THE VALHALLA OF BRITISH HEROISM

The early years of the Star and Garter Home

by Simon Fowler

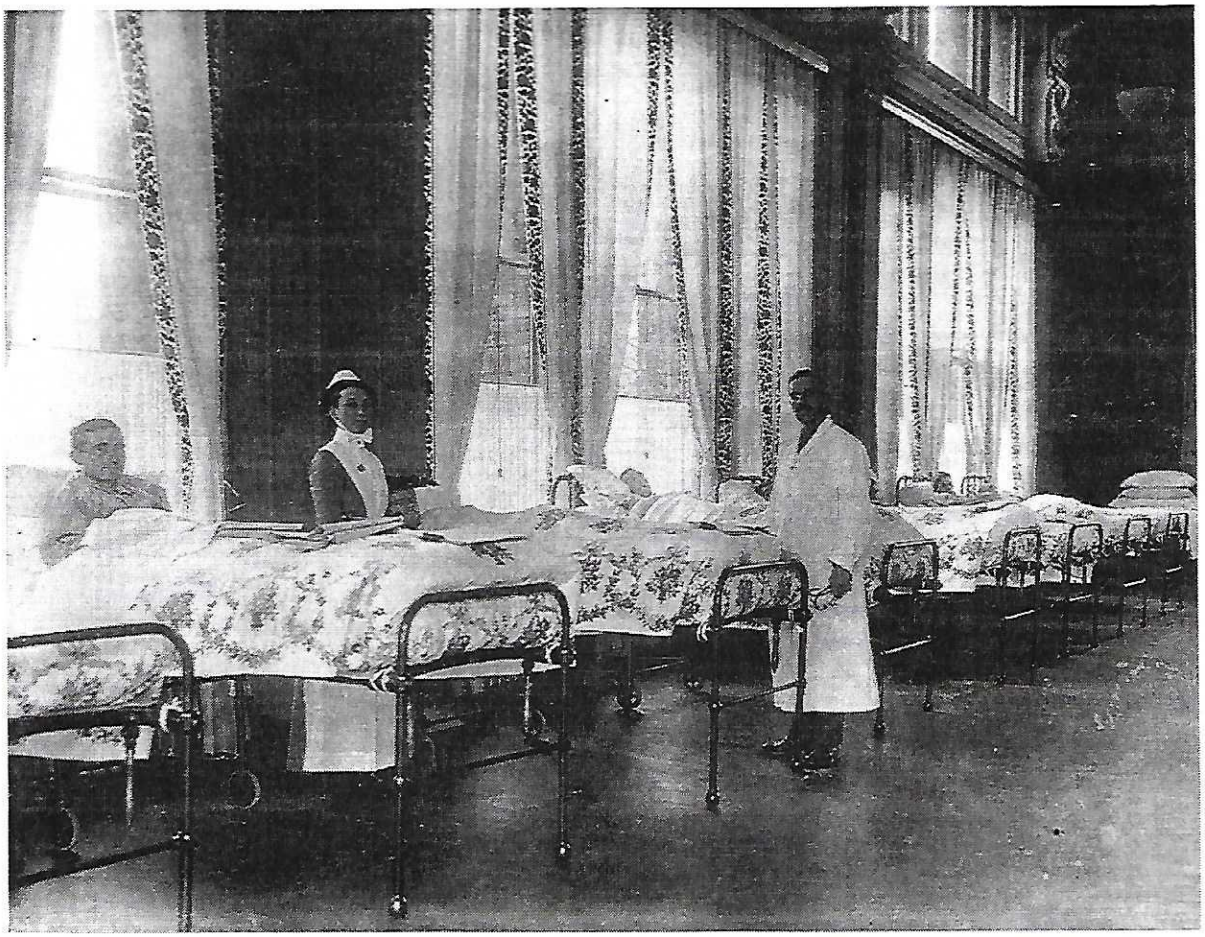
We are so used to the Star and Garter Home that we take it for granted. We forget that in 1915 it was a new departure – a place for permanently disabled veterans where, perhaps, with the best care available they could recover and re-enter the world. The idea came at exactly the right moment. It encapsulated the widespread feeling of the need to mark the sacrifices being made on behalf of the nation. It is often thought that the need to commemorate this sacrifice came with the Cenotaph and the countless war memorials up and down the country. I would argue that this took an earlier - and very practical - form here on Richmond Hill.

