



Dartford War Hospital

Survey

HER: TQ 57 SE 1086

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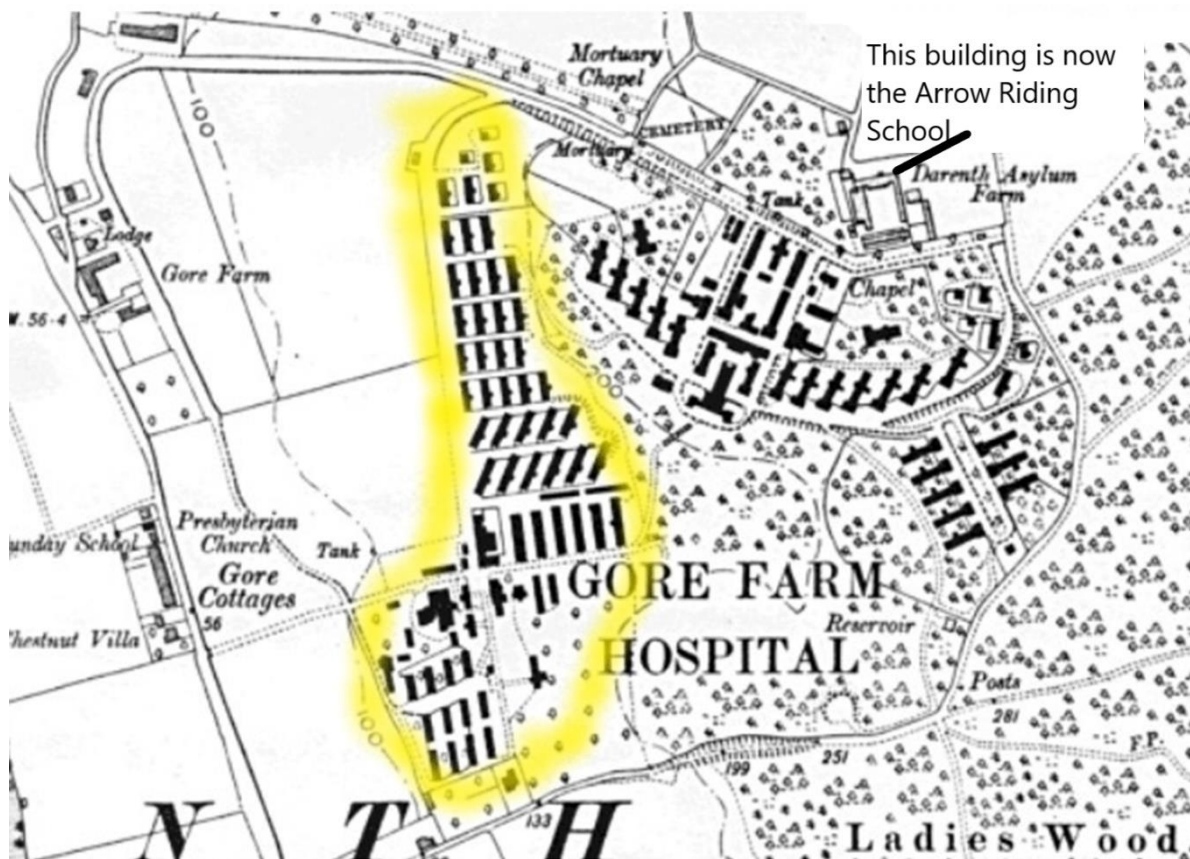


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Dartford War Hospital

Dartford War Hospital (on map below highlighted) was located off Gore Road Dartford. As you enter the road to the Darenth Country Park it is to your right, behind the cottages. The site is currently abandoned and the owners are seeking permission to build a crematorium there. The site has a diverse range of trees and shrubs from the planting of gardens during the various stages of the hospital. The northern end of the range is now under the A2 along with the Southern Hospital (on map not highlighted). The Arrow Riding School is in the old Darenth Asylum Farm buildings and, together with the cemeteries, form part of the Darenth Country Park.



The site was first used in 1883 as a tented camp for smallpox patients. The epidemic at the time meant that there were not enough beds anywhere else.

After the establishment of the smallpox ships at Long Reach a strictly limited number of smallpox beds was available in London, the majority of cases were sent directly to Dartford until 1885 when the beds at the London hospitals were closed and all cases came to Dartford. Convalescent camps were set up again, this time in a hutted temporary hospital to relieve the pressure of the 1884-5 epidemic and these remained until 1890, when they were converted into the Gore Farm Hospital or Lower Southern Hospital (later to become the Mabledon).

At the time of the 1893-4 epidemic the accommodation stood at 300 beds on the ships and 800 at Gore Farm. This was considerably less than was needed so it was increased to 1,000 beds, together with the necessary staff and administration accommodation. During the epidemic a total of 10,033 patients were admitted to the camps. Of these 9,901 were discharged recovered, 74 died and 58 transferred to the ships.



