

Hospital Services in the Mid-Sussex Area During the Great War

By

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Summary

This case study shows how some of the existing hospitals in the area, the British Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment, and the local community came together to make possible the treatment and care of wounded soldiers in the Great War.

Introduction

I decided to research this case study because my family came from this area and the hospitals in it and the buildings used for temporary hospitals were an important part of the community and their use in the Great War is an interesting part of their history.

Background

Mid-Sussex at this time was a predominantly rural area with the two towns Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill and a number of villages of varying sizes. Hurstpierpoint and Lindfield had populations of around 3,000, Balcombe, 1,221, and Twineham, 276 (1911 Census). Burgess Hill (population 5,124) and Haywards Heath (population 4,851) benefited from the London to Brighton Railway running through them and both had a range of commercial ventures and public utilities with some larger businesses being started in Haywards Heath. Land for housing in Haywards Heath had increased in the early part of the century with the Haywards Heath Building Society providing mortgages for householders. Burgess Hill had a pottery and brickmaking industry due to the prevalence of clay soil. Burgess Hill was also widely known as a health resort because of its high position and water supply coming straight from the neighbouring Downs. The Burgess Hill Hydro claimed to be the first nature cure hydro of the south.

Prior to the war hospitals in the area consisted of:

1. The King Edward VII and Eliot Memorial Cottage Hospital, more usually known as the Cottage Hospital. This had moved to new premises in Butlers Green Road, Haywards Heath, in 1912, but had started in 1906 as a result of a bequest by a Miss Eliot, who had been a nurse, in premises in Ashenground Road, Haywards Heath. The new hospital had 10 beds when it opened.
2. The County Asylum or Sussex Lunatic Asylum which had opened in 1859.
3. Deans Farm Hospital for infectious diseases in Gatehouse Lane, Burgess Hill.

In effect the main hospital for residents was in Brighton at the Royal Sussex County Hospital.

The situation at the outbreak of war

The Chairman of the said Royal Sussex County Hospital made an appeal as soon as war broke out and which was published in the local newspaper for the area, the *Mid-Sussex Times*.¹ He said that as it was the largest general hospital to the south it was likely to be made the centre of hospital work in the south-east during the war. It had already agreed to supply a contingent of nurses for military service necessitating ward closures, some surgeons had already been called to the "Colours" and other staff would be required for Territorial Medical Services almost immediately. He was asking, therefore, for the medical profession in the area to send only cases of a serious nature to the hospital and asking the public for increased financial assistance.

Also, at the outbreak of war an appeal was made by the Red Cross Voluntary Aid Society of Haywards Heath via the *Mid-Sussex Times*² calling to the attention of the public the imminent needs of a Voluntary Aid Hospital if orders are received from their Headquarters to set one up at short notice. The use of the Council Schools had been promised which would hold 70-80 beds. The appeal is for beds and domestic articles for the "sick room" and financial help for the provisions that would be required.

The Haywards Heath Cottage Hospital Committee also decide to place the hospital at the disposal of the Red Cross Society with extra beds to the ten already available being provided by committee members.

The hospital in the Council Schools does not materialise but as well as the cottage hospital, temporary hospitals are set up or offered in the following locations:

Lindfield: The Lindfield Red Cross VAD makes an appeal³ as soon as war breaks out for help in setting up a temporary hospital in the village at the King Edward Hall with a list of equipment required. (See Appendix for a list of supplies required to set up the hospital).

By March 1915, an isolation hospital⁴ is fitted out in an empty house in Sandridge Road, Lindfield, in connection with the 22 London Field Ambulance (RAMC).

Cuckfield: Here also, a local doctor suggests that the Urban Council inform the War Office that the Queen's Hall in the village could be equipped as a hospital with 30 beds being accommodated. He offers his services and that of another local doctor for the medical and surgical work. The proposal to write to the War Office is carried unanimously.⁵

Twineham: By early September 1914 a Miss Davidson places 'Westovers' at Twineham at the disposal of the War Office for use as an auxiliary hospital if required. At the same time the *Mid-Sussex Times*⁶ also reports that a similar offer of the Parish Room will be made when it is completed.

