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The Royal Hospital Chelsea

Early history

Until the 17th Century the state made no specific provision for old and injured soldiers. Care for the poor and sick was provided by the religious foundations. Much of this provision ended following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I it became recognised that provision needed to be made for the poor and for sick and disabled soldiers. This led to an Act of Parliament, passed in 1593, that levied a weekly tax (not exceeding 6d in the pound) on parishes for the relief of soldiers and sailors.

17th Century



King Charles I and Family

The Civil War, between Charles I and Parliament, which started in 1642, required changes to the existing arrangements. Therefore, in 1645 Parliament decreed that pensions to disabled soldiers should be paid from national funds, not local taxation.

The Restoration of Charles II, in 1660, and the disbandment of the Parliamentary Army and the return of exiled Royalist forces made the improvement of provision for the welfare of old or disabled soldiers a more pressing matter.

By 1673 it was already being noted that some soldiers were no longer fit for service. It was common practice for maimed or old soldiers to be kept on regimental rolls, or sent on garrison duty - thus impairing the effectiveness of an army that was under heavy demand.

King Charles was determined to make provision for the soldiers on the English establishment and on 22nd December 1681 he issued a Royal Warrant authorising the building of the Royal Hospital.

Sir Christopher Wren, Charles II's Surveyor-General of Works, was commissioned to design and erect the buildings. Sir Stephen Fox (1627 - 1716), who had been Paymaster General to the Army from 1661 to 1679, and was a Commissioner of the Treasury, was commissioned to secure the funds necessary to progress the scheme.



King Charles II

The funds provided were still insufficient and Fox had to find other sources of funding. A levy of 12d in the £ was made on the sale of officers commissions and from 1684 a day's pay was deducted from every officer and soldier in the army. The last measure was, in effect, a contributory pension, as all soldiers were to benefit.

The chosen site, set adjacent to the River Thames in the pastoral setting of Chelsea contained the uncompleted building of the former "Chelsey College", a theological college founded by James 1 in 1610. Never having been successful the College was closed during the Civil War and was later used to house prisoners during the Civil War and

in the later wars against the Dutch. In 1667 the site was given by Charles II to the Royal Society (another of his imaginative creations).



View - late 17th Century

The early building continued at a rapid pace, so much so that Charles II was able to inspect the work, including the partly completed chapel, just before his death in 1685. In 1692 work was finally completed, and the first In-Pensioners were admitted in February 1692 and by the end of March the full complement of 476 were in residence.

20th Century

Since 1913 the RHS Chelsea Flower Show has been held annually on the South Grounds.

Parts of the hospital were heavily damaged, with some loss of life, by enemy bombing in 1918, reconstructed in 1923 only to be destroyed again by a V2 rocket in 1945. Other damage was suffered during the Blitz and the Infirmary was destroyed in 1941

The first televised church service in Britain was broadcast from the Chapel in 1949.

The berths were enlarged in 1954-55 and again in 1991 to their present size of 9 feet by 9 feet (2.7 by 2.7 metres) from their previous size of 6 foot by 6 foot.

21st Century

The Infirmary is the Royal Hospital's 125 bed care home. It cost £27.50M all which was funded by Appeal and it was opened by HRH The Prince of Wales, in the presence of Baroness Thatcher a strong supporter of the Hospital and a regular attendee at the Sunday service.

Admissions

The term 'Chelsea Pensioner' has been used over the centuries to describe both 'In-' and 'Out-Pensioners'. An 'In-Pensioner' is simply one who resides in the Royal Hospital Chelsea. On entry, he surrenders his army pension. An 'Out-Pensioner' is a former soldier of the Regular Army who receives a pension for long service and/or disability caused through service.



The term derives from the period when the Royal Hospital was still being built. James II, who succeeded King Charles in 1685, made the first attempt to put Army pensions on a systematic basis in 1689. He decreed that a daily allowance should be made to all soldiers disabled by wounds or accidents, who had become unfit for service or who had served for 20 years.

In-Pensioner

To be eligible for admission as an In-Pensioner, a candidate must be a former non-commissioned officer or soldier of the British Army who is in receipt of an Army Service or War Disability Pension for Army Service. Normally 65 years of age or over and free from any obligation to support a partner or family. In-Pensioners currently number about 400 and the average age is 82 years old. There are now three lady In-Pensioners & rumour has it that they don't always get on with each other?