

Royal Army Medical Corps in Lindfield

November 1914 – June 1915



[Image from Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive]

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The first troops arrived in Mid Sussex on 19 November 1914, the men belonged to 2/1st Brigade in the 2/1st London Division Territorial Force¹. Lindfield² received 10 officers and 223 men 'belonging to the Field Ambulance', subsequently referred to in the Mid Sussex Times³ as the 2nd London Field Ambulance, Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). This would appear to be the 2/2 London (City of London) Field Ambulance, RAMC, who were attached to the 1st London Division Territorial Force. This unit popularly referred to as the 'Second-Seconds' was a new second line unit⁴ of the Territorial Force raised in September 1914 and initially named the 2nd London (Reserve) City of London Field Ambulance.

Each Division had three Field Ambulances, mobile front line medical units, with one Field Ambulance responsible for the care of casualties for one of the Brigades in the Division. The standard structure for a Field Ambulance was 10 officers and 224 men organised into three sections⁵. RAMC soldiers did not carry arms.

The 'Second-Seconds' volunteers were recruited at the RAMC Territorial Depot, Duke of York's School, Bowes Park, Chelsea⁶. Their first few weeks were spent training and acquiring equipment. Under the command of Major J V Sinclair the 'Second-Seconds' left Chelsea for Lindfield; possibly with a short stay at Crowborough en-route. In preparation for the soldiers arrival, the Lindfield Parish Council⁷ at a special meeting on 14 November 1914 gave permission for the Young Men's Christian Association to erect a temporary 'recreation building' on the Common.

On arrival in Lindfield the RAMC established⁸ their brigade hospital at Fardels [92 High Street], which had been requisitioned by the military authorities.

As well as preparing for active service the RAMC provided medical care for the soldiers of their Brigade quartered in Mid Sussex. In addition to the brigade hospital an isolation hospital⁹ under the command of Sergeant Hopkins was opened in an empty house at Sandridge Road on the western outskirts of Lindfield parish. Sergeant Hopkins appealed to local residents for plants, books and papers for the comfort of patients.

The military cookhouse¹⁰ was situated at the top of the High Street, although the exact location is not known.



Soldiers outside the RAMC hospital at Fardels, right foreground. Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive

The soldiers were billeted with families and in empty houses¹¹. Mr and Mrs Charman who ran a bakery, at Boarsland in the High Street, had two soldiers billeted. Their 14 year old daughter, Kathleen, recalled in her memoirs, 'The first Christmas an RAMC battalion was billeted in the village. They had been in camp at Crowborough and were very glad to be housed in a family home. We had two at Boarsland. They were young men from London who had worked in shops and offices and were so afraid the war would be over before they could get to the front!'

Within two weeks of arriving, the RAMC men billeted in Lindfield organised a Smoking Concert on 2 December 1914 for the village in the Bent Arms Assembly Room. The Mid Sussex Times¹² noted that 'the fair sex was permitted to be present' and praised this approach and the performances. Among those on the top table¹³ were Lieut Colonel Salisbury Sharpe, Captain Bicketon, Lieutenant Pinto-Leite and Mrs Pinto-Leite. In the chair was Sgt Major A Fowler who in his closing address commented that 'the men were very grateful for the hospitable welcome they had been given in Lindfield.' Lieutenant Colonel Salisbury Sharpe also made gratifying remarks on how the men had been made comfortable and happy in their billets.

A further Smoking Concert was held on 15 December 1914 and was well supported including by a group of Belgian soldiers and lady nurses from the Red Cross Hospital¹⁴. RAMC smoking concerts become regular social events.

On the morning of 21 December 1914, 'men billeted in Lindfield belonging to the 2nd London Field Ambulance RAMC' left Lindfield for Hursley Park, Winchester¹⁵. Residents turned out in good numbers to wave and cheer. Outside the Red Cross Hospital at King Edward Hall the wounded Belgian soldiers similarly wished the troops well and on the Common they were repeatedly cheered by Lindfield School children and their teachers. The Lindfield School log¹⁶ for 1914 records, 'Children of the three departments assembled on the Common at 8.50am to give the troops billeted here a 'send off' on being ordered abroad. The boys were in by 9.20am.' The Lindfield Boy Scouts and Ardingly Band preceded the Corps as they marched to Haywards Heath railway station. Uncertainty surrounds the identity of this RAMC draft, perhaps this was the 'First line' 1/2 Field Ambulance, as men of the 2/2 remained in Lindfield until June 1915¹⁷.

