

**Whitley Bay, North Shields & District Branch**

**Royal British Legion**



**100 years in the making**

At the end of the First World War a number of different clubs and associations were formed by the men leaving the military. The idea was to try and help each other and provide comradeship through shared experiences.

Very quickly the different organisations realised they would be stronger and have a louder voice if they worked together. Negotiations began between the four largest ones and eventually the decision was made to merge.

At 9am on Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1921 as part of a national conference four men, each representing their old societies namely The Comrades of the Great War, The National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers, The Officers' Association and The British National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers laid a laurel wreath at the base of the cenotaph in London. The last post was sounded and as the last notes faded away so did any rivalries between the old societies and the British Legion was formed.

The present Whitley Bay, North Shields & District branch is an amalgamation of branches formed in North Shields, Whitley Bay, Tynemouth and Monkseaton. One of the two North Shields branches has been in existence from its formation in 1921, closely followed by the Whitley Bay branch.

This means the British Legion has had a continuous presence in the North Tyneside coastal area for the past 100 years.

The branch was formed when on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1921 the North Shields branch of the Comrades of the Great War held a special meeting in their club at 18 Howard Street in North Shields. At the meeting it was decided by unanimous vote to carry out the resolutions passed at the national conference, namely that on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1921 all ex-servicemen's societies would become branches of the British Legion.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1921 the band of the North Shields branch played two concerts, one in Northumberland park followed by one in the West End park both in North Shields.

In October 1921 Field Marshal Haig wrote to all of the Mayoresses around the country asking them to help with the organisation of selling Flanders poppies on Remembrance Day. As plans for this had been in place before the British Legion was formed a few months earlier the local branches stepped back

leaving the Mayoress and her committee to make the arrangements however a lot of their members turned up to help on the day.

Poppies went on sale all around the borough at 8am on Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1921 and sold out very quickly. The ladies running the stalls improvised, getting any pieces of red material and even red paper that they could find and selling those in place of the official poppies. The first appeal in the borough raised £113 7s 5d (worth around £5,500 in 2020).

In December 1921 the branch provide a Christmas breakfast for a few hundred of the poor children in the area.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 1922 a notice appeared in the local press announcing a liquidation meeting for creditors of the North Shields British legion. A week later another notice appeared this time explaining the difference between the British Legion Club and the British Legion Branch explaining the club was a social amenity for the branch members.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 1922 an appeal for members in North Shields was published which stated the branch had no headquarters at present but one would be established very soon. It also stated that the branch had nothing to do with any club in the town.

While no definitive date has been found for the formation of the Whitley Bay branch as yet the same newspaper also mentions the Whitley Bay branch president in their story so the branch must have been in existence at the time.

Three days later it was announced that the North Shields club had gone into liquidation and that fixtures, fittings and band instruments from 18 Howard Street were being sold off. It's assumed that the social club had been struggling and that they had separated from the main branch before the property in Howard Street was sold.

On Sunday the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1922 the war memorial on the Links at Whitley Bay was formally unveiled by the Duke of Northumberland. The Duke removed a large Union flag before the vicar of St. Paul's performed a dedication service, ending with the playing of the last post and the Northumberland Hussars firing a salute.

In November 1922 the Whitley Bay Branch and the North Shields Branch both organised Armistice Day celebrations although nothing seems to have been arranged at the new memorial on the sea front.

On Saturday the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1923 the Tynemouth Branch officially opened their new headquarters at 10 Lovaine Place in North Shields, it was a joint premises shared with the United Services Club.

At 10 o'clock on Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1923 a short memorial service was held in Hawkeys Lane, North Shields, organised by the North Shields branch of the British Legion and the United Services Club. Wreaths of red Flanders poppies were laid followed by the playing of the last post by buglers of the Smith's Dock Scout Troop. After a two minute silence, reveille was sounded and then the party left to join the mayoral procession from the Town Hall on Saville Street to Christ Church where a service was held including a silence at 11am.

That afternoon a memorial service was arranged by the Whitley Bay British Legion and the Whitley Bay RAOB. The event started with a parade from the council chambers in Whitley Bay at 2.30pm followed by a service at the memorial itself at 3pm. The newspapers reported that parade consisted of members of the Whitley Bay branch of the British Legion, the RAOB, Police, Fire brigade, Scouts and Guides and other organisations including representatives of the North Shields branch of the British Legion and United Services Club.

The North Shields branch had set up its new headquarters at 10 Lovaine Place and over the following years both branches were involved in what we now know as welfare support. The local press described how they existed not only to maintain the brotherhood established during the Great War but also to protect the interests of the ex-servicemen, dependants, widows and orphans.

On Saturday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 1927 members of the Tynemouth branch were amongst those present when the Imperial War Graves Commission handed over the Cross of Sacrifice at Preston Cemetery.

In 1933 the Whitley Bay branch announced plans to hold a festival of Remembrance to culminate the Armistice Day celebrations in the Empress ballrooms in Whitley Bay. The newspapers said "The idea is to bring together

all those in this district who served in any capacity in His Majesty's forces and their wives together with dependants and relatives of the fallen in a great act of Remembrance". It was to be run in a similar format to the national one held in the Albert Hall.

