

Leckhampton Court in the First World War

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Mrs. A. GRACE WARD, M.B.E.
Commandant, Glos. 42.

A. Grace Ward

Signed portrait of Mrs Grace Ward MBE, the Commandant of the Red Cross Hospital. Taken from the *Souvenir of Leckhampton Court V.A. Hospital, 1914-1919*—a copy presented to Mrs Grace Bendall, who had worked at the hospital throughout the war as a pantrymaid.

Voluntary Aid Detachment Hospital

During the First World War Colonel and Mrs Elwes, who owned Leckhampton Court, placed it at the disposal of the British Red Cross to use as a hospital for sick and wounded soldiers. It opened in February 1915 and closed four years later. It was staffed by members of the Gloucestershire Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) No 42, which had been formed as early as 1910, anticipating that there would soon be a need for its services. Thus the local community rallied together in a way that is echoed today by the groups offering support to the Sue Ryder Care Centre. The illustrated souvenir booklet which was produced after the war provides much information on different aspects of life at the Court during that time. Some of it is summarised below, and this chapter offers an opportunity to honour again the men and especially the women who ran the hospital and to remind us of the bustling community to which the Court was home.

The booklet listed the names, ranks, regiments and dates of most of the 1700 British, Commonwealth and Belgian soldiers who had been cared for. The hospital opened with fifty beds, but these were increased to a hundred after the Somme offensive in July 1916.

The Commandant, Mrs Grace Ward, paid tribute in a foreword to the tenacity, courage and cheerfulness of 'our soldier boys' but believed there was just as much honour due to 'our girls, who have shown such patience, pluck, and energy, under trying conditions of new, unexpected and often uncongenial work. I have never seen a black look, nor heard a grumble, at any order given.'

Among the medical officers was Dr H Lloyd-Davies, the popular general practitioner after whom a local surgery has since been named. Over sixty nurses were mentioned, of whom eighteen served throughout the war. Fifty cooks and pantrymaids and over sixty male orderlies were present for some or all of the time. Their names, along with those of other volunteers, read like a roll-call of Leckhampton's notable families. Local clergy acted as chaplains.

Large wards were laid out in the banqueting hall and the ground floor of the north wing, with smaller ones in the bedrooms above, terminating in the upstairs room in Fletcher's Cottage (above the then chapel). The ground floor of the Tudor wing was used for bedrooms for the staff, the quarter-master's room, the kitchen, scullery and dining room. Above were the surgery and operating theatre, and at the foot of the stairs was the passage which led to the billiard and concert room. The Commandant's office looked on to the croquet lawn, next to the nurses' sitting room 'with its low roof and black wainscoting and delightful view on to the rose garden', where the ladies' sewing party met on two afternoons a week under the leadership of Mrs Leonard Barnard.

Dr McAlldowie, the senior medical officer, recalled the arrival of mud-caked, blood-stained warriors straight from the battlefields, the first field dressings still round their limbs or heads. He gave graphic descriptions of some of the wounds the medical staff had to deal with and expressed satisfaction at the 'many happy, useful hours we spent in our bright little operation theatre'. They gradually acquired a knowledge of previously unfamiliar injuries and ailments: trench foot, gas gangrene from gunshot wounds, and gas poisoning, for all of which text-book knowledge proved useless. Others arrived from Salonika and East Africa, suffering from malaria, and one of the last convoys brought only cases of influenza.



The Banqueting Hall in 1884. A large painting of a huntsman hangs in front of the minstrel gallery.
(Sir Henry Elwes)



The Banqueting Hall converted for use as a hospital ward. The painting of the huntsman still hung there.
(Gloucestershire Archives/David Bick)

The 'boys' played ghoulish jokes on each other before the operations and observed with amusement as patients came round from the intoxicating effects of the anaesthetic. There were many severe cases, however, both medical and surgical, but in spite of that there were only two deaths, neither of them from wounds sustained in battle.

Some remarkable recoveries were recorded, such as a musician who despite a shattered arm was able later to entertain with many brilliant performances on the piano, and an Australian with a compound fracture of the skull, thought to be a hopeless case, but who recovered completely and 'was able to resume bush life'. One patient had epilepsy following a brain injury; it was considered that the man's fits should not interfere with his work in civilian life, but this opinion was promptly altered when it was learnt that he was a steeple-jack by trade!

To entertain the men, the staff arranged concerts, dances, plays and whist-drives. Summer fêtes raised money for the 'luxury account', which was spent on things not provided by the War Office allowance. Bright summer days were recalled, 'with our boys in blue [hospital uniform] lying in scattered groups under the great trees, or on grassy terraces in the beautiful grounds'.

Sports played an important part in restoring the patients' health and keeping up their spirits, and teams competed against those from the eight other such hospitals in the area. Appropriately, shooting was regarded as an important pursuit, and practice took place on a miniature range set up at the Court. The Leckhampton team was seldom without a good billiards team, for which it regularly won the cup. Both billiards and snooker were popular, and handicaps among the patients were played off for prizes of cigarettes. Surprisingly, by comparison with the pursuits of today's young men, little interest was shown in football 'as so few people played the association game'. There was more enthusiasm for cricket and some enjoyable matches were also arranged between the patients and the sisters, the patients being allowed only to bowl underhand and bat left handed.



