



THE COUNTRY HOUSE & THE GREAT WAR

The Decade of Centenary Commemoration Programme stated that commemorations should be informed ‘by a full acknowledgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy, of the multiple readings of history, and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience’.

This exhibition, to mark the centenary of the 1918 Armistice, is created in the spirit of these objectives. It chronicles the experience of the Great War from the perspective of the Irish country house.

This exhibition has been supported by the University Executive as part of Maynooth University’s Commemoration Committee 2018 programme, and by The Ireland Funds, and the OPW.

The CSHIHE/OMARC would like to thank the following for their expert advice, help and generosity in sharing their research information: Dr Fidelma Byrne; Dr Jacqueline Crowley; Dr Ian d’Alton; Savina Donohoe (Cavan Co. Museum); Susan Durack; Tony Farrell; Dr Ronan Foley; Dr Donal Hall; Nicola Kelly; Yvonne Kelly (Castle Leslie); Esther Moloney (Ballindoolin House); Dr Ciaran Reilly (who curated the original exhibition); Dr Brendan Scott; and the Trustees of Airfield Estate. Exhibition design by Stubbs Design.



THE IRISH COUNTRY HOUSE AND THE GREAT WAR

In the summer of 1914, many Big House families in Ireland had been preparing, through the Unionist movement, to fight the implementation of Home Rule; in Ulster by force if necessary. However, just as Ireland seemed on the brink of civil war, attentions were turned to a European conflict of unimaginable magnitude. Elizabeth Bowen recalled a garden party at Mitchelstown Castle on 5 August 1914:

‘this was a time to gather...for miles round, each isolated big house had disgorged its talker, this first day of the war. The tension of months, of years – outlying tension of Europe, inner tensions of Ireland – broke in a spate of words.’

Those who had gathered scarcely realised the social, physical and emotional impact that total warfare would have on their families in the years ahead. Scores of relatives would go to war and many would never return; more would enthusiastically sacrifice their time, finances and energies to the war effort at home; and all would be disgusted by the events of Easter Week 1916.



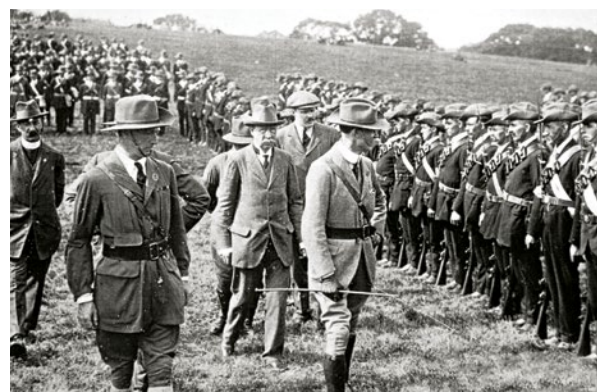
Edward Carson (seated centre) with fellow Unionists at Newbliss House, Co. Monaghan on 5 August 1915.



Letitia Overend born at Airfield, Dundrum, Co. Dublin, records the outbreak of the war in her diary.

COURTESY OF AIRFIELD, DUNDRUM

First World War British Army Irish recruitment poster showing a shawl-clad Irishwoman clutching a musket pleading with an Irish man to join the British Army. A Belgian church burns in the distance. COURTESY OF SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY LIBRARIES



Sir John Leslie inspecting the Monaghan Ulster Volunteer Force at Newbliss in Co. Monaghan.

RECRUITMENT FERVOUR

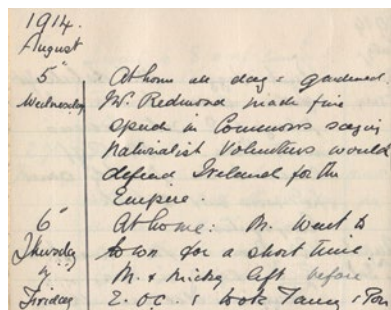
The enthusiastic response of the gentry has been regarded as the natural response of a class with long traditions of military service, keen to get to the Front to do their duty to the empire. In 1916 a frustrated Arthur Maxwell, later Lord Farnham, wrote to a friend: ‘They don’t seem to be in a bit of a hurry to send me out bad luck to them...I had a letter from [?] the other day and he told me he was off. Lucky devil!’

