

# ◆ Training for war

## PLANS OF THE THREE GREAT WAR DIVISIONAL CAMPS IN SUSSEX

By Luke Barber and  
Justin Russell

*During research on the Great War camps at Seaford, the authors located a set of 1916 plans in the Canadian national archives. Not only was Seaford covered but also the camps at Crowborough and Shoreham. These extensive sites have all but disappeared and the plans therefore provide an invaluable insight into the three divisional camps in the county. The plans have been redrawn and colour coded for reproduction here along with a brief explanatory narrative.*

After the outbreak of war in August 1914 and Kitchener's appeal for men, the military found itself inundated by eager new recruits. The need to accommodate, equip and train the 'New Armies' posed an immense task for the War Office. All over the country training camps were hastily constructed; the standard type designed to house a complete division of around 15,000 men. Each division comprised 12 battalions of infantry (1000 strong apiece with around 35 officers) as well as specialist support from Royal Engineers, artillery, medical units, etc.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the outbreak of war, designs for a hutted camp to house a battalion had been prepared by the War Office and these templates were rapidly pressed into service.<sup>2</sup> Although there were several other Great War camps in Sussex, only those at Seaford, Shoreham and Crowborough were divisional establishments (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> These initially trained British troops, but all three camps were taken over by the Canadians in 1916.

During work for an ongoing historical and archaeological project on the Seaford camps, the authors located a massive body of military documents held by the Library and Archives Canada at Ottawa. In this collection are detailed plans from 1916 of Sussex's three divisional camps.<sup>4</sup> These give an unprecedented insight into the exact locations and internal layout of these sites which for a short time were such prominent marks on the landscape, though they have now all but vanished. These plans deserve a wider audience at the centenary of the Great War. The plans have been redrawn from the originals and colour coded to show the functional elements at each site, and background information has been provided to set them in context.<sup>5</sup>

Of the three sites, only the one at Seaford had seen previous regular use by the military, though pre-war summer camps had also been

located in the vicinity of the Great War hutted camps at Crowborough (The Warren camp) and Shoreham. From 1902 to 1913, summer training camps had been held for the territorials (including the yeomanry) just to the north of Blatchington village, situated on the northern edge of Seaford.<sup>6</sup> This seasonal tented camping ground was an obvious location for the military to create a larger, more permanent, establishment at the outbreak of war. However, the area available here was not large enough and a second site was established to the south-east of the town. The latter became Chyngton camp (South Camp), while the former Blatchington camp became North Camp. Despite this separation necessitated by topography, land ownership and the town, the two acted as parts of the same divisional camp (Figs 2, 3 and 4). The camp plans at Crowborough and Shoreham, although having been adapted to fit the local topography, were not restricted by urban areas as was the case at Seaford and thus each was laid out on one site (Figs 5 and 6).

Initially the typical army bell tents, arranged in immaculately laid out rows, made up the accommodation at all of the camps. These were serviced by larger tents and prefabricated huts for storage, cooking and sanitary needs. During September and October, when the weather was still reasonable and excitement was high amongst the recruits, this accommodation was fine. However, as the year progressed and the weather deteriorated, these tented camps became damp, cold and exceptionally muddy. Although construction of huts was well underway they were not ready in time. Men from the 22nd Division, stationed at Seaford, went on strike in December 1914 due to these atrocious conditions and were subsequently billeted elsewhere while the hutted camp was finished properly.<sup>7</sup> They only returned to Seaford



Fig. 1. Location map of the camps at Seaford, Crowborough and Shoreham.

in spring 1915 when the hutted camp, immediately to the east of the tented area of South Camp, was fully completed.<sup>8</sup>

To what extent the tented area at Seaford's South Camp (as well as the other camps) remained in use after the hutted camp was built is uncertain. The 1916 South Camp plan does not depict tents to the west of the hutted area but does clearly show some of the more permanent buildings in this area such as the YMCA, Salvation Army and Church Army huts (to the west of the camp area depicted on Fig. 4). Several postcards depict the large area of original tented accommodation as still standing when the hutted camp to the east was nearing completion (Fig. 7). It may be that these photographs were all taken early in 1915 when the huts were nearly finished but the tents had yet to be taken down. Alternatively the tents may have remained to provide additional summer accommodation but, being so temporary, were not added to the 1916 plan.

