

# ROYAL VICTORIA HOSPITAL NETLEY

## History

What is now an idyllic country park, was once the scene of a bustling military hospital. As the British Army's first purpose-built hospital, the Royal Victoria was a unique and ambitious project which would help change the face of the medical world.

## Crimean War 1854 – 1856

In the midst of a devastating conflict, with no transport, poor shelter, and insufficient clothing and food, the fate of the wounded soldier was hopeless. Indeed, a soldier may well have had a higher chance of survival outside the appalling 'fort' hospitals.

During the Crimean War (1854 to 1856), news of dreadful conditions in military hospitals in the Crimea caused political concern in England, and contributed to the fall of the government in 1855 due to "Mismanagement of the War".

Encouraged by Queen Victoria and aided by the friendship between Florence Nightingale and the new Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, the fresh political climate allowed a large military hospital to be planned and constructed. Florence Nightingale swiftly set to work on improving cleanliness and restoring hygiene.

Netley on the shore of Southampton Water was first suggested as a site for the new hospital by Sir Andrew Smith, and was settled on after the rejection of co-location with the Naval Hospital at Haslar.



## PORT OF SOUTHAMPTON.

**Visit of Her Majesty the  
QUEEN, on Monday, the  
19th instant, at 11, a.m.**

**NOTICE** is hereby given, That Captains and others in command of all Steam or Sailing Vessels are requested not to approach the North Shore between the entrance of Hamble Creek and Netley Abbey, but to keep over on the South side of mid-channel which is to be kept clear. And all Yachts, Sailing, or Row Boats are not to go within the line of Booms which are placed on each side of the landing stage, but to keep in line to the South-East and North-West of the Booms so placed, in order that free ingress and egress may be afforded to the Royal Yacht and such other vessel or vessels as may accompany Her Majesty on the occasion.

It is particularly requested that these regulations be strictly attended to, so as to prevent any confusion or accident which might otherwise be occasioned.

**JOHN T. TUCKER,**

*DEPUTY MAYOR,*

*and ADMIRAL OF THE PORT.*

*Audit House, Southampton,  
15th May, 1856.*

The Board in charge of the project was appointed by Lord Panmure and chaired by Colonel T O'Brien, the Deputy Quartermaster General, and was to keep closely in touch with Smith to ensure that the views of medical officers on the design were respected.

An initial 109 acres (0.44 km<sup>2</sup>) of land was purchased from *Thomas Chamberlayne's* Netley Grange Estate on 3 January 1856. Later that year, developing plans meant that further land was required, which was compulsorily purchased from Chamberlayne.

Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone on 19 May 1856, concealing underneath a copy of the plans, the first Victoria Cross, a Crimea Medal and coins of the realm. The inscription read:

*“This stone was laid on the 19th day of May in the year of our Lord 1856, by Her Most Gracious Majesty Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland as the foundation stone of the Victoria Military Hospital intended for the reception of the sick and invalid soldiers of her Army.”*

Some confusion was caused by the publication in *The Builder* of unrevised plans for the hospital. Moreover, the influential Florence Nightingale, still busy in the Crimea, was not involved in the initial design. On her return she was able to highlight flaws in the design and politicise them. In January 1857, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston wrote:

*It seems to me that at Netley all consideration of what would best tend to the comfort and recovery of the patients has been sacrificed to the vanity of the architect, whose sole object has been to make a building which should cut a dash when looked at from Southampton River. Pray stop all work.*

But construction was well under way, and it was too late to change the design significantly. Subsequent reports and enquiries concluded that the design and its location were indeed flawed, though, under the influence of Dr. John Sutherland, Nightingale eventually expressed approval for the plans.



The hospital eventually opened for patients on 11 March 1863. It was a quarter of a mile (435m) long, had 138 wards and approximately 1,000 beds, and was Britain's largest military hospital. It cost £350,000 to build, and was late and over budget.

