

The Birkenhead Riots, Patriotism and Injustice

By Greg Dawson

During the 1880s and '90s a number of German and Austrian families moved to England for a better life. Many settled in Liverpool and quite a few settled in Wallasey and Birkenhead where some opened pork butcher's shops. One such German immigrant was Karl Deuschle who was married at the German Chapel, Renshaw Street, Liverpool in 1892. Karl and his wife established their own business two years later, opening a pork butcher's shop at 35 Oxtan Road, Birkenhead.

They had three sons: Charles born in 1894, Frederick in 1897, and William in 1900. Karl worked hard to build up his business and bought his pigs from local farmers, smallholders and cottagers. Cottagers were people who had a large garden or maybe a small croft or two and kept a few pigs and a flock of poultry etc., to add to their low wages as, say, a farm labourer or gardener. In Victorian days there were quite a few cottagers living on the rural outskirts of Birkenhead. These local pig producers got to know Karl, or Charlie as they affectionately called him, and found he was a very honest and likeable man who paid a good price, cash on the nail.

At this time my grandparents rented a seven-acre smallholding in Holm Lane, Oxtan, from the Earl of Shrewsbury. They always sold their pigs to Karl, as did their neighbours, the Bennets, Whartons and others. Karl's business prospered and he opened another pork butcher's – a lock-up shop at 135 Price Street, Birkenhead. Sometime between 1900 and 1906 Karl changed his name from Karl Deuschle to Charles Dashley and applied for British citizenship for himself and his family, which was granted in 1911. His oath of allegiance to the Crown went as follows: "I Karl Deuschle, known as Charles Dashley of 35 Oxtan Road, etc..." All was going well for Charles and his business until 1914 when the Great War started. The war made no difference to the attitude of his customers and suppliers to Charles because he was part of the community. Then on Friday 7th May 1915 a dreadful thing happened, the Cunard Line ship *Lusitania* was sunk off Kinsale, Ireland, by a torpedo fired from the German submarine U-20 by Lieutenant Walther Schwieger. Of the 1,959 passengers and crew aboard the *Lusitania*, 1,195 perished, including 123 Americans on their way to Liverpool. Many Merseyside families lost relatives or friends who were passengers or members of the crew and there was obviously great anger and hatred



Thomas Evans, Chief Quartermaster and Helmsman aboard the *Lusitania* lost his life when she went down. Thomas, a former Parkgate fisherman, married Alice Roberts of Hillside Farm, Thurston and they lived at Marfield Cottage, Pensby Road, Pensby. His granddaughter Valery Steel and her husband David still live there (opposite Pensby Petrol Station).



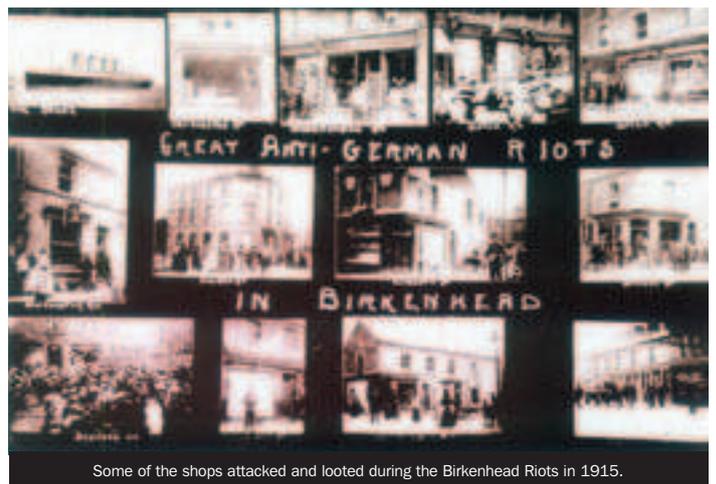
The sinking of RMS *Lusitania*

of anything German. People could not get their hands on the U-boat crew, so they took it out on innocent Germans and Austrians living amongst them.

The day after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, anti-German riots broke out in major British cities, including Liverpool. German and Austrian-owned shops, businesses and houses were attacked, looted and wrecked. Birkenhead Police and German shopkeepers were expecting the riots to spread "over the water" and pubs were advised to close early. Sure enough, anti-German riots started in Birkenhead on the Monday night. The first victim was pork butcher John Swarb, who had his shop at 49 Watson Street wrecked. Police tried to protect the premises from the mob, but they were stoned and overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The next shops to be attacked were those of Charles Dashley, in Price Street and Oxtan Road. Charles was expecting trouble and had sent his wife out of harm's way, but he stayed in his home above the shop in Oxtan Road. When the mob broke in he managed to give them the slip. Most of the rioters were looters who had no idea who the people were whose businesses they were attacking. Charles actually moved around his home amongst the mob, collecting small items of sentimental value and putting them in his pockets. The rioters ransacked and looted the Dashley home and shop below, throwing personal possessions and furniture through the windows to the street below where they were set on fire.

Charles made good his escape before anybody recognised him and fled to Holm Lane where my grandparents hid him for a while. They had friends and family members fighting the Germans in Flanders, but they still stood by Charles and looked after him. My grandparents had a large family and things were a bit cramped in their cottage, so Charles was moved into a neighbour's house where there was more room. My dad was nine at the time and he recalled being told not to talk to anyone about what had gone on and he was not told where Charles was moved to.

The riots continued for a couple of days and pubs remained closed. About 20 or so German and Austrian businesses and houses in Birkenhead were attacked, but in Liverpool the number was nearer 200.



Some of the shops attacked and looted during the Birkenhead Riots in 1915.