The event went ahead and was a great success. It was repeated for a number of years, growing in size and by 1950 it was a hugely popular three day event.



On Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1934 the Tynemouth branch held a large meeting at the Masonic Hall in North Shields. The newspaper is difficult to read but it appears that there had been problems sharing a building with the United Services Club as a quote in the article described how the Untied Services Club does not and will not control the branch. It also described how the British Legion was a non sectarian and non political organisation. At the end of the meeting it was decided to completely dissolve the existing Tynemouth Branch and immediately reform it under the temporary chairmanship of the Mayor, they would have their own premises and be completely independent of the United Services Club.

A few months later, on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1934, Tynemouth Branch had a new standard dedicated in Priors Park in Tynemouth. The service made the front page of the local newspaper which said it was attended by the Right Honourable Earl Grey DL, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor and thousands of visitors including many local branches.

In 1935 the local press reported that members of the Tynemouth branch had been given a talk on how to protect the civil population from poisonous war gasses at their headquarters in North Shields from a local doctor.

On Saturday the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1935 the Tynemouth branch played host to the first visit to the North East of the national chairman, Major Featherston-Godley OBE. The meeting took place in the parish hall on Albion Road in North Shields and the large gathering saw representatives of the Tynemouth, Newcastle, Whitley Bay and Monkseaton, South Shields, Seaton Sluice, Wallsend, Scotswood and Blyth branches attend. The subject of the speeches appear to be around the need for branches to work together to help ex-servicemen and the desire for peace.

On Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 1938 the Tynemouth Branch held a rally which formed up at the Congregational Church in Front Street, Tynemouth. During the rally the new Tynemouth village war memorial was unveiled.

During the Sudeten Crisis of 1938 when the threat of war in Europe was rising, the Germans demanded that Czech troops were withdrawn. There was a need for the region to be policed and Chamberlain proposed that this was a role that could be fulfilled by the British Legion. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October it was reported that a 1,200 volunteers (1000 operational and 200 support staff) had been selected and would travel to the Sudetenland. The force mustered at Olympia in London on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October and were sworn in as special constables on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October. They entrained to Tilbury where they boarded the recently retired P&O liner SS Naldera and the troopship HMT Dunera to sail to Bremen. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, before either ship sailed, the International Commission meeting in Berlin decided that they were no longer needed and therefore the force was redundant. They disbanded on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October and the men returned to their homes.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1938 the Shields Daily News reported how two North Shields members of the British Legion who had volunteered to be members of the British Legion Volunteer Police Force had returned home. One lived in on the Coast Road while the other was from Linskill Terrace.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1944 Capt Williamson MC wrote to the Shields Daily News to complain about the parade organised for the launch of the “salute the soldier” fundraising week. He said the British Legion had been placed 26<sup>th</sup> in the order of march and the Merchant Navy representatives were 21<sup>st</sup>. He pointed out that quite a number of the branch members were ex-soldiers of the present war and said that if this is an example of how they were to be treated then heaven help them. He said the ex-soldier has to fight for everything he has got and the legion has had to fight it for him.

In 1928 the plight of half-a-million service people who remained unemployed had been a constant concern of the newly-organised British Legion branches across the country, one of the things they had done was to form a car parking company in Belfast.

During World War II the prospect of another wave of disabled and unemployed ex-services people looking for gainful employment was on the minds of the British Legion. The example from Belfast was nationalised and the British Legion National Car Attendants Company – an associate company of the Legion – was formed on 1 September 1943, with £35000 working capital provided by Legion HQ.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1946 the British Legion National Car Park Attendants Company Ltd was given the land at the rear of the Alnwick Castle public house and / or a piece of land bounded by Wellington Street and Little Bedford Street in North Shields to use as car parks which in turn provided employment for some of the local veterans.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1946 three performances of the British Legion silver jubilee and Victory Tattoo took place in the Princes theatre in North Shields. It featured a performance of pipes and drums and a historical pageant which saw members of the Tynemouth branch dress as Yeoman of the Guard complete with red tunics and pikes. The money raised went towards a new headquarters for the branch.





On Saturday the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1947 the North Shields field of Remembrance reopened for the first time since 1938. The Mayor of Tynemouth laid the first cross and the intention was to hold an open air, flood lit service to close it four days later.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1949 a picture was in the newspaper showing the new headquarters of the Tynemouth Branch in Stephenson Street, North Shields along with a caption telling how it had been opened by the Mayor.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1950 the Whitley Bay and Monkseaton branch officially opened their new headquarters and club at 42 Victoria Terrace in Whitley Bay. The building had been the Victoria Social Club and before that a dairy.

In February 1951, 15 volunteers from the Tynemouth branch were given special classes in Civil Defence at their headquarters in Stephenson Street.

On Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1951 members of the Tynemouth branch took part in the annual Remembrance service on Hawkeys Lane then attended a dedication service in Preston Cemetery for the war grave stone. Over a thousand people watched as wreaths were laid at the newly installed stone which had been put there by the Imperial War Graves Commission.



