

24th October 2018

Army Medical Services Museum

In the capable hands of tour guide Rob McIntosh, a small group of members spent a very interesting morning exploring this little-known gem of a museum at Keogh Barracks in Mytchett, which is sadly scheduled to be relocated in the near future.

It brings together the collections of the Royal Army Medical Corps, the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, the Royal Army Dental Corps and Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, and was established in the 1960s.

The museum traces the history of army medicine since the English Civil War until the present day and contains examples of every British medal issued since Waterloo—and many foreign ones, too. From the beginning, British medical personnel were at the forefront of understanding disease and developing treatment.

Initially, a surgeon would be attached to each regiment, providing his own instruments and mainly performing amputations. However, it was only during the Napoleonic era that any real system began to be set up.

The Crimean War was the great turning point, when thousands became sick within weeks of arrival on the peninsula, far from any hospital, primarily because of poor sanitation. It was Florence Nightingale who changed everything, using her considerable influence and administrative skill to introduce new standards of care for the sick and injured. She brought in nurses, beds and bedding, set up wards and an apothecary, addressed serious problems with sewerage and laundry and even provided entertainment for patients. Not only did she establish modern nursing but she helped to design Netley Hospital in Southampton and Cambridge Military Hospital in Aldershot, both of which were to play an important part in subsequent wars.

Army nursing during the Boer War was carried out by The Christian Army Nursing Service Reserve, acting as nursing orderlies: a tableau depicts two nurses tending a bed-ridden patient. The First World War saw the establishment of Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, with an initial intake of 1000 nurses. However, it is interesting to note that nurses were not actually a part of the Army till WWII.

Battleground treatment was based on triage, with dressing stations as close to the action as possible, where first aid was administered before transport to clearing stations, where decisions were made about hospital admission or alternative treatment centres. Initially, this work was carried out by the Army Hospital Corps, from which the Royal Army Medical Corps developed. Through this battlefield experience, the British were pioneers in medicine.

Prior to WWII, probably the most important piece of equipment for the Army was the horse, and its welfare was paramount. The logistics of acquiring horses, transporting them, providing good food and water and keeping them in prime condition was a huge undertaking. The Remount Service sought out millions of horses worldwide and prepared them for battleground work, including drawing horse ambulances, as depicted in a tableau at the museum. Unlike doctors, vets were combatants and carried firearms.

24th October 2018

Under the Geneva Conventions, two of which date from 1929, captured medics had to be returned to their home countries; however, in WWII, many chose to remain in detention camps in order to treat prisoners of war. The Royal Army Dental Corps was by now established, and a tableau set in a far Eastern jungle, depicts a dentist at work in his 'surgery', constructed from whatever lay to hand.

Nearby is the VC Room, with stories of extraordinary heroism, not least of the two doctors awarded the VC twice, Surgeon Captain Arthur Martin-Leake and Captain Noel Chavasse, who is remembered locally in the street name Chavasse Way.

Tucked away in a corner of the VC Room is a display devoted to the Dickin Medal, introduced by the founder of the Blue Cross, Maria Dickin, during WWII to honour the role of animals in wartime.

A temporary exhibition, in the former chapel, traces the evacuation chain for casualties of WWI. This is updated regularly to reflect the development of medicine throughout the duration of the war.

One section of particular interest to local residents, (though not the squeamish), is devoted to the pioneering work of Sir Harold Gillies in facial reconstruction, carried out at Cambridge Military Hospital in Aldershot.

This is a museum full of opportunities for fascinating, often quirky, discovery, suitable for all ages and well worth multiple visits. Open weekdays 9.30am till 3.30pm, further details can be found on their website: <https://museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk>.