

# THE VAD HOSPITALS AT NORTHWOOD AND EASTCOTE DURING WORLD WAR I

by Philip Toms

## Introduction

Four days after Britain declared war on Germany a small item in the local paper issued a challenge to Ruislip and Eastcote residents: *As we are now at war, the question may be asked of those who stay at home and can sleep in their beds: 'What can I do at this time?' The answer is: you may do much for your fellow-countrymen. You may acquire a knowledge of 'first aid' to the injured, and you may learn how to treat the wounded; and you can help to make arrangements for the reception and treatment of some wounded soldiers, even in the villages of Ruislip and Eastcote.*<sup>1</sup>

Initial meetings were held by the Red Cross at St Martin's Church Room, Ruislip, on 12 August: it was agreed to form a local ambulance corps and to have regular first aid classes and it was suggested that the Church Room would make a good hospital.

Meanwhile, at Northwood, the Women's Voluntary Aid Detachment declared themselves ready for action should the need arise. Mrs Carmalt Jones, their Commandant, said that they could mobilise a hospital with 20 beds at four hours notice<sup>2</sup>.

## The VAD movement

The two communities were able to respond quickly to the emergency partly because the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907 had ushered in a scheme for the organisation of voluntary aid in England and Wales. The intention was to provide supplementary aid to the Territorial Forces Medical Service in the event of war and trained volunteers were to be organised into Voluntary Aid Detachments. These Detachments could be attached to the British Red Cross Society, the Order of St. John, or the Territorial Forces Association.

Northwood Women's VAD was founded under the Territorial Branch of the St John

Ambulance Association and registered as 'Middlesex X' at the War Office in June 1913. They had begun training in the September of that year, hence their Commandant's confidence at their state of readiness on the outbreak of war. Northwood also had a Men's Detachment which was registered as 'Middlesex 5'.

It is not clear whether Ruislip and Eastcote had formed a VAD by the outbreak of war, but by early September a Detachment linked to the Middlesex Territorial Force Association was reported as doing splendid work in the district.

During the war all Detachments were administered by a Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John. Eastcote and Northwood came under the Eastern Command: from its opening until 28 June 1915. Northwood was under the official control of the Royal Herbert Hospital, Woolwich and thereafter it was controlled by Edmonton Military Hospital.

## Setting up the hospitals

Initial thoughts, in October 1914, were to turn the St Martin's Church Room at Ruislip into a hospital, and, at Northwood, to do the same with a local school gymnasium. A third location was also mentioned, that of the Surgical Home, Northwood, so that at this time three separate hospitals were being considered.<sup>3</sup> No further mention of the use of the Surgical Home has however, been found and, as will be seen, both of the other hospitals were to be located elsewhere.

At Northwood, the Lecture Hall of St John's Presbyterian Church<sup>4</sup> in Hallowell Road was placed at the disposal of the VAD by kind permission of the Deacon's Court, fulfilling a peacetime promise to do so in the event of war. The Church services were thereafter held in the Northwood College Gymnasium.

The hospital was established for rank and file soldiers with twenty beds, much of the equipment being lent or donated by local residents. As far as possible what had to be purchased was bought locally. In addition, there were numerous gifts of food, clothing and comforts for the sick and wounded soldiers, whilst an appeal for funds – people were asked to contribute 1/- (one shilling) or more every week that the hospital was open – proved successful and within two weeks promises amounting to 200/- a week had been received.

Meanwhile, at Eastcote, Mr & Mrs Hall offered to turn their house into a hospital. It was said that Fieldend Lodge, now the Tudor Lodge Hotel, (see Fig. 5) could be fitted with 14 beds and could expand further into a large spare room, or under tents outside; it also had its own electricity supply and there was room for nurses to stay on the premises if needed.

