

The Removal of Railings for Scrap in Peterborough during WWII – By David Gray

At the end of this report there are more images showing the locations where 'some' railings in Peterborough were removed during the war.

9, Burghley Road. This low wall has holes in the top where the railings were pulled out rather than cut off.



The Ministry of Supply wrote to the council at the beginning of September 1940 asking for the removal of unwanted metal railings for scrap. The council replied that the Ministry should arrange for the removal of the scrap already collected and still within the city. The City Engineer stated that the only railings he could suggest were round New England recreation ground - 450 yards and about fifteen and a half tons. It was not thought that railings should be removed from gardens. The railings at the old burial ground in Cowgate and between the grass and asphalt in Fulbridge Road playground were also mentioned.

The government need for scrap iron from home supplies continued, and in order to maintain these supplies and to build up reserves it was essential to tap all sources. The Iron and Steel Control of the Ministry of Supply had already approached all Urban Authorities, and over 1,000 tons of scrap iron a week had been contributed during the five months since December 1940, from railings on the various properties which were administered by Local Authorities.



Above: 63-65 Lincoln Road. Two images again showing holes in the low front wall where railings were pulled out and never repaired.

In many districts private owners had contributed railings, and through a voluntary scheme which was already in place, it was hoped that all property owners would be given full opportunity to make personal contributions to the national needs, by offering unessential boundary fences, front railings, or those which divided adjacent gardens.

To assist even more in this 'push', the Local Authorities were asked by the Ministry of Supply to assist in the collection of privately owned railings. An authorisation form could be obtained from the City Engineer at the Town Hall, which enabled the council to make the necessary arrangements for the removal of the railings. All the owners had to do was to sign the form and the council would go round and remove the railings, any types were required, wrought or cast iron.



Above: 71-73 Lincoln Road. The first image shows a bracket against which a small gate would have rested when closed. The second image shows the hinge pin on the opposite side where the iron gate would have hung. The third image shows where the old railings were cut off, behind which, modern railings have now been installed. This wall stretches quite a long way in front of a long row of buildings.

The prices of iron and steel scrap were controlled, but it was generally thought that the price would cover the making good of the damage, with a little something left over. This 'little something', it was suggested, should be placed at the disposal of the Local Authorities to relieve rates, or be donated to the Red Cross, Spitfire, or other similar local voluntary funds.

Types of railings that were not required fell into three classes:

1. Fencings of light gauge wire type.
2. Railings or fencings serving essential purposes such as protecting the public from personal danger, protecting growing crops, or necessary for enclosing or keeping out of stock.
3. Railings of historical and artistic value.

The public were warned that their railings would not necessarily be taken straight away, as the need to build up reserves was just as important as obtaining immediate supplies.

The Director of Scrap Supplies was now soon asking councils to remove all iron railings not clearly needed for public safety. It was reported that 20 tons could be had from the New England recreation

ground, Bishop's Road gardens and gravel walk, instructions were issued however, that these should not be taken down.

In the latter half of 1941, five members of the City Engineer's staff had been occupied for several weeks on a city-wide survey of iron railings. Workmen were now calling on citizens in order to take away all railings that were considered unnecessary for public safety or for the protection of stock. A standard rate of 25s. a ton was laid down, but there was a compensation provision for those whose claims were higher. Owners were of course encouraged to give up their railings free of charge.

Mr. Iliffe, of the City Engineer's department stated that the iron salvage from Peterborough would make a useful contribution towards the estimated national figure of 350,000 tons required for the manufacturer of weapons and to save shipping space.

One ton of scrap metal was equal to 150 18lb. Shell cases. Five tons of scrap was equal to 48 250lb. bombs, or 25 500lb. bombs, or 500 Bren guns, or 5,000 rifle barrels.

Ten tons was equal to one 3.7 anti-aircraft gun; 14 tons, a 4.5 A.A. gun; and 15 tons a medium tank.



Above Left: 101-105 Lincoln Road. All of these properties had railings removed. Right: 103 Lincoln Road. The holes left after the railings were pulled out can still be clearly seen.

At the meeting of the Fletton Urban District Council on Monday 20th October 1941, the Surveyor reported that scheduled iron railings for salvage amounted to over 22 tons. An appeal by the owner of 244, Oundle Road, against the scheduling of his railings on the grounds that they possessed artistic merit and prevented cattle straying, had been disallowed. The total weight of railings was now 32 tons.

The compulsory removal of iron railings for salvage created a 'row' in the city council chambers. Contractors removing the railings were being accused of a lack of care with demolition by Alderman Fletcher.

He alleged that for every ton of iron removed, and for which 25 shillings was payable, £35 worth of damage was being done which had to be borne by the property owner. He was told that the removal of the railings was not the concern of the council and was purely the responsibility of the Ministry of Works.

Alderman Fletcher was not satisfied with the council washing its hands of the whole business. He had seen in two other towns appalling damage done to the disadvantage of the owners, in many cases he stated, working men's life savings had gone into the purchase of their property.

