

## **Birmingham Medal Society Meeting – The Garden House, Hagley Road Birmingham. Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014.**

The President welcomed everyone and made mention of two guests who had joined us.

Apologies were received from: Roy Painter, Mick Atkinson, Jeff Taylor, Dave Seeney, John Scott, Reg Cook & Chris Burns.

The President confirmed final numbers and collected payments for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary dinner tomorrow evening 6<sup>th</sup> June & confirmed final details for the Convention on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup>. Final numbers were 32 and he announced that sadly June Done would not be able to attend as she had a bad ear infection. June sent her best wishes to everyone for a successful day.

A new member was welcomed in absentia, Dr Chris Davies who had seen the BMS on the web site.

The formal business over Paul Murray gave a very interesting talk on The Portland Hospital in the Boer War.

### **THE PORTLAND HOSPITAL IN THE BOER WAR**

Immediately after the outbreak of war in South Africa in October 1899, it was suggested that private hospitals should be sent to South Africa as independent flying hospitals, but the British Central Red Cross Committee felt they would be better employed attached to some of the larger military hospitals. The War Office agreed that except for the CO who should be an RAMC officer, the rest of the staff would be civilians. The Portland Hospital was one such privately funded hospital, provided by the generosity of the Duke of Portland, Adeline Duchess of Bedford, the Earl of Derby, the Countess of Bective, Lord and Lady Henry Bentinck, and a few other notables. The sum of £12,000 was raised to keep the hospital going for 6 months.

The first contingent of the Welbeck Division of the St John Ambulance Brigade were attached to the Portland Hospital under the command of Surgeon Major Kilkelly RAMC. The SJAB conditions of service for South Africa were:

Minimum height 5 feet 3½ inches.  
Age limit Privates 20-35, officers 30-40  
Married men were accepted.

SSgt George Peat of the Welbeck SJAB wrote “We left Euston at 12.10 a.m. on Wednesday morning. A great crowd accompanied us to the station from head-quarters singing patriotic songs and cheering vociferously. We arrived at Liverpool by the 6.30, special saloon. Parade and inspection took place on the landing stage, by the Duke of Portland, previous to embarkation. Each man of the Welbeck contingent was presented with a handy knife. Superintendent Hamlyn and other officers and members of the Welbeck Brigade also witnessed our departure.”

When the Boer War started in 1899, various civilian ships were called upon to transport troops to Cape Colony. They included the White Star Liner *Majestic* commanded by Captain Edward Smith, the captain of the ill-fated Titanic. Two trips were made, one in December 1899 and one in February 1900, both without incident. The *Majestic* sailed from Liverpool on December 13<sup>th</sup> 1899 with the Portland Hospital on board.

SSgt Peat again:

Our send-off was an event never to be forgotten, the screeching of the whistles from the steamers in the port, and cheers from the crowd were deafening. The sister ship “Teutonic”, which lay higher up the river, gave us another hearty farewell. We had not been long on board before medical aid was called for, and members of the

Portland Hospital had the honour of rendering first aid to the injured. A private of the York and Lancs Regiment fell down the stairs leading to troop deck No 5, and sustained a severe injury. There are 2,048 officers and men on board, besides the crew of over 450. We are all up at 6.00 a.m. and to bed at 9.00 p.m. We treated another severe accident on Saturday – a stoker, with a crushed hand, by coal falling on him. We have physical drill every day. We expect to call at St Vincent this evening to coal. All the troops on board are being inoculated this week as a preventative against enteric fever. (We will hear more of enteric later). The following is extracted from articles in the Medical Journal.

At Rondebosch, the Portland was situated alongside No 3 General Hospital, on clear sandy ground, about 100 feet above sea-level with a good water supply. The hospital is very well equipped. The operation tent is boarded, and in the kitchen, concrete has been laid down for flooring. The cooking arrangements are very good with several ranges. The tents are of the tortoise pattern with the men occupying excellent wire-woven beds and convalescence secure. The hospital consisted of 13 Tortoise tents, 2 ordnance store tents and 8 bell tents, while the staff had square bell tents. The staff were listed as Surgeon-Major Kilkelly RAMC, 4 civil surgeons, 4 nursing sisters, a secretary, a treasurer and 33 St John's Ambulance men. One of the nurses Miss Alice Davies has former war service having nursed in the Graeco-Turkish War and as a result received the Medal and Diploma of the Greek Red Cross.

The tortoise tents were 24 feet by 20 with a waterproof canvas with an a loose inner lining hanging in folds with considerable space between the lining and outer canvas, resulting in the inner area being cool and comfortable for the patients in the hot weather. There were also various suitable ventilation openings. The tents were designed for 8 beds with side tables etc, but could easily take 10 beds without crowding. The bell tents of the staff were 12 feet by 9 and of single canvas, but were uninhabitable in the daytime due to the heat. The Portland also took out 10 ambulance wagons of their own and these were used in conjunction with the army wagons.

