



Old Catton's World War One Hospital

As soon as war broke out in 1914, hospitals in England made themselves ready to receive wounded from France and the expected battles at sea. In Norfolk, the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital led the way in these preparations. Additional beds were made available, marquees and tents with beds were erected in the Hospital grounds, and certain patients such as children were transferred to other locations.



The King Edward Ward at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital in 1916.

But by 1915, there were not enough beds at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital to accommodate the rising numbers of wounded returning from the front. The lunatic asylum at Thorpe St Andrew was taken over for wounded soldiers; its patients being transferred to other institutions such as Hellesdon Hospital.

Over the next two years as the number of wounded soldiers continued to rise, a third military hospital in Norwich, at Lakenham, was created by commandeering a newly built school and then a fourth at the Wayland Union Workhouse near Attleborough.



Supplementing the main military hospitals, 62 Norfolk towns and villages were home to Auxiliary War Hospitals. These were not large or specialised buildings, but village halls, public buildings and large private residences turned over by their owners. In many cases, the purpose of these Auxiliary Hospitals was to offer additional treatment and convalescence to wounded servicemen once they had been assessed and treated in the main military hospitals.



July 1916. The Auxiliary Hospital at Catton Hall in Catton. The Buxton family museum (now the Old Catton Village Hall) is on the left and was the hospital day room. The Racquets Court (now part of a private residence) on the right housed the hospital beds.

Catton was home to one of these Auxiliary Hospitals. The Catton Hospital was opened on 2nd September 1915 at the home of Mr and Mrs Edward Buxton at Catton Hall. The Hospital initially offered 21 beds and this was increased to 30 beds by 1918. These were situated mainly in the Racquets Court. The museum next door (now the Old Catton Village Hall) was used as a day room and it had a covered veranda for use in good weather.



In addition, three special two men huts were provided outside the day room. These were for the soldiers who had been victims of gas attacks and who needed constant fresh air to aid recovery. But this must have been a double-edged treatment as no heating was provided and the huts were made of relatively thin single-skinned wood. One of these huts has been well preserved and exists today at the Buxton family home.



The three wooden "bedrooms" outside the hospital dayroom in April 1917.

Prior to 1914, the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John had been operating as separate Voluntary Aid Societies. They began to establish Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) and recruit and train local volunteers for the coming task. At the start of the war, they joined forces so as not to duplicate effort.

The staffing of each VAD was either an all male or an all female detachment. The male detachments were difficult to recruit as they required 56 volunteers headed by a Commandant, with a Medical Officer, Quartermaster and Honorary Secretary, Pharmacist and four sections each comprising of a Section Leader and 12 men. A women's detachment of 24 was far easier to raise. Led by a Commandant and Lady Superintendant (trained nurse), the detachment comprised of four sections, each with a Section Leader and four women, or two sections each with a Section Leader and nine women. Within its ranks, each female detachment had to comprise of four proficient cooks.

To become full and proficient members of their VAD, women were expected to train for and pass examinations in both first aid and nursing. Male detachments trained in first aid only and during the war, they served mostly in detachments responsible for transport of the wounded and the setting up of Auxiliary War Hospitals.



By 1915, a 'General Service' section of the VADs had been formed providing a wider variety of additional duties for women such as clerks, typists, telephonists and drivers. But the most prestigious position was that of VAD nurse. Generally speaking, VAD nurses were recruited from local middle-class families as they were the ones most likely to be able to fund the training and be able to purchase the required uniform. It was only later in the war that the VADs had funds to provide or replace worn out uniforms. Successful applicants into a VAD served a probation period and after that, they were expected to serve for up to 3 months. Many served for much longer. All of the nurses worked on a voluntary basis.

Most of the Auxiliary War Hospitals in Norfolk had a 'family' atmosphere. Usually it was the owner of the house or his wife that took the role of VAD Commandant and other members of the VAD were drawn from the domestic staff and local girls. Treatment was given by the VAD Medical Officer (who was usually the local doctor) and the Superintendent who was a local trained nurse. Certainly this was true of the hospital in Catton. Mr Edward Buxton's wife, Laura, became the Commandant in 1915 and it was mostly local women who filled the other VAD roles.