On 3 August 1914, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, told the House of Commons that ‘we offer to the government of the day that they may take their troops away, and that if it is allowed to us, in comradeship with our brethren in the north, we would ourselves defend the coasts of our country.’

Redmond’s speech had a profound impact on southern Unionists. In the days after, Sir John Keane appealed to all classes and religions ‘to pull together without prejudice to their political opinions’ so that at the war’s end they might discover that ‘political differences are not so acute as they appeared in the past’.

The Earl of Fingall, Earl of Bandon and Lord Headfort all proposed joining corps of the Irish National Volunteers. The Duke of Leinster and Sir Algernon Coote allowed the Volunteers to drill in their demesnes at Carton and Ballyfin.

However, the early optimism regarding a ‘bond of common service’ ultimately proved misplaced.



In her journal entry of 5 August 1914, Letitia Overend praised John Redmond’s ‘fine speech’ in the House of Commons.



On 20 September 1914, John Redmond’s speech at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow encouraged the Irish Volunteers to go ‘wherever the firing extends, in defence of right, freedom and religion, in this war’.



Irish Guards recruitment meeting at the Mansion House, Dublin, in 1914.



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

Arthur Maxwell, later 11th Lord Farnham (1879-1957) and Farnham House. Farnham was an ardent opponent of Home Rule and a UVF instructor before the war.

UNRETURNED ARMY

The novelty of war began to wear off as casualties mounted; Lord Castletown later described the war as a ‘tale of horror and destruction’.

Of 519 families listed for Ireland in Burke’s *Landed Gentry of Ireland* and *Peerage & Baronetage*, 82 per cent were represented at the Front by at least one member. Of those who served, around 25 per cent were killed in action or later died of wounds.

The Irish gentry contributed proportionately far more than any other social group; as Ian d’Alton has noted, one-in-four gentry families suffered fatal casualties, compared to one-in-thirty of all Irish families during the Great War.

As the landlord class was such a self-contained community it was inevitable that a great sense of loss would permeate it. In November 1914 Shane Leslie of Glaslough lamented: ‘At this rate everybody in a year will be mourning’.

Douglas Hyde, wrote to a friend: ‘Nearly everyone I know in the army has been killed. Poor Lord De Freyne and his brother were shot the same day and buried in one grave... MacDermott of Coolavin, my nearest neighbour, has lost his eldest son shot dead in the Dardanelles. All the gentry have suffered. *Noblesse oblige*. They have behaved magnificently.’

Some families exceptionally so: for example, eighteen members of the extended Lefroy family of Carriglass in Longford served at the Front.

Of the six sons of the Fourth Baron De Freyne of Frenchpark, County Roscommon, three were killed in action and one died a prisoner of war.



Carriglass House, Longford, home of Hugh Lefroy.
COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND



Left: Captain Arthur Reginald French, Frenchpark, Co. Roscommon, 1st Battalion, South Wales Borderers killed in action 9 May 1915.



Right: Lord Farnham, Lieutenant, 10th Hussars, North Irish Horse.



Images captured by Canadian-born photographer Charles Hilton DeWitt Girdwood (1878-1964). Left: ‘We smash the vaunted Hindenburg Line & seize a blockhouse shattered by our guns, Croiselles’. Right: ‘Artillery observation officer in O Pip [Observation Post] regulates our barrage during advance on Woncourt’.



A party of the Royal Irish Rifles rest in a communication trench on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1916.
MARY EVANS/ROBERT HUNT COLLECTION

Recruitment poster urging Irishmen to join the British army to avenge the sinking of the Lusitania.

COURTESY OF SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY LIBRARIES

WOMEN AND THE WAR EFFORT

Hundreds of men returned home physically wounded, or mentally scarred for life. The role of the women of the Big House became vitally important as they acted as nurses and auxiliaries with the Voluntary Aid Detachment.

It was said of Letitia Overend of Airfield House that she 'never tired of working for the poor wounded soldiers'. Lady Farnham worked extensively with the Red Cross; Lady Castletown 'took up with keen interest all the work that was to be done for the wounded' at Ballyvonare camp in Cork; in Galway, Lady Clonbrock worked assiduously as a fund raiser collecting for parcels and medical supplies to be sent to the Front.

