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CHAPTER 1

St Albans in 1914

This chapter describes the main characteristics of St Albans at the outbreak of war in 1914. It considers the growing population and changing employment structure of the city, the ways in which it was governed, the amenities to which its people had access and the cultural and religious life that they enjoyed. The people of St Albans made their living in diverse ways, and the standard of life to which they could aspire varied considerably. However, by 1914, after a century of growth and change, the city was flourishing economically and had a lively political and associational life. The range of local services and institutions that existed at the outbreak of war would have been unimaginable to the inhabitants of St Albans 100, or even 50, years earlier.

This book examines the local impact of a war fought between great powers on the world stage. Sometimes described as the first ‘total war’, involving whole populations and not just the fighting forces, the First World War brought the term ‘home front’ into popular parlance in Britain. Almost every area of life was affected in some way in communities up and down the country: the war created new challenges for individuals, families, businesses, churches, schools and institutions of local government ranging from the police and fire brigade to refuse collection and sewage disposal. Industry, agriculture and services were affected in numerous ways, from the loss of employees to the armed forces, to restrictions on the use of premises and materials, to the increased costs of employing their staff. People’s physical and mental health, religious convictions and patriotism were all tested, and the war had an impact on their diets, sleep patterns, personal finances, social activities and sex lives. At the end of the war a weakened population faced the influenza epidemic of 1918–20 as well as the tasks of reintegrating demobilised servicemen, restoring ‘normalcy’ in economic and social life, and finding suitable ways to commemorate the sacrifices made during the war itself.¹ This book explores how one comparatively small community – the city of St Albans

in Hertfordshire, 20 miles north of London – met the challenges of the war and its aftermath. It is a local study, but one that has potentially wider relevance. As another historian of the home front has noted, ‘there are no perfect microcosms’ when it comes to a local study,² and St Albans can make no particular claim to being typical. However, the city had a diverse economic structure: it was a market town with an agricultural hinterland, a large and growing manufacturing sector and a middle-class commuter population. It became the temporary home of a large number of billeted soldiers; it was the seat of a military service tribunal whose proceedings offer intriguing insights into the economy and governance of the city; and its rich civil society left many records on which the historian can draw. It offers, therefore, an opportunity to examine in a local context the wide-ranging impact that the First World War had on a small area of England.

Population, industry and employment

By 1914 the population of St Albans had been expanding consistently for more than a century. There were just over 3,000 people in the city in 1801, exactly 7,000 in 1851 and 18,133 in 1911.³ St Albans was growing beyond its historic core and a series of boundary extensions, in 1835, 1879 and 1913, reflected this sprawl, each bringing new areas within the government of the city. The last was the most important, incorporating large areas of housing and industry into the city. In the early years of the

twentieth century two significant areas of working-class housing had been constructed outside the city boundaries. These were Sandridge New Town, to the north of St Albans, adjacent to Bernards Heath,⁴ and Fleetville and the Camp to the east, where new industrial enterprises, including the Salvation Army Printing Works on Campfield Road, Smith's Printing Co. Ltd's works on Hatfield Road and Nicholson's Raincoat Co. Ltd on Sutton Road, offered employment opportunities (Figure 1.1). The result of the boundary extension was that the population of St Albans increased by more than a third so that there were an estimated 24,000 people living in the city in 1914.⁵ Urban growth, although it took many different forms, was a key aspect of the economic and social changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and St Albans was not unusual among ancient towns and cities in this respect.

In one respect, though, St Albans and its surrounding areas were unusual: there was a preponderance of women in the population. This was a long-standing imbalance: at the time of the first census, in 1801, there had been just 74 males in the population per 100 females; in 1851 the figure was 84; and, by 1911, the last census before the war, it had fallen again to 81. Historically, this reflected the importance of straw plaiting and straw hat manufacture to the economy of the city and surrounding region; although straw plaiting had almost disappeared by the twentieth century, hat factories remained a feature of the urban landscape. By 1911 domestic service was the largest employer of women and girls, with around 1,300 employed, but the hat makers employed around 650, about 100 of whom worked from home.⁶