

The Kemp Town Estate in the First World War



*Brigadier General Hart and other New Zealand officers outside 13 Lewes Crescent June 1915.
photo: Auckland War Memorial Museum Collection*

Some of the wealthy owners who kept seaside residences at Lewes Crescent stayed away during the war or gave them over to wartime use. Queen Alexandra stayed at her daughter Princess Louise's house at 1 Lewes Crescent for a short period in 1914, but afterwards the family stayed away for the duration of the War. Mr & Mrs Knight of Knightsbridge London gave over their seaside homes, at 4 and 13 Lewes Crescent, complete with servants, to the exclusive use of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force as a convalescent home for 50 sick or wounded officers

The sick and wounded of the war

In his First World War diary¹, 'The Devil's Own War', Brigadier-Gen. Herbert Hart, speaks of going to Brighton on 28th June 1915 and staying at Knight's seaside residence. Hart says of the houses *"They were excellently situated overlooking the sea with magnificent gardens attached. The furnishing of the houses was arranged in the most tasteful manner. In front was a greensward with tennis grounds and, at the foot of the sea-cliff, facilities for sea bathing and boating. Although the houses*

¹ The Devil's Own War, The First World War Diary of Brigadier-General Herbert Hart
Edited by John Crawford 2008

provided for 50 convalescent officers, there were occasions when the accommodation was severely taxed."

As the war went on and the casualties built up, convalescent homes for officers were opened at 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10 Chichester Terrace and at 1 & 2 Sussex Square. Some of these did not revert to residential use until well after the war was over.

The convalescent officers had use of the private gardens of Lewes Crescent & Sussex Square. A Lewes Crescent resident writes² at the time "*Brighton seems to be the General Hospital of the Kingdom just now. We have thousands of sick and wounded from the Front. All the hospitals, schools and public buildings have been taken over and hundreds of private houses as well, including several houses in Lewes Crescent and Sussex Square, so that we have the sick and maimed all around us and the gardens in front of my house are used freely by the soldiers.*"

Houses vacated by schools which had closed for the duration were turned over to war use. On the outbreak of war, the workhouse in Elm Grove was converted for use as the Kitchener Indian War Hospital and the inmates of the workhouse moved to requisitioned houses, including those at 4,5,6,7 & 25 Sussex Square. The Brighton College Preparatory School at 16 Lewes Crescent had been evacuated to a safer location and the house was then used by the Army's 2nd Eastern General Hospital for wounded soldiers, including for a period, Canadian soldiers and, at one stage, German Prisoners of War too. The house next door at 17 Lewes Crescent was taken into use by the hospital and 28 Lewes Crescent became its nurses' home.



British soldiers at 16 Lewes Crescent

At first both officers and other ranks were admitted to the gardens but, as local historian Anthony Dale³ put it, "*difficulties having arisen, a fresh arrangement was*

² Charles Cayzer, letter to his father 17.3.1915

³ Dale, Antony, The History of the Kemp Town Gardens, Brighton, 1964

made whereby the upper terrace of the Slopes was partitioned off for the exclusive use of the patients, with a private entrance by means of the steps opposite Arundel Terrace” The word ‘patients’ is here used to distinguish the common soldiers in the hospital from the officers in the convalescent homes. Despite the existential threat to the nation, the rigid observances of the time were to be maintained. Ordinary soldiers were not to share the Kemp Town Enclosures with residents and officers. Dale continues *’Use of the gardens was extended to officers in the convalescent homes of Percival Terrace and elsewhere in the neighbourhood”*.

Labour shortages

By this time, working people not called to serve in the war, were in short supply and, for the first time, able to use their changed economic situation to improve their pay. For the first 86 years of the enclosures, the gardeners’ wages had not increased by more than 5 shillings a week. During the four years of the war the total paid to the gardeners doubled.

Our privileged Lewes Crescent correspondent⁴ was outraged that his chauffeur would leave him “at a moment’s notice for a safe job at 45 /- a week in looking after aeroplanes at Shoreham.” Little did he know that this was the beginning of the end of cheap domestic service, which in turn brought about the decline in numbers of households on the estate run with domestic servants. After this point more and more houses were converted into flats which could be managed without the need for domestic servants.

The war at sea

Before the war our Lewes Crescent correspondent had advocated Britain threatening Germany with war should they not agree to stop building warships, which, in his view, threatened the supremacy of the British Navy and thus the safety of his family’s shipping fleet plying goods around the world. The family operated the largest merchant fleet in the world and had close connections with the Navy. Our correspondent had, as brothers-in-law, Admirals Jellicoe and Madden. Jellicoe had stayed here in Lewes Crescent in 1909. He was Admiral of the Fleet during the war. The build up of British ‘Dreadnought’ battleships did not deter Germany which entered into a naval arms race with Britain.

