

SOUTH STAFFS WAR YEARS

The Company's archive comprises preserved steam engines, physical artefacts, drawings and records. Indeed, some documents date right back to the Company's creation in 1853. Many have contributed to the archive over the years but most recently the work done by Chris Pattison, who retired last year, in gathering together and organising the document record has ensured its preservation for future generations.

There are many topics and events I could write about but as this year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War I thought I'd shed a little light on how that turbulent time in history impacted on the Company and touched the lives of some of its employees. Much of the information for this article has been taken from 'The Review', the magazine published by the Company's Staff Association.

The Staff Association arranged many activities for its members. One such event took place on 23rd January 1940 and is described thus : "One of the most enjoyable evenings for a long time was the occasion of the supper and smoking concert.... More than 100 members and friends enjoyed the evening but had problems getting home due to the black-out and thick atmosphere in the canteen". There was even a tobacco club. How times have changed.

It is worth sparing a thought for the canteen staff who provided meals throughout the war in spite of rationing and shortages. Levels were set for meat, sugar and butter but fish, although expensive, was not rationed. Members donated home grown vegetables and in one instance a ton of potatoes was obtained thus saving "many members from a potato-less week end"

The industrial areas around West Bromwich attracted the attention of the Luftwaffe. In a raid targeting Bescot marshalling yard in April 1941 ten pipe lengths of the twenty-four inch main in Walsall Road were blown out of the ground as the result of two high explosive bombs exploding within four yards of each other. The considerable uplift of forty yards of main took three days to repair. The picture below, from the 'Raid Album', shows the resulting damage.



The picture is of particular interest to me as my late mother, who was then 11 years old was asleep in the far house when a lump of concrete fell through the ceiling and landed on the pillow next to her. The two nearer houses were so badly damaged that they had to be demolished.

The war restricted the engineering activity of the Company but preliminary works on the Blithfield Scheme had been carried out during the war years. Owing to the increasing demand for water and the approaching completion of the thirty-three inch Blithfield to Seedy Mill main, in 1943 the Board decided to proceed with purification works at Seedy Mill. Tenders for the work were accepted, subject to the receipt of the necessary authorisation from the Ministry of Health to proceed with the work, as follows.

Purification Plant; Patterson Engineering Company Ltd.	£14,150
Electrically Operated Pumping Plant; Sultzer Bros.Ltd.	£2,485
Electrical Equipment; British Thomson Houston.	£3,900
Purification Works & Pumping Station; Thomas Lowe & Sons Ltd.	£25,954

The Company formed its own Home Guard, or Dad's Army, in mid 1940 and numbered amongst its ranks were H. Marshall and L. Morrall, names we are familiar with today. These volunteers would guard the Company's pumping stations every night against what was then a very real threat. Another familiar name I came across was Key and was fascinated to discover that the father of our former colleague, Richard, was taken prisoner of war in Italy. He had joined up in July 1940, captured at Tobruck and was demobbed in 1946.

In all nearly one hundred employees joined His Majesty's Forces during the war. The names of those who made the supreme sacrifice are recorded on The Roll of Honour:

Gilbert Bayley
Robert Bayley
Edward Brunt
Lawrence William Garfield
George Andrew Garford
Stanley Bertram Goddard
John Thomas Gregg
Willfred Harry Hill
Peter Francis Nixon
Frederick Charles Ray
Arthur Francis Vaughan
George Henry Ward
Francis Raymond Wilkes