SSgt George Peat wrote on 16<sup>th</sup> January.

We arrived at Cape Town on Tuesday December 29<sup>th</sup> and disembarked on Saturday. We took train in the afternoon and arrived here about 6 p.m. At present we are stationary, but hope to move up the country in a few weeks time, or as soon as more fighting takes place. We are encamped at the foot of Table Mountain. This is a lovely spot, the air is so pure and dry. We were not long in fitting up the hospital. It only took us five days to cart the stores and equipment from Cape Town docks to here (7 miles) and have the whole hospital ready to receive patients. This is considered very quick time by military experts and especially as we are so short of orderlies. We have only 22, we could do with 40. At present we have 33 patients (3 officers and 30 men). The hospital is beautifully equipped and will accommodate 104 patients. Each Marquee will take 10 beds. The hospital occupies about 2 acres of ground. We have 12 Marquees and a number of small tents. I think we are fitted with everything that money can buy. The operating tent is beautifully furnished, including a large set of X rays. Most of our cases are serious. Some of the poor fellows are riddled with bullets; how they have escaped with their lives is next to a miracle. We parade at 6 a.m. every morning and the orderlies are marched off to their wards to relieve the night orderlies, and tidy up before the surgeons and nurses come on duty at 7.30. Hospital breakfast is served at 7.15, and the detachment have their breakfast at 7.30, parade again at 8.15, and so on throughout the day. Night duty is from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. My duty as Wardmaster comes every fifth day and night. Each NCO takes 24 hours duty. We have had many distinguished visitors to see us. We have just received a message to prepare for about 50 more patients, so our wagons and ambulances are just about to start to meet the hospital train at Rondebosch. Although we are not actually at the front, we are on the direct line of communications.

The Portland's position so close not just to No 3 General Hospital, but also the 2 Wynberg hospitals allowed the medical staff to visit some 1000 beds in the area and acquire a large experience of gunshot wounds in a very short time.

The 4 nursing sisters were each in charge of a tent and over a couple of weeks, the orderlies were sorted into the most suitable jobs for their talents, so some worked on wards, others in the stores, stables etc.

Initially, most of the patients came from General French's forces fighting between Naauwpoort and Norval's Pont. As the fighting became more general, the patients were from all over South Africa including those from Natal being sent round after the heavy fighting at Spion Kop and Vaal Krantz. By early March the flow of patients had started to dry up for 2 reasons. Firstly No 6 Hospital had been set up at Naauwpoort closer to the front and secondly the Boers had blown up the Orange River bridges cutting off the rail line to Bloemfontien.

During their 3 months in Rondebosch, they administered 477 patients and of these only 1 man died, an officer who had been shot through the chest and spine and was virtually paralysed. Also despite some bad wounds, there was no amputations.

Bloemfontein was occupied by the British on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1900. The general health of the troops in Bloemfontein was bad. Owing to the forced march from Kimberley, many regiments were short of boots and clothing and many were without tents or proper shelter. There was heavy rain and much of the ground was swamped and sometimes fouled. The troops were also suffering from short rations, so the combination of factors led to a high risk of disease and sickness and diarrhoea and dysentery were common.

Within a few days of occupying Bloemfontein, enteric fever broke out and spread rapidly, thought to have been carried in by troops on the march, from the bad water and other local unsanitary conditions. There was no general hospital in Bloemfontein and despite utilising many public buildings, the field hospitals rapidly became overcrowded so that they had to accommodate three or four times the number of patients for which they were equipped and it became impossible to nurse or treat the patients satisfactorily.

Typhoid fever, also known as enteric fever, is a potentially fatal multisystemic illness caused primarily by *Salmonella enterica*. The classic presentation includes fever, malaise, diffuse abdominal pain, and [constipation](#). Untreated, typhoid fever is a grueling illness that may progress to [delirium](#), obtundation, intestinal hemorrhage, bowel perforation, and death within 1 month of onset. Survivors may be left with long-term or permanent neuropsychiatric complications

The Portland moved to Bloemfontein in mid April as soon as the rail line was clear enough to allow its movement. It took 10 days to pack up the hospital and load onto the train at Rondebosch station, filling 11 rail trucks. They left on the 8<sup>th</sup> April and arrived in Bloemfontein 6 days later. Their site which had been selected was situated about a mile south west of the town close to excellent wells, the water situation not being so good in the town itself with water having to be carted considerable distance owing to the occupation of the waterworks by the Boers. At the time the Portland arrived, the Langman Hospital, The Irish Hospital, Nos 8 and 9 Hospital were in the process of setting up. The setting up of the tents etc was delayed by heavy rain, but by 21<sup>st</sup> April took in 40 patients.

Within a few days of their arrival, the Portland was receiving wounded and within 2 weeks had admitted 60-70 mainly cavalry and mounted infantry with Mauser wounds. They also treated 5 or 6 wounded Boers. They also quickly filled up with enteric fever cases transferred from the field hospitals. They soon had to increase their capacity by adding additional tents raising the number of beds from 100 to 160, and at any one time they nearly had 100 enteric cases. The extra tents were large ASC tents and set up separately for enteric cases. By May the weather started to dry and with the dryness came the flies, which helped spread the enteric further.

