

Hurdcott Army Camp



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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The camp at Hurdcott was closely linked administratively with that at Fovant. In January 1916 the 4th London Regiment found 'the Hurdcott camps were arranged on suitably designed principles with well ventilated sleeping huts and roomy messing and recreation rooms'. There were excellent training and sports grounds spread over some five acres. The 4th constructed a bayonet-fighting assault course close to a bombing ground and improved practice trenches started by its predecessors. Likewise the 4/2nd City of London Regiment, who arrived there at the same time, found it 'a really up-to-date military station'.

Australian battalions moved to Hurdcott in 1916. Thomas Kermode of the 8th Battalion noted in his diary that in December: 'We had practice in real trenches with dinkum bombs & catapults throwing bombs, we were to have practised one of the raids you see so much about in the papers. It is really wonderful the devices & wire entanglements that can be slapped up in no time. The bombs & explosives used are terrifying in their intensity... A mock trench raid. Lieut Taylor who is in charge of bombing school let me dig a mine. I chose the man I wanted for a mate & my old mining experience stood me in good stead. A fatigue party were trying yesterday to make a hole for putting in ammunition, but had no idea ... But I knew what to do & made a success of it. Loading & firing it. Colonels, majors & all the heads about. Bombs, rockets, machine guns, etc. Men advancing in the mud with sandbags around knees & elbows. When a rocket goes up, every man lies flat & still. Just like real war.'

In March 1917 Hurdcott House became the headquarters of Number 3 Command Depot of the Australian Imperial Force, whose diary acclaimed the locality as ideal for a convalescent base and thought the huts well laid out and the kitchens 'splendidly equipped' and capable of feeding 4,000 men. The AIF 'taking-over party' arrived on 12 March and by the 15th 1,700 men had reported there. Initially Number 5 and 6 camps housed

convalescing troops but in the autumn became a 'sub hospital', with higher categories of patient transferred to Number 7 and 8 camps. Much of the training was carried out by British instructors of the Army Gymnastic Staff from Aldershot and Devonport. The depot received men who had been evacuated sick or wounded from France and were reckoned likely to become fit for active service within three months of graduated training. Particular attention was paid to dental health, a man needing to have ten sound teeth in each jaw to be passed fit for overseas training – so he could hold the mouth of his gas helmet properly.

The camp newspaper, the *Hurdcott Herald*, yields some interesting observations on military life and the method of grading men's fitness for service. One article explained: 'The whole aim of the depot is to bring the men to a requisite standard of health and fitness to undergo hard training in the least irksome warf [sic – misprint for 'way']. To this end the men are given as good a time as is consistent with the maintenance of military discipline.'

On 1 March 1918, the Herald noted that 'OC [Officer Commanding] 10 Coy' had sent twenty-six men with measles to 'OC Isolation' who wrote a note back saying: 'I am full of Scabies at present and have no room for your Measles'. Another edition suggests that the military authorities should run motor services between the camp and Salisbury because taxi drivers were charging soldiers too much. In 1917 the rates from the city to Hurdcott (six miles) were 2s and to Fovant (eight miles) 2s 6d (which seem quite reasonable compared with the London taxi-cabs' fare from autumn 1917 of 1s 2d for the first mile). A lady in July 1918 was told the taxi fare from Dinton Station to Fovant would be 4s for a journey of under two miles; despite the rain she decided to walk.

Five huts were transformed into a camp hospital, two more for dressing wounds and another for examining new arrivals – some of whom were on crutches, so stone paths had to replace duckboards. One patient was William Duffell who, after being gassed, arrived at Hurdcott on 24 November, 1917. In his letters home (edited by Gilbert Mant and published under the title *Soldier Boy*), he wrote: 'The scene here was row after row of wooden huts & to one of these I was allotted [sic], together with some 50 other rather war worn diggers. Iron bedsteads with fibre filled mattresses lined the walls & a trestle table together with forms held the centre of the hut. A tea consisting of bread & jam followed by a rice pudding was readily despatched by the troops. Mugs & plates were washed up by the mess orderlies after which blankets were handed out three to a man. Soon all were curled up in bed as it had been a heavy day for most of us who were not yet very strong.'

Duffell was at Hurdcott for eight months, during which he acted as 'offsider' (an Australian term for assistant) to the camp barber, lathering the beards of those willing to pay 3d for a shave and 6d for a haircut. He was meant to be paid in chits from the orderly room but his customers ignored camp regulations about handling money and tipped him. He also did a stint as a cook's offsider, which provided him with much richer food than the ordinary camp patients enjoyed, but he resented being a mess orderly for the officers, whom he regarded as being 'young puppies who are no better than yourself'.

Attractions at Hurdcott included a cinema, YMCA, Red Cross facilities and twice-weekly concerts, with the depot's own concert party, 'The Kangaroos', busy with bookings at other camps, such as Codford, Sutton Veny and Sand Hill. Another popular troupe were 'The Boomerangs'.

In November 1917 Number 4 Command Depot moved from Codford to Hurdcott and in August 1918 Number 3 Command Depot was ordered to prepare to disband, dividing its men between Number 1 Command Depot at Sutton Veny and Number 2 at Weymouth, but the Armistice appears to have prompted a change of plan.

By January 1919, with no longer a need to rehabilitate men for fighting, the command depots had all but ceased to function as such and were receiving men from France on their way back home, most of that month's 3,095 arrivals being in that category.

Awaiting repatriation at Hurdcott in 1919, Number 4 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps had a mascot who attracted much press publicity. In Germany shortly after the war's end the squadron had adopted a French lad aged about eleven, whom they nicknamed 'Digger'. He was smuggled back to England in a kitbag to Hurdcott, where he was spoilt by everyone. On a trip to London his comrades paid £21 to fit him out with a uniform and extra clothing and spent a further £12 in Salisbury on toys for him. When the squadron left for home in May, he was hidden in a hamper which was loaded into the luggage van on the train to Southampton and then on board ship. (In 1926 Digger, now a naturalized Australian, joined the Royal Australian Air Force as Henri Heremene Tovell, having taken the name of his 'guardian' at Hurdcott, Air Mechanic Tim Tovell, but was killed in a motor-cycle accident in 1928.)

When camp stores and equipment were advertised for sale in August 1919, five pianos, six billiards tables and hundreds of cricket bats were included. The camp was demolished early in the 1920s.

Terry Crawford

Wiltshire and the Great War (Crowood 1912)