The railings had been hammered and slashed away and copings broken until the streets looked as if they had had a very heavy blitz. There was no equality of sacrifice when 25 shillings a ton was offered for the iron and for every ton, damage to the extent of £35 had to be borne by the property owner. He proposed that the City Engineer be instructed to press for the removal to be done in a different fashion.

"I know Peterborough well enough to know there will be a terrible row if more care is not taken", he said. "It is said that the railings are necessary to the war effort, but is it necessary to take them when there are still untouched dumps of iron that have been lying neglected for years?"

Mr. Viney replied "Alderman Fletcher talks of equality of sacrifice. Is there any comparison between the sacrifices we are making and sacrifices the flower of our young manhood is being called to make, and the sacrifices the defenders of Stalingrad are making?"

"The whole thing is potty and absurd. I don't think Alderman Fletcher has made any sacrifice; I don't think any of us has really made any sacrifice. We are fighting to prevent the enslavement of Britain, not to keep our railings at the right height."

Alderman Fletcher explained that he meant equality of sacrifice among the ratepayers themselves. Some had wooden fences and were losing nothing; others had iron and were losing everything.

The Engineer said he had discussed the matter with a Ministry of Works official on the lines suggested by Alderman Fletcher, and the official said the Ministry were quite prepared to see that a wall was restored to decent condition.



Above: 107-109 Lincoln Road. This is a long, low curving wall that extends round the corner into Burghley Road. The holes in the top can be seen all along its length.

Peterborough's collection of iron railings for munitions was carried out by Messrs. John Lucas (Peterborough) Ltd., Dogsthorpe Road, and Mr. B. Stokely, Henry Street, Peterborough, who were the official contractors. As far as possible, the clearance of the iron was being made street by street, Mr.

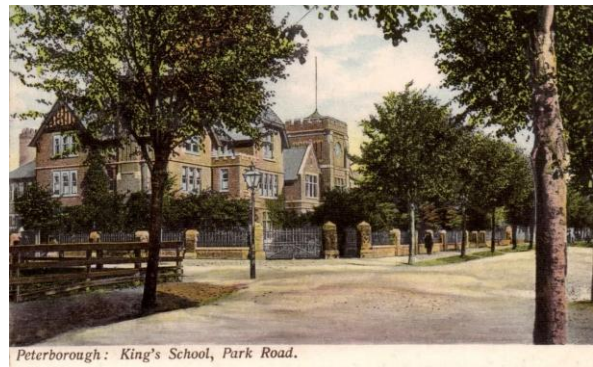
Stokely being responsible for one part of the city and Messrs. Lucas for the other. The collectors had begun by taking railings from the East Ward and the centre of the city.

The removal of iron railings from the Paston Estate was spoken of at the City Council at the beginning of May 1943. The Town Clerk had found that the railings had been removed without the knowledge of any official of the Council.

The Highways Committee authorized the Town Clerk to point out to the Ministry of Works and Planning that in the Committee's opinion, when an owner of railings objected to their removal, the objection should be looked into, and the owner notified of the decision before the railings were removed.

Mr. Coates asked at the committee meeting if there was any instance of "ordinary individuals" having obtained permission from the Ministry to retain their gates or railings. The City Engineer said he knew of none. Mr. Coates said it seemed rather strange that some people were making such a fuss about their gates being taken, while others were having their own flesh and blood taken at 18 and had no opportunity of objecting.

The Engineer said the railings were scheduled to be removed and the contractors went to remove them. The owner got on the phone with a corporation official and asked him to stay his hand. The official replied that the matter was out of the Corporation's hands, but that a Ministry official was coming on the following day. Unbeknown to the local official or the government official, another government official came on the scene and immediately instructed the contractors to remove the railings. The owner of the railings was very indignant at that.



Above: Kings School from the Park Road junction. The low wall with its columns is still in place, but the railings that can be seen in the old, pre-war postcard on the right were removed.

The Problem with Railings

It is important in the context of this chapter to look more closely at the removal of railings and their usefulness during the Second World War. An initiative which was controversial at the time and remains so even today. It is true that many hundreds of tons of scrapped railings lingered on in scrap yards throughout the period of the war and were never melted down to be used to make weapons.

Many people believed that those running the scrap yards were hoarding the metal and waiting for the prices to go up before selling it to the government (prices were fixed by the government and did not fluctuate). Another view strongly held by many is that the removal of railings was just a trick, played on the British public by the government in order to boost morale and keep them busy by making them think they were contributing towards final victory.

I believe the argument about railings, and indeed the whole salvage campaign on the Home Front can be justified by one little incident that took place in London in July 1942. To understand this, we need first to understand the concept of Lend Lease. Lend Lease was a policy under which the United States supplied the United Kingdom (and the Soviet Union, France, China, and other Allied nations) with food, oil, and other materiel such as weapons, between 1941 and 1945. The aid was given free of charge on the basis that such help was essential for the defence of the United States. The value of this aid cannot be overstated. It is quite possible that without it, Britain at least, would not have been able to continue to fight the war with Germany and could well have been invaded or at the very least, been forced to surrender to Hitler.