Supporting infrastructure was also built, including a reservoir at Hound Grove, and a Gasworks. A cast iron pier was extended into Southampton Water in 1865, restricted to 560 ft (170m) in length and not reaching deep water.



A railway line connected Netley to Southampton docks on 5 March 1866. At the suggestion of Queen Victoria, the line was extended into the grounds of the hospital on 18 April 1900. In 1903, an electricity generating station was built.

In 1864 a Portland stone memorial was erected, dedicated to the members of the Army Medical Department who died in the Crimean War.



Netley Station in 1866

### Early use

The building was enormous, grand, and visually attractive, but was neither convenient nor practical. Corridors were on the sea-facing front of the building, leaving the wards facing the inner courtyard with little light and air. Ventilation in general was poor, with unpleasant smells lingering around the vast building.

In 1867, journalist Matthew Wallingford paid visit to the hospital to write a report for the local parish newsletter:

*"It was a ghastly display of deception to say the least. To the naked eye it is a triumph of modern architecture, but should you inherit the misfortune to be sectioned there, one would not think of the place as so. It is not so much as the greatest military hospital in the world as much as it is a rather impractical waste of government finance."*

Early patients arriving from campaigns taking place all over the world during the expansion of the [British Empire](#) had an uncomfortable journey to the hospital, either having to be transferred to a shallow-draft boat if landing at the pier, or transported from Netley station to the hospital if arriving by rail.



An Ambulance Train arrived at Netley Station

The hospital was particularly busy during the **Second Boer War** (1899–1902) which, when the project was further encouraged by Queen Victoria, provided the impetus for extending the railway line.

The extension terminated at a station behind the hospital but was awkward to operate, having gradients which were quite steep for a steam locomotive. Some trains needed a locomotive at each end to travel that 3/4 of a mile.

The railway and pier were also used for Queen Victoria's frequent visits to the hospital, she often arrived at the pier having been conveyed in the Royal Yacht from her residence on the Isle of Wight, Osborne House. She awarded three Victoria Crosses to patients at the hospital.

From its construction until 1902, Netley Hospital served as the home of the Army Medical School, training civilian doctors for service with the army. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Dr. Watson recounts his earlier life before meeting Sherlock Holmes; it is established that Watson received his medical degree from the University of London in 1878, and had gone on to train at Netley Hospital as a surgeon in the Army.



**Role model:** Surgeon-Major Alexander Francis Preston was injured during the Battle of Maiwand in 1880, one of the British Empire's bloodiest defeats.

How are you? You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.' Sherlock Holmes' first words to Dr. Watson in 'A Study In Scarlet' are among the most famous introductory lines in literature.

They are spoken to Dr John Watson, the narrator of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes stories. Watson is baffled as to how Holmes, who has never met him, could have known he had just returned from Afghanistan, where he was wounded in the Battle of Maiwand in 1880.

As many patients were suffering from tropical diseases, the hospital was also used for medical research. The first thing that confronted anyone entering the imposing central tower block was a large museum of natural history and anatomical specimens, interests of many of the doctors, not the patients.

## **The First World War**

Many young men were sent to fight in the trenches in Europe, just across The English Channel. In that awful war, millions of people were killed, injured, or died of disease or hunger.

