

Blackshirts in Exeter

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Context

The Blackshirts is a name applied to members of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) before World War II. The name derives from the uniform worn by the **Arditi**, Italy's elite storm troops of World War I, characterised by the wearing of black shirts. In the United Kingdom, the BUF were led by Sir Oswald Mosley, who founded the political party in 1932. The party was based around fascism, which views political violence, war and imperialism as a way to achieve national vitality, believing that stronger nations and races should displace weaker ones¹.

Devon was not at the forefront of the fascist movement, but once it was established, there was a frantic level of activity. Although it was commonly thought that Exeter, like the rest of the country was against Mosley and his Blackshirts, this was not completely the case. Many saw the party as offering an end to unemployment and as presenting a way out of the 'funny time' England was in². On Friday the 9th of July, 1937, Mosley famously addressed a crowd at Exeter Civic Hall. In his speech he claimed that the only way to get out of the depression was to shift from the international political system to a more national one, sourcing all imports from within the UK and its empire. He was also seen to criticise the Jewish community stating that they have no place in England and that they should find an uninhabited part of the world to create their own nation³.

Summary of Blackshirt activity in Exeter 1933-1940

In 1933, Mosley was first recorded to have addressed the people of Exeter at the Civic Hall; people often remembered his tremendous presence and public speaking skills. The first headquarters for the Blackshirts was located at 85 South Street, and a large amount of interest and support was shown in Exeter. However by 1934 the branch was closed down due to dwindling funds from the national headquarters and the Exeter branch's leader becoming disillusioned with the party due to its dictatorial style.

In 1936 national headquarters sent down an accomplished member of the party, originally from Newcastle to revive the Blackshirt presence in Exeter. New local headquarters were set up at 7 Queen Street near Civic Hall, where many public addresses were held. Between the years of 1936-1937 Exeter overtook the Plymouth branch as the centre for fascism in Devon with the development of a large following. However this increase in interest was accompanied by a rise in opposition to the BUF, several cases of anti-fascist arson were recorded at the Rougemont Hotel on Queens Street, a note was left saying "Down with fascism, rulers in Britain". During 1937 a partnership was set up between the Exeter and Dorchester branches, many meetings were held and social events were also held at 7 Queen Street for members, friends and family to come and discuss what fascism stood for. February 1937 was a particularly good month with many people turning up to meetings and a huge increase in the sales of fascist newspapers.

¹ Wikipedia 2013 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackshirts>

² Todd Gray, *Blackshirts in Devon*, (The Mint Press, 2006)

³ Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 1937, p.9

In July of 1937 a successful meeting was held at Civic Hall; however there was a huge presence of 'red' (Labour) opposition. After this time a few meetings were shut down by police due to crowd members threatening speakers. This problem got so bad on the 16th of October 1937 that the police had to escort the speakers back to 7 Queen Street as a crowd of 400-500 protestors were present. One member of the party in particular was highly unpopular and ended up receiving a ban on public speaking on the 19th of October 1937 for the use of inappropriate language; the ban lasted until May 6th 1938.

After these displays of public opposition it was noticed that the BUF had considerably lost their boastfulness and during 1938 progress was described as steady. Another important member was sent down from national HQ to once again inject some life into the fascist movement in Devon, he lived on Oxford Road, in Exeter. He managed to hold 9 successful meetings in 10 days, which gave great hope to the local members. Mosley was said to have been in Exeter quite frequently, holding meetings on top of a van, usually on Market Street, where he would get heckled and on some occasions people would throw rotting fruit⁴.

In 1940, the presence of the party in Exeter and Devon as a whole was on the brink of collapse, the huge rise in local and nationwide opposition led to violent disorder and the fascists responded illegally. According to the Western times on June 7th 1940, police were sent to the Exeter headquarters at 19 South Street to arrest leading party members as part of a nationwide detention process of BUF members. 2 members were detained, one living on Jubilee road and one on Union road. Also a powerful figure within the party who had stood as the leading party member at the local election was arrested along with his wife⁵.

“The arrival and disappearance of Mosley's Blackshirts is a tale of how an extreme party suddenly appeared in a remote corner of England and galvanised tremendous support. It is commonly said in Devon this would not happen today, but it has once before. It could easily again. History can repeat itself and it is also possible to overlook and forget it”⁶.

Locations of interest

Civic Hall

Located where WH Smith now stands; this hall is where Mosley most frequently addressed the people of Exeter. In 1933 he spoke for the first time there for one and a half hours. In 1937 he held a speech there where 1,500 people were said to have turned up

Rougemont Hotel, Queens Street

Anti-fascists caused 7 fires in the hotel in protest against the party and what it stands for. On one occasion a note was left reading, “Down with Fascism, rulers in Britain”.

South Street

85 South Street, first Exeter BUF HQ, opened in 1933, in 1934 the branch closed due to low funds and internal problems. Records show rocks were thrown through windows.

In 1936, 85 South Street was also used

In 1938, new HQ was established at 22 South Street

HQ was moved to 19 South Street in 1940

⁴ Todd Gray, Blackshirts in Devon, (The Mint Press, 2006)

⁵ Western Times, 1940, p.2

⁶ Todd Gray, Blackshirts in Devon, (The Mint Press, 2006), pp.307-308

Queen Street

1936 a man from national HQ was sent to revive the party, he moved HQ to 7 Queen Street, near Civic Hall.

Market Street

A large crowd gathered in 1937 to discuss the war, literature was also frequently sold on the street.

October 1937, a large meeting was held, the podium was rushed and the event was broken up by police.

Other streets where meetings took place

Belmont Road

Belmont Park

St Anne Road

Kings Street

St Thomas district

Important area and efforts were made on the 20th March 1937 to draw a large crowd and encourage support in the area; it turned out to be hugely successful.

Buller Hall

12th February 1937 – Exeter and Plymouth Gazette - “Blackshirt meeting at Buller Hall, Exeter, 19th Feb, 1937 at 8.00 pm (doors open at 7.15pm) Speaker: Clement Bruning” - Buller Hall is located on Cowick street, St Thomas.

The Hall

23rd October 1936 – Exeter and Plymouth Gazette - “Blackshirt meeting at The Hall, Exeter, tonight (Friday) 23rd October, 1936, 8 pm (doors open at 7.15pm), speaker: Raven Thompson” - The Hall is near Fore Street and West Street.

Further Reading

Todd Gray, Blackshirts in Devon, (The Mint Press, 2006)

