

THE ROYAL VICTORIA PATRIOTIC ASYLUM, WANDSWORTH COMMON

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SUMMARY

For almost one hundred years the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum (later 'School') on Wandsworth Common, South London, was the nation's principal orphanage for the daughters of British servicemen killed on duty. During World War I the building also served as the Third London General Hospital, one of the capital's 'Big Four' Territorial hospitals. Later, during the Second World War, the building functioned as the London Reception Centre, the MI5 interrogation centre to which all male foreign nationals were brought immediately on arrival in the UK from occupied Europe. The building survives to this day, and prompted by the 150th anniversary of its opening in 2009, this paper summarises the history of the building from its origins in the Crimean War until the removal of the orphanage to new premises in Hertfordshire after 1945.

As well as creating a record of developments to the building and the different uses to which it was put, this paper aims to provide unique insights into life within the building. These are drawn from sources sometimes overlooked in histories of buildings, including family history records, community newsletters and personal accounts of individual occupants, such as private journals, memoirs and correspondence, as well as oral histories compiled from interviews conducted by the author. However, some material collected at the building by MI5 and other intelligence agencies during World War II remains classified.

ORIGINS

On 11 July 1857, four carriages swept out of Buckingham Palace carrying Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, their three eldest children and representatives of the European royal families. Their destination that afternoon

was Wandsworth Common in South London, where a vast wooden amphitheatre had been constructed for thousands of VIPs and invited guests. The occasion was the foundation ceremony of the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum, a military orphanage for the daughters of soldiers, sailors and marines (Fig 1). On her arrival, Queen Victoria processed along a red carpet to a covered platform at the centre of the arena. That evening in her journal, she described the ceremony:

The Archbishop read a Prayer, after which Albert, as head of the Commission read a long address, to which I responded. Then, the stone was laid, Bands playing, & guns firing & we returned as we came. May their good work, which is to bear my name, prosper!

The building was commissioned by the Royal Victoria Patriotic Fund, a popular appeal on behalf of the widows and orphans of servicemen who perished in the Crimean War. Partly because of technological advances such as telegraphy and photography that brought home the true horrors of war, and partly due to the prominence of the Royal Commissioners, who included Prince Albert and the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, the public response to the appeal was phenomenal. As the Commissioners noted in their First Report, 'every class of the community has contributed liberally to the Fund'. Queen Victoria's children auctioned their own artwork at an exhibition in Bond Street, while in Shoreditch 1,500 poor children each gave a penny to the Fund.

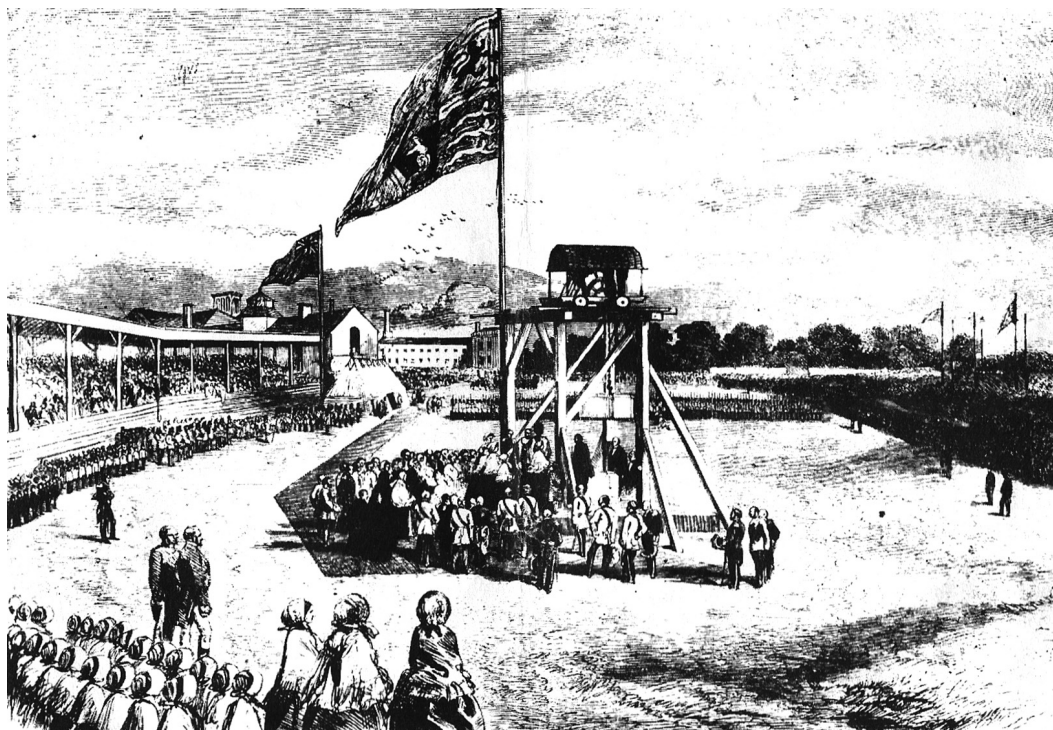


Fig 1. The foundation ceremony on Wandsworth Common on 11 July 1857

In one striking instance, the inmates of the Reformatory Asylum, Smith Street, Westminster, having literally nothing of their own to give, denied themselves a meal, that its value might be offered as their gift.

One-fifth of the contributions were donated from other parts of the Empire and elsewhere, including the Six Nations tribe of North-American Indians. In the end, the Fund raised almost £1½ million — the equivalent today of about £1 billion — making it probably the largest public appeal ever.

With so much money, the Commissioners decided to establish a permanent orphanage for girls. A sub-committee was appointed to find 'a desirable site of not less than 5, and not more than 15 acres' located 'not more than 20 miles from London'. Several potential sites were identified, including Feltham, Hampton, Harlesden, Holloway, Shooters Hill, Slough and Willesden, but Kneller Hall at Sudbury quickly emerged as the favourite.

Unexpectedly, in a letter dated 5 December

1856, the Fourth Earl Spencer made the following offer to Prince Albert:

My Dear Sir, If the Patriotic Fund Commission should select my ground to found their Institution on Wandsworth Common I should be willing, in consideration of the national object, to take one half the price Mr Lee has fixed on the value viz: fifty pounds an acre.

