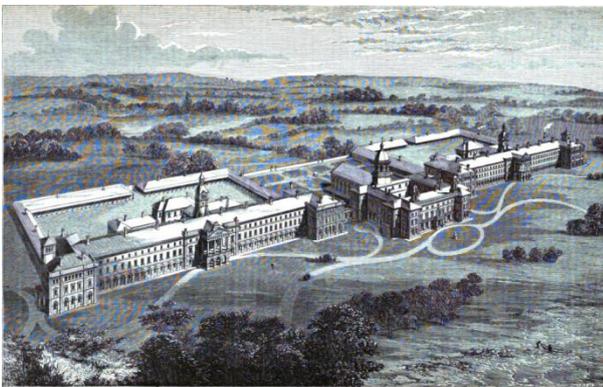


## Royal Victoria Military Hospital A Short History

The history of the Royal Victoria Military Hospital at Netley has its roots in the Crimean War. By 1855, the number of casualties of the war returning to England was increasing and there was a clear need for more hospitals to accommodate them. In March 1855, Queen Victoria commissioned the building of a new military hospital with easy access from the sea for hospital ships returning from foreign wars. The site at Netley was approved by the army's Medical Board in January 1856 and the land purchased from Mr Thomas Chamberlayne for £15,000.



The hospital was designed by Mr E.O. Mennie, the surveyor of the Royal Engineer's Department in Pall Mall and stretched  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile along Southampton Water.

The hospital had two wings (one mainly for medical cases and the other for surgical cases) with 138 wards to accommodate around 1,000 patients.

A central building housed the hospital's Chapel, patients' reception and examination rooms, offices and Board room. The whole hospital was connected by a single long corridor along the front of the building on each of the floors.

Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone for the hospital in a ceremony at Netley on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1856. Underneath the stone was placed a copper box containing the first Victoria Cross, a silver Crimea medal with all four campaign bars and a set of coins of the realm.

Building the hospital took seven years, during which time its design was heavily criticised by Florence Nightingale. She was particularly concerned about the long corridor running along the front of the building, which she said would keep out sunlight and stop the proper ventilation of the wards. Florence Nightingale wrote to the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, who complained to the Secretary of State at the War Office that '... at Netley, all consideration of what would best tend to the comfort and recovery of the patients has been sacrificed to the vanity of the architect, whose sole object has been to make a building which should cut a dash when looked at from Southampton River.'



The first patients were admitted in March 1863 and Queen Victoria made her first visit to the hospital on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1863.

This was her first public appearance after the death of Prince Albert in 1861 and brought the hospital into the public eye.

The hospital received the sick and wounded from India and other colonies where British troops were based, as well as from the Egyptian campaigns of 1882 and 1885. However it was not until the Boer War (1899-1902) that the hospital was fully occupied.

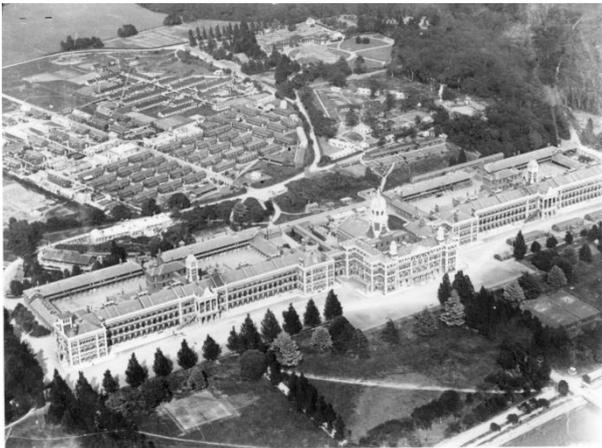


The Army Medical School was established in Chatham in 1860 and moved to Netley when the hospital opened in 1863. Its purpose was to train Medical Officers for the British Army.

As well as lecture rooms, the operating theatre was set up with benches for 100 spectators and the hospital had its own natural history and medicine museum which was used for teaching purposes.

Netley became a leading institution for medical research and advancements in treatment, particularly for tropical diseases. It was at Netley that Sir Almroth Wright, who was Professor of Pathology at the hospital, developed the first vaccination against typhoid.