Following the death of King George VI the Tynemouth branch took part in a church service to mark coronation day of Queen Elizabeth II on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1953.

On Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1953 Tynemouth's deputy mayor planted the first cross in Tynemouth British Legion's garden of Remembrance in Northumberland Square, North Shields, a short service was also held there.

Throughout the 1950's and 60's the North Shields and District branch was hard at work and they were not alone. Branches also existed in Tynemouth, two in Wallsend, Whitley Bay, Monkseaton, Willington Quay and Howden

In November 1957 a second branch was formed in North Shields. The new estate branch covered the Balkwell area and was based in the library classroom of Collingwood primary school.

In 1971 the North Shields and District branch opened a new headquarters and club at 9a Howard Street to coincide with the golden anniversary of the formation of the British Legion. At the same time the British Legion was awarded the Royal prefix as a thank you for all of its work supporting veterans over the past 50 years. This meant that all of the branches changed their names to become the Royal British Legion.

In March 1972 the local press reported the opening of 36 Royal British Legion flats in Battle Hill. The flats were and still are known as the Duke of Northumberland Court and were built by the Royal British Legion Housing Association to provide homes for ex-servicemen in the area.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 1977 the branch in Wallsend closed its doors due to low numbers. The existing members transferred in to the Willington Quay branch and its money was donated to the Duke of Northumberland Court's comfort fund.

In February 1980 the North Shields branch opened up in Norfolk Street in premises that had once been used by the fire brigade.

In March 1982 the club in Norfolk Street was struggling however it was given a new lease of life when a group of workers on the Uncle John oil rig which was being refitted in Smiths Dock heard of the trouble and organised three events spending over £1000 there.

In 1984 the Royal British Legion Housing Association started work on 30 flats in the Market Garden, Back Park View in Whitley Bay. As with the flats in Battle Hill they were built to provide homes for ex-servicemen in the area.

In December 2003 the Whitley Bay branch won the Whitley Bay town cup, a trophy which is awarded to an organisation for its contribution to the life of the town. The branch was awarded it for the amount it had raised for the Poppy Appeal over the years together with its welfare work, support and comradeship given to the people of the town.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2009 the club at the Whitley Bay branch closed just one day short of its 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The club was run separately from the branch and used the downstairs room in Victoria Terrace which was rented from the Royal British Legion. The rent paid by the club had not been increased for over 10 years so when an increase was independently evaluated the increase was quite high, that combined with a number of other factors resulted in the club closing. The branch itself continued to run from the building.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2009 the North Shields branch standard was laid up in St Columbus Church in North Shields.

The exact date has not yet been confirmed however from talking to people who were active branch members at the time it is known that the two branches merged to form the Whitley Bay, North Shields & District branch before the North Shields standard was laid up.

Later that year, in October 2009, the Whitley Bay branch was awarded the Honorary Freedom of the Borough by North Tyneside Council. The newspapers referred to the Whitley Bay branch however the two branches had merged by this time.

In October 2018, after years of legal work 42 Victoria Terrace was sold. The old building had not been fit for purpose for a number of years and was not being used to its full potential meaning all it was doing was costing the branch money.

As a result the branch no longer had a permanent meeting place. The branch meetings are now held in the Whitley Bay Comrades Club while the annual poppy appeal is run out of 216 Squadron RLC's barracks in Tynemouth.

The lack of their own premises didn't stop branch activities and in 2019 the branch opened a very successful veterans breakfast club at Rockcliff Rugby Club in Whitley Bay. The breakfast club is still active running on the last Saturday of every month between 10am and 12 noon.

The branch still runs the annual poppy appeal in the North Shields, Whitley Bay, Monkseaton and Tynemouth area and thanks to the generosity of the local community, as well as the hard work of a small band of volunteers, regularly collects over £70,000.

We continue to work in partnership with a number of other organisations to help plan major events such as the annual remembrance parades in North Shields and Whitley Bay, Armed Forces day and other commemorative events as they arise.

The branch is an active member of the RBL's Branch Community Support scheme and has provided speakers in schools and community groups as well as telephone and funeral support.

We are always looking for new members to join our branch which can be done via the national RBL website or by calling the membership help line on 0800 3077 773. Serving members of the armed forces, regular or reserve can even join for free.

For more information about the branch's current activities please visit the branch website or find us on facebook and twitter.

Note: This history has been compiled using old minute books and newspaper stories and only relates to the British Legion branch currently in existence. The area also had very successful branches of the Womens Section and they worked very closely together.

## **Welfare Support**

The Royal British Legion is here to help members of the Royal Navy, British Army, Royal Air Force, veterans and their families.

We support serving and ex-serving personnel all year round, every day of the week.

Our support starts after one day of service and continues through life, long after service is over.

**If you are a member of the military family and need help or support  
please visit <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/>**

**Call the national help line on 0808 802 8080 between 8am and 8pm**

**Out of hours call the Veterans Gateway on 0808 802 1212**