Only three miles from London, and yet 'in the midst of pure air, uncontaminated as yet by the smoke of the metropolis', the members of the Sub-Committee considered the site on Wandsworth Common '... in every respect the most eligible of any brought under their notice'. Ignoring their previously self-imposed limit, the Royal Commissioners were so pleased with the offer that they authorised the purchase of 65 acres at a final cost of £3,700. Not without reason did the current Earl Spencer observe that the sale of the family estates south of the River Thames:

... has become something of a joke among

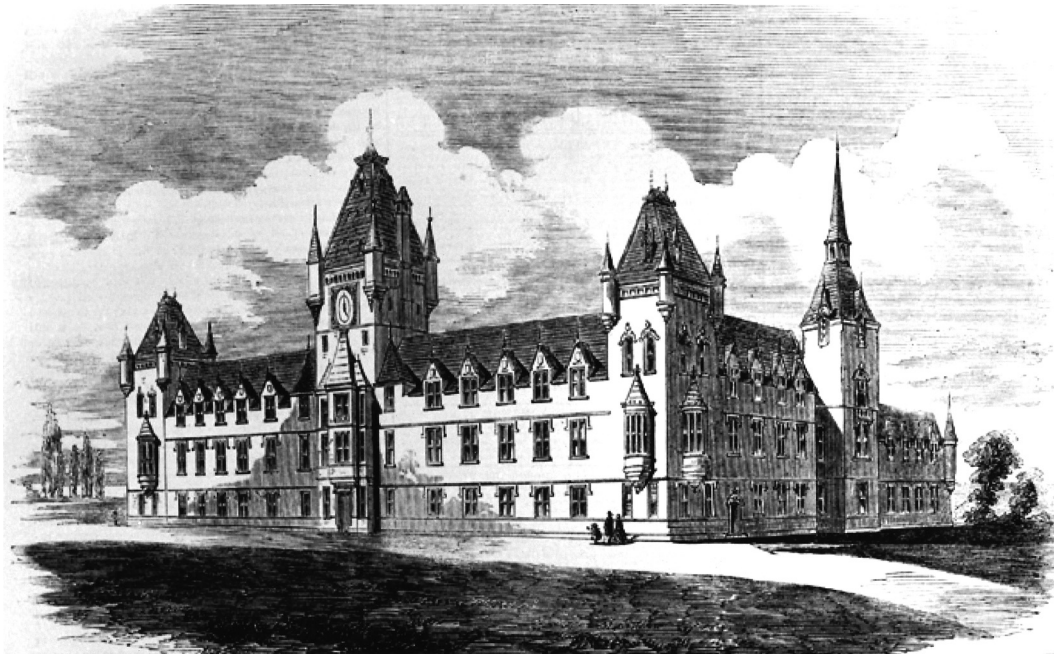


Fig 2. Rohde Hawkins' original design for the building

succeeding generations of Spencers ... Within a generation, thanks to the advent of the railway, they had become parts of Greater London, worth millions.

For the design of the orphanage the Commissioners turned to the Architect to the Committee of the Council on Education, Rohde Hawkins (Fig 2). Hawkins was neither a particularly accomplished nor prolific architect, but fortunately he took as his model for the building George Heriot's Hospital in Edinburgh, built in the 1660s to designs by Inigo Jones.

In contrast with Hawkins, the construction work was awarded to one of the leading building contractors of the time, George Myers of Lambeth, whose successful tender of £31,337 was also the lowest. Myers was the preferred builder of the renowned Victorian architect, Augustus Pugin, who had redesigned the Houses of Parliament after the fire of 1834. Together, Myers and Pugin worked on 55 projects, including four cathedrals — Birmingham, Nottingham, Newcastle and St George's at Southwark. The Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum was just one of several national institutions connected to

the British Army built by Myers, including the British Army's Camp at Aldershot, Netley Military Hospital on Southampton Water, and Woolwich Hospital. In spite of a builders' strike, the construction work was completed in just two years, due in part to the introduction of many innovative features — iron filler joist floors of standard span, cast iron windows and stone dressings, roof trusses and decorative leadwork— all pre-fabricated off-site.

On 1 June 1859, Queen Victoria wrote in her journal:

Drove up to Wandsworth, to see the School of the Patriotic Fund, of which I laid the 1st stone two years ago ... Albert met us there & took us over some part of the building, which is beautiful, roomy and airy.

One month later, the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum opened to receive the first of its complement of 300 girls.

EARLY DAYS

Immediately the orphanage ran into problems. Firstly, the Lady Superintendent had to be dismissed for being drunk. Then, in

December 1861, Prince Albert suddenly died, plunging the Royal Commission into paralysis. But the greatest trial involved one of the first orphans, Charlotte Jane Bennett. ‘The Case of the Girl Bennett’ became a national *cause célèbre* — the subject of a highly-critical editorial in *The Times* and of questions in the House of Commons.

The story of Charlotte’s early life is typical of the ‘daughters of the drum’, the young girls who followed their soldier-fathers around the Empire. She was born in Gibraltar on 29 July 1844, the elder daughter of John Bennett, a serjeant in the 38th Foot and his Irish wife, Rose Anne. Charlotte was just one year old when the regiment received orders to embark for the West Indies. For the next six years, Charlotte followed her father around Britain’s imperial possessions in the Americas before finally setting foot in England for the first time in 1851.

Three years later, John Bennett and the 38th Foot set sail for the Crimea, leaving behind Charlotte and the rest of her family on the dockside at Portsmouth to make their way back to the family home in Tooting. The following year, just three days before Charlotte’s 11th birthday, John Bennett died of his wounds at Sebastopol. With no army pay or pension, Rose Anne was soon forced to give up her four children into whatever care she could find, and Charlotte and her younger sister eventually found places at the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum.

On the morning of Monday, 6 January 1862, Charlotte was cheeky to the Assistant Laundress. The Lady Superintendent was absent at the time, so the School Chaplain, the Reverend W Kirkby, placed her in solitary confinement for two days in the former’s bathroom in the main tower. That night Charlotte was allowed out to sleep in her own bed, but the following morning,

... she had again been placed in the Bathroom with a view of separating her from the others. Her dinner had been taken to her about 3 O’clock ... when Lucifer Matches were left with her to enable her to light her fire. She was visited again about half past 4 O’clock, but unfortunately ... the young woman who should have taken her Tea to her about ½ past 5 O’clock, forgot to do so, and did not think of it until the middle

of the Prayer Meeting ... About half past 8, on opening the door she saw the poor girl lying on her back in front of the window, dead, from the effects of fire — evidently caused by a Lucifer Match used to light the Gas.