Many young gentry women served at the Front with the British Red Cross, or as auxiliaries. The De Robeck sisters of Gowran Grange in Kildare drove ambulances; Edith Stoney of Rosturk Castle in Mayo won the *Croix de Guerre* for her work as a radiologist.

There is no evidence of country houses in Ireland being used as hospitals but throughout Britain, houses such as Mount Stuart on the island of Bute became Wartime Therapeutic Spaces. Operating as a Naval Hospital between 1915 and 1919, and overseen by Augusta, marchioness of Bute, daughter of Sir Henry Bellingham and sister of Roger and Edward (see panel on the Bellingham brothers) of Castle Bellingham in Louth, the specific interior and exterior spaces of Mount Stuart and its grounds functioned as therapeutic settings. Here treatment and recovery in safe locations contrasted with the traumatizing surrounds of front-line combat.



Augusta, marchioness of Bute, was centrally involved in all aspects of the running of the Naval Hospital at Mount Stuart and even took time to help out during operations in the house's upstairs conservatory.

The drawing room of Mount Stuart was transformed into a 22-bed surgical ward.

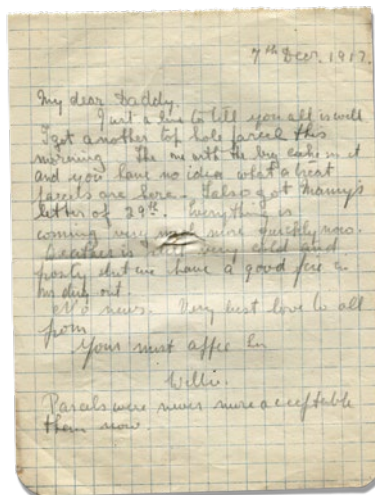


Throughout the duration of the war, Letitia Overend volunteered at the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot in Merrion Square, sending medical supplies to war hospitals.



Lady Beatrix Beresford was President of the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, Merrion Square, Dublin.

Prisoners of war and soldiers at the Front were grateful for the efforts of families back home who ensured that parcels of everything from socks to cigarettes arrived in camps or the trenches.



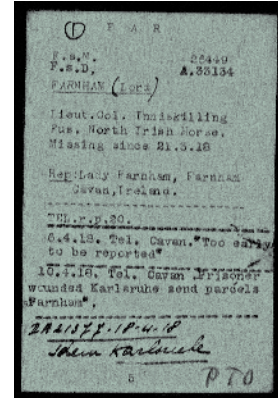
PRISONERS OF WAR

Many members of the Irish gentry were taken prisoner of war: Charles Howard-Bury of Charleville Castle in King's County was captured at Ypres in 1915 and remained a POW until his release in 1919; Fergus Forbes, son of 7th earl of Granard, was captured at Mons and died of his wounds while a POW; Lieutenant Edward French, son of 5th Baron De Freyne, died as a POW in Germany two days after the Armistice.

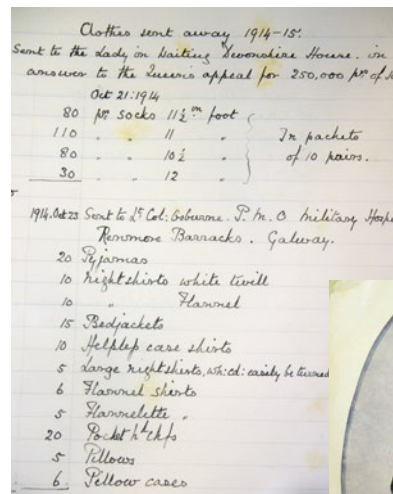
The case of Arthur Maxwell, 11th Lord Farnham (b.1879), is of interest. An ardent opponent of Home Rule and a UVF instructor before the war, Farnham re-joined the army to serve as a lieutenant colonel of the North Irish Horse and ADC to his friend and fellow Cavan landowner, Major-General Oliver Nugent.

While on active duty tragedy befell Farnham and his wife, Aileen, when, in April 1916, his two youngest sons, Barry (9) and Arthur (3), died suddenly. When he returned to the Front in May Nugent noted that Farnham 'looked so white and sad'.