Haywards Heath: By November 1914 the Public Hall in South Road, Haywards Heath is prepared as a Red Cross Hospital by the Haywards Heath VAD with 20 beds. Requests for provisions are made⁷ and residents from “all walks of life” come forward to help as well as the Haywards Heath District Gas Company lending and fitting a geyser and gas stoves.

Balcombe: In November 1914 people start preparing and equipping a Red Cross Hospital at Knowle, a house in the village, for 12-15 soldiers. As with the other hospitals, the *Mid-Sussex Times*⁸ reports of the readiness to give “on all sides” either in “cash, kind or service”. The Petrol Gas Company lay a main to the house so this type of light can be used instead of lamps. However, when it opens in June 1915⁹ it has 53 patients admitted – 10 from the Expeditionary Force and 43 sick from camps in the neighbourhood. Most of the beds have been lent or given by local people.

Hassocks: In November the *Mid –Sussex Times*¹⁰ reports that soldiers are being cared for at the Oldland Convalescent Hospital and are being taken on drives by local people lending cars and “carriages”. It says that the care they have received has contributed to their fit condition so that three out of the five patients have already been returned to the 2nd Eastern Hospital in Brighton certified fit to go home. By March 1915 the Hassocks VAD staffing at Oldlands and another site, Broadhill, make a request¹¹ for gifts for “comforts” because with such a small number of beds (14 over both sites) the government grant of two shillings per day for each patient does not allow much for extras. It reports that since opening the previous October, 114 patients have been admitted.

Ditchling: A Red Cross VAD Hospital is set up at Meadowcroft, Lewes Road, Ditchling, with 18 beds.¹²

Keymer: Keymer House is offered for hospital purposes by Mr and Mrs Warren-Browne, the former being called up for service.¹³

East Chiltington: A hospital is inaugurated there in conjunction with its neighbouring villages and Plumpton. It is organised by the Clergy and the Red Cross with a £5 grant from the War Office. A rent-free cottage is provided by Rev. H.S. Musgrave along with a portable room. £5 a week maintenance is promised and offers of “gifts in kind”.¹⁴

Chailey: A Red Cross Hospital is opened at Hickwells early in 1915 but by June 1916 it moves to part of Beechlands (a house owned by a Mrs Harcourt-Rose) in Newick because larger premises are required. It can take 36 – 40 patients and is staffed by VAD Sussex/54 under the 2nd Eastern General Hospital in Brighton.¹⁵

Burgess Hill: By the end of 1914 a hospital is set up by a Mrs Tindal-Atkinson in Silverdale Road, Burgess Hill, called St Margaret’s Military Hospital. Although she has received “several pounds ” she needs additional funds to carry on so arranges a concert at St Andrews Parish Room.¹⁶

Hurstpierpoint: The Sunshine Home in Hassocks Road, Hurstpierpoint, is taken as a small hospital¹⁷ for wounded soldiers during the war. It was originally set up as a convalescent home for poor women and girls from London who needed skilled nursing after operations or serious illness. Taken over by the Church Army in the 1920s, today it is the Torch Holiday and Retreat Centre for blind and partially sighted people.

By April 1915 the War Office is reporting that with the establishment on a large scale of military hospitals it is not proposing to accept any further houses for auxiliary hospitals or convalescent homes.¹⁸ However, by 1917, the Cuckfield VAD hospital¹⁹ is receiving orders to provide 10 more beds and an appeal is made for funds because of the need to make structural alterations to the building. At the Cottage Hospital, Haywards Heath,²⁰ the War Office issues a requirement for it to take 40 more patients²¹ and a Mr Knight offers his house Beechcroft as an annexe to the hospital.²² By April 1917 it is open and taking its first patients with the most serious cases being treated at the Cottage Hospital. In the Lindfield VAD hospital, too, there is a proposal to enlarge and an appeal²³ is made for funds. In August 1917 it has earmarked six beds to be kept for soldiers who have lost limbs.²⁴

