

Netley Hospital and Chapel

6th April 2017 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

At this meeting there was a much larger than expected attendance with visitors out numbering Society members. This was because Paul Del-A-More, who is the Hampshire County Council's Senior Project Manager, Country Parks Transformation, gave a talk about the history of Netley Hospital and the current Chapel restoration project. As well as the talk Paul brought along some of the project's volunteers with a display of pictures of Netley Hospital over the years of its existence.

Paul started his illustrated talk by explaining his role in the £3.1 million project and that as a child he lived in Hamble. The need for a military hospital was identified during the Crimean war and Queen Victoria was concerned there was nothing to serve the injured soldiers. Therefore it was agreed that a 1000 bed hospital was required in this country by the sea so the hospital ships from abroad could land the casualties direct to the hospital.

Netley was chosen as a suitable location and in 1855 a hundred and nine acres of land was bought from the Chamberlayne family for £15,000. Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone with a casket of memorabilia underneath it in 1856. Florence Nightingale was critical of the hospital's design and very few of the changes she suggested were implemented. The hospital had its own pier and it was not until 1863 that it was ready to receive its first patients. It had 138 wards on three floors and its final cost was £350,000.

The hospital became a leading centre for medical research and Paul told of the important doctors that worked there and their achievements in medical discoveries. Netley was a training hospital so there was an operation theatre with a gallery for 100 trainees to watch the doctors undertaking surgery. There was also a museum of military surgery at Netley to help with medical research. Paul spoke about nursing at the hospital and that in 1881 the Army Nursing Service was established.

As well as the hospital there was a chapel, cemetery, billiards room, theatre, school and post office.

The First World War was a very busy period for the hospital and by this time it had its own railway station as the larger hospital ships could not land the casualties at the hospital's pier. These ships went to Southampton Docks and the injured soldiers were transferred to Netley by hospital trains. The hospital was expanded into the grounds with a Red Cross hutted hospital.

Paul explained some of the treatments that were undertaken on the casualties, such as a strong magnetic machine that pulled metal shrapnel from patients eyes. The hospital had an asylum for insane soldiers but little was known of mental consequences of war such as shell shock.

During the Second World War the hospital was handed over to the Americans in 1944 and they were not impressed of the quality of the facilities there. It was

handed back in 1945. The hospital closed in 1958 and the main building was demolished in 1966, just leaving the chapel and few other buildings.

Paul then went on to tell the meeting about the impressive £3.1 million project he is leading to restore the Chapel, including £355,000 for wider park improvements. There will be four structures to identify the corners of the hospital and another to identify the location of the former pier. These will bring alive the hospital history through images and text and will also tell the story of those who worked there.

At the end of the meeting there was a question and answer session and there was a long discussion about whether an American Jeep had driven along the quarter a mile long corridor. Paul said as far as he was concerned he believed it was folklore until someone provided any evidence such as a photograph to prove it happened, although a number of the audience disagreed from stories they had been told.

Paul explained the name to be used for the hospital from now will be the 'Royal Victoria Military Hospital', so it can be differentiated and found easily on the internet from a number of other Royal Victoria Hospitals around the world.

It is hoped that the project will be completed by summer 2018, when access to the Chapel will be free but with a charge for people who wish to go up its tower. A very successful talk with an excellent balance between the hospital's history and the current restoration programme.