

## **David Parker: Lord Fortescue and Recruitment**

As early as the 11th December the Western Times acknowledged that the rallies were failing. On four nights that week there had been military processions and rallies watched by cheering crowds in Exeter, but 'fewer than a score of volunteers have come forward'. The newspaper made great play of the alacrity with which it claimed Elizabethan Exonians had rallied to the beat of Sir Francis Drake's drum as the Spanish Armada approached. It highlighted, too, the poignancy of the 'Will they never come?' tableau in the Hippodrome, showing a British soldier, rifle in hand, standing over a wounded comrade and looking in the direction of England's southern shore.

Speakers at rallies became more cynical. At one, Lieutenant the Hon. Lionel Walrond, the young MP for Tiverton, said 'he rather fancied that there were in this county some citizens who thought they were doing their duty to themselves and their country if they spent a shilling in cheering a faked war picture at a cinema palace or stood a soldier back from the front to a drink'. Devon was lagging behind, and 'every eligible man who had done nothing would be branded by women and children as a coward, a man shunned by patriotic men as a leper'.

Burdening men with potential shame, rather than filling them with immediate pride, became a common thread in rallies as winter approached.

Lord Fortescue did not mince his words at a cross-party planning meeting in Exeter at the end of November. Kitchener now needed a million men - 6 per cent of the population, and 40,000 from Devon. Not much more than a quarter of this figure had been enlisted so far. He intimated that farmers were stopping their sons enlisting, and said he hoped that nonconformists had got over their pacifism. Despite some demeaning at his frankness, the meeting agreed to intensify recruitment through the creation of a Joint Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC) for Devon, affiliated to the national body of the same name. Even so, historian David Stevenson states that 2.4 million volunteers came from across the United Kingdom, yet he confirms that the poorest responses came from the southern English and Irish agricultural counties.

With maximum publicity in newspapers and through numerous local meetings several divisional PRCs were set up, each creating smaller district organisations within it. Fortescue addressed each divisional meeting, bluntly emphasising 'that Devon had not distinguished itself in the matter of recruiting' and pointedly criticising local figures. He cautioned members 'against stories which were circulated about the treatment of recruits as regarded food and accommodation'. In March 1915, he went so far as to publicise figures from thirty mid-Devon parishes, showing widely varying recruitment rates from 'Widcombe's lowly 3.0 %, Throwleigh's 3.2% and Buckland-in-the Moor's 3.7% to Kingskerswell's welcome 9.5%, Moretonhampstead's 10.1 per cent and Chudleigh's 11.9%'.

And all the time the newspapers listed the casualty figures.

**David Parker. The People of Devon in the First World War; pp59-60. 2013**