Although the topography meant that all three camp plans differ, overall the template of the battalion camp, as issued by the War Office, is clearly in evidence, particularly at the larger Seaford and Shoreham camps set up to train the new 22nd and 24th Divisions respectively. The Crowborough



Fig. 2. Key to the function of buildings on Figs 3 to 6, from the keys on the original plans.

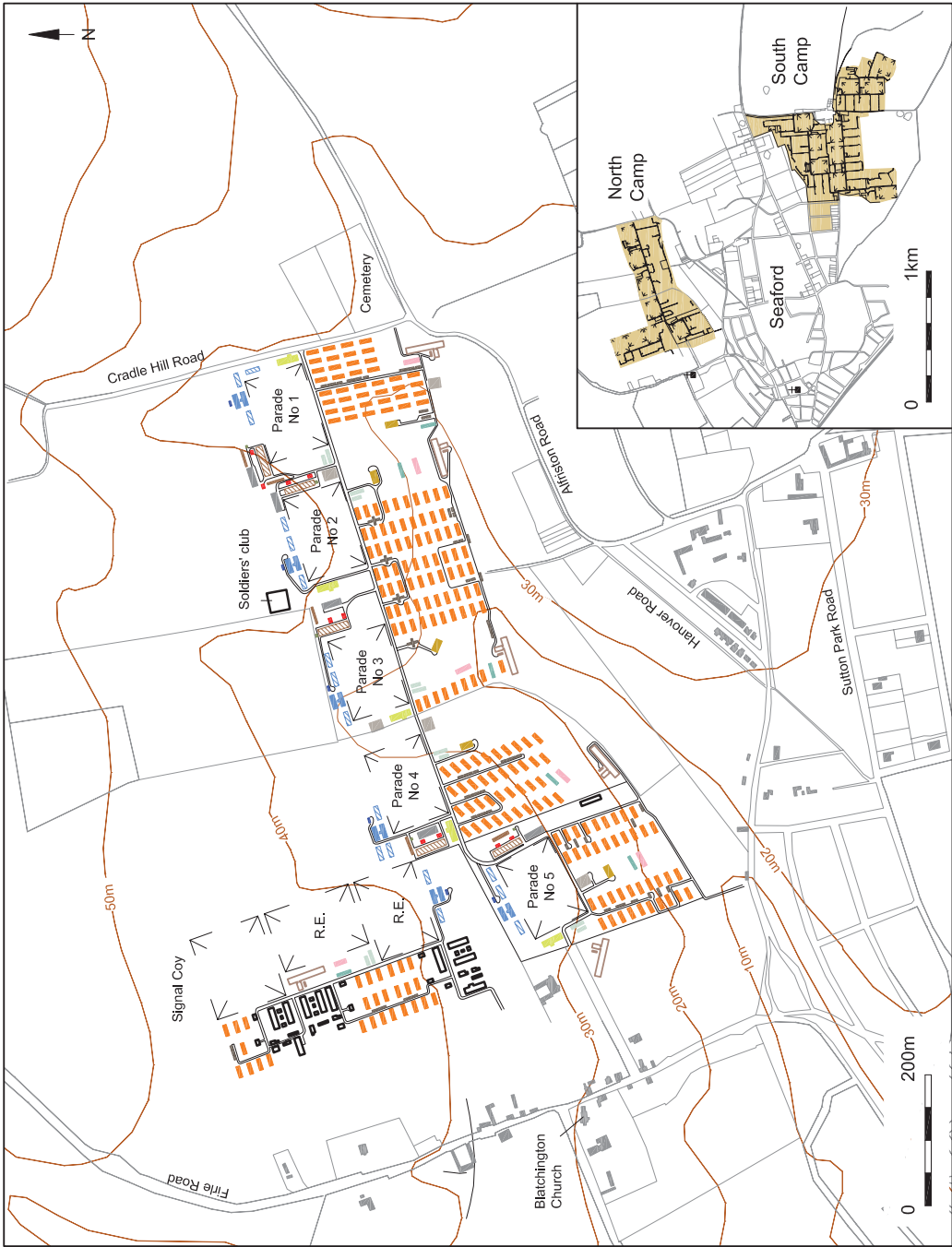


Fig. 3. Plan of Seaford's North Camp with inset map showing position of Seaford's North and South camps in relation to each other (the original plan lacks a key, so the function of buildings has been determined by comparison with the other plans).



Fig. 4. Plan of Seaford's South Camp (for key, see Fig. 2).