There were some initial difficulties with starting the Eastcote hospital however, for the War Office would not sanction any such homes unless they were affiliated to the Red Cross Society, and also a hospital would require a large amount of money, for it cost something like £1 a week to keep a bed. As in Northwood, local appeals for such items as bedding, linen, ward utensils, kitchen and surgical stores were very successful. Indeed, the minutes of the Ruislip & Eastcote War Emergency Committee indicate that the hospital appeal was having a major impact on its own collections!<sup>5</sup>

The War Office strictures on affiliation were met by Eastcote hospital being placed under the Northwood VAD with Mrs Carmalt Jones acting as Commandant. 'Middlesex X' acted as a conduit for War Office contributions to the hospital at Eastcote but no finance was drawn directly from Northwood.

So, by early November both hospitals were equipped and ready for use. Mrs Carmalt Jones wrote to the authorities on 6 November confirming that the necessary money was in

place and, perhaps a little despairingly, 'Our hospitals of 36 beds have been ready over a week, and if you can do anything towards getting patients for us, we should be very much obliged. This Detachment is in the rather unique position of having turned a congregation out of their church! and they do not fail to let us know it!'<sup>6</sup>

### **Mobilisation**

Both hospitals mobilised on Thursday 19 November when 14 English and four Belgians were received as patients. A further nine patients were brought from Stanmore on the Saturday. Of the total 27, Eastcote took twelve and Northwood fifteen.

That first Christmas at the hospitals must have been very special and something of its flavour comes through in the following newspaper report:

*The six British and three Belgian soldiers in the comfortable hospital at 'Fieldend Lodge' Eastcote, the residence of Mr & Mrs B J Hall, spent a very happy Christmastide. In keeping with the festival, the three wards, named after General French, General Joffrey, and King Albert were brightly decorated. Early in the morning Mrs Hall handed to the soldiers personal messages from the King and Queen, and they were received with great delight. They consisted of cards bearing the photos of the King and Queen on one side, and on the other the message: 'With our best wishes for Christmas 1914. May you soon be restored to health'.*

*Mary R, George, R.I*

*After a splendid dinner in the dining room with Mr & Mrs Hall, the patients adjourned to the general room where they had the pleasure of welcoming their relatives and friends, and enjoyed an excellent tea together. Then came the exhibition of a huge Christmas tree, Mr Ayliff, the actor, filling the role of Father Christmas, and making time merry with songs and dances. All the soldiers and visitors received presents from the tree and thoroughly enjoyed themselves ...<sup>7</sup>*

### **From small beginnings ...**

We have seen that both hospitals were started with relatively few beds. These numbers increased throughout the war

reflecting the great numbers of sick and wounded who required nursing care.

In April 1915 Northwood needed to accommodate sick men sent from camp at Windsor and hired a small house next door to the hospital – Lea Croft – so that it could install ten extra beds. By October a further 10 beds had been installed and bed capacity reached 50 by the end of the year with the opening of a new temporary building:

*Those who pass by the hospital have noticed this week the beginnings of a new ward. This temporary building, 70 foot long, is being generously erected by Mr T. M. McAlpine of Valency House, Eastbury. It stands in the field adjacent to the hospital, by kind consent of the Metropolitan & Great Central Railways. The extension, which is undertaken at the request of the military authorities, will raise the accommodation in the hospital to 50 beds, and it will also provide a recreation room, which is greatly needed for wounded soldiers, who overcrowd the existing premises. The new ward, however, requires heating, lighting, furnishings etc and also entails the provision of extra bathroom and lavatory accommodation. Towards the cost of this several unsolicited donations, amounting to £200, have already been received. At least £100 more is needed, and any gifts for this good object will be gratefully acknowledged. When the hospital was opened in November 1914 with 20 beds Northwood friends promised to contribute 200/- a week towards the expenses of maintenance, for which the Government grant does not suffice. Now that the accommodation has reached 40 beds, and is to be increased to 50 beds, an appeal is made for additional promises of 150/- a week for the maintenance fund.<sup>8</sup>*

Eastcote also expanded during 1915. It became an independent unit ('Middlesex 50') on the 22 April and Mrs Hall took over as its Commandant from that time. In May she wrote to Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council (RNUDC) saying that as the dust season was approaching and the hospital was filled with patients it would be more healthy and serviceable if the Council would extend the tarring of the road past the hospital: they were carrying out a large number of operations and the dust would prove troublesome.