The subsequent investigation into Charlotte’s death revealed that although two orphans had reported hearing screams at about six o’clock, the matron in charge had assumed that Charlotte was merely throwing a tantrum and scolded them instead. Too scared to say anything more, the girls sat at prayers in the main hall, terrified and listening for further screams from the tower above.

An inquest on 10 January found that Charlotte had died accidentally as the result of her clothes catching fire, and she was buried the following day in the churchyard of All Saints’ church on Wandsworth High Street, following a funeral officiated over by none other than the Reverend Kirkby. Charlotte was just 17 when she died, but she had already experienced more than most do in a lifetime. That she should survive all the hardships of 19th-century army life overseas — perilous sea voyages, deadly tropical diseases and barrack room fires — only to die at the heart of the British Empire in an orphanage intended to care for her is an even greater irony.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Nevertheless, further improvements continued to be made to the original building; an Infirmary in the south-west corner of the grounds was completed, creating space for two new dormitories for additional girls in the main building, and a separate chapel was constructed on the east side. Then, in 1870, work began on the Royal Commissioners’ second great project — an orphanage for 200 boys — in the northern corner of the grounds, close to Clapham Junction. Two years later, the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum for Boys was opened.

By now, however, the Royal Commissioners were growing increasingly concerned that they may have over-extended the Fund’s resources. As the nation’s principal organisation for the care of servicemen’s dependants, the Patriotic Fund had assumed responsibility for administering similar funds for the

widows and orphans of later conflicts (as the Empire expanded, the British Army fought more campaigns in the 50 years following the Crimean War, than in the whole of the previous two centuries). Yet, the proceeds from these later appeals were by no means as substantial as the original Patriotic Fund and its liabilities therefore quickly mounted.

In 1881, just nine years after it opened, the Royal Commissioners decided to sell the Boys' Orphanage, together with 12 acres of land. They received just two bids, and were about to accept one for £28,000 from the Board of Management of the North Surrey School District, when a letter was brought into their meeting with an improved offer of £32,000 from the United Westminster Schools.

The new occupant was Emanuel School. Endowed in 1594 by Lady Dacre, a second cousin to Queen Elizabeth, it stood for 300 years in Tothill Fields, close to the Dacres' Westminster home in what is now Dacre Street, before being demolished in 1894. Originally intended for '... twenty poore children to be brought uppe there in virtue and good and laudable arts ...', by the second half of the 19th century, Emanuel had become a school for boys, the majority of whom were fee-paying and drawn from the City's middle-classes.

A scheme to combine Emanuel with other endowed schools in Westminster was initially defeated in Parliament in 1871 with the help of Lord Salisbury, a future three-times Prime Minister. But when the Governors of Emanuel attempted to have a revised scheme similarly rejected in the House of Commons in 1873, the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, himself rose to condemn their objections. The Scheme was approved and Emanuel School was absorbed into the United Westminster Schools. In 1884, it moved into its new setting on Wandsworth Common.

In spite of these early setbacks, the orphans and staff at the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum soon settled into a daily routine that had changed very little by the time King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra visited in 1907 to commemorate its 50th anniversary.

A GREAT WAR HOSPITAL

On 4 August 1914, the staff at the Royal Victoria Patriotic School (its name was changed in 1910 to avoid confusion with

institutions for the treatment of the mentally ill) were enjoying their short summer holiday when war was declared. The building was taken over by the army the very next day and for the following five years it served as the Third London General Hospital, one of the capital's four major territorial hospitals for the war-wounded (Fig 3).

Despite the impressive speed with which the building was occupied, other aspects of army administration did not appear to have improved much since the Crimean War. On the first day, Colonel Bruce-Porter, who commanded the Third London General throughout the war, received equipment for a field hospital, including tents and entrenching tools, the War Office apparently under the impression that Wandsworth was on the front line! Not among the equipment they received were any beds, on the grounds that the girls' dormitories were already equipped with 300 of them — until Bruce-Porter pointed out that the girls' beds were just 4 feet long!

Initially, the Third London General had beds for 500 men, but as the war in France dragged on and the awful cost in human life mounted, additional wards were constructed right across the top of Wandsworth Common. At the height of the war, the Hospital had accommodation for more than 2,600 patients in what became known as 'Bungalow Town'. One orderly who worked there described the wards.

Entering a typical hut-ward you behold thirty beds, fifteen on each side of the room. Between each pair of beds is a locker in which the patient stows his belongings. (Woe betide him if his locker is not kept neat!) In the central aisle of the room are the Sister's writing-table, certain other tables, chairs, and two coke stoves for heating purposes in winter. The floor is carpetless, and maintained in a meticulous state of high gloss by means of daily polishing. At a height of a few feet from the floor, the asbestos-lined walls cease and become windows. There is no gap in the continuous line of windows all down each side of the ward — a special type of window which, even when open, declines to allow rain to enter. In consequence of these windows the ward is not only very well lit, but also airy and odourless.

