hands of the British.

There were no major casualties and what followed was a typical German and English scene. Their commander and twenty-one other German Officers marched in formation along an Essex Lane near the village, their aim was to find a boat to commandeer somewhere in the estuary to take them home. Unfortunately for them they came across special constable Edgar Nicholas who having heard the explosion, was on his way to investigate and he insisted they followed him. They were soon joined by Special Constable Elijah Trailer and then by Sergeant Edwards of the Metropolitan Police, they then met up with PC Charles Smith at nearby Peldon. Unable to get any reinforcements they were instructed to march the captured crew to the Strood at Mersea where they were met by a military escort.

The Rev. Pierrepont Edwards, vicar of West Mersea, met the party and accompanied them to Mersea High Street where they met local parishioners. The Vicar curbed threats of a lynching and an injured German received treatment at the West Mersea Post Office. The party then marched to the Artillery Camp between Beech Road and Lower Kingsland Road (where there were then no houses). As the tented camp was not sufficiently secure to hold prisoners, the vicar offered the

Church Hall. The injured crewman slept the night at the Vicarage next door while the rest were kept in the hall, although the airship commander would not sleep with his crew. This is believed to be the only time a parade by a hostile force took place in Britain in the two world wars.

While all this was going on Alfred Wright, a seed grower and owner of nearby Grove Farm volunteered to ride off on his motorcycle to fetch further help but he was involved in an accident with another vehicle, broke both his legs and died from his injuries two months later. The wreckage of the Zeppelin had to be cut through to allow his funeral to reach the church.



The site as expected attracted a large number of visitors including the Aussies. These early visitors found it easy to get souvenirs but the site was soon guarded by the military and later visitors had to content themselves with buying mementoes from the Zeppelin.

A local resident Fred Mallett while playing with his brother, found papers in a ditch which turn out to be the log book of the airship.

For his coolness and judgement in dealing with the matter PC Smith was awarded the medal of merit and promoted to Sergeant.

The Federation of Essex Women's Institutes occasionally produce publications of their member's memories one such publication 'Within Living Memory' published in 1995 we find two members memories of the Zeppelin coming down: -

'My earliest memory is of the Zeppelin coming down at Wigborough in 1916, which my brother Eric, two years older than me, was taken to see. I was very angry because I was considered too young to go. However, he brought me back a small

bunch of ripe blackberries picked from the hedge of the field where the Zeppelin came down. The German crew gave themselves up to the local police and were taken into custody as prisoners of war and the Zeppelin caught fire and burned itself out. The skeleton framework remained in the field for some time and many photos were taken of it.'

'A Zeppelin came down at Peldon and father took me out to see it, we brought home a small piece of fuselage. The Strood was zigzagged with sandbags and there were soldiers on duty there' (this is the Wigborough Zeppelin).

On the night Doctor Salter of Tolleshunt Darcy delivered a baby at Abbots Hall Cottages, Wigborough and suggested she was christened, 'Zeppelina.'



Commander Bocker and his crew spent the rest of the War in captivity.

A more detail report on the incidents can be obtained from the following books: - THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE L32 By R.L.Rimell – (The true story of the Billericay Zeppelin) – THE FATE OF ZEPPELIN L32 BY C.E.Wright (re Cater Museum Billericay). – THE IMPACT OF CASTASTROPHE BY Paul Rusiecki.

**Ken Porter
Basildon Borough Heritage Society
21st January 2023**