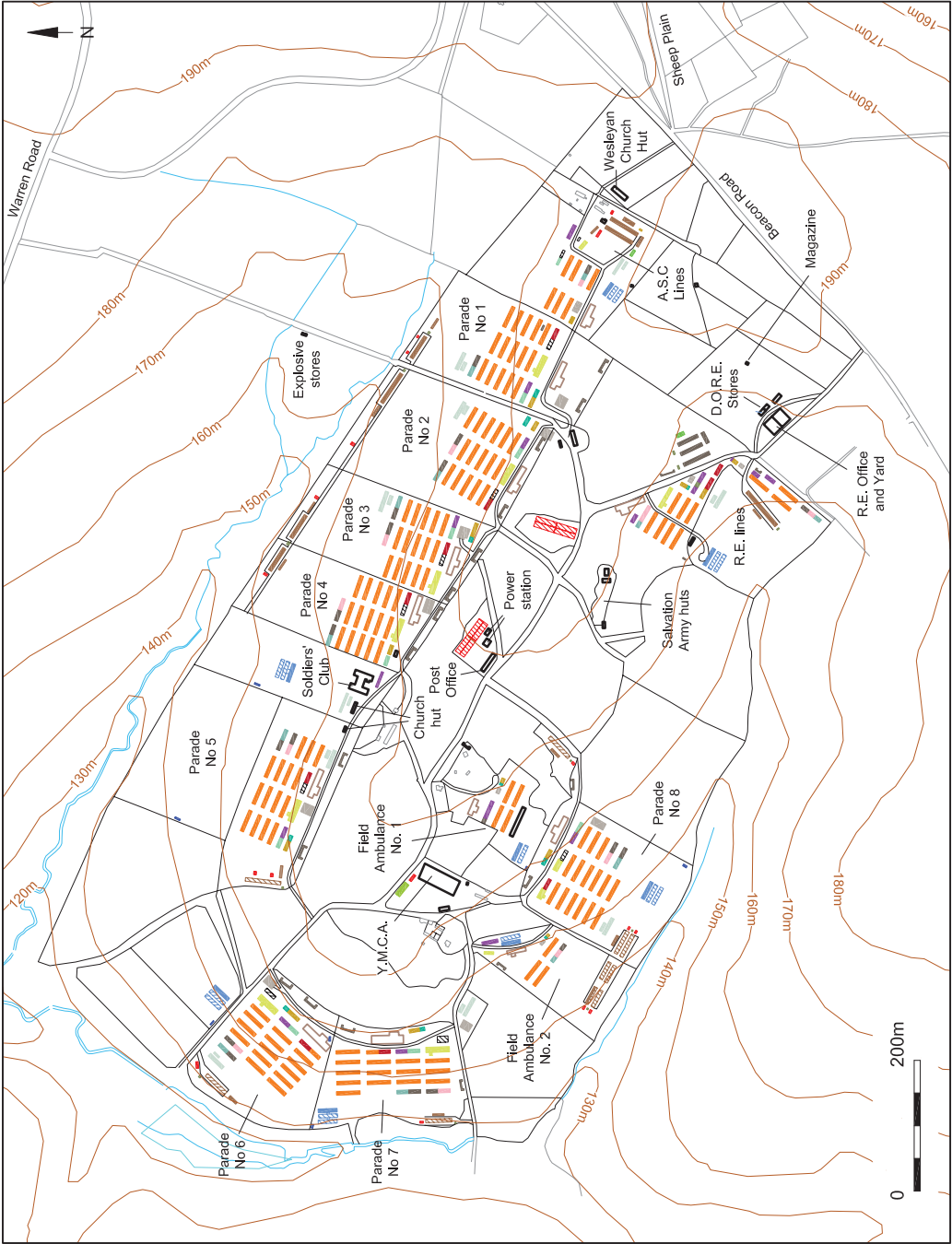


Fig. 5. Plan of Crowborough Camp (for key, see Fig. 2).