The County Asylum

James Gardner in his book *Sweet bells jangled out of tune: a history of the Sussex Lunatic Asylum (St. Francis Hospital), Haywards Heath*,²⁵ says that military service patients, paid for by the Ministry of Defence, arrived in 1917. Most were suffering from shellshock. They were given a richer and more varied diet than the other inmates who actually began to lose weight with the food restrictions that had come into force. By January 1915 the hospital had lost 31 men to military service and soon the only men working there were either over military age or medically unfit for action. Female nursing shortages were even worse because local women could find much better working conditions in some of the traditional male jobs now open to them. In Haywards Heath women were employed at the railway station and the post office.

Although the overall number of patients in asylums had fallen during the war, at the Sussex or County Asylum they increased. In 1915 it received patients from Graylingwell (the West Sussex Asylum) at Chichester which was taken over by the War Office and from the Brighton and Eastbourne workhouses which had temporarily converted into military hospitals. In 1918 207 patients arrived from the Portsmouth Asylum which was being used by the American Red Cross. By 1918, there were 1,021 patients – over 200 more than at the outbreak of war. By 1921 there were 21 military service patients in the hospital.

The arrival of the wounded soldiers

At the beginning of September 1914 wounded soldiers start to arrive in Brighton to the 2nd Eastern General Hospital at the Brighton, Hove &

Sussex Grammar School in Dyke Road. Over 300 minor injuries are brought by Red Cross trains from Southampton to Brighton and then by cabs, ambulances and private cars. The *Mid-Sussex Times*²⁶ reports that they are cheered along the entire route.

By mid-September the Haywards Heath Cottage Hospital is treating soldiers including Territorials. The number of beds now fitted into the hospital is twenty three. The Territorials are having their feet attended to – a result of the long marches they are undertaking. The *Mid-Sussex Times*²⁷ reports that nursing is carried out by the Women's VAD who "all tackle their tasks most cheerfully, and their joviality infects the patients". It says the wards are "models of cheerfulness" and "their spick-and-span condition reveals effective management". A plea is also included for local residents to give generously to aid the funds of the institution.

By November 1914 the Hospital is nursing seven Belgian soldiers as well as English, the majority of which have been in the fighting line only a few days previously. Their ages range from 17-31. The paper²⁸ reports that the soldiers are very fond of their cigarettes and they "smile all over their faces" when the doctor arrives with a large carton of them. The Matron also makes it known that she would welcome supplies of "Burgundy and Stout (which the doctors consider it advisable for the men to have), game, vegetables and dairy produce". Some local people are acting as interpreters and others with cars are taking soldiers for drives.

Also, in November, the King Edward Hall in Lindfield receives its first batch of 13 wounded soldiers, all Flemish, from the Front. They have bullet and shrapnel wounds but the paper²⁹ reports they are all in good humour and will remain at the hospital until they are well enough to return to the Front. The hospital now has 20 beds. Local schoolchildren are carrying out sock mending and an outing is arranged for the soldiers to the cinema in Haywards Heath.

The Queen's Hall in Cuckfield also receives 16 wounded Belgian soldiers in November. The hospital is in the charge of the Cuckfield Red Cross VAD and a range of provisions is being provided by the local community. The paper³⁰ reports that the soldiers "greatcoats show obvious signs that their wearers were in the trenches for many days" so suits are provided for them to wear while their uniforms are being brushed and mended. A number of women are undertaking to wash for the men in their own homes thus reducing the hospital's laundry bill.