Gore Farm/Lower Southern Hospital as the Dartford War Hospital. 1915

The Lower Hospital was handed over to the Military in May 1915. Until the end of the war it became known as the Dartford War Hospital and treated badly injured German Prisoners of War, and also held interred Germans and Austrians. Once recovered they were transferred to other POW camps around Britain. Some were classified as 'low grade' and many worked around the town, in the hospitals, on the airfield at Joyce Green and on the local farms.

The local newspapers often wrote reports about the Germans working. Help was especially needed on the farms to keep up with the amount of food that needed to be grown. Farmers could 'employ' the Germans through the camp. Unfortunately, they could be recalled to another camp at any time. William Rogers, a farmer in Horton Kirby, employed German POWs on his land at harvest time, they were recalled before the task was finished and Rogers was left to complete the harvest on his own. Many farmers like him were left in a similar situation as the local newspaper often records.



German POWs from the Dartford War Hospital help men from the RFC to cultivate the land at Joyce Green Airfield.

German POWs were used as casual labour on the airfield at Joyce Green. They are said to have cheered when Gothas passed over in 1917. Some were also employed as auxiliary staff at Joyce Green, many cleaning and completing other menial tasks. Some stayed on after the war and trained as nurses.

The news that War had ended arrived at the hospitals very quickly. A few hundred yards away from the Dartford War Hospital was the Southern. This was home to the U.S. Base Hospital No. 37. The Americans paraded around the Southern then came down to the Dartford War Hospital. Here the German celebrations were equally jubilant. The Germans waved their skull caps and cheered at the Americans who gave them cigarettes.



The Americans from the US Base Hospital No. 37 arriving at the German POW camp at the Dartford War Hospital (Lower Southern).

Many Germans died from their wounds and were buried in the cemetery in Darenth Park (now part of the Country Park). They were exhumed by the German War Graves Commission in the 1960's and moved to Cannock Chase.

The 285 graves that were transferred were made up as follows:

German Soldiers	263
German Airman	1
German interned civilians	14
Austrian interned civilians	7

One of those buried and transferred to Cannock Chase was Jacob Herbst. He was captured on 16.02.1917 at Givenchy. He was badly wounded and was transferred to the Dartford War Hospital where he died of his wounds on 3.8.1917¹.



Grave of Jacob Herbst in the cemetery at Cannock Chase.



Newspaper cutting regarding the death of Jacob Herbst.

After WW1 the Lower Southern was partly demolished and, in 1955, the remainder was reopened to receive the Polish Ex-Services Rehabilitation Unit and was renamed the Mabledon as the unit had moved from Mabledon Park, Tunbridge Wells. It had a full complement of Polish medical and nursing staff. The patients worked hard to transform the depressing huts into comfortable accommodation surrounded by terraces of well-kept gardens and flowers. The patients also built themselves a Centre from scrap from the Southern site. The Centre had television, library, reading rooms and a canteen. In the 1980s, the remaining patients were moved to a specially adapted ward at Stone House and the Mabledon closed.



The Poles made the Mabledon their home and altered many of the buildings to suit them. This ward block was changed to a chapel.

Survey of remaining features by Bexley Young Archaeologists' Club

The site was surveyed by Bexley Young Archaeologists' Club in April 2018 as part of the Home Front Legacies project, recording World War One sites in the UK. We spent one day looking around the remaining part of the site to record any remaining evidence of the hospital.

The northern part of the site is now under the A2, so we were only able to see the southern range.