By February 1918, Farnham was commanding the 2nd Inniskillings. On 21 March, he led a battalion against German infantry and was feared killed. However, he had been captured and interned at a camp in Karlsruhe, Germany. Conditions were far from harsh. Farnham was permitted to take walks outside the camp grounds, and this lax security was a factor in his escape. He returned to Cavan in December 1918, where he was presented with an illuminated address congratulating him on his escape.



Left: Arthur Maxwell, 11th Baron Farnham who was captured at Boadicea Redoubt south west of St Quentin on the first day of the German Kaiserschlacht offensive in March 1918. He spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner of war. Right: Red Cross POW card which records Farnham as 'Missing since 21.3.18'.



Extract from Lady Clonbrock's records of supplies sent to the Front from Galway, October 1914.

First World War postcard from the Clonbrock papers. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND



Above: Lord and Lady Clonbrock, who both involved themselves in a variety of ways with the war effort in County Galway, 1914-18.

Right: Receipt for parcels sent to the Front by organising committee supervised by Lady Clonbrock.

CAPTAIN NORMAN LESLIE

Captain Norman Leslie of the Rifle Brigade was the second son of Sir John and Leonie Leslie of Glaslough in Monaghan.

Before the war he had lived the roguish lifestyle of womaniser, gambler and adventurer.

When war broke out he wrote to a friend, Zoe Farquharson, framing his patriotism within his British imperialism: 'let us forget individuals and let us act as one great British unit, mixed and fearless. Some will live and many will die, but count the loss not. It is far better to go out with honour than survive with shame.'

He soon witnessed the horrors of total warfare. On 23 September 1914, he recorded in his diary: '...I dashed round with him [soldier] and found a proper charnel house – all shrapnel wounds, one arm hanging by a shred, another pierced through the lungs, another neck, back and thigh, 2 broken legs...I was trying to tie up one fellow's leg when crash came another shrapnel and wiped out another man 20 yards off. At the end of the job I was drenched with their blood.'

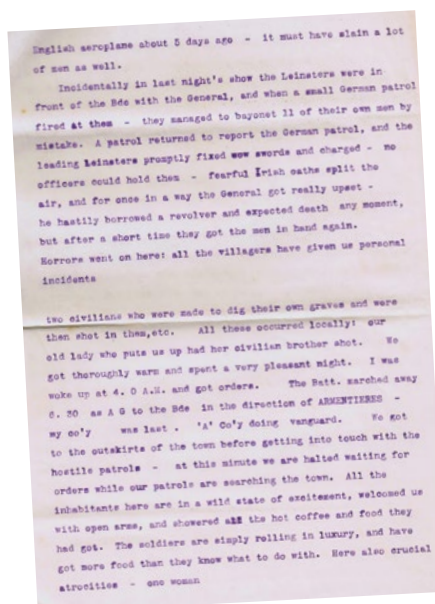
'Honey for breakfast and the most gorgeous lunch of apple tart and goose cooked by our soldier servants.'

Recorded by Norman Leslie – sometimes trench warfare was juxtaposed with the remnants of a gentry lifestyle

of excitement, welcomed us with open arms and showered all with hot coffee and food'. That was his last diary entry; he was killed the following day.



Glaslough, now Castle Leslie, where Norman Leslie grew up.



Extract from Norman Leslie's war journal, dated October 1914. LESLIE FAMILY ARCHIVES



Norman Leslie with his mother Leonie before he left for France, September 1914.



In 1932 a Belgian farmer discovered a sword when ploughing a field which was later identified as Norman's. It was returned to the family home at Glaslough, where it can be seen today.



CAPTAIN THOMAS FILGATE AND REV FRANCIS GLEESON

Captain Thomas Filgate was the second son of Townley Filgate of Arhurstown, Co. Louth. He served in the 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers.

On Saturday, 8 May 1915, the Fusiliers marched through Rue du Bois, close to the town of Neuve Chapelle in Belgium. The Battalion halted near a wayside shrine. They were accompanied by Rev Francis Gleeson, a Tipperary-born Roman Catholic chaplain who had trained at St Patrick's College, Maynooth and was ordained for the diocese of Dublin in June 1910. Father Gleeson recorded in his diary:

'We march out from Tombe Willot (Locon) about 900 strong, our Commanding Officer being Major Rickard and the Adjutant, Captain Filgate – two of the kindest men I have come across. We leave about 7.00 pm. The scenes of enthusiasm are outstanding. I ride my horse. Give Absolution to Batt. during rest on road.'

