

The Birkenhead Bantams

by Greg Dawson



After the First World War started in 1914, a small, broad-shouldered coal miner arrived in Birkenhead after having walked 150 miles, all the way from Durham. As he roamed through Yorkshire, Lancashire and down to Liverpool, he tried to enlist in the army at every town he passed through, but was rejected because he was too short. Eventually he crossed the Mersey and at the Birkenhead recruiting office, he presented himself for enlistment. The young miner was measured and rejected by the sergeant, who said to him: "Nothing doing, Army regulation height is 5 foot 3 inches; you are only 5 foot 2 inches." The young miner ranted and raved and swore at the sergeant and offered to fight any man in the room, all to no avail. It was said that it took half a dozen men to get him out of the office.

At the head of the local Recruiting Committee was the Conservative and Unionist MP for Birkenhead, Alfred Bigland of Wexford Lodge, Oxtou. He was informed of the incident concerning the small young miner by Alfred Mansfield, a member of the Recruiting Committee. Mansfield said that the British Army required every available man to fight the Germans and the large pool of small men should not be overlooked. Our losses in Flanders were huge; for instance, the 1st Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers went into battle on 19th October 1914 with 1,150 men, even after reinforcements, by the end of the month only 90 men were left. Bigland and Mansfield decided to write to Lord Kitchener and inform him that in their opinion a 'Bantam' contingent of men between 5 foot and 5 foot 3 inches tall could be raised. Providing these men were all fit and sturdy, with a minimum chest measurement of 34 inches, they would make a valuable addition to the manpower of the Army. The War Office informed the Birkenhead Recruiting Committee that they were in favour of 'Bantam' battalions, but were too busy to organise them. However, if the Birkenhead Office wanted to take on the task of forming Bantam battalions, then money, rations, equipment, transport and rifles would be made available. These small soldiers were to be called 'Bantams' after the fierce little roosters used in cockfighting, which originally came from the city of Bantam in Indonesia. In the bantamweight boxing division, fighters weighed 8 stone and nearly all stood under 5 foot 3 inches tall. These small boxers were nicknamed "the gamecocks of the ring".

Alfred Bigland agreed to take on the task and reckoned that he could raise a thousand small fit men to form a Bantam battalion of the Cheshire Regiment. He informed every recruiting office in the United Kingdom of his intention to recruit Bantams and of their required medical stipulations. Signs were put up saying "Join Biglands Birkenhead Bantams" and successful applicants were given railway passes to Birkenhead. Bigland then began to organise accommodation and drilling grounds, etc. By November 1914, Birkenhead was ready for 1,100 Bantam volunteers. However, small strong patriotic young men kept pouring in from all over the UK. Particularly from working-class areas in the industrial towns and cities of Northern England, Central Scotland and South Wales, where undernourishment and hard work from an early age in dreadful conditions often impeded growth. Most recruits came from the mines, foundries, shipyards, docks and steel mills, etc., where they had been engaged in years of hard manual labour, in most cases since they were 12 years old. They had developed muscular upper bodies and strong thighs, but their legs were short. Quite a number of Bantams were local lads from Birkenhead and other parts of

Wirral. Many came from North Wales, arriving daily in numbers; some walked, others came by train. Most were coal miners and farm labourers.

Although the original target of over 1,000 recruits had been comfortably reached, would-be Bantams continued to arrive in Birkenhead from all over the country. Irishmen, Lancashire miners in clogs, tough Scots and Welshmen kept pouring in by the hundreds, the only possessions many of them had was what they were wearing. Birkenhead people found it hard to understand them due to their dialects and strong accents. The many groups of Welsh miners were remembered in particular by Birkenhead residents who were entertained by their singing as they waited at various places for blankets, kit or meals, etc. The miners were particularly tough and wiry, with strong arms and shoulders from years of hard work in confined spaces and hewing coal in narrow seams. Their hero was the Welsh boxer and coalminer Jimmy Wilde from South Wales, who had also been rejected by the Army. When Jimmy was 17 he nearly lost a leg in a mining accident but went back to work and boxing. He started his fighting career as a teenager in the fairground boxing booths taking on all comers for money, many of them local 'hard knocks', sometimes several in a day. Most of his opponents outweighed him by several stones, but he amazed spectators by knocking most of them out. Jimmy turned professional and won the world flyweight title in 1916 and later fought for the world bantamweight title. Just like many of the Birkenhead Bantams, Jimmy had tried to join the Army over half a dozen times, but standing at 5 foot 2½ inches tall and weighing just 7 stone, he was rejected. Eventually, he was signed up as a physical training instructor. Jimmy Wilde was an inspiration and role model to the young volunteers of Biglands Birkenhead Bantams who shared his fighting spirit. He was nicknamed 'The Ghost with a Hammer in his Hand' and his record of only 4 losses in 149 fights, which included 99 knockouts and an incredible run of 101 fights undefeated, will probably never be beaten.

Unfortunately, because 18-year-old Bantams were so small and young looking, many underage lads managed to slip through the net and join the Army – some were as young as 14. Also, a blind eye was turned to quite a number of recruits under the designated 5 foot and they were allowed to join, there were even cases of lads as small as 4 foot 9½ inches. Then again, a bullet fired by a giant is no more deadly than one fired by a small man. Over 3,000 would-be Bantams travelled to Birkenhead, enough to form two battalions. Trams with the bantam cockerel emblem painted on them toured the Birkenhead and Liverpool streets and were used as mobile recruiting stations.

Alfred Bigland and his team more than had their hands full, but the Birkenhead News and the proud and patriotic people of Birkenhead got behind their MP and helped the Army unit which bore their town's name by making donations and organising concerts and clothing centres, etc. Bigland acquired food, tents, boots and uniforms from all over the country and managed to find stabling for officers' horses and accommodation and open spaces in and around Birkenhead for the thousands of volunteers. Birkenhead Town Hall was opened up for hundreds to sleep in for the night. Blankets arrived from the Army Stores Department in Burscough and each man was issued with two. They slept on the floor, in halls, rooms and corridors etc. One of the town's many buildings turned over to the Bantams was Rock Ferry School. Any kind of uniform was issued to begin with; many Boer War uniforms were requisitioned from an army depot in Manchester. Alfred Bigland, Thomas McArthur and Theodore Hunter McArthur bought hundreds of Post Office uniforms out of their own pockets as a temporary issue for the Bantams. Some curious Birkenhead girls got chatting to some of the Bantams and asked 'If you are soldiers why are you wearing post office uniforms', and the lads replied 'Cos we're being posted to France'. Alfred Bigland and his team did a fantastic job and all the men were fed, accommodated and eventually, kitted out.

Gordon Bigland Wood, grandson of Alfred Bigland, recorded some of the Bantam volunteers' memories and anecdotes, including one from Wirral shipyard worker Cyril Wright who said: "I was exactly 4 foot 10 inches when they accepted me. I turned up at the Town Hall office with very little hope of getting in, but as I was a strong and healthy lad otherwise, they just said my heart was big enough to make up for my