As it turned out, war with Germany brought stalemate at sea, with the Grand Fleet blockading the German fleet in port. In response, the Germans developed their U-boat fleet and used it to cut off Britain’s food supply from abroad and disrupt its trade around the world. The Cayzer family’s fleet lost 15 ships during the war and with them 574 merchant seamen lost their lives.

Precautions against air raids and shelling from sea.

Brig-General Hart noted, *”Extraordinary precautions are taken at Brighton at night against air raids. Every window is most carefully shuttered and not a light is allowed in the streets. In the buses and trains just one well-screened light is visible”*.

⁴ Charles Cayzer, letter to his father 9.3.1916

In the first months of the war German warships had fired shells at Hartlepool and killed 119 people. They had shelled Scarborough and Whitby too. That they would shell non-combatants had caused a great public outrage which only confirmed the propaganda view that 'the huns' were barbarians. Bombing raids aimed at London by Zeppelins, and later by aircraft, caused fear and consternation. Until this point, wars had been fought between armies or navies. These developments marked the advent of 'all out war' in which civilians became legitimate targets.

Our wealthy correspondent at Lewes Crescent⁵ speaks, in letters of this time, of being visited by special constables to be told what to do in case of bombardment or invasion from the sea. They were to get their car as quickly as possible and fly on the one road to be left open. No mention was made of the arrangements for the butler, the family nurse, cook and housemaids who, presumably were to stay and face the bombardment.

Love in wartime

Brig-General Hart says of Brighton *"I never in my life saw so much spooning and flirting in broad daylight as takes place daily on all the beaches here. They don't mind a scrap who is standing by or looking on."* Hart was from Wellington, where presumably the war had not had such an effect on decorum.

An Australian newspaper report⁶ of the time describes the meeting of a New Zealand officer, Captain Vernon Crawshaw from Taranaki and a local woman, Eileen Jackson, and their subsequent marriage in Brighton. Captain Crawshaw had served at Gallipoli where he was invalided with malaria. They met as cast members of a revue put on for wounded soldiers while Crawshaw was at the 13 Lewes Crescent convalescent home. They spent their married life here in England.

The casualties of war

Sick or wounded soldiers who came to Brighton to recover had to face the prospect of going back to the trenches, the mud and the guns, when deemed fit again. There must have been some who simply could not face that prospect. The coroner passed a verdict of death by misadventure on William Donaldson, a Canadian soldier who, in 1917, died at the Lewes Crescent hospital from the effects of 'a certain poisonous substance the origin and nature of which cannot be ascertained'.

At the end of the war an epidemic of influenza swept the world, adding as many casualties as had been killed in the war. At the hospital in Lewes Crescent, amongst others, 14 young German prisoners of war died of influenza in October and November 1918. At this time there were on average seventy deaths a week from influenza in Brighton.

Apart from those who lost their lives, there were those whose lives were forever changed by the war. Charles Cayzer, whose parents lived at Lewes Crescent, went out to France in 1916 as a young Lieutenant of the 19th Royal Hussars. He was wounded and captured shortly before the end of the war but later returned to his

⁵ Charles Cayzer, letter to his father 14.7.1915

⁶ The Queenslander, 23 December 1916

mother's house here. He was greatly affected by his wartime experiences and attended séances, as did many others at this time, trying to get in touch with brother officers lost in the war. A very unhappy man, he was periodically depressed, but did marry and have a family and a career as an M.P. At the start of the Second World War, he rejoined the army but was discharged after a nervous breakdown. He had tried to throw himself out of a window at the Hyde Park Hotel. He shot himself in 1940: a late casualty of the First War.

War dead whose next of kin lived at addresses on the Kemp Town Estate

2nd Lt. Ronald Lacey Fidge,

age 24 on 21st Sept 1917, son of Horace and Hannah Fidge, 16 Sussex Square

2nd Lt. John Skelton Clark King, DCM,

trainee solicitor, age 28, on 3rd May 1916, husband of Maude A King. 46 Sussex Square (*Joseph Liddell's house*)

Major Austin Hanbury Brown MC, DSO,

age 31, on 27th March 1918, husband of Charity Hampton Brown, Flat 8, 35 Sussex Square

2nd Lt. John Arthur Christopher Croft,

age 27, 18th April 1915, son of Henry Herbert Croft, barrister & Emma Croft his wife, 8 Sussex Square

Lt. Frank Molyneux Eastwood,

age 21 on 30th October 1914, son of John Edmund and Ethel Eastwood, 14 Chichester Terrace. (*Then The Princess Royal's house. The Eastwood's family home was Enton Lodge, Witley, Surrey*)

Lt. Alec Arthur Crichton Maitland-Addison

age 28, on 27th October 1914, son of Major Alfred Chamberlain Maitland Addison and Mary Eliza Kay his wife, 12 Arundel Terrace (*Arundel Home of Rest*)

Rifleman, Roy Alfred Crichton Maitland-Addison

age 27, on 6th January 1917, son of the above. His father, Major Maitland Addison had died in 1916

