

When wartime wounded arrived at Wheatley

When the Wheatley schools were recently consolidated on one site at Holton Park, it was another change in a little corner of Oxfordshire which is held in some affection by local families.

To make way for the expanded school campus and sports centre, builders removed some of the last remaining huts there — ugly, utilitarian buildings perhaps, but a memorial nevertheless to a significant part of Wheatley's war-time history. For these were the huts originally built for the American 57th Field Hospital.

The hospital was built by Trollope and Coles, using Irish labour, after the Americans entered the war. And many of Wheatley's womenfolk, especially those who were children at the time, remember the American medical staff and orderlies arriving at Wheatley railway station, followed at depressingly regular intervals by hospital trains carrying wounded and shellshocked servicemen.

In later years, after the hospital was handed over to the British Army's 21st Company RAMC, casualties began to be ferried in by helicopter — with flight paths illuminated by car headlights and landing sites marked by nurses waving white sheets and pillowcases.

The hospital, which earned a reputation for treating head injuries, closed in 1961. One man who worked there from 1948 until 1961 was Mr George Martin, of Littleworth. He recalls that the last patient to be brought in by helicopter was Sgt. Fred Dooley, of the Royal Engineers, who had been badly injured in a swimming pool accident in Kuwait. The last commanding officer, he remembers, was Col. Coleman.

Mr Martin, now retired, spent his own war service with the 32nd Field Regiment Royal Artillery, in France, India and the Middle East.

He went to the Wheatley military hospital as storesman and after it closed became a school caretaker.

He has an excellent aerial photograph of the hospital taken at the end of the war, on which he can identify everyone of the dozens of huts — from wards to nurses' accommodation, from kitchens to the hospital cinema.

Among the buildings remaining now are the former medical stores, Red Cross hostel for patients' relatives and "Other Ranks" billet which is used by the schools meals service, and by Wheatley School as art rooms.

The former pathology laboratory it now a rugby club pavilion, and a former dispensary and patients' pack store in an education authority storeroom.

One of the Wheatley people who volunteered to help at the hospital during the war was Mrs Avril Hassall, who has fond memories of her time there as a crafts therapist attached to the Red Cross.

Mrs Hassall was later to teach art to the girls of Wheatley Girls' Grammar School for 23 years, on the same site using one of the old huts A* a classroom.

One particular recollection is of Christmas celebrations at the hospital. "I took some medical orderlies with me to Cuddesdon, where we cut some holly and ivy. And I was asked to make something really English for the decorations — a stained glass window.

"I got hold of nil the transparent materials I could find, including old X ray plates, and by Inc limo my 'window' had been hung with a light behind it, it looked quite effective,"

She remembers the medical staffs "beautiful carol singing", and the party they gave for Wheatley children.

"The Americans were very generous and kind hearted, and it was a lovely atmosphere" says Mrs Hassall. "But I had to take a very firm line with my children about accepting all the 'candy' they were offered."

But when the Americans finally evacuated the hospital Mrs Hassall could not turn away the Jeep that arrived at her front door at The Manor House, piled high with all the consumer stores that they were unable to ship back to the United States — everything, in fact, which was part-opened.

"It was actually a godsend, because it included things like vests and towels," recalls Mrs Hassall. "And right on top of the pile was a pair of silk stockings, tied up with a beautiful bow . . ."

She built up many personal relationships with both staff and patients. She remembers the young soldier who had his leg amputated, and who spent his convalescence making a hat for his fiancée, constructed from red felt scrounged from the Red Cross.

And there was a shell-shocked patient who kept "escaping" over the wall and turning up at The Manor. Mrs Hassall, who gave him tea and sympathy, was told by the authorities to let him continue believing he was getting away with his "escapes" undetected, as it was good for rebuilding his morale.

Mrs Hassall has maintained a lasting friendship with one of the medical staff at the hospital Major Ewell, now General Medical Officer at Yale "He was from New England, and was very keen on gardening — he planted the flower beds around the hospital," she recalls

Mrs Hassall even has a medal to remind her of the hospital "When they went, the Americans gave all the ladies special Red Cross badges. But when it came to me they had none left, so they found an Army Veterans Badge for me instead!"