

The Seven Ages of Aldershot Camp

By Paul Vickers

Well-known local historian and author Paul Vickers gave a lively, entertaining and very informative talk covering 160 years of history from the Army's arrival on Aldershot Heath to today 'super-garrison' and plans for the Aldershot Urban Extension.

Paul's First Age covered conditions on Aldershot Heath before the Army arrived, when the only features of interest in an otherwise empty landscape were the Basingstoke Canal, the Winchester Turnpike, now the A325, and the Union Building, which was, at that time, a paupers' school; the children were moved out when the Army came. Aldershot itself was a mere village with a population of just 875.

The Army had become moribund following Wellington's victory over the French, but in the 1850s a reform movement grew up after the great man's death. An exercise at Chobham in 1852 was followed, a year later, with another, at Aldershot, that brought 25,000 troops to the area. It was clear that a permanent training camp was necessary and Aldershot was chosen as the site because of its excellent communications, dependable water supply and cheap land. By 1861, some 8000 acres was been acquired.

It was time for the Second Age, the Wooden Camp. The first soldiers arrived in 1854, and numbers increased dramatically at the end of the Crimean War. By 1859, 1200 huts had been built in straight lines, housing 15,000 soldiers in North Camp and South Camp. The Royal Pavilion was also built, in wood, to accommodate royal visitors including Queen Victoria. The officers' huts had 8 rooms, though they were small and very plain. The men, however, slept in one large open space, with 22 in each hut. These huts were expected to have a life of 13 years, but it was soon decided that the buildings should be permanent, something the Prince Consort supported.

The first wooden buildings were cavalry barracks, in blocks of four, with officers' and sergeants messes and riding schools. Then came infantry barracks, in huge blocks with 250 men in each, followed by artillery barracks. A wooden bridge was built across the canal, later replaced by an iron structure.

But even at this time, some permanent buildings were erected: All Saints Garrison Church, 1863; the first ever Army gymnasium, 1860; the Prince Consort's Library, 1860; the Cambridge Military Hospital, 1879.

By 1890, the wooden huts were still standing but in dreadful condition, so General Sir Evelyn Wood lobbied the government for funds to build in brick, ushering in the Third Age, The Brick Camp.

At a cost of £1.5m, a new camp was constructed along the Marlborough, Stanhope and Wellington lines. In South Camp, the buildings were two-storey, while in North Camp they were single-storey, with each block accommodating 30 men. Each man had a bed, two shelves and one hook for all his possessions, and there was a mess table and benches for communal use. The beds were collapsible, serving as seating when not in use as beds. Period photos show efforts to personalise their meagre space with pictures and plants. The married quarters were three-storey buildings arranged in squares.

Along with the accommodation blocks, another church was built, St George's, originally Anglican, but now Roman Catholic and the cathedral church of the Roman Catholic Bishop for the Forces. A new, and larger, gymnasium was built, now known as the Fox Gym, along with a swimming pool, no longer in use, the Connaught Hospital, capable of accommodating 250 patients, and the Louise Margaret Hospital for women and children, which continued as a maternity hospital until 1995.

By 1899, Aldershot Camp was home to 17,599 soldiers and their families, plus a large number of support staff. When Aldershot Command was formed to encompass all the surrounding camps, such as Pirbright, Minley and Borden, the total number of troops under its command was 29,000, which was the biggest command in the British Army.

When WWI broke out, the 1st and 2nd Divisions left immediately and Aldershot became a training camp. Throughout the duration of the war, the Army underwent significant changes, as mechanisation took hold, and its aftermath saw the Fourth Age, the Final Expansion.

Among the new construction, Mons Barracks was built in 1921 for the Royal Corps of Signals, and St Omer, in 1940, for the Army Catering Corps. St Andrew's Church replaced the earlier iron church, and was officially opened in 1939 by George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

As with WWI, when WWII was declared, the two permanent divisions immediately left Aldershot, and this time the Canadian Army took up residence until 1946, when the British Army moved back in, along with the Parachute Regiments. A decision was then taken to replace the Victorian buildings with modern concrete ones. This brought the Fifth Age, the Concrete Camp.

At this time, some 10,000 soldiers were stationed at Aldershot, and the Montgomery Lines were built to accommodate the airborne forces. With only four men to a room, the new barracks were initially popular, but structural problems with these cheaply built prefabricated buildings soon changed that. St Omer Barracks was rebuilt, with its landmark tower, and the Royal Pavilion became a training school for Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. Small flats were built as married quarters, and the cavalry barracks demolished and sold off for development; Princes Hall, the police station and Magistrates Court were built on the site.

Paul calls his Sixth Age Post-modern, covering the late 20th century, when Gale Barracks was built, in 1992, and the Royal Corps of Transport moved in. The hospitals closed, and the Connaught and Louse Margaret were demolished, along with the Willems Park tower blocks, where Tesco now stands. Crucially, a programme of building traditional style family homes began, notably in Salamanca Park, providing much more agreeable housing than the enormous blocks of earlier times.

The Seventh Age is the Allenby-Connaught project to modernise the camp and the Aldershot Urban Extension (Wellesley) in South Camp. With the Army reduced to 4800, (set to increase by 750 upon the return of the Army of the Rhine), dramatic changes are taking place. The first phase was the establishment of Wellington House as the new HQ. St Omer Barracks has again been modernised, providing separate bedrooms with communal areas. There's a new Sergeants' Mess, a 'Super Diner' to provide a range of facilities, and the impressive new Centre for Health. Looking forward, the AUE will provide 3800 homes, two schools and community buildings.

Paul ended his talk with a prediction that, given the Army's history in Aldershot, there's every likelihood that there will be another major redevelopment in about fifty years.