Role and rank were defined by the colour of uniforms. The Commandant wore a conspicuous bright scarlet dress. The Quartermaster wore grey, cooks pale brown, and the Nurses the iconic pale blue dress. All Nurses were expected to have the correct clean white headgear and starched, detachable collars and cuffs. The Nurses' uniforms were not issued with a red cross on the breast so they had to make their own and sew them on. As there were no regulations for the size of these crosses, it is rare to see any photographs of Nurses with red crosses of the same size (if at all). This is amply demonstrated below by this photograph of the Catton VAD taken outside the hospital in 1916.

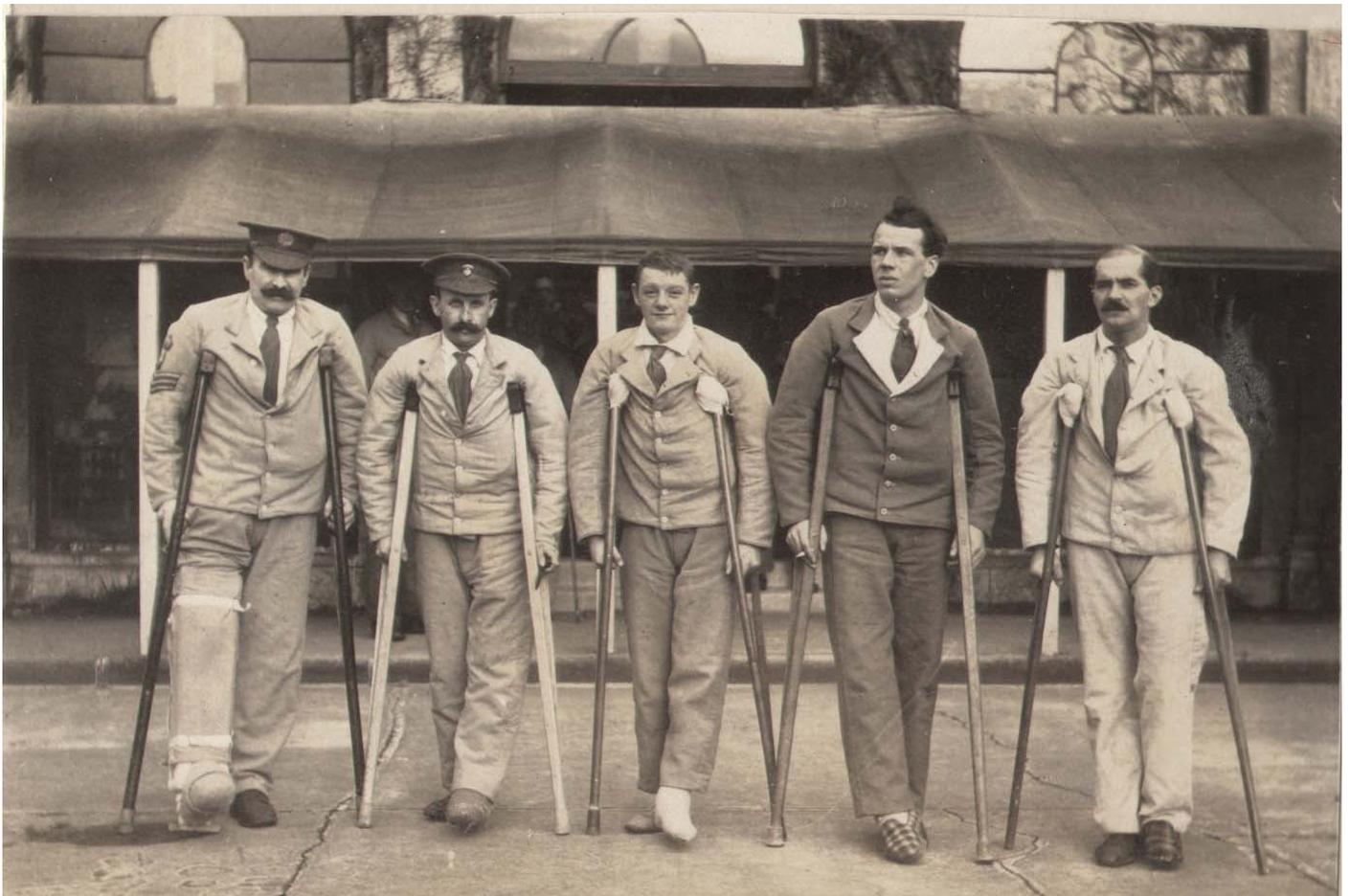


The Catton VAD in 1916. The Commandant, Mrs Laura Buxton, is at the centre rear of the group.