The representation of Fr Gleeson's blessing by Fortunino Matania is one of the great iconic images of the war. Captain Filgate is said to be the officer to Gleeson's left with the rifle on his right shoulder.

The following day, Gleeson wrote: 'We lost at least 350 men, between killed and wounded and missing. Spent all night trying to console, aid, and remove the wounded. It was ghastly to see them lying there in the cold, cheerless outhouses, on bare stretchers with no blankets to cover their freezing limbs...No ambulances coming. They came at last – at daylight.'

Filgate survived but later died of wounds received on 29 September 1915.



The Last General Absolution of the Munsters at Rue du Bois by Fortunino Matania, painted before the Battle of Aubers Ridge.
© ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS LTD/MARY EVANS



The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 9 May 1915. Following a meeting of battalion commanders at 23rd Brigade HQ, Lieutenant Colonel C.B. Vandeleur briefs the 2nd Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), on their role in the forthcoming attack. At this time the battalion were in billets at Rue de Bois.



[Then] Lieutenant Thomas Filgate, on the far right, duck shooting at Jung Shai, Sind Desert, December 1911.

COURTESY OF THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

ROGER AND EDWARD BELLINGHAM

Roger Bellingham (1884-1915) of Castle Bellingham, Co. Louth was both a Catholic and Nationalist, unusual for a member of the Irish gentry. At the outbreak of war he immediately reported for duty with the Royal Field Artillery in Dundalk. He was amused to note that as the train of Catholic Nationalist recruits passed through staunchly Unionist Lurgan, Co. Armagh, they were wildly cheered

On 4 March 1915 Bellingham was found dead in bed. It is thought that he suffered from heart failure, brought about by stress. A 'handsome memorial' was erected in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dundalk in November 1915, but it went missing after renovations in the 1990s.

In February 1916, Roger's brother, Edward (1879-1956), took command of the 8th Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers in France. Between 27 and 29 April 1916, the battalion suffered 500 casualties, killed, wounded and missing. During that same week, the Easter Rebellion broke out in Ireland. Edward wrote to his father:

'Our men are furious with the Sinn Féiners, and asked to be allowed to go and finish them up. We were defending the Empire with serious losses the very day these people were trying to help the Germans that we were fighting. It is all too sad.'

He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his actions at the Battle of Ginchy in September 1916. In March 1918, he was taken prisoner in the German Spring Offensive. After the war he served in the Irish Free State Senate from 1925 until its abolition in 1936.

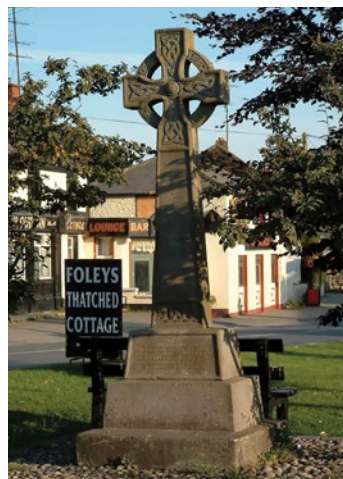


Above: Castle Bellingham, Co. Louth.

Right: Edward Bellingham in 1922.



The Battle of Ginchy, 9 September 1916. Supporting troops moving up to the attack.



War memorial at Castlebellingham, Co. Louth. The Celtic cross, proposed by Sir Henry Bellingham, was dedicated to local men who fell in the Great War. In total fifty names are recorded including Captain Roger Bellingham.

COUNTRY HOUSE AND ARMISTICE

After the Armistice, Norman Leslie's brother, Shane, condemned war as: 'Simply waste, waste of limb and life, waste of time and talent, waste of heroism and prudence, waste of all things useful and beautiful.'

On Armistice Day, his father, Sir John, wrote to his wife, Leonie: 'I wish I was with you to embrace you... I feel excited almost to insomnia. The news is the most wonderful since the world began.' However, that joy was tinged by the memory of Norman's death: 'I should like to go to Armentieres in the Spring', Sir John wrote, 'not in the cold dreary winter, and lay spring flowers on our boy's grave, both of us together.'