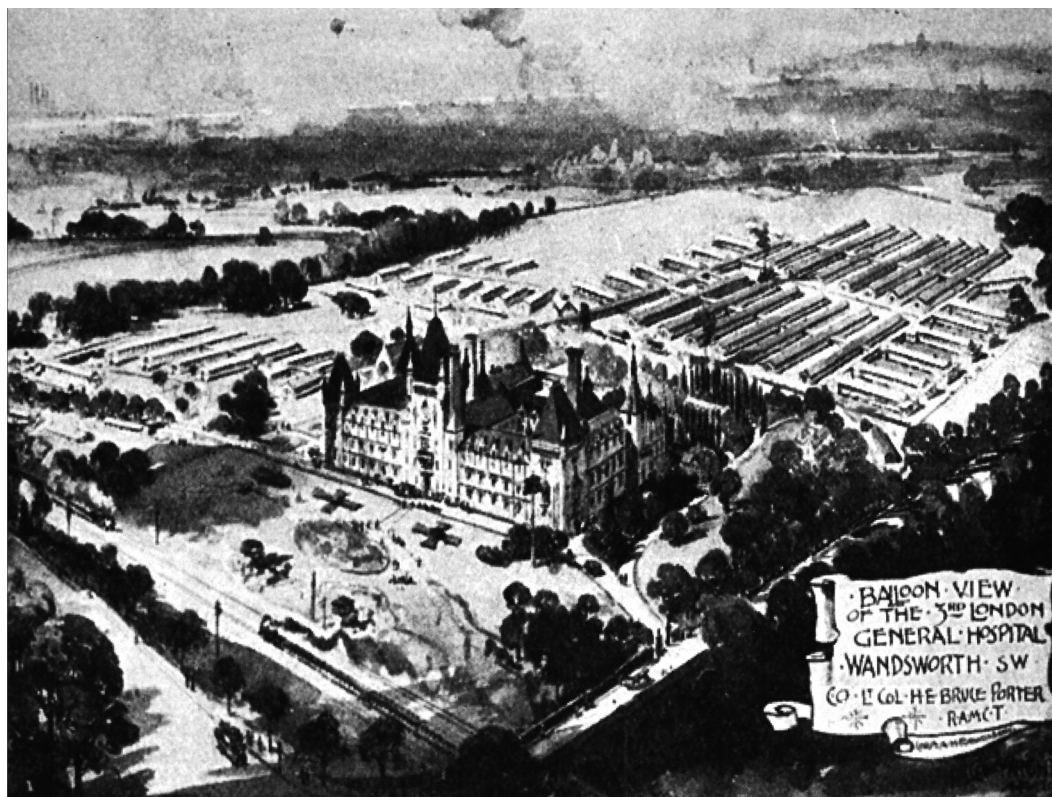


Fig 3. Balloon view' of the Third London General Hospital during World War I

Among the first volunteers at the Hospital was a group of distinguished artists from the Chelsea Arts Club, including Henry Fullwood, Tom Roberts and (Sir) Arthur Streeton, as well as Punch cartoonists H M Bateman and J H Dowd. Too old or unfit for active service, they shaved not only their beards but years off their ages in order to be allowed to join up in the days before conscription. Their daily work as orderlies provided them with plenty of inspiration for their artistic talents, and in October 1915, they held a well-received exhibition of their work at the Hospital. As a result, the artists were given permission to publish a selection of their artwork, together with sketches and poems by other members of staff, in a monthly journal to raise money for the patients: the 'Comfort Fund'.

With so much talent on show, *The Gazette* (Fig 4) of the Third London General Hospital was critically-acclaimed from the outset. It achieved a monthly circulation of over 5,000 — no mean feat for a magazine that was only

sold at the Hospital and 'from a few helpful shops in the Wandsworth neighbourhood' — and proved so popular that it ran for the duration of the war. In all, 46 issues of *The Gazette* were published, providing historians today with a rich seam of humorous articles, poems, sketches and photographs of daily life in the Hospital.

The principal duty of the orderlies at the Third London General was to collect the war-wounded as they arrived from the Western Front on the hospital trains that ran from the south coast to Clapham Junction. From the platforms they carried the wounded on stretchers over the station bridge to the waiting ambulances outside, from where they were driven up St John's Hill to the Hospital (Fig 5). There, the new arrivals were taken into the main hall, which served as a receiving ward, where they lay on the 60 beds waiting to be assessed and dispersed to the other wards according to the nature of their injuries.



Fig 4. *The Gazette*, the monthly magazine of the Third London General

Not surprisingly, the arrival of the wounded frequently figured in the sketches and paintings of the artists working there. George Coates, a renowned Australian portrait painter, later produced several paintings of the Hospital, which can be seen today in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, including one set in the main hall called ‘First Australian wounded at Gallipoli arriving at Wandsworth Hospital, London’ (<http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/ART00200>).

Today, Coates is commemorated in the name of one of the roads on the housing estate that now stands on the former grounds of the Royal Victoria Patriotic School. Another road is named after the Futurist artist, C R W Nevinson. A pacifist, Nevinson might be thought an unlikely volunteer for the Front, but for his fascination with the machinery of war. In 1914, he joined the Red Cross and went to France as an ambulance driver, until ill-health forced his return to England. The following year he joined the staff at the Hospital at Wandsworth. He later contracted rheumatic fever, which, as *The Gazette* noted, gave him the rare distinction of ‘first as working as an orderly here and then being himself an inmate of one of the wards’.

While recovering at the Hospital in 1917, Nevinson held an exhibition of his work in

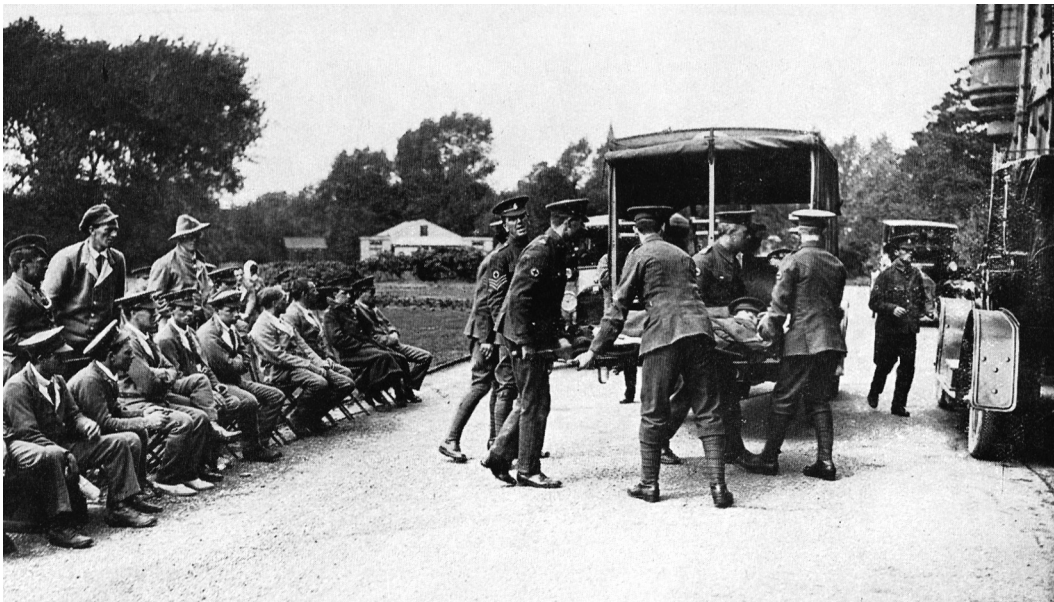


Fig 5. *The arrival of the wounded from Clapham Junction*

Leicester Square. He was now the best-known artist in London and shortly afterwards he was commissioned as a war artist and sent back to France. However, as a result of his experiences both at the Front and in the hospital at Wandsworth, Nevinson had developed a deep-seated loathing of war and the grim realism of some of his work caused it to be censored. After the war Nevinson's work never recaptured the impact or intensity of his earlier paintings. However, he was still held in sufficient regard in 1937 to be commissioned by the BBC to paint the cover of the *Radio Times* for the Coronation of King George the Sixth.