To provide 24-hour cover, VADs worked shifts and although they had core duties to perform it is certain that no two days were ever the same. Convalescent men would arrive at the Auxiliary Hospital from one of two sources; either they would come from the local main military hospital after treatment, or they would come direct from the train at Norwich railway station if their wounds were less serious and they had been treated in a field hospital already. In either case a telegram would be sent to the Auxiliary Hospital notifying the Commandant of the pending arrival. If no ambulance was available to deliver the patient, the VAD would organise a reception committee to attend the main hospital or the railway station. Often the collection of the patients was in hastily converted delivery vehicles, private cars, horse drawn carts or even wheel chairs and hand-drawn carriages.

Once at the Auxiliary Hospital, the convalescing and wounded men would have to swap their khaki uniforms for the flannel 'hospital blue' uniform. This comprised of a jacket, trousers, white shirt and red tie. The soldier retained his own cap and boots for outdoor trips – but whilst inside the Hospital, slippers were issued. These soft and shapeless blue uniforms aided the identification of wandering servicemen who had slipped away from the Hospital – perhaps in search of a strictly against the rules pint! There were occasions when the blue uniforms were in short supply, particularly when heavy numbers of casualties were returning from France. This is most likely to be the reason why photographs depict some patients still in their khaki uniforms.



Some of the wounded at the Catton Hospital in 1917. Note the Hospital uniforms.



A typical day at the Auxiliary Hospital began with nurses assisting those patients marked “UP” to rise, shave, wash and dress before breakfast. Some patients would be marked “UP FROM AND TO”, the specific times being set by the Medical Orderly. Patients ordered ‘bed rest’ would be made to look presentable for the Medical Orderly’s inspection rounds. Patients able to stand to attention would do so by their beds. Patients that were conscious and bed-bound would lie down to attention!

Once the Medical Orderly’s inspection was complete, the VAD nurses would assist the Medical Orderly and Lady Superintendent with changing dressings. Throughout the day, bedpans and sputum cups had to be supplied and emptied, and Nelson’s inhalers were used to clear congestion on the lungs. The incapable would be fed, and those learning to walk again were helped onto crutches or supported. To occupy convalescing troops, most Auxiliary Hospitals were gifted various comforts such as gramophone records, books and magazines. Crafts such as embroidery were also taught. Many VADs patiently helped the wounded to write letters, took dictation or read letters to the blinded. In addition, there were regular teas, card games, concerts, trips out and other similar events to keep moral up and boredom at bay.



May 1916. A Whilst Drive at the Catton Hospital.

Mrs Harmer, one of Mr and Mrs Buxton’s daughters, gave an account of the happy atmosphere in the Catton Hospital and how she enjoyed visiting the wounded and talking to them. She was only sixteen years old at the time and she recalls taking part in the many concert parties and outings which were arranged for the patients.



The first anniversary concert party being organised outside the Catton Hospital on September 2nd 1916.

On one such occasion, to celebrate the first anniversary of the opening of the Catton Hospital, Laura Buxton planned a concert. Not all went to plan. On the 4th September, the Eastern Daily Press reported, "On Saturday evening the Catton Hall Red Cross Hospital celebrated the first anniversary of the opening by giving a concert in aid of its funds. It was intended to hold it in the garden, and an excellent stage had been erected by a few of the wounded soldiers, but unfortunately no sooner had the programme started than rain commenced to fall, and the large audience hastily adjourned to the day room, which was quickly packed to the doors, those unable to gain admission finding ample accommodation in the verandah. The first half of the program was arranged by the men themselves, who were ably assisted by Mrs. Carter and the Misses Carter, and by Master Cushing, whose two solos were beautifully sung to his own accompaniment. Sergeant Baker contributed comic songs in inimitable style, and was vociferously encored. Lance-Sergeant Bonser and Private Coates were equally successful, and were warmly applauded. Private Cranswick proved an able accompanist. The latter half of the entertainment was in the capable hands of "The Pals", a Norwich troupe, who willingly gave their services in aid of such a deserving cause..... The Catton Hospital has now been open twelve months, and has received 197 patients, one of whom, Private