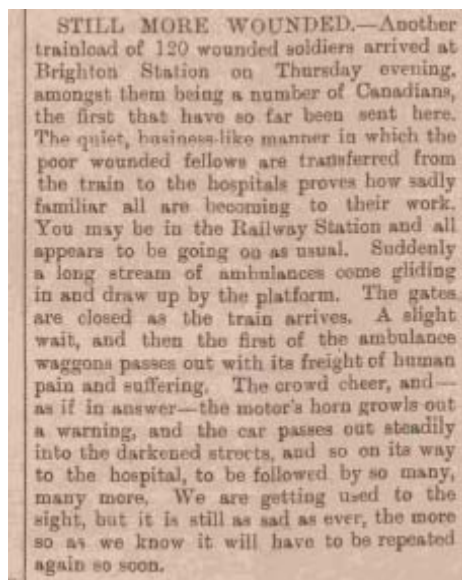
Life for the soldiers in the hospitals

There are numerous reports in the *Mid-Sussex Times*³¹ of the good care the soldiers receive and how grateful they are. One Belgian soldier, when well enough to leave, tells the Commandant of the Haywards Heath Red Cross Hospital that the two months spent there have been the happiest in his life. Other Belgians, on leaving the Cottage Hospital, present the Matron with a flower vase which has been engraved with their names.³²

Much is done to provide entertainment and occupation for the soldiers with concerts, outings, football and cricket matches either to take part in or as spectators. At one point the soldier patients make an appeal for the gift of 14 mouth organs in the key of G!³³ Another appeal is made for a dozen deckchairs plus an awning.³⁴ In the Cuckfield VAD Hospital, the paper³⁵ reports that the ladies-in-charge are teaching the Belgian soldiers how to make mitts and dishcloths and that they “display much interest” in the work “which relieves monotony”. It also says they are very fond of bread and butter and brown sugar and “strong” tobacco is to their liking. In fact, the quantity of chocolates and cigarettes that the soldiers get through leads to a plea for more when the “liberal supplies” already received at the Cuckfield VAD Hospital are exhausted.³⁶ This appears to be an ongoing and common request so that in February 1916 a lady starts a special fund for cigarettes and tobacco.³⁷

These reports are in contrast to one in November 1914. This describes a group of Belgian soldiers, who arrived on the previous day at the Red Cross Hospital in the Public Hall in Haywards Heath, being taken to attend a Sunday service at the Chapel attached to the Priory of our Lady of Good Counsel to celebrate the birthday of their King. The *Mid-Sussex Times*³⁸ reports they are clothed in their “tattered uniforms” and the “drawn features of the men’s faces showed plainly the sufferings they had undergone”.

This report in the *Mid-Sussex Times*³⁹ of the transport of wounded soldiers to Brighton Railway Station in February 1915 shows the magnitude and relentlessness of the numbers that are being received.



STILL MORE WOUNDED.—Another trainload of 120 wounded soldiers arrived at Brighton Station on Thursday evening, amongst them being a number of Canadians, the first that have so far been sent here. The quiet, business-like manner in which the poor wounded fellows are transferred from the train to the hospitals proves how sadly familiar all are becoming to their work. You may be in the Railway Station and all appears to be going on as usual. Suddenly a long stream of ambulances come gliding in and draw up by the platform. The gates are closed as the train arrives. A slight wait, and then the first of the ambulance waggons passes out with its freight of human pain and suffering. The crowd cheer, and—as if in answer—the motor’s horn growls out a warning, and the car passes out steadily into the darkened streets, and so on its way to the hospital, to be followed by so many, many more. We are getting used to the sight, but it is still as sad as ever, the more so as we know it will have to be repeated again so soon.

Funding the hospitals

Official funding for the patients comes from the War Office and varies from two shillings to four shillings per day per bed with the highest sum going to the Cottage Hospital. Six old pennies is paid for unoccupied beds.