When Norman's niece, Anita, came to Glaslough in 1919, she found that 'one room frightened us.

'The CO got the message thro' while we were at dinner that the armistice terms had been accepted so you may imagine the pandemonium which followed. Everyone is asking everyone else if it can possibly be true.'

William Upton Tyrrell writing to his father

It had been that of our Uncle Norman... it was kept just as he had left it... a bunch of withered flowers lay on the pillow.'

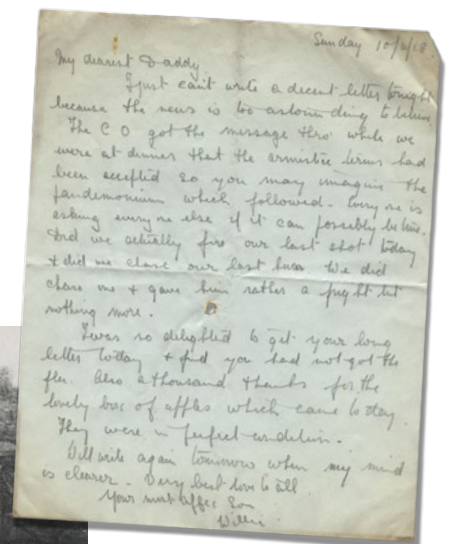
The ubiquitous sense of loss was captured by Lady Elizabeth Fingall: 'I used to think and say, during the war, that if ever that list of dead and wounded would cease, I would never mind anything or grumble at anything again. But when the Armistice came at last, we seemed drained of all feeling. And one felt nothing. We took up our lives again or tried to take them up. The world we had known had vanished. We hunted again but ghosts rode with us. We sat at table, and there were absent faces.'



Family portrait to mark the golden wedding anniversary of Sir John 1st Bt and Lady Constance Leslie in 1905.



News of the Armistice is received at the Front.



Above: A letter from William Upton Tyrrell to his father expressing his delight that the Armistice terms have been accepted, 10 November 1918.



Left: William Upton Tyrrell at the Front c.1914.

CONSEQUENCES OF WAR

For some families, the death of an heir(s) had huge consequences. On 25 September 1915 at the Battle of Loos, Charles Annesley Acton of Kilmacurragh House was killed. His estate passed to his only surviving brother, Reginald who was also killed at the Battle of Ypres in May 1916. Thus, over an eight-year period Kilmacurragh had three successive owners and the death duties amounted to 120% of the value of the estate. The financial pressure became too much for Reginald's widow and after 200 years of residence the Acton family left Kilmacurragh.

In general, however, casualties had few implications from the point of view of succession. Norman Leslie's father survived another thirty years after his death. Edward Stafford-King-Harman was killed at Klein Zellebecke in November 1914 but his father, Sir Thomas, lived until 1935. The decline of the Big House in Ireland after the war had more to do with more powerful, but less heroic, wider economic factors.

From 1918 the Irish gentry supported organisations working on behalf of the returning wounded such as the British Red Cross which, for example, provided advanced equipment for the Blackrock Special Orthopaedic Hospital, open from 1917 to 1931.

Even after independence, some like the marquis of Ormonde and Lady Bellingham served on War Pensions Committees to administer to the financial, medical and re-training needs of veterans in their localities, or on Free State advisory committees reporting to the British Ministry of Pensions. The earl of Granard was involved in the organisation of ex-servicemen's associations; he set up a branch of the Comrades of the Great War in Longford. Lord Headfort was president of the Kells branch of the British Legion.



Kilmacurragh House as it stands today. Having been acquired by the Land Commission in 1974, the house was seriously damaged by fires in 1978 and 1982.



1917 image of the Hermitage War Hospital in Lucan from *Irish Life* magazine showing the visit of the Viceroy. The Hermitage War Hospital later became the Hermitage Golf Club.

Edward Stafford-King-Harman, a very early casualty, killed at Klein Zellebecke in November 1914. Edward's wife, Olive, served as a nurse during the war. She gave birth to a son shortly after Edward was killed.



Blueprints for the Military Orthopaedic Hospital in Blackrock, Co. Dublin.