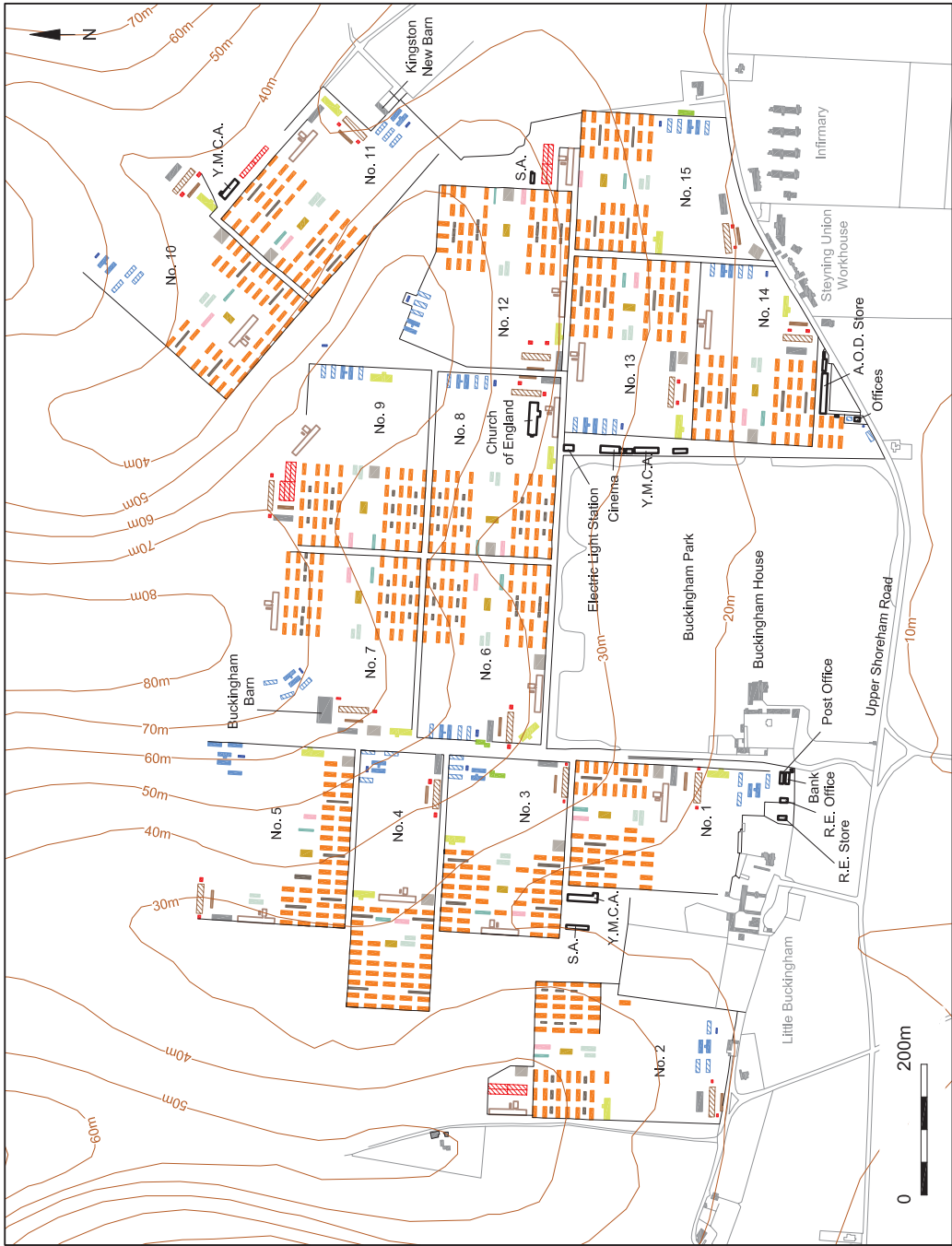


Fig. 6. Plan of Shoreham Camp (for key, see Fig. 2).

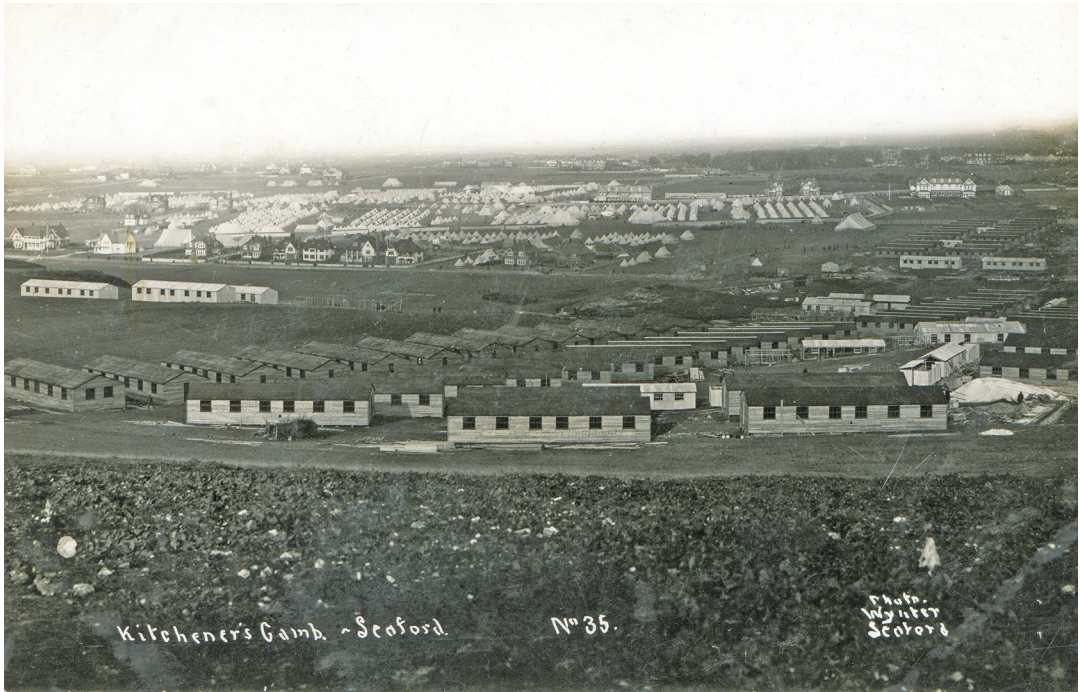


Fig. 7. View from Seaford Head looking north-west showing the original 1914 tented camp and, to the east, the western part of the 1914/15 hutted camp, probably in early 1915 (Seaford Museum, Rosemary Holland Collection).

camp was notably smaller, probably as it was initially to hold existing territorial battalions (the London Rifle Brigade and 2nd East Lancshires (later the 66th Division))<sup>9</sup> rather than be the base for one of the New Army divisions. Despite Crowborough's constricted position, the plan clearly shows that some areas, which could have taken more accommodation, were not used in 1916. Its size was initially dictated by the capacity required rather than purely by topography (Fig. 5). Whether these areas were later utilized after the 1916 plan was made is currently uncertain.