Florence Nightingale was retained by the War Office after the Crimean and wrote a handbook on *The Introduction of Female Nursing into Military Hospitals*. Nurses were officially appointed to work at Netley and other military hospitals from 1866 and the Army Nursing Service was established in 1881. Nursing Sisters, trained at Netley, were sent to work in hospitals in Aldershot, Gosport, Portsmouth, Devonport, Dover, Shorncliffe, Canterbury, the Curragh (Ireland), Malta and Gibraltar, as well as overseas.



In World War 1, the seriously wounded were evacuated back to England with what were called 'Blighty' wounds. The hospital ships went into Southampton docks and casualties were brought round by ambulance train – the hospital's station and trainline was added in 1900. During the war, the capacity of the hospital was increased with the addition of a temporary hospital at the back of the site by the Red Cross

The Red Cross hospital was like a Field Hospital and had its own operating theatre, ward huts, isolation huts, stores, kitchens, recreation and dining rooms and accommodation for nurses and staff. Huts, beds and hospital equipment were sponsored by individuals, villages and districts. Lord Iveagh of the Guinness family donated the Irish Hospital at Netley, whilst fundraising across Wales led to the building of the Welsh Hospital in October 1914 with beds for 100 patients.



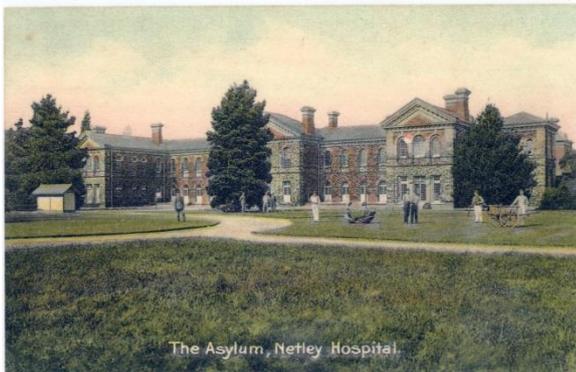
Netley's most famous World War 1 patient was the war poet Wilfred Owen, who was briefly treated at the hospital in June 1917 for physical and mental exhaustion.

At the start of World War 2, the hospital was one of the main muster points for medical staff being posted to France with the British General Hospitals and the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS). After the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940, the hospital was filled to capacity and it remained fully occupied for the next four years.



In January 1944, control of the hospital was transferred to the Americans to give them a medical base on the south coast. The US Army moved into a new single-storey building at the back of the site, whilst the US Navy set up in the main hospital buildings. The Navy nurses were not impressed with what they found – two of them later reported that, 'the grounds outside the buildings were beautiful, with wonderful surroundings and the view of the water,' but the hospital itself was 'a very cold monstrosity... terribly cold and damp and certainly not conducive to treating patients.'

The hospital was kept extremely busy after the D-Day invasion in June 1944, with around 400 casualties from Omaha and Utah beaches being admitted on 11<sup>th</sup> June and many more in the following days. The operating theatres in both parts of the hospital were in use around the clock, with 141 operations carried out in one 36 hour period and 1,159 patients treated in just day! Control of the hospital was finally transferred back to the British on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1945.



Right from the start, Netley had its own separate psychiatric hospital with room for about 60 patients. This was the locked part of the hospital, which included padded cells for the care and treatment of patients with the most serious mental illnesses. During World War 1, this hospital was used for the initial assessment and treatment of patients suffering 'shell shock' and nervous and mental breakdown.

Thankfully, after the 2nd World War, the Royal Victoria Hospital received far fewer patients. The hospital was never filled to capacity again, and in fact many wards were closed and parts of the building fell into disuse. The psychiatric hospital, however, increased both in importance and in size, expanding into the buildings left by the Americans at the back of the site to treat patients suffering from drug/alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety and phobic disorders as well as other mental illnesses.

The main building of the Royal Victoria Hospital closed its doors to patients in 1958, with the building standing empty for several years. The high costs of maintaining the building, along with all its impracticalities as a hospital, meant that it was considered more cost-effective for the Army to move its medical services elsewhere. Only the psychiatric hospital remained open, becoming the training centre for Registered Mental Nurses from all three services as well as the Royal Navy's main psychiatric treatment centre.



The main hospital building was badly damaged in a fire in June 1963 and the decision was made to demolish it entirely. Demolition started on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1966 and on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1966, a special ceremony was held to lift the foundation stone and open the copper box placed beneath it by Queen Victoria.

The last part of the hospital to close was the psychiatric hospital in D Block, which finally closed in August 1978.