Much fund raising is done locally either through direct appeals in the newspaper or by fundraising events. Concerts are regular features as are sports matches; the proceeds from a box at the Burrell Arms pub in Haywards Heath and a sale arranged by local auctioneers are all ways that the public contribute. There are almost weekly reports in the *Mid-Sussex Times* of produce and supplies received by the hospitals which carries on throughout the war. The League of Mercy (a national organisation where people only able to give very small amounts can subscribe to hospitals), gives a grant of £20 annually to the Haywards Heath Cottage Hospital.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The case study shows how much the Mid-Sussex community rallied so readily to do what they could to help in the war effort and how generous they were with their time and money. The staff at the hospitals, with the exception of the trained nurses, gave their services free. The constant appeals for more money, more supplies, more cigarettes, are met continuously throughout the war.

Appendix

List of items requested by the Lindfield VAD to set up the temporary hospital at the King Edward Hall

Bolton sheeting or unbleached calico for nightshirts
Flannel
Old sheeting
Old linen for bandages
Nurses aprons and sleeves
Graduated glass measures
Bandage rollers
112 sheets
20 blankets
36 forks
Two clinical thermometers
16 waterproof sheets
20 hot-water bottles
Two scales and weights
Coal
Soap
Soft soap and soda
House flannel

Notes

- ¹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 11 August 1914, p.5, column f
- ² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 11 August 1914, p.1, col. a
- ³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 11 August 1914, p.5, col. a
- ⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 2 March 1915, p.5, col. c
- ⁵ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 11 August 1914, p.6, col. g
- ⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 8 September 1914, p. 5, col. e
- ⁷ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 10 November 1914, p.8, col. b
- ⁸ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 24 November 1914, p.4, col. f
- ⁹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 17 August 1915, p.7, col. d
- ¹⁰ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 24 November 1914, p.3, col. g
- ¹¹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 16 March 1915, p.1, col. a
- ¹² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 20 April 1915, p.5, col. d
- ¹³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 1 December 1914, p.5, col. f
- ¹⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 1 December 1914, p.6, col. e
- ¹⁵ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 20 June 1916, p.5, col. a
- ¹⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 9 February 1915, p.5, col. e
- ¹⁷ Raymond A. Packham, *Hurstpierpoint in old picture postcards*, Volume 2 (European Library, 1997) unpaginated
- ¹⁸ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 27 April 1915, p.7, col. c
- ¹⁹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 27 March 1917, p.6, col. b
- ²⁰ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 27 February 1917, p.4, col. a
- ²¹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 27 February 1917, p.4, col. g
- ²² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 24 April 1917, p.5, cols. b-c
- ²³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 1 May 1917, p.6, col. b
- ²⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 28 August 1917, p.5, col. g
- ²⁵ James Gardner, *Sweet bells jangled out of tune: a history of the Sussex Lunatic Asylum (St. Francis Hospital), Haywards Heath* (James Gardner, 1999) p.p. 240-244
- ²⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 8 September 1914, p.6, col. g
- ²⁷ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 15 September 1914, p.5, col. b
- ²⁸ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 3 November 1914, p.4, col. g
- ²⁹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 10 November 1914, p.5, col. c
- ³⁰ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 10 November 1914, p.8, col. d
- ³¹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 19 January 1915, p.5, col. b
- ³² *Mid-Sussex Times*, 1 December 1914, p.8, col. a
- ³³ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 22 June 1915, p.2, col. d
- ³⁴ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 25 May 1915, p.7, col. c
- ³⁵ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 29 December 1914, p.5, col. b
- ³⁶ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 8 December 1914, p.7, col. c
- ³⁷ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 8 February 1916, p.8, col. d
- ³⁸ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 17 November 1914, p.8
- ³⁹ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 2 February 1915, p.3, col. d
- ⁴⁰ *Mid-Sussex Times*, 21 November 1916, p.4, col. f

Other sources used

Books

Burgess Hill history and guide (Burnett & Co, 1912)
Ford, Wyn. *Metropolis of Mid Sussex: a history of Haywards Heath* (Charles Clark, 1981)
Ford, Wyn. *Story of Haywards Heath* (S.B. Publications, 1998)

Website

www.visionofbritain.org.uk (for census data)