

The Hospital on the Downs ¹

By Amy Myers

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row

These are the opening lines of one of the best known poems from the First World War, written by John McCrae, a lieutenant-colonel in the Canadian army. 600,000 Canadian soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force crossed the Atlantic to England during the war, and many of them left for France from Shorncliffe, near Folkestone. During the war, 60,000 Canadians lost their lives and many more were wounded, gassed or otherwise ill. With Kent only twenty miles away across the Channel the Canadian Army Medical Corps established several hospitals here, and Lenham was one of them.

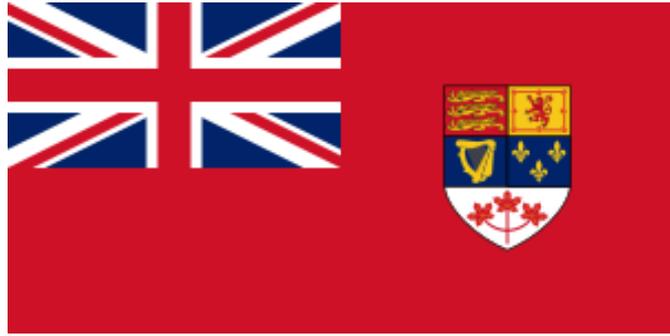


They took over the newly built tubercular sanatorium² on the downs (now demolished) which in October 1917 became the Lenham Sanatorium for the Treatment of Tubercular Canadian Soldiers, commanded by Lt Colonel W. M. Hart.

¹ The earliest reference to the hospital is held by the National Archives: 'Sanatorium at Down Court Manor Farm', Lenham 1913-1919 Ref.: MH48/78

² The photo shows the sanatorium just prior to completion.

A month later the sanatorium was redesignated a Canadian Special Hospital. The staff were also from the Medical Corps, and included three nursing sisters one of whom was Nurse Belle Grace Browne, who returned safely to Canada after the



war. Others from the medical corps did not survive, suggesting that the so-termed Spanish flu that swept through the world through 1918 and onwards, was responsible for some of the hospital deaths.

The war ended in November 1918 but the hospital remained open until 7th July 1919. Convalescent patients were able to return to their homes, but some like Private Don and Private Bonfonti were too ill to do so. They lie in Lenham cemetery with their comrades who had lost their fight for life at the hospital earlier and all were buried with full military honours. The white tombstones are together in rows, under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Visit them and you'll see these names: Sapper H. Southerland, aged 27, Private A. O'Reilly, aged 24, Private Andrew Bonfonti, aged 26, Sapper Colin Macdonald, aged 35, Private F. S. Oliver aged 20, Private R. Don, Private Harmon Sherk, aged 26, Private W. E. Mond, Private J. Randell, Driver I. G. Henderson, aged 29, Private A. B. Macdonald, Captain H. P. Thompson, aged 50, Corporal C. W. Smith, Private D. Soutter, aged 31, Private W. Stewart, Private W. J. Treacy, Ordinary Seaman B. O'Hara, aged 23, Gunner T. Caulfield, Private P. Cooper, Private G. Coming Singer aged 23, Sapper R. I. King, Private J. Redbreast, aged 28, Private John Beattie, aged 21, Private J. B. Buck, Private C. Douglas, Sapper T. Smeluk, Private A. Robinson, aged 20, Serjeant R. V. Powell, aged 28, Private H. Johnson aged 22, Driver C.T. Cameron aged 18, Private W. Grey, Private C. Ash, Private D. B. McDonald.

With them lies Staff Serjeant W. Ward, who was in the Royal Army Medical Corps and died in January 1921. His connection with the hospital is not clear but it must have been a close one. He lies with the men he must have known and helped. They came from a variety of backgrounds. Jacob Redbreast, of Aboriginal descent and from Chapleau in Ontario, known for its game reserve, was a trapper. Ordinary Seaman O'Hara was in the Royal Naval Canadian Voluntary Reserve and in training at HMS Vivid, the name of the Devonport barracks. Captain H.P. Thompson was in the Royal Canadian Dental Corps and aged 50.

On Armistice Day every year a poppy is laid on the Canadian graves in Lenham cemetery, as on the graves of all those there who died in war. Representatives from the Canadian High Commission visited Lenham in 2019 and a service was organised by the graves by the British Legion. In early 2020 one of Andrew Bonfonti's great-nieces came to Lenham to visit her ancestor's grave and to find out more about the village where Andrew had died. A moving service was again held by the graves. One of a large family, Andrew was 26 when he died, after taking part in the battle of Amiens, the last big offensive of the war. His brother George also died in the war after being gassed. They, as all the others who lost their lives, should not be and are not forgotten. As John McCrae's poem continues:

From failing hands we throw
The torch: be yours to hold it high.