

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

GUINEA PIG CLUB

The Guinea Pig Club

In the mid 1930s, the British Government was making plans for the war that seemed inevitable. Air raids and aerial combat had played a large part in the Spanish Civil War, and it was thought the same would be true of the coming conflict, resulting in many airmen and civilians suffering serious burns. To treat these casualties, four specialist Emergency Medical Service units were set up around London – one of them at the Queen Victoria Cottage Hospital in East Grinstead.

On September 4th 1939, Archibald McIndoe arrived in East Grinstead to take charge of the new unit. A plastic surgeon from New Zealand, McIndoe had been in London since 1930, and had worked with other specialists on the development of grafting techniques. Faced with the severe burn injuries suffered by his first RAF patients, he continued to develop new and often controversial treatments. He recognised the importance of psychological and social rehabilitation as well as reconstructive surgery, and encouraged a relaxed atmosphere at the hospital, allowing beer to be drunk on the wards. He also enlisted the help of the inhabitants of East Grinstead, asking them to accept the recovering patients into the social life of the town despite their sometimes horrendously disfiguring injuries. Mabel Osbourne, then a waitress at the Whitehall restaurant, remembers:

'We sort of made up our minds about what we should do. [We thought] Oh let's look at them – look them full in the eyes and just see them, and treat them as if we don't see it. We'll look at them and not look away from them, and we'll speak to them. And that's what we did.....and we got so used to it we never took any notice after that.'

East Grinstead patients with pedicles¹ – live skin grafted from another part of the body to reconstruct noses, lips etc.



© Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead

¹ A pedicle graft connects a tube of 'living' skin from an undamaged part of the body to the area to be rebuilt. This ensures blood supply to the burnt area. The pedicle is cut loose once the blood supply in the graft has developed.

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The first airmen to be treated at East Grinstead were pilots injured in the Battle of Britain. Later, as the bombing programme intensified, the emphasis switched from burned fighter pilots to burned bomber crews – by the end of the war, these represented 80% of the total. Many Canadian airmen were treated at Queen Victoria hospital and much-needed new bed space was added with the opening of the 50-bed Canadian Wing, built by Canadian military personnel and paid for by the Canadian Government. More than 600 injured airmen received treatment at the unit during the course of the war, many of them having to undergo a series of operations over months or years - one patient had a total of 70 operations.

In 1941, a group of airmen at the hospital decided to form the 'Guinea Pig Club', so named because of the experimental nature of their treatments. The Secretary was a pilot with badly burned fingers, ensuring that there would not be much paperwork; the Treasurer was a member whose legs were burned, so he could not abscond with the funds!

Guinea Pig Club members with Archibald McIndoe at the piano



© Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead

There were 649 Guinea Pigs at the end of the war, mostly British, but also a number of Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and some Czechs, French, Poles and Russians. The Club began as a drinking group but grew into a social network that looked after the welfare of its members for decades after the war. Over the years they have also met and encouraged many other burn patients during their treatment and rehabilitation. Guinea Pigs from around the world gathered every year in East Grinstead for the annual reunion known as 'The Lost Weekend'. In 2007, with only 96 members worldwide, 56 of them in the UK, it was decided that the October 2007 meeting would be the last official reunion.