The names of the two other roads on the estate acknowledge two others who served at the Third London General. W R S Stott was a lesser talent than Coates or Nevinson, perhaps, but he nevertheless became a prolific illustrator of books during the inter-war years. The fourth road is named after the founding editor of *The Gazette*, the Canadian writer Ward Muir. Muir later published a book describing his experiences at the Hospital, *Observations of an Orderly*.

One artist who was able to put his talents directly to use at the Third London General Hospital was Francis Derwent Wood. He inaugurated the hospital's Mask for Facial Wounds Department, using his skills as a sculptor to repair the many terrible facial wounds among those returning from the Front. After the war, Derwent Wood was appointed Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy and he left his mark on the face of the capital in the form of *David* on the Machine Guns Corps Memorial at Hyde Park Corner, the *Atalanta* in Chelsea Embankment Gardens, and a figure of William Pitt for the Houses of Parliament.

By the time the Third London General Hospital closed in July 1919, some 52,000 wounded officers and men had been treated there. Many of them had come from other parts of the British Empire to fight at Gallipoli and Flanders, and, as the war graves in Wandsworth Cemetery testify, not all of them returned home. After the war, the Matron at the Third London General, Edith Holden, moved into a house opposite the Hospital at the top of Earlsfield Road where she ran a small nursing home. When she died in August 1930, she was buried at her own

request in Wandsworth Cemetery beside the men she still regarded as her 'boys'.

EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE ORPHANAGE

Meanwhile, the girls had spent the war within sight of their School in eight houses at the opposite end of Spencer Park, and in January each year, the staff and patients at the Hospital invited them back for a tea party and concert.

After the war, in 1919, the orphans returned to the building and the 'Royal Pat' girls settled back once again into their daily routine. The war had created many more orphans, and as the new arrivals approached the great iron gates in Trinity Road, they caught their first glimpse of the vast, turreted building where they would spend the rest of their childhoods. They were met at the imposing iron gates by the gate-keeper, Mr Marchant, and led down the drive to a side door, where they were taken away, sobbing, by the Assistant Superintendent, Miss Warren.

New arrivals were not admitted into the main building, but taken to the Infirmary where they were held in quarantine to ensure they brought in no infectious diseases or infestations. Eve remembers what happened next:

First we were taken up to the bathroom, stripped and bathed. Mind you, to step into a real bath with running hot water was pure delight after being used to the tin bath in front of the fire at home. After the inspection for any spots the next thing was such a horrific experience I shall never forget it. My head was looked through and like all the other children I knew at that time I had fleas. HORROR of HORRORS out came the scissors and razor and our heads were shaved. Bald as a coot. On went the little white cotton pudding basin cap with a drawstring. I cried and cried but to no avail ...

When quarantine was over, the new girl was taken to the main building, where she was issued with two sets of the orphanage uniform — each piece of clothing stamped with a unique number between 1 and 300.

The main building had two internal quadrangles (Fig 6), separated by a main hall, which served as the girls' dining-hall.

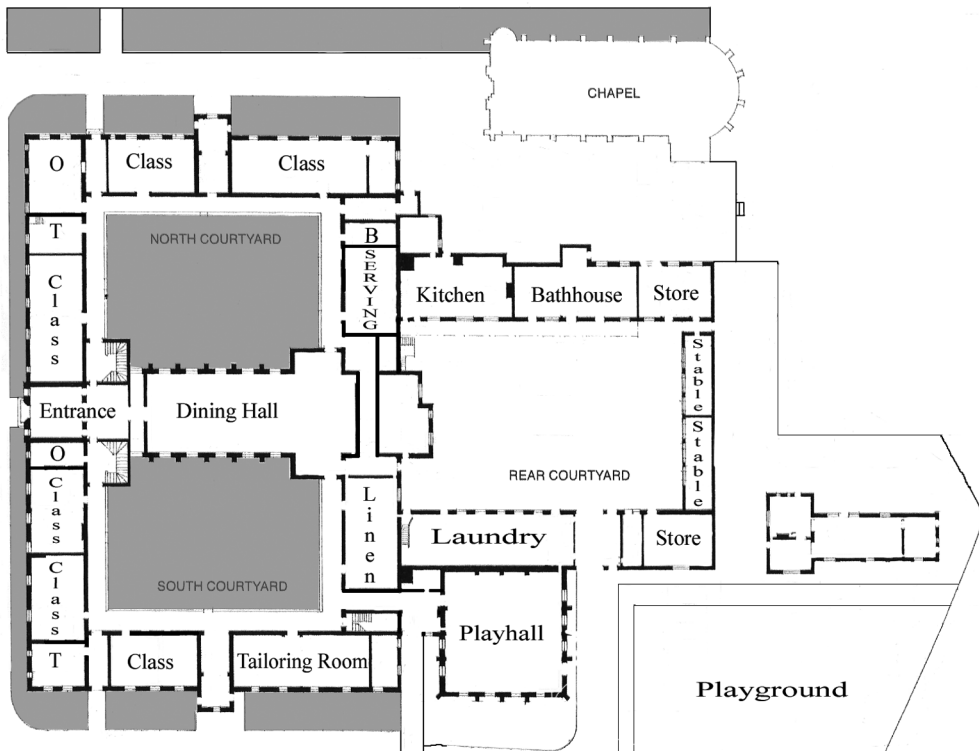


Fig 6. Ground floor plan; the main facade (224 ft in length) faces north-west

From the main entrance outside the hall, cloisters ran along the other three sides of the quadrangles, giving access to the classrooms, workrooms, offices and storerooms. The quadrangles themselves were strictly off-limits to the girls. Off the south courtyard was a playhall, where the girls assembled every morning.

Behind the main building was a large, cobbled courtyard, housing many of the support services for the orphanage, including the main kitchen, the large communal bathroom, the laundry, and the farm buildings.

The School was divided into four age groups: Infants, who were 5–6 years old and pre-school, Juniors, 7–12 years old, Seniors, 12–14 years old, who attended daily classes in the building, and the Elders, 14–16 years old, who performed all the chores in the building in preparation for a position in domestic service. They slept in six large dormitories on the upper floors (Fig 7) named after British military heroes: Haig, Havelock, Jellicoe, Nightingale, Raglan and Roberts.

