

ST JAMES CHURCH TAUNTON

WORLD WAR 1 MEMORIAL PROJECT

The Taunton Red Cross Hospital at Priory School



As early as 1909 the War Office issued the Scheme for the Organisation of Voluntary Aid. Under this scheme, the British Red Cross was given the role of providing supplementary aid to the Territorial Forces Medical Service in the event of war. Even earlier Queen Alexandra had encouraged the wives of the Lords Lieutenant to be proactive in marshalling support amongst their friends and associates for the Red Cross in the event of a conflict. In order to provide trained personnel for this task, county branches of the Red Cross organised units called voluntary aid detachments. All voluntary aid detachment members (who themselves came to be known simply as 'VADs') were trained in first aid and nursing. Within twelve months of the scheme's launch, they numbered well over 6,000.

At the outbreak of the First World War the Red Cross and St. Johns combined to form a joint War Committee. Like many other Counties Somerset was prepared for the need to provide nursing care. Premises were secured by the Red Cross to be used as Auxiliary Hospitals to meet the need of the increasingly vast numbers of wounded soldiers. Overall there were about 3,000 such hospitals set up, staffed largely by volunteers. The buildings varied widely, ranging from town halls and schools to large and small private houses, both in the country and in cities. The most suitable ones were established as auxiliary hospitals. Each hospital was administered by a Commandant, Lady Superintendent and Quartermaster (all female). In Somerset there were 20 or so such hospitals throughout the county. In Taunton the Education Committee agreed to the Red Cross taking over Priory

School, which was an almost brand new building, opened in August 1913 as an elementary School. On 7th February 1916 it was opened as a hospital. The building had been handed over in late 1915 and the children initially went to Trinity school, where they shared the building with the children there. It mean that their education was only part time until in January 1916 they moved to school premises in South Road that had been previously condemned for use. The school log records the bare facts without any comment about the changes of fortune.

The organiser in the first instance was Miss Janet Felicia Vaughan who was later awarded the OBE. In 1911 she was living with her older sister in their family home in Private Road, off Staplegrove Rd Taunton and she worked with Mrs. J.P.T. Allen who was the first Commandant. Miss Vaughan seems to have been an indefatigable fund raiser and organiser within the local community. The Taunton hospital had been entirely funded by local contributions in cash and kind and they even had a balance in hand when it closed. Initially there were 50 beds but during the first year this was increased to 100, having fitted up two sheds as sleeper huts. There was a further increase in 1917 to 127 , when Town Council gave up a shelter in Victoria Park! Recreation rooms were built "which proved a great boon to the patients. The room was heated by two stoves" donated by the local M.P and others who also had windows put in and woodwork fixed.

During the time it was there 1121 patients were treated, only one of whom died. The hospital closed in 1919, when the buildings reverted again to a school, which re-opened on 1st April 1919. There is an article in the Somerset County Gazette on 19th February 1919, about the closure and the celebration that attended the event. This article gives some idea of what the hospital had offered. *"Many of the patients have in fact termed the hospital a little paradise and have been reluctant to leave when their turn came. In addition to good nursing and good food they have been made as happy as possible by concerts and entertainments and by frequent treats provided for them in the town during the winter and in the country in the summer"*. One man decided to return to live in the town when he was discharged because he had been so happy there and made so many friends.

There was a tea, concert and presentations to senior members of staff. The Men's VAD Commandant Mr. White was fulsome in his praise of the staff at all levels and commented on the dedication and care that had been provided. Miss Vaughan was presented with a diamond broach and the past and present commandants and the matron were also given gifts. Miss Vaughan in accept, and hopefully with a twinkle in her eye said that *"the first thing they had to learn in the Red Cross was obedience but that evening they had broken out in disobedience. She had said at the beginning that there were to be no presentations, yet they had now come forward with beautiful presents"*. She thanked all those from Matron to Canteen helpers who had helped to make the hospital a happy place.

We know from news paper reports that at least one of the men on our war memorial was treated there. [William Greedy](#) was in the hospital for a kidney condition before returning to the front, where sadly he died from wounds in Rouen Hospital.

THANKS FROM THE ARMY.

The sub-committee reported that Priory School (recently vacated by the Red Cross Society) would be ready for the reception of school children by April 1st. The following letter has been received by the Town Clerk from General Henry G. Sclater, G.O.C. Southern Command:—"I understand that the Red Cross Hospital at Taunton, so kindly provided by the borough municipal authorities, has been closed, and I should be glad to take this opportunity of thanking the borough authorities on behalf of the Army for their kindness and generosity in placing this hospital at our disposal, and enabling so many of our sick and wounded soldiers to be treated in such comfortable surroundings."

The report was adopted, on the motion of Mr. A. S. Haslam, seconded by Mrs. Loveday.

After the war General Henry Sclater of Southern Command wrote to thank the Borough for the use of the Priory School building.



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