

The Luton riots, 1919



The history of the riots which flared up in Luton. Ex-servicemen and their families, angered by extravagant publicly-funded victory celebrations while they were unemployed and poor, took to the streets in protest.

Peace comes to Luton!

In the summer of 1919, as the local Council launched extravagant celebrations of the war's end, angry ex-servicemen demanding work took to the streets.

How one interprets the mutinies of World War I depends on one's attitude to social change. If one is looking for a centralised overall strategy, one will only see a series of eruptions flaring up and dying out, some achieving their objective, others ending in failure. A mutiny may be defeated, or fragmented by demobilisation, but the participants live on, learn lessons and pass what they have learned on to others.

Mutinies can only be understood as part of a wider movement of social upheaval, a movement which may include police as well as army and industry. It is a mistake to draw strict distinctions between military disturbances and other forms of social protest. A mutineer might cease to be a mutineer on the day he ceases to be a member of the armed forces. But he does not thereby cease to be a political animal nor will he forget the ties of comradeship forged during his fight with the military authorities.

During the summer of 1919 military unrest swept into civilian disturbances in many regions. Employers and the authorities took advantage of the post-war depression to try to impose the old bonds of discipline upon returning soldiers. Ex-servicemen were equally determined not to accept pre-war conditions. A fierce conflict took place during which the government and the employers never felt strong enough for a show-down until, with the aid of the TUC General Council and an army purged of its dissident elements, the ruling class was able to defeat the workers during [the General Strike of 1926](#). An adequate account of social upheaval between the Armistice of 1918 and the defeat of the General Strike has yet to be written. What follows is a short account of an incident in Luton, where comradeship in arms was continued in a struggle against the civilian authorities.

The Peace Treaty was signed in June 1919. Luton Town Council planned processions with brass bands, floats, entertainment for the children and a fireworks display followed by an evening of official gluttony described as a 'Mayor's banquet'. The cost of the latter was to be paid from civic funds. Invitations were strictly limited to the Mayor, councillors and close friends - none of whom had served in the armed forces. In fact the officials had not even seen fit to include any ex-servicemen in the preparations. As a result the Discharged Soldiers and Sailors' Federation and the Comrades of the Great War Association withdrew from the activities. They had planned alternative celebrations, but the Mayor and his Council refused them the use of Wardown Park.

On July 19, a rainy Saturday afternoon, a somewhat gloomy official procession set off from Park Street recreation ground, along a route which passed the Federation's headquarters, at the corner of Lea Road, where the ex-servicemen had prepared their own contribution to the 'celebrations'. The Federation lined both sides of the procession route with maimed and disabled ex-servicemen. Across the road they hung a streamer saying: 'Don't pity us, give us work'. As the official procession went past, it was joined by the angry ex-servicemen. Eventually they arrived outside the Town Hall where they halted in heavy rain whilst the Mayor read out the proclamation of peace. By now the Mayor was the most unpopular man in town and his rating declined even further as thousands of old soldiers booed and catcalled his patronising speech. Sensing the increasing hostility one councillor called for three cheers for ex-servicemen. This only gave rise to even greater howls of derision. By now the noise was deafening. Suddenly the crowd surged forwards, causing the Mayor and his entourage to beat an undignified retreat into the Town Hall. The crowd swiftly swept aside two constables. Willing hands tore down the doors and the people entered just in time to see some of the mayoral party disappearing through a rear entrance. Once inside, untold damage was done. Decorations for the Grand Ball were torn down. The contents of the Town Hall were hurled through the windows into the street.

Meanwhile someone discovered that the Mayor and some supporters were barricaded inside the Mayor's parlour. Serious harm to them was only prevented by the last minute arrival of a contingent of police. The crowd inside the Town Hall engaged them in pitched battle, the fighting soon spreading to those outside. Missiles were hurled at the Town Clerk's office.

Later that evening a crowd of 20,000 gathered in Popes Meadows for the advertised fireworks display. But the rioting and looting at the Town Hall, which had taken on a carnival atmosphere, turned out to be a more powerful attraction. At 10 pm the Mayor was still besieged in his parlour. Instead of the planned banquet the mayoral party had spent seven hours huddled together in the dark behind shattered windows.

As the night wore on the riot gathered momentum. The Food Office in Manchester Street was raided and several fires started. Attempts to put out the flames were met with resistance and the Fire Brigade beat a hasty retreat. More bonfires were lit outside and inside the Town Hall. In the confusion the Mayor was smuggled out, disguised as a special constable. The nearby garage of Hart's Motors was raided for petrol. When this was added to the fire the Town Hall quickly became a blazing inferno. Attempts to put out the fire were thwarted by the cutting of hosepipes. Remaining hoses had to be used to protect the police from the crowd rather than to quench the flames.

During the fierce fighting that followed the police found themselves heavily outnumbered as soldiers, many in uniform, joined in against them. A chemist's shop was raided and medicine bottles were used as missiles. A man was hit so hard by a fireman's jet that he was hurled through a music shop window. The crowd that went in to rescue him emerged with three pianos. These were dragged into the roadway and used as accompaniments. The crowd sang 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' before the biggest bonfire that Luton had ever seen. The burning down of the Town Hall provided the perfect culmination to what had started as a very wet day.

Around midnight, supported by reinforcements from London, the police read the riot act to the crowd, which by now numbered several thousands. Then, just as the Town Hall clock struck one (before crashing to the ground amid a pile of debris) the police began a savage assault, hitting out at men, women and children.

The following morning Luton looked like one of the ravaged cities of World War I. Steel-helmeted troops stood guard amidst the burnt-out embers of buildings and looted shops. The day passed with no signs of hostility between the troops and the locals. But after closing time further outbreaks of rioting and looting

began. This continued for three or four nights until either police reinforcements (or lack of further places to loot) brought the business to an end.

Needless to say no more official banquets were planned in Luton for some time. A subdued Council organised a banquet to end all banquets - for the aged and children from the local workhouse.

What became of the Mayor? Fearful of his life he cut short his political career and left for Sutton-on-Sea. He only returned to Luton twice. Once for the funeral of a friend and once more for his own.

The 'restoration of law and order' led to several arrests. Because the authorities were fearful of further repercussions the judge handed out surprisingly light sentences. He even said there had been 'some provocation'.

This account was drawn from 'The Luton Riots : A Reconstruction of the Events', a recording made by Mr Ron Hall, reproduced by Bedfordshire County Library from a copy in the possession of Dr D.H. Shaw. It is edited by libcom and excerpted from Mutinies, by Dave Lamb