In January 1915, at a Sunday morning church parade Mr W A Sturdy of Paxhill [a large estate to the north of the village] presented Col Sinclair, the 'Second-Seconds' commanding officer, with drums and fifes so that a band could be formed¹⁸. The band became a constant feature in the life of the unit¹⁹.

At about the same time, to meet the needs for an ambulance²⁰, Mr H M Knight of Haywards Heath provided a motor vehicle to the RAMC. Also Eastholme, Compton Road was taken over as a Sergeants and Non Commissioned Officers' mess with a piano being provided by Mrs Leslie²¹.



Eastholme, Compton Road. (photographed by Richard Bryant)

For residents RAMC soldiers in the village became a familiar sight. While for the soldiers drill, training, lectures, route marches and church parades became the pattern of life for the troops. The Congregational Chapel school room was one of the venues used for lectures and training²².



An RAMC officer in Lindfield High Street. Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive



Soldiers relaxing outside the Stand Up Inn. Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive

The next few months were described²³ as, 'a happy time, for while the training went on and the unit began to find its feet, there was leisure and convenience for sports of all kinds. The relations between the unit and people of the village were particularly cordial' and 'in such a glorious countryside, all were enriched with pleasant and lasting memories'. A view shared by residents and as Kathleen Charman recalled, 'They certainly made life more exciting. Concerts and dances were held in the village'. The cordial relationship was demonstrated in the cooperation and involvement between the RAMC troops and residents.

On Saturday 6 February 1915 to raise money for the Red Cross Hospital at King Edward Hall a football match was played between the RAMC and a Lindfield team drawn from the village, Haywards Heath and Ardingly by Mr A C Crosley. The home team included V J Woodward a Chelsea Football Club player. The game, refereed by Mr J Newnham, was played in wet and muddy conditions in Tentermead field resulted in a 4-1 win for the RAMC. The 2d admission charge raised £1 3s 2d for the hospital²⁴.

The Congregational Chapel²⁵ held a 'Social Evening' on 5 March 1915 to welcome members of the RAMC stationed in the village. Refreshments were provided together with vocal and instrumental music entertainment by local friends, visitors from Haywards Heath and Cuckfield, and the soldiers. The evening was presided over by Rev Taylor, Mrs. Coules, Mrs Taylor and Mrs Stevens with others assisting.

The RAMC men organised another Regimental dance²⁶ for the village on 10 February in the Reading Room to raise money for their funds.



The Bent Arms adjacent to the RAMC hospital was the location of the RAMC smoking concerts. Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive

It was noted in the Mid Sussex Times that residents on 6 March 1915 gave another hearty send off²⁷ to a draft of RAMC men billeted in Lindfield who, it was said, were bound for 'somewhere in France'. The drum and fife band accompanied the men as they marched to Haywards Heath station. On the platform to see the troop off on the train were the Brigadier General and other staff officers. Before leaving Lindfield, Captain Phillips read the men a farewell poem he had composed for the occasion.



The RAMC drum and fife band leading RAMC soldiers down the High Street. Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive

The minutes of the Congregational Chapel in April 1915 note the use of the chapel's schoolroom by various units of the RAMC billeted in the village for the soldiers' relaxation in the evenings, with chapel ladies providing refreshments²⁸.

In late April the Post Office Rifles band from Cuckfield marched through Lindfield High Street and the RAMC band²⁹ reciprocated with a parade through Cuckfield.

Another RAMC unit, the 2/3 East Lancashire Field Ambulance³⁰, arrived in Lindfield on 21 May 1915 having travelled overnight by train from Southport. Sending a post card home on his arrival Private Gent described Lindfield as 'the prettiest place I have ever seen'. The unit quickly settled into the village. The *Mid Sussex Times*³¹ on 25 May 1915 reported, 'The RAMC Unit from Lancashire enjoy the facilities for drill and reaction afforded by the Common' and that a cricket match, Officers v NCO and men, played on the Lindfield Cricket Club pitch resulted in victory for the NCO and men, by 110 to 100 runs. This was followed by an evening rugby match on the Common. The report also noted that the Village Hall club was open to the soldiers on 'advantageous terms'.