Inevitably, in a Victorian institution with

strong military traditions, daily life within the School was subject to a strict routine. It was dictated by a large bell in the passage behind the main hall which was ‘so loud that no-one could ever say “I didn’t hear”’. The day began at 6.00am when the girls got up, made their beds, washed and dressed. Then they were marched downstairs in files of two to the playhall where they sat quietly until breakfast. At 7.50am the bell rang again and the girls lined up once more. When the bell rang a second time, they marched in pairs along the corridor to the dining hall (Fig 8). Inside the hall, long tables ran the length of the room, each seating 100 girls. When all the girls were in position, the large door at the far end of the hall opened and in walked the Lady Superintendent. She moved to the rostrum and led the girls in saying Grace. After she had left, the girls sat and ate their breakfast in silence, as the matrons patrolled between the long tables. Breakfast was always one and a half thick pieces of bread. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday it was served with dripping. On the other mornings,

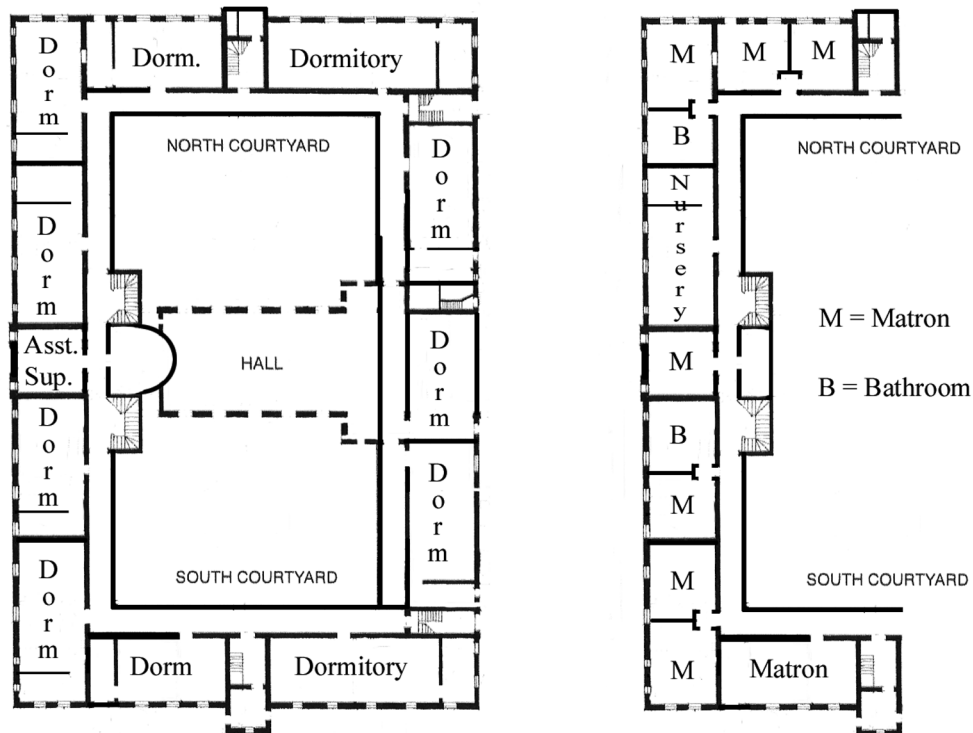


Fig 7. Middle and upper floor plans

there was marmalade, brown sugar or black treacle.

At 8.30am sharp, the Lady Superintendent re-entered the hall. Any girl still eating stopped immediately and they all rose to their feet. Grace was said for a second time, and then the Lady Superintendent read out the names of girls who had wet their beds the previous night. These 'wet-beds' were made to line up in front of her and then sent round to the laundry. At that time, all the laundry was cleaned at the School in two very large rooms using a big cylinder machine. There, the matron in charge would shout at them and 'threaten to put the girls in the machine'. Then they were marched up to Dormitory Seven (where all the 'wet-beds' slept) to arch their mattresses, open out the rubber sheets and collect their wet sheets to take back to the Laundry and its fearsome matron. That night they would be dragged out of bed to go to the toilet. Similarly, any girl who had been caught talking during breakfast was called forward by the Lady Superintendent to be smacked

twice on the hands with a plimsoll or given an evening punishment, such as cleaning boots.

After breakfast, the girls were marched out again. While the younger ones went to classes, the Elders had to work all day, some in the vast kitchen preparing meals for 300, others in the laundry doing the washing and ironing. The biggest chore was keeping the building clean, however. The floors were especially hard work.

And in that dining hall ... We used to have a great, big, heavy mop. I don't know the weight of it ... The polish had been thrown down. We had to throw [the mop] down one side. Pull it back. Throw it the other side. We ought to have great big muscles on us. Honestly!

Dinner was at 12.30 and the main meal of the day. It was always the same every week: stew on Mondays and Fridays, roast lamb on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