Each camp was divided up into areas, each centred on a parade ground with adjoining accommodation and ancillary huts for a battalion of a little over 1000 men. The parade ground was the heart of each area (numbered 1–5 on the North Camp plan and 6–15 on the South Camp plan; 1–15 at Shoreham and 1–8 at Crowborough). The parade grounds (ideally c. 150 × 100 yards but notably restricted at Crowborough) were used for drill, inspections, announcements etc. Where space allowed, buildings were arranged around the parade ground, at Seaford and Shoreham

typically including 40 huts on one side and a row of headquarters and officers' buildings along the opposite side. The designs of a Major Armstrong proposed a standard accommodation hut, measuring 60 × 20 feet, which would hold 30 men.<sup>10</sup> The grouping of 40 of these huts adjacent to each parade ground would therefore provide a battalion's accommodation.

Crowborough's parade grounds have notably fewer accommodation huts. However, as depicted on the plan (Fig. 5), the huts are notably longer than those at the other camps and this may have made up the needed accommodation space on a somewhat restricted site. The presence of these abnormally long huts and the close-set nature of the standard type are clearly shown on contemporary views (Figs 7 and 8). The huts were usually prefabricated and set on level platforms provided by brick/concrete piers, timber piles and/or terracing, depending on the slope. In one area of Seaford's South Camp a double row of huts had a distinctive herringbone layout, again to counter the slope in the area (Fig. 5, Parade No. 10).<sup>11</sup> These huts were not sited in the more usual position on the south of Parade No.



Fig. 8. View of some of the huts at Crowborough. Note the double-length huts (central) and close-set standard huts (left) (Luke Barber's collection).

10, as the ground here begins to rise steeply up to Seaford Head.

Similar deviations from the expected layout, whether in orientation or length of hut rows at all the camps are often due to practicalities such as this and the need to fit within extant field boundaries and around existing buildings. At Shoreham, the orientation of Parades Nos 10 and 11 is clearly the result of the axis of a dry valley (Fig. 6) and the whole layout of Crowborough follows the curving contours of the hill (Fig. 5). Stream valleys surrounded the base of this hill, explaining the tight bunching of the huts and somewhat stunted nature of the parades. A notable deviation to the typical parade ground pattern is apparent at the north-western side of Seaford's North Camp (Fig. 4) where the base of the Royal Engineers was established. Similar deviations on the other plans (e.g. Royal Engineers [RE] and Field Ambulance at Crowborough, Fig. 5) may well be the result of small areas dedicated to other specialist units.

The standard hut building material was red fir scantling<sup>12</sup> but images of the camps show that a few structures were clad with corrugated metal sheeting. The standard Armstrong barrack hut had

a door in one of the gable ends with six windows down each of the long sides. The floors and roofs were planked, the latter having bitumen felt and tarred coatings. They were draughty and lacked insulation. The voids beneath them, created by the piers, caused air circulation that may have been good for the structure, but less so for the occupants when the breeze came up from any gaps between the floorboards. Heating was in the form of small centrally placed stoves. The body heat from 30 soldiers probably helped with heating too, though this would have had its own drawbacks! The huts had no running water or drainage, as the separate communal latrines and ablutions buildings dealt with all sanitary needs.