However the 2/3 East Lancs Field Ambulance did not stay long enough to fully enjoy the facilities Lindfield had to offer, as in June they moved to Pease Pottage and subsequently on to other locations in England³².

Similarly in May 1915, the Battalions of the 2/1st London Brigade, 2/1st London Division, Territorial Force, which had been based in Haywards Heath, Cuckfield and Burgess Hill, moved to Norwich³³. The 'Second-Seconds', who had been billeted in Lindfield since November 1914, also moved with the Brigade to Norwich.

June 1915 marked the end of the RAMC's association with Lindfield and it would appear no further military units were subsequently billeted in the village.

With the RAMC having departed, the Congregational Chapel Ladies Working Party held a Sale of Work in aid of church funds to defray the cost of entertaining the various RAMC units who used the schoolroom whilst billeted in the village³⁴.

A month after leaving Lindfield the 'Second-Seconds' were reorganised with the Home Service and Foreign Service volunteers being separated³⁵. The Foreign Service men, under the command of Capt Phillips, moved to Ipswich and with new drafts continued training until arriving in France on 22 February 1916.

References

¹ The Long, Long Trail, Battalions of the Territorial Force, The London Regiment. <http://www.1914-1918.net/london.htm> and Mid Sussex Times, 17 November 1914 p. 4

² Mid Sussex Times, 17 November 1914 p. 4

³ Mid Sussex Times, 8 December 1914 p. 7

⁴ *The Second-Seconds in France, The Story of the 2/2 City of London Field Ambulance*. (Spottiswoode Ballantyne, London, 1920) p 9-11 [No author listed, written by committee] via <http://www.ebooksread.com>

⁵ <http://www.1914-1918.net/fieldambulances.htm>

⁶ *The Second-Seconds in France*, p. 9-11

⁷ Lindfield Parish Council minutes PAR/416/49/2 West Sussex Record Office. and Mid Sussex Times, 17 November 1914, p. 4

⁸ Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive, WWI Collection

⁹ Mid Sussex Times, 2 March 1915 p. 5

¹⁰ Lindfield Parish Council minutes PAR/416/49/2 West Sussex Record Office

¹¹ Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive, Charman Memoirs

¹² Mid Sussex Times 8 December 1914 p 4 & 7

¹³ Mid Sussex Times, 8 December 1914 p. 8

¹⁴ Mid Sussex Times, 22 December 1914, p. 5

¹⁵ Mid Sussex Times, 22 December 1914 p. 1

¹⁶ Lindfield Parish Council Village Archive, Whitehead Papers

¹⁷ *The Second-Seconds in France*, p. 9-11

¹⁸ Mid Sussex Times, 23 February 1915 p. 5

¹⁹ *The Second-Seconds in France*, p.9-11

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- ²⁰ Mid Sussex Times, 9 February 1915 p. 7
²¹ Mid Sussex Times, 9 February 1915, p7
²² Congregation Chapel Minute Book III, United Reformed Church, Lindfield
²³ *The Second-Seconds in France*, p. 9-11
²⁴ Mid Sussex Times, 2 February 1915 p. 2 & Mid Sussex Times, 9 February 1915 p. 7
²⁵ Congregational Chapel Minutes Book III, United Reformed Church
²⁶ Mid Sussex Times, 9 February 1915 p. 7
²⁷ Mid Sussex Times, 9 March 1915 p. 8
²⁸ Congregation Chapel Minutes Book III, United Reformed Church
²⁹ Mid Sussex Times, 27 April 1915 p. 7
³⁰ Letters from the Great War, Frank William Gent,
<http://fjgent.zxq.net/pow/chap1.htm>
³¹ Mid Sussex Times, 25 May 1915 p. 5
³² Letters from the Great War, <http://fjgent.zxq.net/pow/chap1.htm>
³³ <http://www.1914-1918.net/london.htm>
³⁴ Congregational Chapel Minutes, Book III, United Reformed Church
³⁵ *The Second-Seconds in France*, p.9-11