

The Royal Hospital Haslar

The Royal Hospital Haslar has a long and a most distinguished history in providing medical care to the Royal Navy for 250 years, including the civilian population of the Portsmouth area from 1950, and all three Services from 1996.

After submissions to King George II, led by the Earl of Sandwich and the Admiralty, planning for the hospital commenced in 1745. Haslar was to be one of three proposed hospitals to provide hospital care for sailors of the Fleet. The building of the hospital took 16 years and was completed in 1762.

Haslar was designed by Theodore Jacobsen, FRS, in the manner of the Foundling Hospital (London). Building was under the direction of James Horne, a surveyor, and John Turner, a Master Carpenter from Portsmouth Dockyard. Dr James Lind ('The Father of Nautical Medicine' and one of the first physicians in command at Haslar) when writing to friend in 1758 described Haslar as 'an immense pile of a building and when complete it will certainly be the biggest hospital in Europe!'

By 1753, with the hospital only half built, the situation concerning the care of the sick and wounded sailors in the Portsmouth and Gosport area was desperate; having heard of the new building, desperate patients were already living in the builders' accommodation (huts) in the grounds of Haslar. Consequently the first hundred patients were admitted into the first stage of the hospital, by direction of the Admiralty, but no record of a formal opening of the Royal Hospital Haslar can be traced, although it is believed to have opened on the 12th October 1753.

The original hospital plans included a chapel within the main hospital, which was to have been sited in the fourth side of the quadrangular building. Due to over-expenditure this part of the hospital was never built: St Luke's church was eventually built facing the quadrangle, but not completed until 1762. It served staff, their families and patients. Surgical and Medical patients were to be seated either side of the aisle with staff and labourers seated in the gallery.

The first decades at Haslar were not without problems: there are many accounts of drunkenness and petty scandal amongst both staff and patients. Female nurse's imported rum from Gosport taverns in pig's bladders, suspended under their skirts and smuggled through the hospital sewers at low tide, despite the presence of an armed guard. The patients, being "pressed men", were escaping from Haslar in large numbers, necessitating a guard of soldiers, stationed close by, who were instructed to patrol the perimeter wall in order to apprehend those attempting to escape. Haslar at this time resembled a prison more than a hospital: records show that all the doors on the ground floor were locked at night to prevent patients escaping.

The hospital buildings soon became overcrowded: discharged pensioner sailors lived in the attics, staff and their families shared the main building, and many were accused of stealing patient's food.

In 1761 three sailors (patients) petitioned the Admiralty by letter, stating their grave concern at the way in which they were being mistreated by the staff. There followed various Admiralty inspections and in the late 18th century the hospital underwent many changes, including the appointment of a Naval Commanding Officer. This

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improved the lot of the sailor as a patient, and the hospital administration changed eventually for the good.

During the nineteenth century many Army casualties from the Peninsular campaign (1809), the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and the Crimean War (1853-56) were admitted and treated at Haslar. Such was the fine treatment given by Haslar to the Army that the hospital was held up as a shining light to Nursing by the Army authorities.

By the late nineteenth service pensioners (Navy) were also admitted both for care and shelter, including the Greenwich Pensioners, who in turn helped to care for the patients. In return many wards (named after famous Admirals) in the hospital held pensioners who ended their days in comfort.

From research it is estimated that both the Paddock burial area and the Memorial Gardens (opened 1826-59) contain the remains of some 13,000 sailors and soldiers who served their country through a century of conflict from 1753 -1859, only to die at Haslar, or be landed from ships for burial. This also includes 114 Russians from the impounded Russian Fleet in Portsmouth, 1808-9. It is thought that there is nowhere within the United Kingdom where those who served their country and died lie so close, side by side, brothers in arms in death as in life.

Since 2005 a running programme of forensic exploration has been undertaken within the Paddock burial areas. One skeleton recently found (2009) was discovered with coins over the eye sockets, one of only three examples found in the UK. On closer examination one coin turned out to be a Slavery Abolition token minted in 1794 for a limited period in the local area. The coin bore the inscription 'Am I not a Man and a Brother'. Another skeleton had multiple fractures from the skull to the leg bones (possibly due to a fall from a great height) and yet there was evidence (calcification of fractures) that the person had survived the fall and lived for some six months after the event. Following examination of those exhumed, re-interment will take place in the Naval Cemetery (1859 – to date) at Clayhall, a short distance from Haslar.