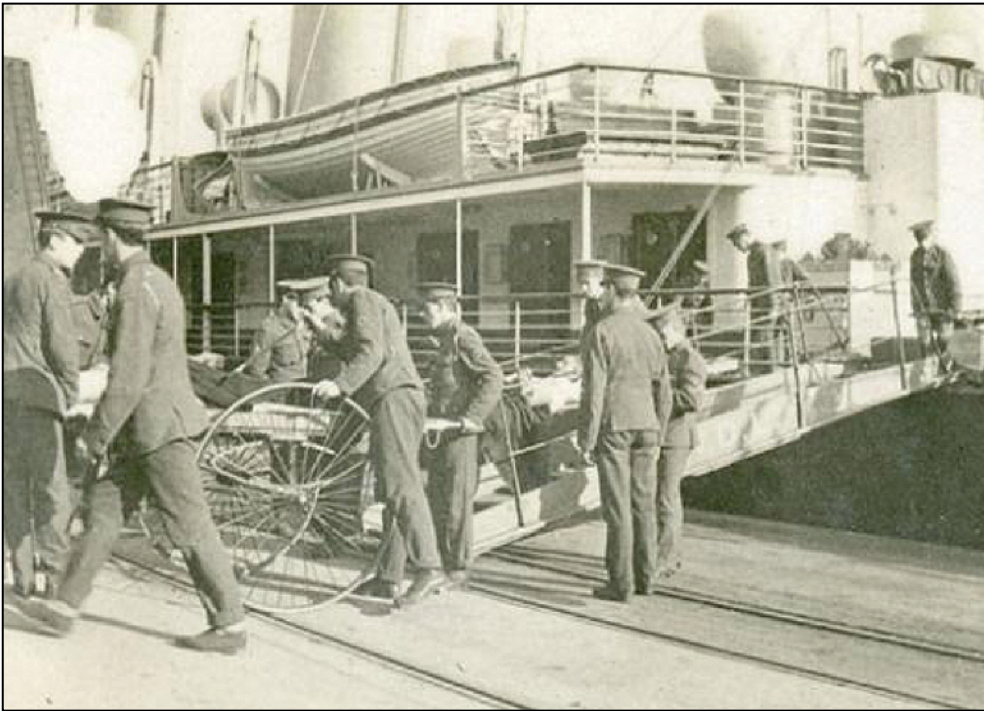
Now Miss Nightingale's reservations about Netley Hospital were more correct than ever, and many new rows of wooden hospital huts were built behind the main hospital to facilitate for this dreadful War.



A train bringing wounded soldiers into Netley Station.



Ward 10a Lower Royal Victoria Hospital Netley.



Wounded soldiers arriving at Southampton (for Netley)

## **1918 – 1939**

### **Hospital used for Tuberculosis patients**

With the end of the First World War, Netley's hospital, once again fell silent. You could hear the birds again, rather than the railway engines. Most of the soldiers have gone, and the wards were empty. Peace had returned, but one part of the hospital was used to treat patients with tuberculosis.

### **World War II**

Similar usage was seen during [World War II](#), when around 68,000 casualties were treated. In 1944, [US Forces](#) took over the hospital prior to [D-Day](#).

### **Decline**

After the war, the hospital continued to care for some casualties returning from overseas service. It also accommodated some Hungarian refugees in 1956, but due to its high cost of maintenance, it gradually fell into disuse, and the main site closed in 1958.

In 1963, a large fire damaged much of the building, and it was demolished in 1966, with only the chapel retained. A ceremony uncovered Queen Victoria's time capsule beneath the foundation stone on 7 December 1966.

At the rear of the site, D Block (Victoria House) and E Block (Albert House) formed the Psychiatric Hospital. D Block was opened in 1870 as the army's first purpose-built military asylum. These buildings were also used from the 1950s to 1978 to treat Army (and from 1960, Navy) personnel who suffered from VD, drug and alcohol problems, and later the Joint Armed Services Psychiatric Unit.



The unit moved to the Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital, Woolwich in mid-1978. Today, only the hospital chapel remains of the main building. The chapel was originally scheduled for demolition, but was saved at the last moment as a monument to the hospital.

The site is now open as the Royal Victoria Country Park. The chapel is open as a visitor centre, presenting history of the hospital, and the tower provides views of the surrounding area.

Some buildings at the rear of the site, including the former asylum, are used as the Hampshire Constabulary Police Training Headquarters. The Officers' Mess, just to the west of the former main building, has now been converted into private flats. To the east of the park and accessed by a roadway closed to traffic is a military cemetery.



The Chapel is all that remains of the original structure at Netley.