And Wednesday was 'Fishing Day' as we

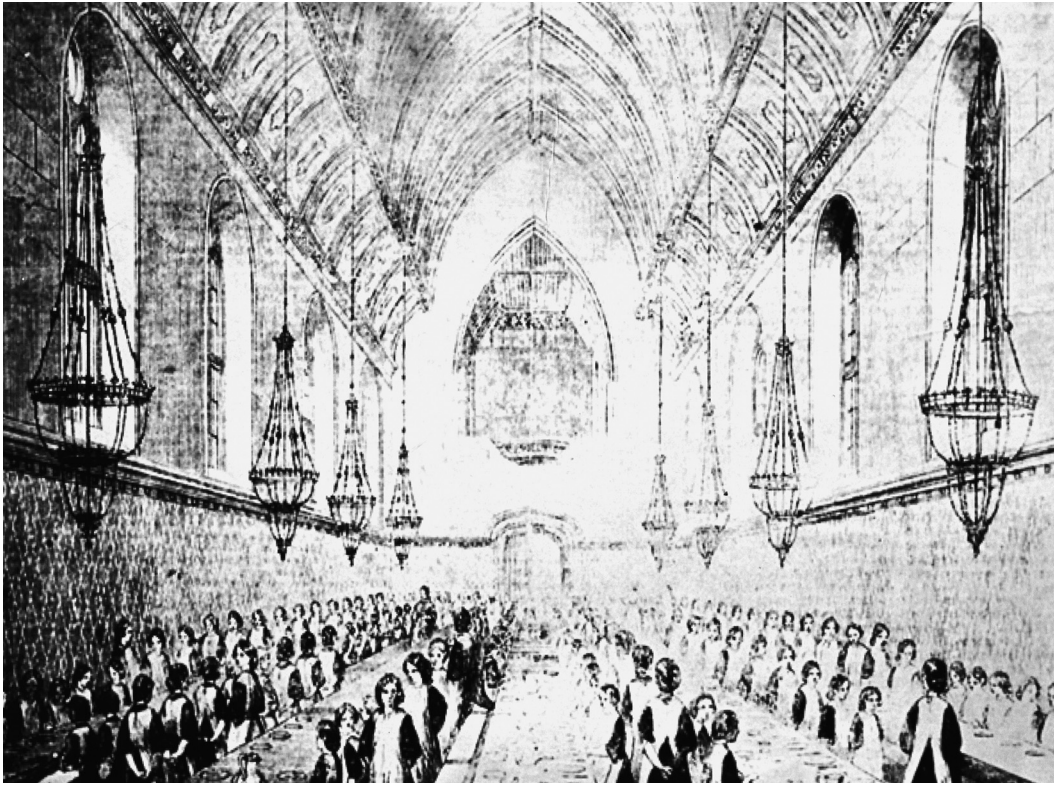


Fig 8. Mealtime in the Main Hall

used to call it. Because it was all grey. I don't know what was all in it. I think it must have been lamb, it was so fatty.

Every scrap of food, including fat, had to be eaten. Any girl who left anything on her plate had to stay behind to eat it under supervision or find it served to her again — cold — for tea.

After lunch, the girls filed out of the hall. The Elders went back to their work duties and the remaining girls returned to their classrooms. At four o'clock when the afternoon session of school ended, they were turned outside to play, in rain or shine. After tea, the infants and juniors prepared for bed by 7.00pm. The older girls stayed up until 8.00pm, doing homework in the special preparation room or punishment jobs such as polishing boots. Mainly, they sat in silence, knitting socks.

On Sundays, the girls dressed in their best clothes and went to church in their own chapel — twice — once in the morning and then again in the afternoon. In between,

there were long walks around Wandsworth Common (Fig 9):

After chapel, and before lunch, we lined up in pairs according to age to form a long procession — a crocodile — to go for our weekly walk around Wandsworth Common. Turning left out of the main school gates, we always passed the Wandsworth Prison, looking grim with its tiny windows and the huge entrance door. The prison was a stone's throw across the Trinity Road from the school and we were always scared about a break-out. From there, we walked down Trinity Road as far as the Surrey Tavern — I often wondered what lay beyond this point in the wide world. We then continued the circuit up Bolingbroke Grove, then back along the opposite side of the railway to Emanuel School, before crossing 'over the Cat's back' into the Orphanage again.

Once a month, a few lucky girls might receive



Fig 9. A 'crocodile' in Wandsworth Common

visits from relatives. Otherwise, the highlight of the year was:

... the annual outing ... to Olympia for the Royal Tournament ... Everyone up early and awaiting the five double decker buses in front of the orphanage to take them out. Every girl was given their Father's regimental badge to wear... It was a strange journey across London and people stared from the pavements as the buses passed them and the children waved from the windows.

The girls were allowed to go to relatives for the short summer holiday, but Christmas was spent at the orphanage.

We had the Third London. They were men that were in the hospital in the First World War. They used to get a party together every year, a party, and they used to come and entertain us. Singing and ... magic and juggling. Things like that.

It was during this concert in 1928 that the Minutes of the School Management Committee record the Lady Superintendent died while carrying out her duties. Frances tells a different story, however:

We were all sitting round and they were entertaining us, and it came to half-time — they were going to have a drink, you see. Madam Hill got up and she said: 'Now, you all sit quiet until they come back.' And with that, she went out the

door. And back came Madam Hill, after about half an hour. And of course we were all nattering and cheering. Ooh, she went off her head. She said: 'That's it! The party's off!' She got out the door, and there was all lockers along that corridor, where we used to keep our weekday clothes. And she got out the door and she collapsed and she hung onto these lockers. She died.

Understandably, the girls' memories are dominated by the army-like discipline at the orphanage and their unsympathetic treatment at the hands of the staff there.

They were all very stern, the matrons. I never saw one of them smile. ... it was all ... not much play and everybody had jobs to do. Or else you were sitting, knitting ... nobody gave you a cuddle, or said: 'Don't mind, dear'. You were always told: 'Call yourself the daughter of a soldier?' You know, you weren't allowed to smile ... cry if you hurt yourself.

SPY SCHOOL

The outbreak of war at the beginning of September 1939 triggered the largest mass movement in British history. In all, 1½ million people were evacuated, including 400,000 unaccompanied children from London, in the curiously codenamed Operation Pied Piper.

Among them were 90 girls from the

Royal Victoria Patriotic School, the others remaining on extended summer holiday with relatives in areas deemed safe at the time. Their destination was Saundersfoot in Pembrokeshire, Wales, where the Assistant Lady Superintendent kept a home. There, the girls were billeted in three buildings around the town, including Hean Castle, the home of Lord and Lady Merthyr, where the four smallest girls slept each night on the billiard table!

Back in Wandsworth, the empty building was for a while occupied by a flight of Number 30 Barrage Balloon Group, which provided air defences on Wandsworth Common against German bombers navigating along local landmarks, such as Trinity Road. They could not prevent every attack, however, and at the height of the Blitz in the autumn of 1940, enemy bombs fell all around the orphanage, destroying or damaging several of the outbuildings, including the gatehouse.

Other dangers lurked too. The sudden collapse of France and the Low Countries in summer 1940 convinced many that enemy agents had been at work in those countries. Facing a huge influx of refugees from the Continent, the British now began to fear that enemy agents might be infiltrated into this country too. The Ministry of Information contributed to the growing spy hysteria with a somewhat self-fulfilling warning:

There is a fifth column in Britain. Anyone who thinks that there is not ... has simply fallen in to the trap laid by the fifth column itself. For the first job of the fifth column is to make people think that it does not exist.

Initially, Immigration Officers interviewed refugees at whichever ports they arrived at. This, however, made it impossible to check their stories against information gleaned elsewhere. In October 1940, MI5 prevailed upon the Home Office to create a single, central establishment for the detention and interrogation of refugees at the Royal Victoria Patriotic School. Female refugees were to be accommodated in a nearby building at 101 Nightingale Lane.