A cheerful group of patients and nurses
Gloucestershire Archives/David Bick

Several mementos of the hospital are held in the Gloucestershire Record Office. A 'Gift Book' lists meticulously all the donations of money and in kind, together with their values, made between April 1916 and March 1919. There were standard headings for cakes, eggs, vegetables, flour, fowl, cigarettes, pillow cases, jam and potatoes. Some examples are:

Donation	Miss Hargreaves	£2
84 eggs	Pilley Band of Hope	8s.6d
12 eggs	Miss Laurence, Whittington Court	1s.3d
2 doz Bengall Chutney	'Buckler'	1s.
1 box Woodbines	Mr Shipley	5s.6d
4500 cigarettes	Mr Shipley	£4.10s.0d
5 sacks greens	Mrs Barnard	9d
Absorbent wool, bandages, 30 pr braces, 9 pillows, h'chieves, etc	Mrs Thompson, New York	£3.0s.0d
12 prs sheets	Lady Mayoress	£7.0s.0d
11 prs sheets	}	£6.10s.0d
50 pillow cases	} Queen Mary's Needlework Guild	£2.10s.0d
6 pillows	}	£1.0s.0d

Of especial interest are two scrapbooks recently deposited by David Bick, containing drawings, photographs and correspondence. They had been kept by two of the young ladies on the staff: Edith Harland, the 'Colonial Visitor', and Gladys Duckworth, who had worked as a cook throughout the war. (Miss Harland's address was Rosenho(e), 30 Moorend Road. After the war local directories show Mrs Duckworth as the occupant.)

The books included numerous affectionate and humorous messages to their owners: 'a kind mother to all the boys,' 'great kindness to wounded Tommies,' 'many thanks for all the enjoyable outings during my stay,' 'many thanks ... especially for the buck-shee lunches'. Some of those who wrote in Miss Duckworth's book were members of 'the Mysterious Order of Spud Peelers'



It is clear that Miss Harland's car was as popular as Miss Harland herself. A friend, writing from the British Expeditionary Force in 1916, hoped that 'the little car is still going well'. A photograph showing patients and the front part of a car (a Standard), registration No AD 1925 and 'VOL ORG CLUB' on the windscreen, was surely hers. Her scrapbook contains a letter from the Duchess of Beaufort, Chairman of the Gloucestershire Association for Voluntary Organisations, thanking her for 'the splendid way in which you helped by lending your car (and personally defraying the expenses of transport of same) to the County Depot for Voluntary Organisations'.

Miss Harland at the wheel of her car
(John Randall)

A photograph album, now at the Gloucestershire Archives, shows many of the soldiers, medical staff, orderlies and other helpers in a variety of poses, mostly in relaxed groups taking their ease in the grounds of the Court. One photograph shows them on board a heavily laden pleasure cruiser, the 'SS King' at Tewkesbury. Others show a crowd at Pershore, having been ferried in cars and char-a-bancs on Cheltenham Soldiers' Day ('Motor trip for soldiers from Red Cross Hospitals'). In others we see groups taking tea in the garden of a grand house at Worcester. The album was compiled by a Canadian patient, Private William Platt. (By chance, Platt was also the maiden name of John Hargreaves's wife).

Several of the staff received official recognition for their service. Mrs Grace Ward was invested at Buckingham Palace with the order of Member of the British Empire, Sister Lucy Hills, the 'Lady Superintendent', received a Red Cross honour, and Miss Evelyn Crane received

the Belgian Médaille de la Reine Elizabeth, avec Croix Rouge. Others who had served throughout or otherwise distinguished themselves were mentioned in dispatches, including Miss Lilian Whishaw, the Quartermaster, Miss J Ormerod, the Assistant Commandant, Miss J Bourne, the Housekeeper and Head Cook, and Staff Nurse Mrs A Savile, and Mr P H H Kenworthy, Quartermaster to the male Orderlies. (Miss Whishaw was the half-sister of Frederick Whishaw, who in 1891 had lived at The Grotto in Moorend Road, later occupied by Canon Trye's daughters. She was related to the mother of Dr Edward Wilson, of The Crippetts, who died with Captain Scott in Antarctica.)

A party to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the hospital's opening was held on 27 February 1919, attended by 300 guests, many of them in fancy dress. The proceedings were presided over by Mr Sydney Harrison, Honorary Secretary of the hospital and editor of the souvenir booklet (and also Cheltenham Borough Librarian). Presentations, with warm speeches of praise, were offered to Mrs Ward and Miss Whishaw by Drs McAlldowie and Lloyd-Davies. Mrs Ward received a silver salver and tea service, together with a vellum-bound list of subscribers and a pen-and-ink sketch of the Court by Miss N Hills, of the Cheltenham School of Art.

As the party was being held, there were still fifty patients at the Court, and these were joined two days later by others from the Racecourse hospital, which was closing down. On 2 April 1919 the last patients left the Court. The event was marked by a service of thanksgiving and a special celebration of Holy Eucharist for members of the staff at St Peter's Church, presided over by the Reverend J Austin Hodson, Rector of Leckhampton, who had recently returned after serving as an army chaplain in France.



Red Cross Hospital medical and senior nursing staff, in December 1918 on the return of the Matron, Mrs Grace Ward, from London where she had received the MBE from King George V. She is seated in the position of honour in the front row. Dr Lloyd Davies and Dr McAlldowie are standing respectively first left and second right on the back row. Miss Whishaw is fourth from the right on the front row. (*From the Souvenir of Leckhampton Court V.A. Hospital, 1914-1919*)