The Council agreed to do the work at a cost of some £5. By Christmas 1915 28 beds were in use.

The Battle of the Somme (1 July – 15 November 1916) led to immense pressure being put on the capacities of the home hospitals. The fifty beds at Northwood were always full and as the realisation of the scale of casualties took hold the Committee decided to increase capacity by a further 10 beds. The full extent of the need must, therefore, have come as a bit of a shock:

*The military authorities have made a request for an immediate doubling of the accommodation at Northwood VAD hospital and to discuss this request a meeting was held in the church hall on Tuesday. A large gathering crowded the hall...<sup>9</sup>*

By this time the Detachment was coping with 66 men in the 50-bed hospital, nearly all of them being wounded in the British advance that started on 1 July. The military had told them that 40 extra beds were required and, if possible, they should be installed within a week. In order to accommodate them the Presbyterians placed their new church (which had only been opened the year before) at the disposal of the hospital (see Fig. 1) and the congregation returned to the now vacated Lecture Hall, the transformation being completed within a week. There were various other offers of accommodation: the Primitive Methodists offered their Assembly Hall for sleeping accommodation, a school hall was offered for entertainments and concerts, and the District Council offered the use of the Council Chamber as a recreation room for the soldiers.

Northwood was now a 100-bed hospital split into three wards (two large and one small) and it was clear that hundreds of pounds were needed to pay for it – some £500 in all, and upkeep costs would amount to 600/- per week. It was suggested that every road in Northwood should maintain a bed.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there were appeals for more nursing members, cooks, kitchen maids, and ward maids to cope with the enlarged hospital.



Francis Edwards scrapbook

**Fig. 1**

The new church converted to a hospital.

The photograph was published in the Daily Mirror of 23 August 1916

It was about this time that Eastcote hospital also increased its size - from 28 to 40 beds. A further expansion could also have been made during 1917 as a newspaper report states that 60 soldiers spent the Christmas there.

Back in Northwood, the average number of patients nursed during the last five months of 1916 shows the pressure that they were under: 92.5 (August), 96.5 (September), 96.3 (October), 90.2 (November) and 84.2 (December). To ameliorate crowding a wooden hut was erected to serve as a day-room for the patients in times of bad weather: inaugurated in November by a whist drive enjoyed by 120 of the patients and staff, it was equipped, among other things, with a full-size billiard table.

A further expansion took place in April 1917 when the Presbyterian Church premises were entirely given up by the congregation and Sunday services were moved to Emmanuel Church.

The number of beds was then increased to 125, a capacity which was maintained until the end of the war although there must have been much pressure to enlarge again: in April 1918 the hospital was described as being full to overflowing with not one of the 125 beds being vacant.

#### **The Detachments, the VADs and other staff** **'Middlesex 10'**

Mrs Carmalt Jones described the organisation at Northwood in November 1914:

*'The Detachment, 28 in number, are on duty alternately one morning 8am to 2pm, one afternoon 2pm to 8pm. They sign on and sign off duty. The timetable holds good each week - four members on at once under a trained nurse. They are working well and some of the new Detachment<sup>11</sup> (22 just formed) are working as ward maids and cooks. The Men's Detachment do the bathing from 6-8pm and one man each night acts as orderly on night duty when a trained nurse is on from 8pm to 8am with one number of*

*the Women's Detachment. The Quartermaster is excellent, her accounts well kept and all food ordered only by her. The MO is very satisfied'.<sup>12</sup>*

In June 1915 she became matron of the Allied Forces Base Hospital at Etaples near Boulogne and was succeeded by Mrs Ellen Darlow. The other main members at that time, who all lived in Northwood, were Mrs Brigg (Lady Superintendent), Mrs Bright and Mrs Featherstone (Acting and Assistant Quartermaster respectively).

Dr O Hildersheim acted as Medical Officer and Mr H B Sharman was the pharmacist.