At Seaford and Shoreham a battalion's officers' quarters, mess and associated latrines were usually located on the opposite side of the parade ground from the other ranks' barrack huts. This maintained a physical distance between the officers and the men while allowing good visibility for policing both the parade ground and the barrack area.<sup>13</sup> The NCOs' mess was frequently sited much closer to the men. The headquarters office building/guard house was usually positioned immediately adjacent to





Fig. 9. View of Canadian troops dining in their hut at Seaford while waiting to go home, February 1919. Note the stove beyond the table and folded-up beds by left wall (Seaford Museum, John Eastlake/Jim Marsh Collection).

the parade ground but can show more variability in location. The position of the officers' quarters at Crowborough is much more unpredictable. Each battalion also had access to a Regimental Institute that was provided by the regiment, for the improvement of the soldiers and to reduce excessive drinking.<sup>14</sup> As well as the official camp church and post office the camps also had privately-run huts for the spiritual and moral benefit of the men funded by the YMCA, Salvation Army and other local and national organisations.

Each battalion had a cookhouse and two 'wash-ups', located beside or among the barrack huts. Crowborough varies again in that the cookhouses tended to be situated near the top of the slopes, adjacent to the inner perimeter track, presumably for the ease of supply. The original Armstrong designs for divisional camps included large central communal eating halls. These are apparently missing from the three camp plans, probably as a result of Kitchener's cuts to the camp building programme implemented in the winter of 1914/15.<sup>15</sup> It appears that the barrack huts also acted as the men's dining rooms, as certainly borne out by contemporary images (Fig. 9). The camps were

well provisioned with coal yards to supply both the kitchens and the hut stoves. Each area also had a group of buildings for storage and transport. The latter mainly consisted of horse-drawn carts and wagons: a battalion maintained 13 riding and 43 draught packhorses.<sup>16</sup>

Sanitary facilities were also provided for each battalion in a standard fashion. Each double row of barrack huts had an ablution, latrines and urinals block and there was a bath house and drying hut for clothes etc. Although most of the camp plans do not detail drainage arrangements<sup>17</sup> detailed analysis of the 1950s aerial photographs of Seaford camp has identified main drains associated with the cook houses and ablution blocks/latrines, with more minor ones between the huts, presumably to take water from the roofs.<sup>18</sup> Other elements of the infrastructure, such as the camp roads, used local stone rubble and it is clear great use was made of the local chalk at Seaford to this end. Certainly some of the chalk pits on Seaford Head appear on the post-war Ordnance Survey maps for the first time. The presence of Great War refuse in some clearly shows they were opened during the war. However, later in the camps' lives the large quantities of clinker

and slag from burning coal in the cookhouses and huts, as well as from the incinerators for refuse, provided another source of hardcore for surfacing both roads and open yards. At Seaford, field survey has found many of the camp roads around Parade No. 13 (Fig. 4) covered in this slag. Pre-war guidance on 'military hygiene' required refuse to be incinerated before being dumped outside the camp's perimeter (initial survey work by the authors suggests disused quarries were often used where available).<sup>19</sup> Although all three camps appear to have had incinerators, only a small proportion of the ceramics and glass in refuse from Seaford's South Camp shows signs of burning. Guidance which may have been enforceable on a small professional army was unenforceable in a civilian army of considerably larger size.

Although these massive camps saw thousands of men from all over the British Empire passing through on their way to the war, they were but temporary sites. After the war the buildings and materials were rapidly sold off by the War Office<sup>20</sup> and the land returned to agriculture, often with the farmers financially rewarded for clearing any remaining foundations and debris.<sup>21</sup> At Seaford some parts of South Camp were retained for military training well into the 1920s,<sup>22</sup> and some

of the former huts were pressed into service as domestic houses, particularly at North Camp. The final Seaford hut was demolished shortly after 2005, probably the last *in situ* from any of the camps. Their complete obliteration above ground and the scant archaeological traces left by most of the associated structures means that the historical value of these plans is immense. However, comparison of the South Camp plan with crop, soil and shadow marks on 1950s aerial photographs shows that, although the camp never extended further than on the 1916 plan, there were clearly some areas of internal remodelling – the 1916 layouts did not remain totally static for the camps' lives.<sup>23</sup>

Although these training camps were the centre of activity, much of the actual training, from route marches to gas training, from trench digging to musketry and grenade practice actually occurred in the surrounding landscape. These training areas were not mapped in detail, as the camps were and little is known of their layout from documentary sources. Luckily this training has left a stronger archaeological footprint than the camps. Future survey and excavation work will therefore provide a much more complete picture of life and training at these sites.

