MILLBANK AND THE ARMY MEDICAL SERVICES

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Before we talk about the history of the Army Medical Services at Millbank I feel I should briefly recap the journey, which brought the college and hospital to this site. In the 19th century England lacked behind much of the continent with regard to both military hospitals and more importantly medical education of army doctors. There were army medical schools in Lille, Strasburg, Metz, Vienna, Copenhagen, St Petersburg and Berlin but no thought was given to opening one in England until after the Crimean war of 1854-56.

The reforms of our Army Medical Services brought about after the Crimean War resulted in the Practical Army Medical School being established, firstly at Chatham in 1860 and then it moved to the new military hospital at Netley, close to Southampton, in April 1863. The early days of the school were troubled and over the next few years there were attempts by the government to close it down.

The Army Medical Services underwent close scrutiny after its performance during the South African war of 1899-1902 and reforms were again undertaken. One of the recommendations was that a Medical Staff College should be opened in London and that the Army Medical School should move to join it. Eminent civilian surgeons voiced their opinion publicly that what was needed was a large military hospital to be opened in London with the college and school attached.

The need for a new military hospital in London had been identified in the late 19th century, especially after the very bad press that the garrison and guard’s hospitals repeatedly received. The British Medical Journal reported the proposed build in March 1897. The site chosen was on land previously occupied by the penitentiary, at Millbank and this hospital was officially opened by the King, accompanied by his wife Alexandra and daughter Victoria on 1st July 1905. As a consequence three of the wards were named after the royal family, the rest being named after medical Victoria Cross holders.

The college did not immediately join it. It moved into hired rooms in London in 1902 until the site for the new college was completed, just along the road from the hospital. It officially opened its doors on 15 May 1907.

The architects of the college were Messrs Wood & Ainslie and the design was well thought out; it included laboratories, lecture theatres, offices, space for part of the museum collection and of course the Officer’s Mess. There was a large parade square to the rear and quarters were built for the soldiers.

Let us now look at the design in more detail:

The college was governed by a Commandant and a Director of Studies and commenced teaching in earnest. It ran courses for officers on promotion except during the First World War. In its early years it was the scene of much investigative work into disease, especially tropical and the home to many famous military doctors such as David Bruce and William Leishman.

In 1908 the Officer’s Mess was officially opened and eventually connected to the college by an internal bridge. In 1915 the King visited the Mess but it closed its doors in June 1916 and was converted to offices for the duration of the First World War. The walls of the corridors of the Mess were adorned with hunting trophies whilst the public rooms were hung with grand portraits of
previous Directors General of the Army Medical Services. Overlooking the
dining room was a minstrel’s gallery where musicians played on many
occasions. The stairs leading to the bedrooms were covered in frames of
medals donated by former officers of the Army Medical Services.
In 1909 the grand statue of Sir James McGrigor, the father of the Army
Medical Services was moved from its original home in Chelsea and was
placed in what became known as The McGrigor Courtyard. It stayed there
until 2002 when it was moved to the current home of the Army Medical
Directorate at Camberley in Surrey.
During the First World War the college became the centre for the production
of vaccines, including Tetanus and after the first use of poison gas by the
Germans in April 1915 was used to investigate methods of protecting the
soldier against gas warfare. Much of the design and testing of the various gas
masks took place here in the college with the testing taking place on the
square and in the cellars. Later in the war investigations took place on
nutrition.
The hospital had a chapel built in the classical style of plain red brick and was
lined with oak panelling over three hundred years old. It had many memorial
windows and tablets and was dedicated by King Edward VII and Queen
Alexandra on 24 June 1909.
From the hospital’s point of view it functioned as a general hospital and shortly
after the war the number of beds was enlarged to 220.
On 27 June 1928 the Thames flooded to a height of 6 feet and as a
consequence part of the hospital was water logged.
Between the wars normal teaching resumed and the college became the
centre for the army’s pathology department but the start of the Second World
War once again brought reorganisation to the function of the college. Vaccine
production had moved out of London in 1939 and the focus of attention was
tropical medicine, soldier’s rations, clothing, water supply and a major study
was carried out on the effects of Mepacrine.
During the Second World War much of the hospital was evacuated but at
2.25am on 16 September 1940 the area of Bulincja Street was bombed. This
resulted in the day rooms of both Chavasse and Queen Alexandra wards
being demolished and severe damage to the operating theatre and some
damage to the chapel. Ironically in the hospital at the time was a recently shot
down Luftwaffe pilot. The bombing also resulted in damage to the college and
as a result the Hygiene Department moved to Mytchett in Surrey.
Post war the college resumed its teaching of officer’s courses including from
the late 1940’s to early 1960’s to National Service Officers. Again hygiene and
tropical medicine featured predominately but also the following subjects were
taught, Army Health, Pathology, Military surgery and psychiatry. All army
laboratory technicians were also taught at Millbank.
Once again after the war the hospital expanded and became a teaching
hospital and school of nursing and specialised in Oncology and Ear, Nose &
Throat amongst others but a review of hospital provision in the late 1960’s
resulted in a new military hospital being built in Woolwich, S.E. London which
would take over the duties of not only Millbank but several other military
hospitals. On 27 April 1977 the remaining patients were transferred to the
new Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital at Woolwich and the Queen Alexandra’s Military Hospital finally closed its doors.

MUSEUM & LIBRARY
When the original medical school moved to London so did the library and museum. The library was originally founded in 1822 and was finally moved to London in 1922. It held many rare books on medicine, military history and the history of the Army Medical Services. Some of those volumes were destroyed by fire and water during the air raid in September 1940. When the college closed many books were transferred to the library at Gosport but luckily many came to the Army Medical Services Museum at Mytchett. From the museum point of view, again much came to London but over a period of time transfer and loan depleted the pathology part of the museum. Damage was done to parts of the collection during the flood and again during the bombing. Now nothing remains of the pathology collection but the historical collection now forms part of the museum at Mytchett.

For the Royal Army Medical College, its days were numbered and it would eventually combine with the Air Force and Navy. With the MoD looking to reduce the number of historical buildings it owned and save money it was decided to sell the site. On 14 December 2000 the site was handed over for disposal and it was eventually sold in excess of 30 million pounds.

This site had been the home of the RAMC for almost 100 years and many of us still retain fond memories of the building.