The London Reception Centre — or the Royal Patriotic Schools as they became known — opened on 10 January 1941 (Fig 10) and the number of refugees processed there



Fig 10. Guarding the internees during World War II

quickly rose to an average of 700 a month. Colonel Oreste Pinto, a Dutch Intelligence Officer, later described his experiences there for the BBC series, *Spycatcher*:

At the Royal Victoria Patriotic School we stressed the importance of searching with the utmost care all luggage and personal belongings brought in by refugees. This was usually done after they had made their preliminary statements and before they were given a detailed interrogation, which might well be based on clues picked up from the search of their effects ... The ... School contained a large room which was empty of furniture except for a long bare table with chairs drawn up on either side of it. We called it 'the lumber room'. Every morning examiners would sit at the table with the belongings of their 'clients' spread in front of them. They would examine, sometimes under a powerful magnifying glass, the suitcases, briefcases, wallets, pocketbooks, correspondence, fountain pens, spectacle cases, tobacco pouches, cigarette cases, bunches of keys, and all

the other paraphernalia carried by the refugees. Once passed, the articles would be pushed to one side. The room used to look like a cross between a customs examination and the vicarage jumble sale.

In all this, the whole process was greatly facilitated by the informal and even friendly atmosphere that prevailed at the Royal Patriotic School. The interrogators recognised that the vast majority of the refugees were not only genuine but had overcome considerable hardships to reach Britain. Most interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner and this probably encouraged those being questioned to divulge more readily and fully what information they had.

The enormous variety of information that was acquired in the interrogations about living and travelling conditions in enemy-occupied Europe was of great interest to Britain's other clandestine organisations, too. The Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and the Special Operations Executive maintained a presence there, as did MI9, which was responsible for teaching 'escape and evade' techniques to Allied aircrew in the event that they were shot down over enemy territory.

Airey Neave, who later became a Conservative MP and who was assassinated by the Irish National Liberation Army in 1979, was an MI9 officer (Codename: Saturday) who served at the Royal Patriotic School. The first Briton to escape from Colditz, Neave contrasted his own treatment at the hands of the Gestapo, with conditions at the School:

In contrast, the R.V.P.S. system seemed deliberately soulless. It wore down the suspect by patience, suspense and boredom, mixed with cigarettes and endless cups of official tea. When not under interrogation, the inmate was allowed to roam the stone-flagged corridors and school-rooms, like orphans of the Crimea, to ponder the future. The very dreariness of the place, and the taste of that Government tea, would, I thought, be enough to break the stoutest German agent.

No matter how courageous or distinguished they might be, no foreign national was ever exempted from the requirement on arrival

in the UK to pass immediately to the Royal Patriotic Schools for interrogation — as future French President, Francois Mitterand, discovered after his own exfiltration from occupied Europe in 1943. By the end of the war an estimated 33,000 foreign nationals had been detained and interrogated at the School. Among them were uncovered six enemy agents, three of whom were subsequently returned to Wandsworth after trial at the Old Bailey to be executed by the renowned hangman, Albert Pierrepoint. Their bodies continue to lie in unconsecrated ground beneath the tarmac in the south-eastern corner of the prison.

Only three enemy agents were known to have passed through undetected, and then only on the basis of misleading information from other parts of the intelligence machinery. The success of the Royal Patriotic School was due to two crucial factors. Firstly, it formed a 'narrow bottleneck' through which all refugees had to pass. Secondly, the Central Information Index made it increasingly easy for the interrogators to check the truth of each arrival's story — what Dick White, who later became head of MI5, called distinguishing the 'sheep' — genuine refugees — from the 'goats' — enemy agents.

RECENT HISTORY

Even before the war had ended, the Commissioners planned to move the School to smaller premises that would be cheaper to maintain, and in 1946 it re-opened at Bedwell Park in Essendon, Hertfordshire, with just 100 girls. It was there that the School celebrated its centenary in 1957. Just 15 years later, in 1972, the doors of the Royal Victoria Patriotic School closed with just five orphans remaining on its register, the last of some 4,500 girls.

The property at Wandsworth was sold to London County Council in 1950, and in September 1957, as the girls of the Patriotic School were celebrating their centenary at Essendon, a new school opened in the grounds of the original building. Spencer Park Comprehensive School for Boys was an amalgam of Honeywell, Lavender Hill, Eastfield and Wandsworth Technical Schools. Built for 900 pupils, within a year the roll at the new school had reached 1,200, as a

result of which, the Royal Victoria Patriotic Building was brought back into use to house the first and second years.

With no budget for maintenance, however, it fell more and more into disrepair. In their report of 1967, the School Inspectors described the situation they found there:

... it has long been under threat of demolition and internally has been allowed to deteriorate until its condition can now only be described as squalid ...

In 1973, Sir John Betjeman and his Victorian Society had managed to get the Royal Victoria Patriotic School listed. Abandoned and unwanted, however, the building continued to deteriorate and its very survival seemed doubtful. Ironically, it was not the squalor of the old building, but the discovery of asbestos in the new ones that forced the School to close in 1991 and led to its eventual demolition.

Then, in 1980, a New Zealand entrepreneur, Paul Tutton, negotiated to buy it — for just £1. Paul jokes today that he probably paid too much for the building:

All the lead had been stolen from the roofs, and as a result, the building was riddled with dry rot. We also had to remove four tons of pigeon droppings before we could even begin work.

In May 1981, just one day before Paul was due to sign the lease, an arson attack destroyed the roof of the main hall. Fortunately, craftsmen were able to reconstruct its decorated ceiling accurately using photographic records taken only two weeks earlier. The renovation work was led by two architects, John Dickinson and Giles Quarme, who lived and worked on site. It eventually took seven years to complete and cost almost £1.5 million — coincidentally, the same amount raised by the Patriotic Fund that originally commissioned the building.

Today, the Royal Victoria Patriotic Building is home to a thriving community of residential apartments, studios and workshops, ALRA

— the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts, and Le Gothique bar and restaurant. One of its current residents is Xavier Pick, who like his World War I predecessors, was recently commissioned as a war artist.

To mark its 150th anniversary in July 2007, the building hosted a visit by the current President of the Royal Patriotic Fund, Prince Michael of Kent, the great, great grandson of Queen Victoria. Among those gathered for the occasion were the last of the ‘Old Girls’ who were at the orphanage during the 1920s and 30s.

CONCLUSION

For 100 years the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum provided sanctuary to almost 100,000 orphans, wounded servicemen and refugees from Nazism. In turn, the building had to be rescued itself. If today, surrounded by trees and tower blocks, the building is no longer as visible as its founders once intended, it has at least proved to be a *permanent* memorial to the national generosity.

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