

WW 1 HOSPITALS IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS

by John Cunningham and Ed Gilbert

The War soon brought soon brought many soldiers back to Britain for treatment and recuperation, and their numbers were such as to create severe problems in providing sufficient beds for them.

The sequence of treatment for an injured soldier was somewhat protracted. He would be treated first at a Regimental Aid Post in the trenches by the Battalion Medical Officer, then at an Advance Dressing Station close to the front line by members of a Field Ambulance, RAMC. If further treatment was needed, he would be moved to a Casualty Clearing Station, generally a tented camp behind the lines and then, if considered necessary, moved to one of the base hospitals. Then the seriously wounded would be taken back to Britain by hospital ship for further treatment. The less seriously injured would also be taken back to Britain by ferry for further treatment, recuperation and convalescence at the thousands of VAD * hospitals which would be created in Britain to cope with the situation.

In 1914, there were three military hospitals in Kent - at Woolwich, Chatham and Folkestone. Woolwich had 629 beds and was one of the largest military hospitals in the country.

In 1914-15, the existing hospitals in Tunbridge Wells did their best to cope with extra influx. The General Hospital was only able to take about 60 and other smaller hospitals even fewer, so there could have been a problem, not just in Tunbridge Wells but throughout Britain.

It had been recognized since the end of the Boer War in 1901 there was a shortage of qualified nurses in Britain and it was felt workload could be lessened if some of the more mundane jobs of nursing such as looking after convalescents could be given to less qualified volunteers, thereby freeing up more time and staff for nursing the patients who needed expert care. A solution, which would be as yet untried and untested in 1914, was created in August 1909, not for World War I which could not then have been anticipated, but for any major military emergency which might develop. This may be indicative of underlying fears and insecurity at the time, but also possibly of a certain prescience. This was the 'VAD' - the Voluntary Aid Detachment - which was a volunteer organisation established by the British Red Cross and the Order of St John (St John's Ambulance) to run auxiliary military hospitals in houses, church halls, schools and even tents.

Kent would accommodate more wounded soldiers than any other area of country and by the end of the War, its VAD hospitals had cared for 125,000 patients - about a third more than any other county. Pembury Hospital (the Sandhill Infirmary) was the infirmary of the Pembury Workhouse which was outside the Borough of Royal Tunbridge Wells. It had over 100 beds before the War and became a major VAD hospital, converting its Outpatients Department to a ward of 32 beds.

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