

Amersham – the Post-war Experience

Servicemen returning home to Amersham had complex needs and required emotional, financial and practical support to help reintegrate them into society. With no official welfare system this was primarily provided by the Royal British Legion, which was founded in May 1921, uniting four groups of ex-servicemen that had been established after the war. The role of the Legion was to care for those – both servicemen and their families – who had suffered as a result of their wartime experience. Although much of the Legion's help was in providing financial support, in practice the Legions also became places where men could meet and spend time together, helping them deal with their harrowing wartime experiences.

Amersham's Legion was founded in July 1921. Originally meetings were held in the Griffin pub but it moved to permanent premises in 1923. The building, which still stands on Whielden Street, came from RAF Halton and was given to the Legion by the Tyrwhitt-Drakes. The Legion's welfare committee provided support and financial assistance to men unable to return to work and to war widows. Although the options for employment in the town were largely unchanged after the war, many servicemen would not have been able to do the same gruelling labour on farms and in the brewery as they had done previously. The Legion continues to play an important role in the local community today, supporting ex-servicemen and their families.

Although many returning servicemen found it difficult to talk about their experiences, it was a local resident who conducted pioneering research into the psychological problems they were suffering. Doctor Frederick Mott (1853-1926) purchased the Old School House on the corner of Chestnut Lane and Bois Lane in 1894; renamed as 'Downash' it became a weekend home for his family. Mott was already a well-respected physician when war broke out, but it was his wartime work for which he became famous. Mott spent the war investigating and treating shell-shock, becoming one of the first people to recognise and name it as a medical condition. His work resulted in many accolades, most significantly a knighthood in 1919.

One of the few positive outcomes of the war was that women gained the right to vote. Women took on new roles throughout the war. Once conscription was introduced in 1916 it was agreed that women would take on work traditionally carried out by men, in Amersham this included farm work. This new found independence helped to make the case for women's suffrage. In Amersham the community appears to have been divided and there are records of anti-suffrage as well as pro-suffrage meetings. 1918 became a momentous year in the campaign for suffrage, with women aged over 30 (with certain stipulations) being given the right to vote.

When the war finally ended, resources were made available to deal with the chronic shortage of suitable housing for local residents. People had been living in overcrowded and substandard conditions before the war and now the Council could finally realise some of their long-held plans to address the problem. In 1919 pre-war plans for new houses on Back Lane, now School Lane, were finally implemented. New social housing developments emerged elsewhere in the town, including Piggotts Orchard at the bottom of Gore Hill. Many returning servicemen were given a new home in this development.

In the 'new town', Amersham-on-the-Hill, development gathered pace after the war. One of the most experimental developments was Elm Close, designed by J H Kennard in 1919. With many building materials in short supply after the war the houses were constructed from concrete blocks, cast on site, and the fittings were simple with no requirement for complex joinery. (There were plans to replicate this model in Chesham Bois but they didn't materialise.) Throughout the town, private developers also began to build new shops and houses and the population of the town began to flourish.

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