On the outbreak of the Great War there was very little provision for permanently disabled soldiers and sailors. On the whole they were expected to be cared for by their families - unlucky men would probably end up in the workhouse - while several small charities, notably Lord Roberts's Workshops run by the Soldiers and Sailors Help Society, also provided facilities to train disabled servicemen in new trades. This had worked reasonably during the small colonial wars of the Victorian period, where casualties were generally light, but within weeks of the despatch of the British Expeditionary Force to France in August 1914, it was clear that old ways of doing things were no longer suitable.

As casualties mounted - to a far greater extent than anyone had expected - maimed ex-servicemen became a common sight on the streets, and people began to demand that suitable provision be made for those permanently scarred by the war. This change was echoed in the media. The *Daily Telegraph* wrote: 'When this war is over, we must have a "clean bill of health", for there are few more unworthy acts on the part of the state than to accept the greatest or almost the greatest of sacrifices and then neglect the giver.'

In July 1915 Mr B. I'Anson Breach, past president of the Auctioneers and Estate Agents Institute, put a resolution to the Institute that 'the services of the members of the Institute be given towards the raising of funds sufficient for the purchase and presentation to HM the Queen of a building suitable for a permanent hospital for the accommodation of disabled and paralysed soldiers.'

This remarkably generous proposal was adopted unanimously, but it was not untypical of the times. We remember today the rush for the colours, but it has almost been forgotten that at the same there occurred a remarkable outpouring of philanthropy. Thousands of charities were set up to knit socks for the troops, help families of soldiers and sailors in the line, and assist Belgian refugees. Hundreds of thousands of pounds were given to charities. The Prince of Wales National Relief Fund, which was the largest, received £2m within a fortnight of its establishment in August 1914. In Richmond by the end of August, £459 was raised for the Fund: a greater sum than that raised for all charities in the town during 1913. (To get a very rough idea of what a pound in 1914 would be worth today, multiply by 50.)



Patients and staff in the ballroom of the old Star and Garter in 1916
(Photograph courtesy of the Royal Star and Garter Home)

Within a few weeks the Auctioneers had raised £21,000 from their members, and decided to buy the Star and Garter Hotel and the land it stood on. The old hotel had finally closed its doors in 1907 - the high days of its popularity were long over and there were new attractions to entertain the rich and fashionable. It seemed an ideal choice. The site had a long and famous history, its location at the top of Richmond Hill was a famous beauty spot, and - even before the Institute had passed its resolution - HM Queen Mary had agreed to present it to the British Red Cross Society as a home for permanently incurable ex-servicemen.

Like many women of her social class, Queen Mary threw herself into philanthropic work during the war, being described as a 'charitable bulldozer'. She seized every opportunity to be useful and welcomed the favourable attention her usefulness elicited. She had spent much of her childhood at White Lodge in Richmond Park and took a particularly close interest in the Home. It was she who decided that it should be known as the Star and Garter Home - the 'Royal' in the current title was added as late as 1981 - rather than the bland British Women's Hospital which was the initial suggestion. Yet it is right to remember that from the beginning money to equip and support the Home was raised primarily by the women of Britain and overseas as a memorial to the men who had died at the front.

In July 1915, the British Women's Hospital Committee was established by members of the Actresses' Franchise League with the intention of equipping a hospital unit in France. At the suggestion of the Red Cross the energies of the Committee were soon diverted to, in the words of its final report, 'the magnificent if somewhat formidable task' of raising the £50,000 thought necessary for the conversion of the hotel to a hospital and its subsequent maintenance. The Committee addressed its plea for money directly to the women of Britain and the Empire, asking them to 'give this building as a memorial of their gratitude to the men who have suffered and died in the Great War.'

During the war the Committee collected almost £400,000. Of this £223,948 was given to the Home to equip the building, endow a ward, and establish a compassionate fund to provide extra comforts for the men and support relatives who wished to visit husbands and sons in the Home. Many of the arguments used during fundraising related to the desire to thank serving men for the sacrifices they were making on behalf of the nation. One appeal went:

> 'What have I done' is the anguished cry of every true woman's heart in these times – 'what have I done that these broken men should have given all that life is worth to fight for me?'... Show your gratitude and your pride by helping to create a Haven of Rest and Happiness for those who have given all that life is worth in the task of guarding your home, your freedom and your honour. Let every woman send what she can.