Above: 194 Park Road. This large building, which is now turned over to flats, has a long, low wall. In this instance the railings were cut off with an oxy-acetylene torch. The cut-off 'stubs' can still be seen all along the wall, embedded in their old lead fixings.

Lend Lease of course was more complicated than this, and as the war progressed it changed according to the needs of all sides and also worked in reverse, with the other nations sending materials to the Americans. For the purposes of this explanation however, the fact remains that the Americans were giving Britain the tools with which to fight the war, and it was a lifeline to Britain.

In July 1942, Mr. Edward R. Stettinius Jr. the head of the United States Lend Lease Administration, came to Britain on one of three wartime visits to see how the American aid was being used and what Britain was doing to help herself in order to pursue the final victory. Mr. Stettinius visited the Prime Minister Mr. Churchill and many other politicians, heads of industry and businessmen. He visited factories to see how war material was being produced, and toured bombed cities to see the damage that was being inflicted on the buildings and the population. Mr. Stettinius was impressed, but one thing caused him some concern, and he made this clear to his British hosts.

In his book, 'Lend Lease – Weapon for Victory' (MacMillan, 1944), he wrote the following about his first visit to Britain:

“Several things about the British iron and steel picture disturbed me. In Bristol, I had seen the steel frameworks of many blitzed buildings still standing. And in London, near the American Embassy, I saw day after day the huge steel girders of some large buildings which had been wrecked in the air raids many months before. What bothered me most, however, was to see the high iron fence around the park in Grosvenor Square every time I walked out of the United States Embassy. It seemed to me that the British were not making the most of their scrap collections, and I pointed this out at Ashborne Hill.” (Ashborne Hill was the head offices of the Iron and Steel Control of Great Britain which controlled Britain’s steel programme).

“I told them”, continued Mr. Stettinius, “we could not continue to supply them under Lend-Lease at the present rate unless they were collecting all the scrap iron and steel they possibly could at home.

After I had been shown the entire picture on scrap, I realised that I had jumped to conclusions a little too fast. Large amounts of iron and steel scrap were being collected systematically, but the British could not spare the manpower or the railroad cars, to collect it all at once. They were starting with the blitzed areas nearest the steel mills and gradually working outward. Railings and fences were also being dismantled under a nationwide plan. I did not feel completely easy about it, however, and asked the Lend-Lease mission to keep me informed. Their reports showed that the collections continued at a steady rate. I must confess, however, that it was good news to get the message a few months later that ‘the railings in Grosvenor Square are down at last’”.

Although as Mr. Stettinius says, he realised he had jumped to conclusions, his statement about not continuing to supply Britain with materials must have struck terror into the hearts of those at Ashborne Hill. This message must have been passed straight to the highest level, and we can see clearly that whether the British people saw it as a good thing or not, cutting down the railings had suddenly become one of the most important initiatives of the war. If Grosvenor Square was to lose its railings, then individual property owners in Peterborough had no chance of saving theirs. Even if they never made it to the melting pot.

There now follows a number of images showing other locations in Peterborough where railings have been removed for salvage. I took all of the images in this document while walking around a very few parts of the city. I know that there are examples all over the old areas of Peterborough that are too numerous for me to list and this project would be well worth carrying on with if anyone has the time.



Above: 195, Park Road. Another large building with a low wall from which the railings have been cut using a hot torch.



Above: 'Fairview' Park Road. Showing where its railings were cut off.



Above: Gransley House, Lincoln Road. Railings cut off with a torch.



Above: Lathbury House, Lincoln Road. Railings cut off with a torch.



Above: Old School, corner of Lincoln Road and York Road. All railings cut off with a torch.



Above: 'William Nicholls Court', Park Road. This is a modern building which interestingly retained the original old wall. We can see that the railings, still seated in their lead fixings, were all cut off with a torch.



Above: An interesting comparison of a line of houses on Lincoln Road opposite St. Mark's Church. These begin with the number 71, and have a Blue Plaque on the wall commemorating a 14th Century 'Great Barn' which stood near this spot.

All of the railings which were situated along the front wall shown in the image on the right, were removed for salvage. A few railings that can be seen in the new image on the left, run from the front wall to the buildings and were installed in modern times. There are no railings on the front wall any more.



Above: Old and new images of what used to be Peterborough Central Library and which is now a restaurant. We can see a very low wall from which all the railings were cut with a torch.

The image below shows that part of this low wall still exists. It continues along the front of the 'College Arms' pub, next door to the old library. For some strange reason the wall was never removed, and a new one was build behind it. We can see quite clearly, the cut off 'stubbs' still seated in their lead fixings.