**Authors:** Luke Barber, 17 Stoke Manor Close, Seaford, BN25 3RE, la.barber@talk21.com, and Justin Russell, 8 Hillside Terrace, Steyning, BN44 3GH, kihoska@yahoo.co.uk

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> J. Schofield, *England's Army camps* (2006) [dataset]. York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor] (doi:10.5284/1000269). [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/armycamp\\_eh\\_2006/index.cfm](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/armycamp_eh_2006/index.cfm).
- <sup>2</sup> P. Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The raising of the new armies 1914–16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
- <sup>3</sup> P. Chasseaud, 'A Mirror to Armageddon: the landscape of Sussex in the First World War: trench systems, defence plans and military training in Sussex 1914–1918', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* **152** (2014), 153–87.
- <sup>4</sup> Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Q4-54887, Series E-17, Vol. 21, File '21' (21–27) 1916-C 'Plans de camps'.
- <sup>5</sup> The Library and Archives Canada group of plans does not include one of Seaford's North Camp. The plan in Fig. 3 used one printed on an undated postcard in the Rosemary Holland Collection, a copy of which is lodged with Seaford Museum.
- <sup>6</sup> R. Castleden, *On Blatchington Hill: A history of a Downland village* (Seaford: Blatchington Press, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Simkins, 244.
- <sup>8</sup> K. Gordon, *Seaford and Eastbourne in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014).
- <sup>9</sup> Chasseaud, 175; K. Gieves, *Sussex in the First World War*, *Sussex Record Society* **84** (2004), 325.
- <sup>10</sup> Simkins, 234.
- <sup>11</sup> The terraces for these huts are clearly visible on aerial photographs of the 1940s and 1950s prior to scrub covering the area (e.g. runs held by the National Monuments Record such as RAF/58/613, 5 April 1951).
- <sup>12</sup> R. Skinner, *Kitchener's camps at Seaford: A First World War landscape on aerial photographs*, English Heritage Research Department Report Series **27–2011** (2011), 16. [http://services.english-heritage.org.uk/ResearchReportsPdfs/027\\_2011WEB.pdf](http://services.english-heritage.org.uk/ResearchReportsPdfs/027_2011WEB.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Skinner, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Skinner, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Simkins, 242.
- <sup>16</sup> Skinner, 12.
- <sup>17</sup> An example is known for Shoreham camp: West Sussex Record Office, Add. Ms. 10,168, '1917, Shoreham-by-Sea, Hutment Camp for 15 Battalions of Infantry. Copied by E. F. Bowtilier', 25in. to 1m.
- <sup>18</sup> Skinner, 14.
- <sup>19</sup> War Office, *Manual of elementary military hygiene 1912* (London: HMSO, 1912), 72.

<sup>20</sup> There are numerous sales listed in the *Sussex Express* and *Kent and Sussex Courier* between March 1919 and June 1921.

<sup>21</sup> East Sussex Record Office, ACC 4600/257.

<sup>22</sup> Photographs and postcards in Luke Barber's collection show an Officer Training Corp camp of 1921 occupying the easternmost huts at Seaford's South Camp.

<sup>23</sup> Skinner, 9. Some archaeological work undertaken by the authors within the former footprint of South Camp have also located structures that are not depicted on the 1916 plan. A similar situation is also apparent at Shoreham where some buildings not on the 1916 plan are visible on 1946 aerial photographs.

---