

A community's unflinching support for Charing's WW1 VAD hospitals

And a surprise cure after an accident with a lit cigarette

Lighting a cigarette and then putting the lit end in your mouth is not generally to be recommended. But in July 1916, in Charing's VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) hospital in Kent, Sergeant Mahoney of the Royal Fusiliers, dumb from shell shock, accidentally did just that – and the shock from the burn restored his power of speech.

This was probably the most unusual cure recorded in Charing's two VAD hospitals but Sergeant Mahoney was far from being the only patient who had cause to be grateful for his time in the hospital. Nearly 1200 patients were treated in Charing's hospitals during the First World War.

A quick response to the needs of war

Charing, with a population of 1,223 recorded in the 1911 census, was not slow to respond to the need for hospitals. On 5 August 1914, the day after the UK entered the war, the Parish Council agreed to establish a VAD hospital in the Parish Hall, close to the village's railway station. Dr Littledale, one of the village's two doctors who would be the hospital's initial Commandant and its Medical Officer throughout the war, found no shortage of volunteers for nursing staff, cooks and general help, neither was there any shortage of offers of supplies and equipment. After training had been carried out and arrangements made the hospital opened with 12 beds in October, the first inmates being 10 Belgian soldiers. An 8-bed convalescent home was also established in the village.

Charing and the surrounding villages carried on supporting the hospital and convalescent home. Later the number of hospital beds was increased to 20 and a second hospital in a formerly private house (Manton House in Burleigh Road) was opened in 1916. Both hospitals were usually full or nearly so and there was little respite for the staff.

Volunteer staff; food donations; 200 potatoes peeled a day

Running the VAD hospitals was no small task for the community. The staff were all volunteers and appear to have been unpaid, often even supplying their own uniforms. This did not just apply to the nursing staff but also to the cooks (when both hospitals were operational 200 potatoes had to be peeled a day) and to other help.

The allowance granted by the government for food was usually inadequate, especially given the rapid inflation in food prices. The gap was filled by regular gifts in kind from people in Charing, surrounding villages and sometimes further afield (the Parish Magazine even mentions a donor in Australia). A typical month's donations could include:

Eggs (weekly), Fruit, Vegetables, Potatoes, Jam, Buns, Cakes, Butter, Rabbits, Pheasants, Joints (weekly), Tea and Coffee (weekly), Milk (daily), Rice, Flour, Cigarettes, Books and Magazines, Coal and Logs in season and at Christmas, Turkeys.

Food donations were given regularly throughout the war – even in 1917, the year when sustained attacks by German submarines on merchant shipping brought the UK's food situation to crisis point and shortages were noted even in rural areas. And after rationing was introduced in 1918, the hospitals were still able to supplement patients' official rations with continued gifts of fresh produce.

Fundraising and washing muddy socks

In addition to nurses, cooks and general help the community also ran regular fundraising events, provided furniture, sewed clothing and offered laundry services – one “laundress” never forgot the difficulty of cleaning soldiers’ socks caked with Flanders mud.

The hospitals were finally closed in 1919, their tasks completed.

Charing and District Local History Society’s research into the parish during the First World War has uncovered just how much volunteer effort there was from civilians to support the men at the front. The VAD hospitals are a noteworthy example of how communities rallied round. Charing would not have been unique. Kent established over 80 VAD hospitals during the war and cared for around 30,000 men – 31% more than any other county.



Charing VAD hospitals patients and nurses; photo courtesy of Chubby Carnegie