One headstone of interest in the Memorial Gardens is sacred to the memory of James Pierce who died on board the Frigate Niagara on the 18th June 1857 aged 32 years: he was a native of New York.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century's many physicians left Haslar as members of expeditions, not only pushing forward the frontiers of medicine but also those of global exploration. The most famous of these was Sir John Richardson, Inspector of Hospitals and Fleets, who undertook two expeditions in support of Franklin in search of the North West Passage. At the age of 62 he was, at the request of Lady Franklin, involved in the search for Franklin and his crew. Richardson became a naturalist of renown, and played a part in founding the Museum and library at Haslar that held a collection of animals, birds and books. The museum was destroyed by enemy action in October 1941, with the total loss of the collection. The library survived, and the books are now held by the Historic Collections Library in the Institute of Naval Medicine at Alverstoke.

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Richardson is also known to have met with Florence Nightingale: in a letter to his wife he describes a lengthy meeting with Miss Nightingale, who wished to know how naval hospitals were run and equipped in order to improve Army hospitals. Richardson also met and corresponded with Charles Darwin: while Richardson was not a theorist, his findings made Darwin's theories possible.

Thomas Huxley, under Richardson's direction, left Haslar in 1846 as the surgeon on board HMS Rattlesnake. During his time in the southern hemisphere he devoted time to the study of marine life: later, through his studies and support, he became known as Darwin's Bulldog for his advocacy of Darwin's theory of evolution.

William Balfour Baikie, a physician at Haslar, was appointed to the Niger expedition in 1854 which explored the west coast of Africa. He was instrumental both in discovering a treatment for Malaria and in the discovery of Nigeria. Edward Atkinson, vaccinator at Haslar in 1909, became Captain Scott's Medical Officer on the ill-fated South Pole expedition of 1912. Atkinson survived Gallipoli, and was decorated for his life-saving actions during the First World War.

Others came as famous men to the hospital, among them James Lind, the 'father of nautical medicine' who discovered a cure for scurvy thanks to his work on board HMS Salisbury. Lind continued his studies whilst at Haslar, for in his time ships landed many of their crew suffering from scurvy. In 1759 he is reputed to have advised Sir Edward Hawke, in command of the Fleet blockading Brest, of the importance of fresh vegetables and fruit, and on the day of the battle of Brest, out of 14,000 men in the fleet, only 20 were not fit for duty. In 1797 the First Lord of the Admiralty visited Haslar and asked to see a case of scurvy, but not one could be found.

In 1847 Captain Sir Edward Parry, Arctic explorer of renown, took command of Haslar. He had previously overseen the transition from sail to steam for the Royal Navy, but had made his name in Polar exploration. Parry worked with Richardson to improve the care of patients at Haslar, especially those incarcerated in the hospital asylum. His departure from Haslar in 1852 was much lamented

Those named have their place in history, along with many others too numerous to mention here.

During the many wars of the twentieth century and especially the First and Second World Wars, Haslar was a busy hospital. During and after D-Day, both Allied and enemy Troops were treated at Haslar in great numbers, and Royal Navy surgeons were joined by US Army surgeons in treating the wounded. Haslar continued to grow in professional and technological ability in the treatment of its patients, both at home and in areas of conflict. In 1954 the word Naval was formally included in the title of the hospital, only to be removed again in 1996 when Haslar became the core Tri-Service hospital and the original title of 'Royal Hospital' was added once more.

When Haslar entered its fourth century it opened a new chapter in its history, joining in partnership with Portsmouth Hospitals National Health Service Trust in 2001. Blending the best of Medicine in the NHS with the best of Military Medicine at the

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same time, it was sophisticated hospital with advanced medical technology, housed in a prestigious and splendidly-preserved historic Georgian building.

Times quickly change: on the 31st March 2007 the Royal Hospital Haslar ceased to be a Ministry of Defence-managed hospital, and 254 years of continuous military medical care came to a close.

Grand in conception and magnificent in design, the Royal Hospital Haslar is certainly assured a place in history: and in celebrating that history we must remember those who designed it, and those who built the hospital from bricks made of local clay, not forgetting those who have served in the hospital throughout the centuries. The staff from early years were followed from the late nineteenth century by the Sick Berth Staff and Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service, and from the twentieth century by the ladies of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, Wren Sick Berth staff and Royal Navy Medical Branch Staff, joined in later years by medical colleagues from both the Army and Royal Air Force.

The Royal Hospital Haslar finally closed after 256 years of service and history in July 2009, and we must certainly remember the sick and injured patients admitted across the centuries, from Trafalgar to D-Day, who served and fought for their country or countries, and for whom, through a vision of the Admiralty, the Royal Hospital Haslar came to be built. We now look forward to the future use of this fine Georgian building, that changed history and the care of the maritime sick and injured, in a new vision, that of a 'Veterans' Care Village'.

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