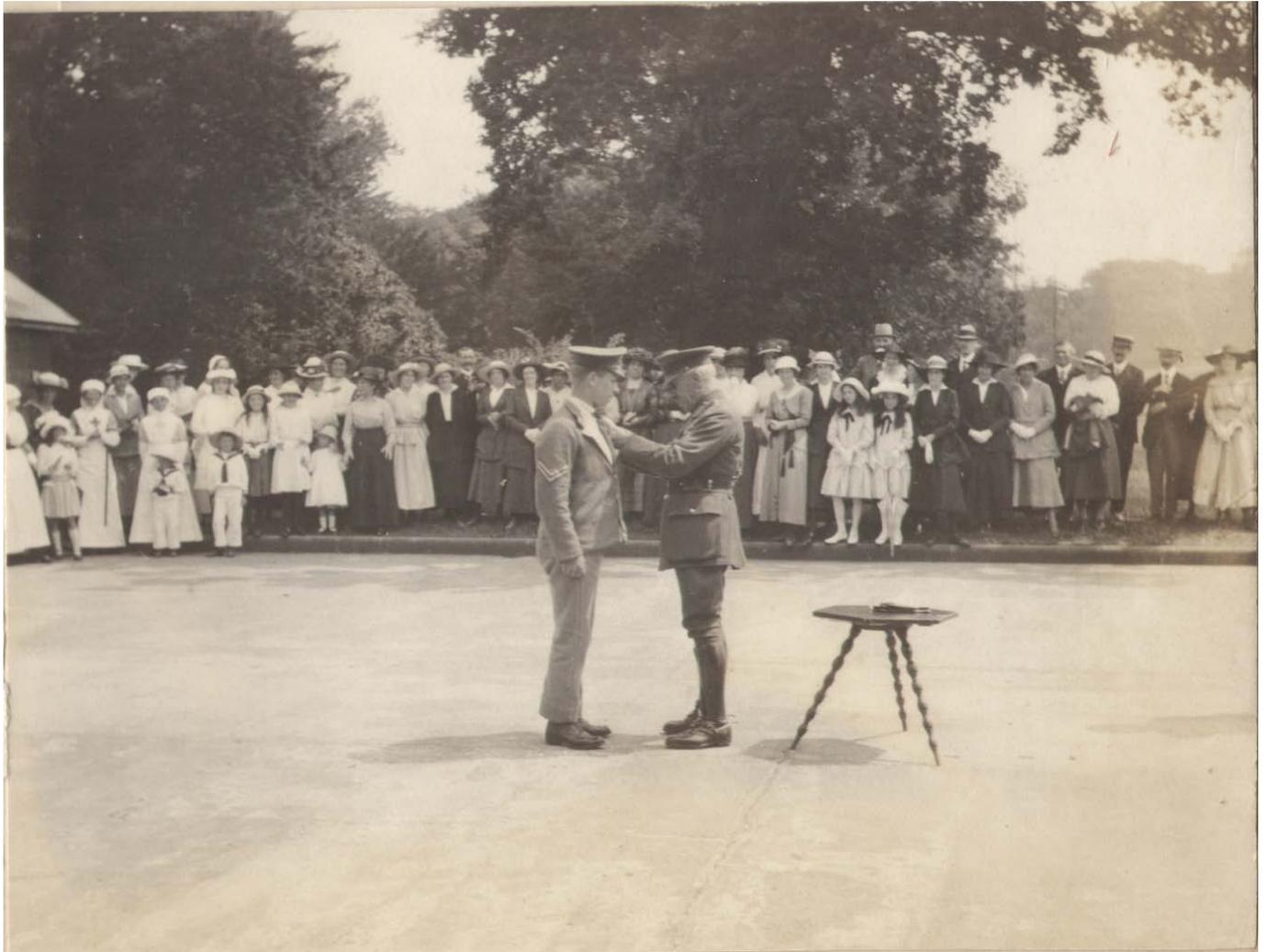
Armstrong, who left for his furlough a few days ago, came to Catton as long ago as last November. Since he was wounded in France he has undergone eight operations. Mr and Mrs Buxton are unfailing in their efforts to give the men a good time and to make their period of convalescence as happy as possible”.