As the main army started to march on towards Pretoria, there was reported to be 4500 sick and wounded in Bloemfontein. By 28<sup>th</sup> May, the number of unfit men in town had risen to 11,000. The treating of the enteric brought its own risks to the hospital staff. 9 of the 24 orderlies and 1 nurse suffered from the disease with 1 man dying. This was 97 Pte Henry James Borer of the Caterham Division who died on 12<sup>th</sup> June.

The unit log records "In the face of these risks the behavior of our orderlies was beyond all praise. They were all St John's Ambulance men, and had no previous experience of hospitals or sick people. They proved a most excellent lot, and were most keen to learn to nurse."

The start of the frosts at the end of May began killing off the flies and the number of new cases started to fall rapidly and by mid June, there was a rapid decline in the epidemic. By July the Portland started to have empty beds for the first time since their arrival in Bloemfontein. They informed the authorities that they could stay until September if required, but this offer was turned down, due to the improving situation. At the end of July, all the equipment and remaining stores was sold off to the Army, officers, soldiers and civilians.

In total, the Portland admitted 1009 patients. Of these 37 died, 159 returned to duty, 303 were discharged to convalescent camps or hospitals, 98 went to England and 412 were transferred to other hospitals at the base. Of the 303 surgical cases, only 3 died, the 1 mentioned earlier at Rondebosch, 1 shot through the brain who hung for a week and one with gangrene of the leg. There were no other amputations.

The Worksop Guardian dated 24<sup>th</sup> August 1900 reported under the heading Local Ambulance Men's Return:

On Saturday morning, the "Canada", from South Africa, landed at Southampton with a number of invalided soldiers and their attendants; amongst the latter were three of the Welbeck Ambulance men who had been serving in the Portland Hospital. The names of these were G. Peate, W. Moore and J. Boaler. G. Peate reached Worksop on Saturday night whilst the other two followed on Sunday when, Sabbath though it was, a hearty reception was accorded them. They were met by Supt Hamlyn and other members of the Welbeck Ambulance Corps, besides a number of other people, and conveyed in wagons through the town, causing a good deal of attraction by their flags and bunting of various colours and sizes, - In reply to our representative they said had all enjoyed fairly good health whilst in South Africa, and although the work was hard and of times unpleasant they were not sorry they had gone.

It is indeed, an exceptionally excellent record of work done that Dr Tooth and his colleagues bring home. Originally the hospital, which was calculated on strict army lines for 100 men and 4 officers, was stationed at Rondebosch. On the great outbreak of enteric at Bloemfontein it was moved thither, and alone of the hospitals there escaped the terrible criticism and censure that has brought about the present commission of enquiry.

*Far more people have been killed by negligence in our hospitals than by Boer bullets... Men are dying by hundreds who could easily be saved'*

Lady Violet Cecil to the Prime Minister 30 May 1900.

During the fearful epidemic the staff admit themselves to have been frightfully over worked, for, instead of their calculated 104 cots, they made places for 166. An incidental point, however, which shows that in the military hospitals consideration was not wholly wanting, is that this excess was largely due to the fact that the Portland internal arrangements were known to be so good that Major Kilkelly was constantly urged to receive exceptionally bad cases. As for the nurses, no words of praise can overstate the value of their services, and doctors and patients alike testified to their skill and untiring devotion. Under them, the orderlies worked capitally, and proved to have been most judiciously selected. Funds were available to have carried on the hospital for quite 3 months, or even more, but Lord Roberts notified that he thought its services were no longer needed. Accounts are not yet definitely made up, but it appears that when the sale of unused stores is taken into consideration, the entire cost of equipment in tents and furniture, passages, salaries, and food, will work out at rather less than £13 per head for those treated.

The work of all continued until Southampton was reached, for the staff were entrusted with the medical charge of the ship. Dr Tooth and Mr Calverley were the physician and surgeon respectively, while the orderlies were chiefly those provided by the St John Ambulance Association, though some 3 or 4 had had the full training of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Having in grateful recollection the labours, zeal and patriotism of the St John Ambulance Brigade, Welbeck Division, a true hearted body of eighty members, thirty one of whom at the call of duty to their sovereign and country offered their services for the relief of their brethren in the war in South Africa 1899-1902. William 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Portland K.G. erects this tablet, recording such faithful services as examples for those who come after.

And what of Jim Boaler?

Jim Boaler was born in January 1876 in Norton Cuckney and registered in the Worksop district. On his return from South Africa he went back to living with his elder brother Joe and the 1901 census lists him as a farmer living in Norton.

He married in April-June 1907 in Worksop district, the 1911 census lists him living with 4 females at Collingthwaite, Holbeck, Norton Cuckney. He died between July and September 1949 in the Chesterfield district.