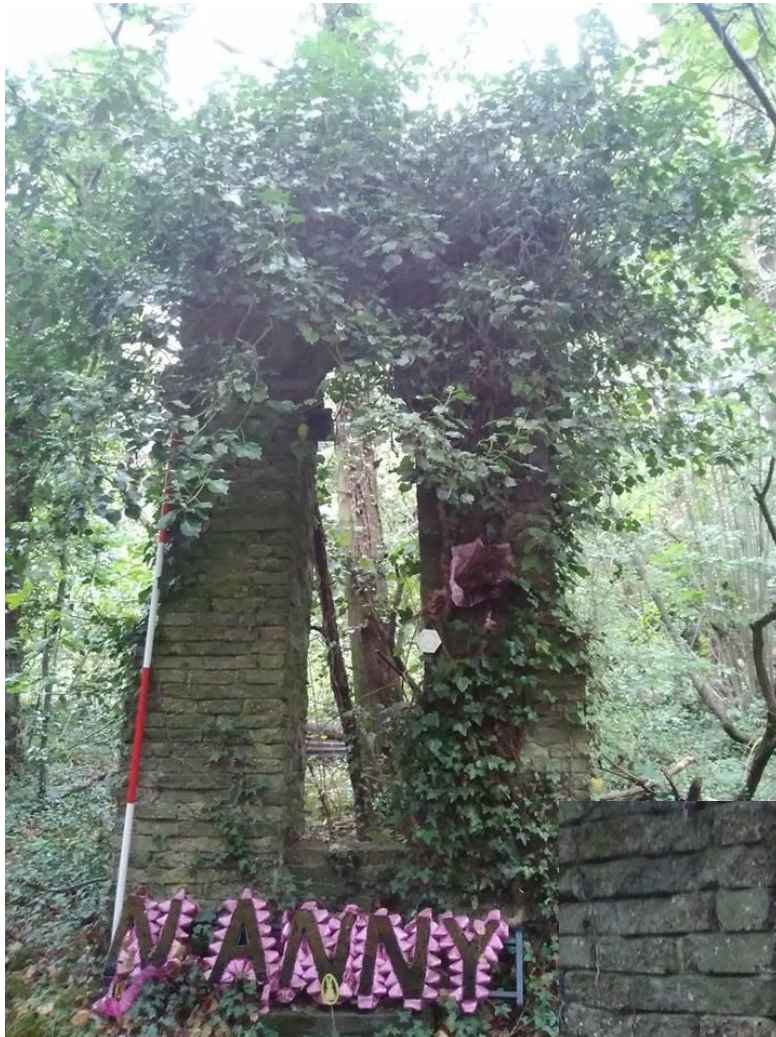


There is still evidence of some of the ward buildings, they have metaled or tarmacked bases. It was difficult to see where they started or finished as the site was very overgrown.



This base (above) has been destroyed by a modern track and continues on the other side.

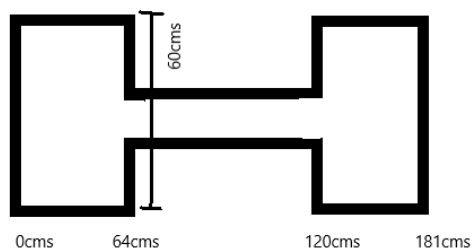
There was still evidence of the brick courses, which supported the wooden huts (left).



The only standing archaeology was found in the woods on the southern most part of the site. It is the east window to the chapel. Memorials had been placed there at some point by the family of someone who must have had connections to the hospital.

The wall is substantially built from stone. Its depth was 60cms. The feature is 1.81m wide and is located at Latitude 51.484, Longitude 0.25485 (correct to 5m).

Still visible was the original floor level and window recess.



Dimensions for the East Window feature (not to scale)



We were able to locate the chapel's west end wall at Latitude 51.42467 Longitude 0.25482 (correct to 5m). The land after this drops sharply away. On the footpath was evidence of the north and south walls.



On the footpath that runs through the middle of the chapel North wall.

Latitude 51.42479 Longitude 0.25479 (correct to 5m).

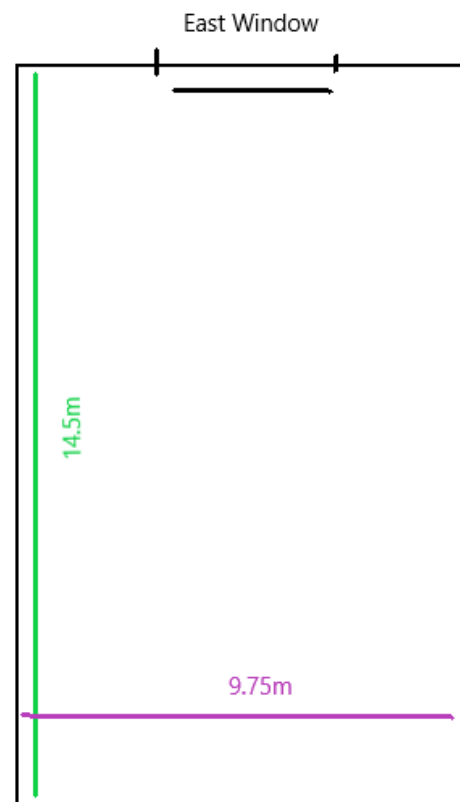
There was evidence for the South wall at Longitude 51.42456 Longitude 0.25481.



On the footpath there was also evidence of glazed tiles possibly floor tiles.



To the rear of the East window is a post which formed part of a fenced off garden. Other posts were visible and some still with corrugated metal attached as a fence.



Approximate size of the chapel

Other remaining evidence on the site is the abundance and variety of non-native trees and shrubs, forming part of the evidence of gardens around the hospital site. The YAC were fascinated by many of these, and this one (right) in particular.



It had amazing pink pods, unlike anything they had ever seen. It was difficult to identify but thanks to the Woodland Trust we now know it is a *Colutea arborescens*, (common bladder senna) a non-native species and although it is rare in England is more common in the South East. There were several of these across the site.

We chose some other trees that we could not easily identify to research at home.



The glossy red leaves are Copper Beech (*Fagus Sylvatica Purpurea*).

Turkey Oak (*Quercus Cerris*).



Whitebeam (*Sorbus Aria*).

Sweet peas were growing in abundance across the site between the ward blocks.





ⁱ Emails from Hubert Magdas, Germany

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