

Review article: histories of hospitals

THE HISTORY OF TEWKESBURY'S WAR HOSPITALS 1914-18: 'alien duties for the privileged' by *John Dixon* (Tewkesbury Historical Society 2019 164pp ISSN 1742-60300) £18 <https://tewkesburyhistory.org/How-To-Buy>

This book, illustrated throughout with colour and black and white photographs, is the story of how the Gloucestershire town of Tewkesbury and its inhabitants were involved in Voluntary Aid hospital services during the Great War. It is a follow up to a 2015 publication, *A Noble Band of Heroes*, the product of a Lottery-supported centenary project. A volunteer for that project, Linda Kean-Price, undertook the research on the participants in Tewkesbury's war hospitals incorporated in this book. The book is divided into two parts: first, the history of Tewkesbury VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) and, second, biographies of Tewkesbury's medical volunteers. The foreword explains that the phrase 'alien duties for the privileged' came from *The Chronicle* of 21 November 1914, in which 'Sabrina' stated that 'It is striking what a change of manner and a bringing to the fore of a common sense, practical spirit the emergencies of the present time have effected. Ladies turned to and scrubbed floors and carried out all manner of duties to which many must have almost become alien through the privileges of their social position. Some who before would have considered it infra dig to carry even a parcel in the street may now be seen tripping along muscling big jugs of milk. All seem animated with the desire to do everything they can for the common good of the soldiers entrusted to their charge'.

Chapters 1 to 4 discuss the prelude to Voluntary Aid hospital services in Tewkesbury, which were established in the town's Watson Hall in November 1914. It would have been useful to refer to the article in the *Gloucestershire Chronicle* of 21 November 1914 detailing the annual report of the Gloucestershire Red Cross, which spells out the progress made in all areas of medical support for the armed forces. Tewkesbury's Voluntary Aid contribution for the period from 1914 to 1919 was about 3.3 per cent of the county total of patients treated, but photographs reproduced in the book are testimony to the town's efforts in the early part of the war. The text touches on the significant role of the Devereux family in the VA effort in the town. Mrs Ethel Mary Devereux (née Phillips 1870-1931), the hospital commandant, was a doctor's daughter married to Dr William Charles Devereux (1866-1935). He was the son of a doctor and was the medical officer for the VA hospital.

A major element of the book concerns the new VA hospital at Mitton Farm, which replaced the Watson Hall in 1915. The farm had been offered by its owners, the Earl and Countess of Coventry of Croome Court, Worcestershire, in September 1914, when William Devereux had agreed to be the medical officer in charge. When it opened Mitton was designated a convalescent hospital and this probably accounted for the relatively low number of patients (1223) and the low death rate (no patients died until the influenza epidemic of 1918). The hospital closed on 2 January 1919—in June 1918 Ethel Devereux had been awarded the MBE for her service. In total 119 volunteers have been identified as serving and these are listed on pages 61-64, including 28 men, mostly orderlies.

Along with the magnificent collection of photographs, the detail of the people involved is the strength of the book, shining light on how a small community contributed to a huge national effort of medical care. An attempt is made in the first part of the book to identify some of the patients who benefited, but this is limited to only two soldiers. However, in her Foreword one of the current owners of Mitton Farm recounts an experience nearly 50 years ago, before they moved into the near derelict building: 'an elderly man, visibly upset [was] standing outside the gate ... he said that he had come back to where he had been nursed after being wounded ... "they took us from the blood and filth of the trenches and sent us to Mitton and it was like going to heaven"'.

JOHN BANHAM undertook a part time PhD on North East business and banking history 1755-1840 (University of Sunderland 1997). He has been Secretary of Durham County Local History Society for nearly 20 years, has written articles for the Society's journal, and helped to produce a number of its other publications. Since 2014 he has researched Spennymoor's participants in the Great War with special reference to those involved in medical services. This resulted in a Heritage Lottery supported film being made in 2018 on the theme of the contribution to medical services of individuals from Spennymoor.