

Anzac Day on 25th April, is remembered every year in the English village of Harefield. This is the story why.



Three months after the outbreak of the First World War, Mr and Mrs Charles Billyard-Leake, a wealthy Australian couple living in Britain, offered the use of Harefield Park and its extensive grounds to the Minister of Defence in Melbourne. It was to be a convalescent home for wounded soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force.



Ethel Grey from Melbourne set up the hospital with 80 beds. Harefield was staffed by members of the Australian Army Medical Corps together with a strong contingent of volunteers from Mrs Billyard-Leake's circle who organised the canteen, ran entertainment for recovering patients and offered the use of their cars for trips. It had two purposes: a rest home for officers and other ranks, and a depot for soldiers who were invalided and due to be sent back to Australia.



The first casualties arrived from Gallipoli in June 1914. Within three weeks over 300 casualties had arrived. At first tented accommodation was erected, but the ferocity of the war required fully equipped accommodation and Nissen huts were erected to cope with the 1000's of patients.

By November 1916 the hospital was functioning as a general hospital with an operating theatre, an X-ray department and specialists in eye, ear, nose and throat conditions. By now there were 1,000 beds and the hospital occupied nearly 50 buildings around the estate, including ward huts, garages, recreation rooms and a mortuary.



MR. ANDREW FISHER
(HIGH COMMISSIONER).

MR. HUGHES.

MRS. HUGHES. MISS ETHEL GRAY
(MATRON).

THE AUSTRALIAN CONVALESCENT HOSPITAL, HAREFIELD PARK.

Of some 50,000 patients treated at Harefield, 112 did not recover. These men, and one female nurse, were buried in the parish churchyard. Francis Newdegate, a local MP whose family had long connections in the village and who was later knighted and appointed Governor of Tasmania, offered a plot of land next to the churchyard to extend the cemetery. He also covered the funeral expenses for all the burials.



Their coffins were carried through the village before they were laid to rest. It was during the first procession that the headteacher of Harefield Junior School, a Mr Jeffrey, noticed the coffins had nothing to cover them – unusual for a soldier’s funeral procession. He grabbed a Union Jack Flag from the classroom wall and rushed out to drape it over the passing coffin. From then on, the school’s flag was used to cover every coffin as it was carried through the village. Turnout for the funerals was always huge, with most of the village lining the streets to pay their respects.

After the war Mr Jeffrey presented the Union Jack Flag to Lieutenant Colonel Yeatman, the last officer commanding the hospital, with a request that he give it to an Australian school willing to send its own Union Jack Flag in exchange. The officer chose Adelaide High School, which had been sending relief packages to Harefield, and the school’s patriotic fund arranged for the return gift.



Over the years the condition of the flag had deteriorated. With the assistance of the Anzac Day Commemoration Fund the Adelaide High School was able to have the flag restored. Today Harefield is considered one of the world's leading heart and lung transplant centres. Its patient services unit is known as the Anzac Centre. Hundreds of patients are treated each year for heart blockages and heart attacks.

Whilst the original manor house has fallen into disrepair and the huts built for the Anzacs are long gone the Australian soldiers nursed at Harefield are not forgotten. Every year since 1921 the local school and the Cubs, Scouts and Girl Guides lead a parade through the village to the graves of the Australian soldiers where they lay flowers on every grave in the cemetery.