To keep the men occupied many handicrafts were organised, one of the most popular being embroidery as this enabled those interested to embroider their Regimental badge. There was also a local family group which every fortnight visited and gave a concert. Twice a week, Mr Buxton provided a pint of beer for each patient allowed to drink (this excluded those with head wounds) as visits to local pubs was forbidden by War Office regulations. As a means of taking fresh air and seeing the grounds of Catton Hall, the Buxton's pony and trap, with a string of bath chairs attached, was fashionable transport for those who were immobile. Mrs Harmer was often the driver of this quite remarkable convoy, supervised it would appear by an anxious staff!



1918. The Buxton pony and bath chair convoy ready for a tour of the Catton Hall estate! This photograph was taken behind the Hospital outside farm buildings that now form garages for private residences on Hall Drive in Old Catton.

Another feature of life at the Catton Hospital was the occasional presentation of awards for gallantry to some of those in convalescence. On the 13th May 1917, Major General Bannatyne Allason CB visited the Hospital to award the Military Medal to Sergeant C. W. Galyer of the East Yorkshire Regiment. The Major General returned again on the 17th June to present the Military Medal to Corporal Wood of the Leicestershire Regiment. In August 1918, Major General Lloyd came to the Hospital to present the Military Medal to Corporal A. E. Rae for the Royal Horse Artillery. In November of that year Major General Capper attended and presented the Military Medal to C. S. Houghton (no Regiment given).



June 17th 1917. Major General Bannatyne Allason CB presents the Military Medal to Corporal W. Wood of the East Yorkshire Regiment in the grounds of the Catton Hospital.

By early 1919, the last of the convalescing soldiers were discharged from the Auxiliary Hospitals in Norfolk and they were gradually closed, decommissioned and returned to the use of their private owners. On the 4th February 1919, the last of patients left the Catton Hospital and it finally closed.

On Friday 21st February 1919, a closing down party was held at Catton Hall which was well reported by the local Eastern Daily Press:

“After a total service of nearly three years and a-half, the Catton V.A.D. Auxiliary Hospital closed down a few days ago, and Friday evening was the scene of a breaking-up party given by Mr. and Mrs. Buxton at the Hall to the whole of the staff. Amongst those present besides the nurses, orderlies, and helpers were Lady Gurney, Vice-President of the Taverham Division, Lieut.-Colonel G. H. Thompson (the County Director), the Sister-in-Charge, and Mrs. Barton, the first Quartermaster of the Hospital. Forty-four guests sat down to a bountiful meal, after which speeches and presentations followed.”



On the 25th February 1919, in recognition of her outstanding efforts and dedication, Mrs Laura Buxton was awarded an MBE at Buckingham Palace.



Mrs Laura Buxton MBE – Commandant of the Catton Auxiliary VAD Hospital 1915 to 1919.

When Mrs Laura Buxton and her husband opened the Catton Auxiliary Hospital in 1915, Mrs Buxton became the Hospital Commandant. Mrs Buxton was studious in her record keeping and she produced one of the most informative and unique records of any of the Hospitals in Norfolk. Her record included a great many photographs and press cuttings. It also included an exceptional list of every patient and their Regiment, which included soldiers from Scotland and Australia.

Her financial record keeping was very detailed and the financial report of 1917 clearly shows how funds were distributed and spent. The general administration of the VAD unit, supervised by Mrs Buxton, must have been of a very high standard. Catton Hall must have been a unique Hospital. Other Hospitals in the area were no doubt as dedicated, but none made such meticulous effort to record the daily life of the hospital as that of Mrs Buxton.



On Saturday 18th October 1919 a service of Thanksgiving was held at Norwich Cathedral. At the end of the service the Dean and Chapter accepted a Banner marking the work of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John Auxiliary Hospitals in Norfolk during the First World War. Today, this Banner is displayed in the Tribune Gallery of Norwich Cathedral and it lists the 62 locations in Norfolk of the Auxiliary War Hospitals – one of those being in Catton.



The British Red Cross and Order of St John Banner hanging in the Tribune Gallery at Norwich Cathedral in 2009.

In total, 687 patients were treated at the Catton Hospital.