This appeal was pitched exactly right. It came at a time, in late 1915 and early 1916, when enthusiasm for the war was at its peak, but the realisation of the damage done to millions of young men had begun to sink in. And it was before the exhaustion and cynicism of the last eighteen months of the war which began to hinder the efforts of other charities.

Women were not alone in raising money. £18,000 was presented by the Navy League to endow rooms in memory of Jack Cornwell, 'the boy VC' who lost his life at the Battle of Jutland. Upwards of five and a half million children donated pennies to this fund. There is still a Jack Cornwell VC ward at the Home. Money also flowed in from around the world. The British consul in Richmond, Virginia, for example, made special collections from British residents and others supporters of the Allied war effort. And the log-cutters of British Honduras (now Belize) sent in enough to endow a quiet room. This worldwide generosity can be seen on the memorials in the Home's main hall.

Not everyone, however, was happy about the purchase. The *Star* was particularly hostile to the scheme and grumbled: 'The late owners of the Star and Garter Hotel have been fortunate in getting rid of their "white elephant" ... but the whole transaction reveals a lack of business foresight that is not excused by the benevolent object of the original promoters.'

The newspaper had a point. The hotel was entirely unsuitable for use as a hospital, let alone a home for permanently disabled soldiers and sailors. The King's Surgeon, and one of the movers behind the scheme, Sir Frederick Treves, admitted as much in February 1916, when he told the press that: 'I found the old building quite impossible to adapt to the requirements of a modern hospital for the reasons that the basement was dank, very badly

ventilated and in other ways unsuitable. One could hardly have asked the domestic personnel to take up their duties in the basement.' It is not surprising that the only parts of the building actually used by the new Home were the ballroom, the grand entrance and the rooms adjacent.

The first men were admitted on 14 January 1916 – an anniversary which is still celebrated by residents every year with a special dinner and entertainment. They were ordinary soldiers, most of whom had been badly injured during the battles of 1915. Most died of their wounds within a few weeks of their arrival, although several managed to recover to leave the Home. There was great joy when Private Harry Mingary was discharged in September 1916 to marry Miss Nina Bredman, a masseuse he had met while in the Home.

A surprising proportion of early residents, however, was discharged for insubordination. This may have been bound up with the emotional stress caused by their injuries. While discipline was probably greater than would be acceptable today, it was less than in many other hospitals of the period. Great efforts were made to treat the inmates as humanely as possible, a great step forward at a time when working-class patients in general were often regarded as being at best rather dim children. The aim was to provide a 'home' rather than a hospital.

The Home was given enthusiastic support by most local residents - they were well used to have wounded soldiers in their midst, for there were other hospitals in Richmond Park. Most would have agreed with the *Ladies Pictorial* in December 1915 that: 'Richmond will indeed be proud to have such heroes in her midst, and to share with them the exceptional natural beauties and many interests with which she is so lavishly endowed. When in future visitors come from afar to see Richmond and its world-renowned 'view', surely the chief point of interest will be "the Star and Garter" and its inmates who fought in the "Great War".'

Indeed the Home became so popular that streams of visitors wandered round the wards. A report noted: 'One patient said to me: "I am sick to death of them." This can be understood when one thinks how often foolish questions may be put to the same man by a stream of well-meaning but tactless people.' A limitation on visitors was immediately implemented.

The Red Cross had hoped to demolish the hotel during the war and start building a purpose-built home. Unfortunately the Ministry of Munitions refused to permit the release of building materials to allow the work to commence, and it was not until 1919 that work on the building we know today was finally began. It was designed by Sir Edwin Cooper, who undertook the work without charge, and opened by King George and Queen Mary on 10 July 1924. Appropriately, it was dedicated as the British Women's War Memorial.

FURTHER READING

The only history of the Home is Ken Wilson's *The Story of the Royal Star and Garter Home, Richmond, Surrey* (1986): copies are in Richmond Local Studies Library, along with press cuttings. See also my 'The Home on the Hill: The Star and Garter Home' in *Family History Monthly* February 1999. Most archival material is held by the British Red Cross, but the Home itself has some archives and photographs.