The hospital also had visiting consultants covering problems such as nervous and skin diseases, ear nose throat and eye problems, and surgical cases. Dental treatment ('Decayed teeth are very prevalent among the soldiers') and massage ('Massage is a very valuable remedial treatment in a hospital of this kind [&] takes a good deal of time and energy') were also provided.<sup>13</sup>

A succession of trained nurses served at Northwood and while many of these came from the London area some came from Scotland, Ireland and Wales. They stayed for different periods of time – from just a few days to several months – before moving to other postings. Five trained nurses were working under the matron in early 1918.

The majority of VADs would have supported the nurses as cleaners, cooks, ward maids, etc.

A plea was made to them in February 1917:

*Since our hospital was opened we have had a splendid record of service rendered by 'Middlesex X', and I thankfully recognise the spirit of devotion and sacrifice which animates our Detachment as a whole.*

*In recent months several members have resigned and others have undertaken work in military hospitals. As a result, our VAD staff is depleted, and suitable recruits are not easy to obtain; while I am warned that in the near future the resources of the hospital will most probably be taxed to the utmost.*

*The Government has appealed to women to volunteer in large numbers for service of national*

*importance, and has hinted, not obscurely, that compulsory service may be required.*

*I feel bound to ask every member of our Detachment to consider very seriously whether she is at present doing all she possibly can, and whether she is able to give more of her time to the hospital than she has given hitherto. I shall be glad to hear from you on this matter.*

*In his speech last Saturday the Prime Minister said "Let those who are doing something, do something more. But let us all do our best". I ask you, whether each of us is already doing her very best.*

A few months later the hospital staff were said to be below strength and the Commandant was looking for fresh offers of help from local women. The situation could not have improved much for another similar appeal was made in May 1918.

Several members received awards:

Mrs Darlow (who became a member of the RNUDC after the war) received the St John Ambulance Service War Service Badge and then an MBE in January 1918, Mrs Brigg received the Royal Red Cross 2nd class, and several others earned St John Ambulance 'white stripes'.<sup>14</sup>

#### 'Middlesex 5'

The counterpart Men's Detachment was headed up by Mr Oliver (Commandant), Mr Stanley West (Assistant Commandant), Mr T Fendick (Quartermaster), and with Dr Hignett acting as Medical Officer. The Detachment helped to set up the hospital and a picture of their subsequent work is as follows:

*Possibly the least known and probably the most useful of the various mens' organisations in Northwood is the Men's Voluntary First Aid and Ambulance Corps. Owing to the joining up in the RAMC etc. of several members, there are vacancies for fresh men. Every man should know something of first-aid work and there is no better way of obtaining such knowledge than by joining the local corps at once...*

*Regarding the present usefulness in connection with the war this Corps – which is connected with the VAD hospital (Middlesex 5th) and under orders of the Metropolitan Police for night raid*



*and other ambulance work, and nearly every member has both the St John Ambulance and Army Medical Services badges – has given approx 1,000 hot baths to our wounded soldiers, travelled 650 miles bringing in wounded or taking away convalescent men, spent scores of nights through at hospital orderly work, and also the Annexes etc., practically all of which work is still very willingly being carried on...<sup>15</sup>*

Transport operations were subsequently made easier when, in February 1916, an ambulance was purchased and presented to the St John Ambulance Association by the residents of Conisborough, near Doncaster, and subsequently handed over to Northwood. (see Fig. 2)



Northwood Hills Residents Association

Fig. 2

### 'Middlesex 50'

On 22 April 1915 the hospital at Fieldend Lodge became an independent unit under Mrs Hall as Commandant (although it is interesting to note that she is described as 'administrator' on her record card: she was to receive an OBE in June 1918). Doctors E O Fountain and A Davies, both from Ruislip, offered their services in the early days while Dr Phibbs was Medical Officer for about twelve months up to September 1916, a period during which the hospital doubled the number of beds to 40 and during which over 400 patients were treated and 88 operations performed.

When he left to join the RAMC his place was filled by Dr Ritchie who lived in Northwood. There must also have been a succession of trained nurses (see Fig. 3) but we have only three names at present: Ellen Ingram was there between March and October 1916, Florence Forde from October 1916 to May 1917, and Miss Annie Doris Hall, a staff nurse, received the Royal Red Cross 2nd Class in 1917.<sup>16</sup>