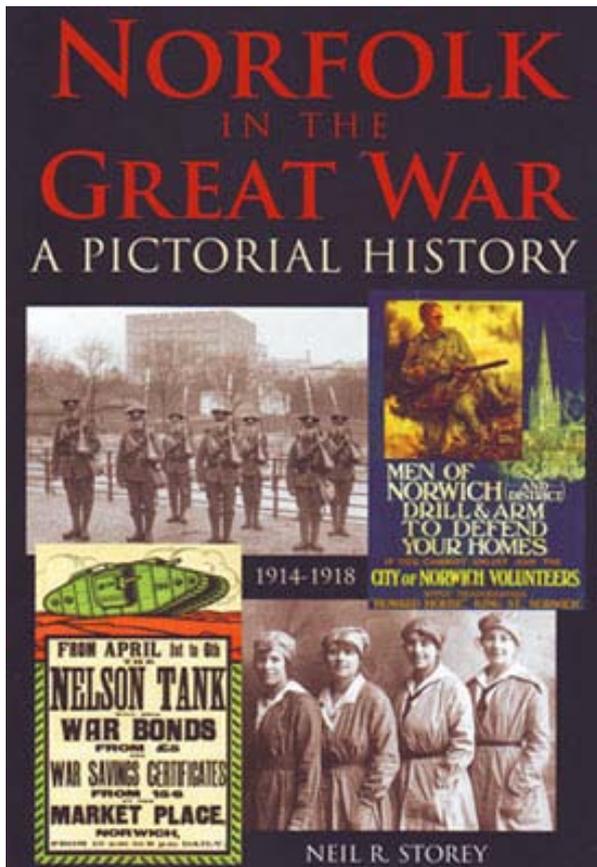
Larger versions of the photographs in this article, together with many other photographs of the Catton Hospital, can be viewed in the photo archive at www.oldcatton.com.



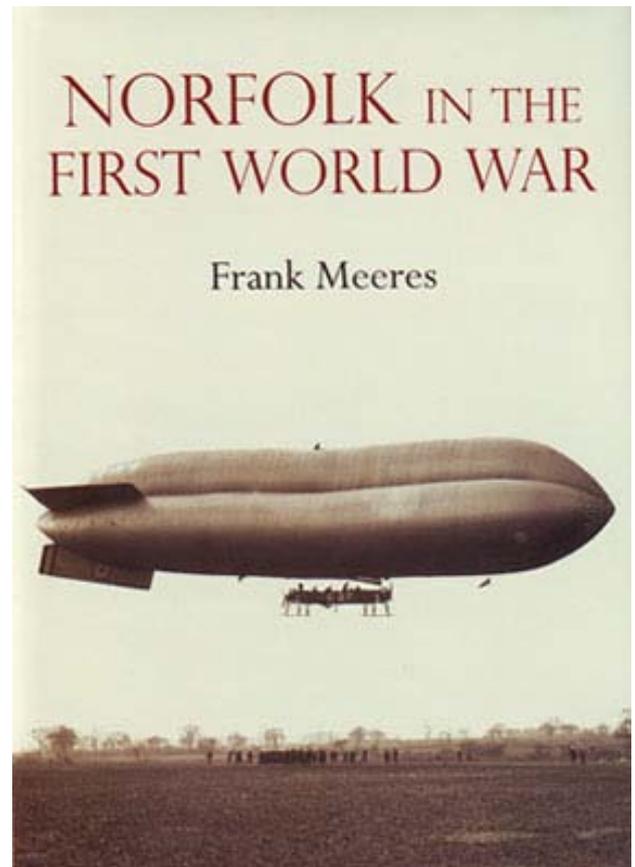
Finally, a few words of thanks.

Firstly, we are extremely grateful to Mr Andrew Buxton for allowing us view and copy the unique photo album created by his grandmother, Mrs Laura Buxton. It was this photo album that inspired the work to understand the history of the Catton hospital.

Secondly, our genuine thanks go to the authors and publishers of the following books who have very kindly allowed us to reference their work in the creation of this article. We are especially grateful to Mr Neil Storey who we were lucky enough to meet at RAF Duxford during the 2008 Armistice Day commemoration.



"Norfolk In The Great War" by Neil Storey
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