

The First World War in Kent

As the closest county in England to the continent, Kent played a crucial role during the First World War. It was the county most likely to be a target for invasion and was heavily defended with fortifications. It was also the main departure point for troops and materiel heading for the battlefields of France as well as the first point of refuge for the wounded.

Kent was in the fore-front of anti-invasion measures during the First World War. Immediately before and during the war defences around the ports of Dover, Chatham and Sheerness were strengthened and vulnerable stretches of coast defended. A defensive system was put in place to protect the approaches to London by both land and sea.



Centre Bastion Sheerness: gun towers c. 1913 (HER: TQ 97 NW 129)

The coast was fortified with sandbagged breastworks, artillery and machine-gun emplacements and barbed wire as at Scrapsgate and elsewhere along the coast of Swale and Medway.



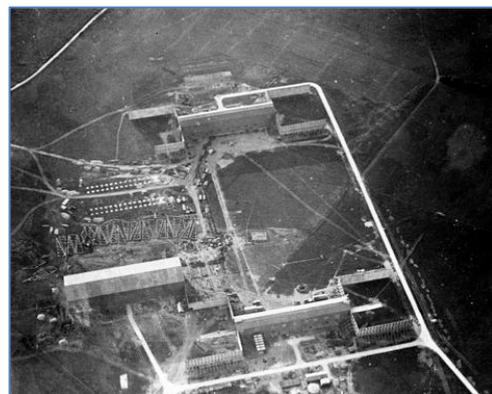
Sandbagged breastworks and barbed-wire entanglements on the Scrapsgate seafont (Royal Engineers Library and Museum)

To equip the armies in France and Belgium required an enormous amount of supplies – far more than the existing ports in Kent were capable of transferring. To address this a brand new port was constructed at Richborough that by 1918 had developed into a huge facility employing in excess of 24,000 people.



Port Richborough © Kent History & Library Centre (HER: TR 36 SW 414)

Other ports and harbours were expanded and defended such as at Dover which saw the addition of several new batteries. The airplane and airship became major new weapons and military airfields were developed such as the RNAS airfield at Capel.



Aerial view of RNAS Capel airship station. (HER TR 23 NE 29)

The war at sea also left its imprint on the coast of Kent. The seas around Kent include numerous shipwrecks including many ships sunk by submarine and one German submarine (UB 122) that surrendered at the end of the war and later sank near Lower Stoke.



The wreck of UB 122 (HER: TQ 87 SW 30)

As well as being the departure point for soldiers for the Front (mostly from Folkestone) Kent was the main port of arrival for wounded soldiers returning to Britain. In

the years before the war, and during it, an emergency medical programme was launched to complement civilian services. The programme, known as Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) eventually grew to 2,500 detachments country-wide, mostly staffed by volunteers, mostly women. Kent had more than 80 VADs, more than any other county treating over 125,000 wounded and sick soldiers.



Brewood School, Deal, former VAD hospital (HER: TR 35 SE 895)

Information on all these sites and hundreds more can be found on the Kent Historic Environment Record (HER) (www.kent.gov.uk/HER), a computerized database of historic buildings and archaeological discoveries in Kent. The HER is used to help conserve Kent's heritage through the planning system, to inform research and education and for community projects. It is maintained by Kent County Council.



The Council for British Archaeology is working with English Heritage and partners across the UK to help local communities identify and map the remains of the First World War in Britain. Local people can help to document and preserve our stories, and vulnerable remains, for future generations.

Running from 2014–2018, the **Home Front Legacy project** is supporting community groups researching local places associated with the Great War with an online toolkit and guidance for recording the remains of surviving sites, structures and buildings around Britain.

For more information visit <http://www.homefrontlegacy.org.uk>

