

World War One: Weymouth invasion by injured Anzacs

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Weymouth was identified as an ideal location for injured Anzac soldiers to recuperate

By Stephen Stafford

BBC News Online

The Australia and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzac) suffered some of the worst losses of Allied forces during World War One, with tens of thousands of injured troops finding themselves billeted to the Dorset coast to recuperate.

Following the ill-fated Gallipoli landings in the Dardanelles, thousands of wounded Anzacs were evacuated to England. Weymouth was soon identified as an ideal site for their recuperation.

The influx of antipodean soldiers had an enduring impact on the resort which was affectionately dubbed "Wey-Aussie" by its wartime visitors.

The first hutted camp, complete with cook house, shower block, gymnasium and orthopaedic recovery unit was set up at Monte Video in Chickerell, near the site of the Granby Industrial estate today.



Strawberries and cream

Weymouth was chosen because of its existing army camp facilities, which were emptying as British soldiers completed their training and headed for the trenches in France.

But the seaside climate also lent itself to rest and recuperation - soldiers in their light blue uniforms, pushing others in wheelchairs became a common sight on the seafront.

A reporter from the Melbourne Argos visited the Chickerell camp, describing it as "an ideal place with warm sea breezes and slopes lined with purple heather that lay between the camp and the sea".



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More than 120,000 Australian and New Zealand troops went to Weymouth to convalesce



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Monte Video camp was set up in Chickerell to take in casualties from the Gallipoli campaign



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Anzac soldiers made a snow kangaroo during a Dorset winter at Westham camp

"And the markets of Weymouth supply plenty of honest butter, vegetables and fruit for the convalescent man," he added.

Phil Sherwood, of the Somerset and Dorset Family History Society, said: "You can imagine, in a town of 40,000 population, it had a big impact."

The Weymouth public welcomed the first influx of troops with a huge strawberry and cream tea. They and their successors would also enjoy whist drives, concerts and dances.

The local church choir would also go into Chickerell camp to sing for those soldiers who could not get out.

There were fishing trips organised to Chesil beach while the Anzacs later formed their own band and performed at the Pavilion and Alexandra Gardens.

However, many did not get the chance to enjoy the resort's pleasures for long.

The priority was to get men fit enough to fight again and by October 1915, having survived the horrors of Gallipoli, hundreds of men were being transferred to Weymouth train station, to begin their journey to other European battle fronts.

Those who could not be restored to fighting fitness were sent back to Australia.

For those who did stay for longer there was a chance to get to know the Dorset population - 50 ended up marrying local women.

Fred Kelly, a member of the Goldfields Regiment had been brought to Weymouth after being wounded in action. He married a nurse and eventually they both moved to Kalgoorlie, Western Australia.

Mr Sherwood has set up a **Facebook group** to bring together family stories of the descendants of the Anzacs.

Eighty six soldiers did not make it back to their homelands and died while in Dorset. They are buried in Weymouth and Melcombe Regis cemeteries.

The town observes Anzac Day on 25 April, with a **service at the special memorial** erected on the esplanade.

'Very much at home'

Anne McCosker, a niece of Queensland Lt Fred Martin, has researched her uncle's experiences convalescing at Westham Camp.



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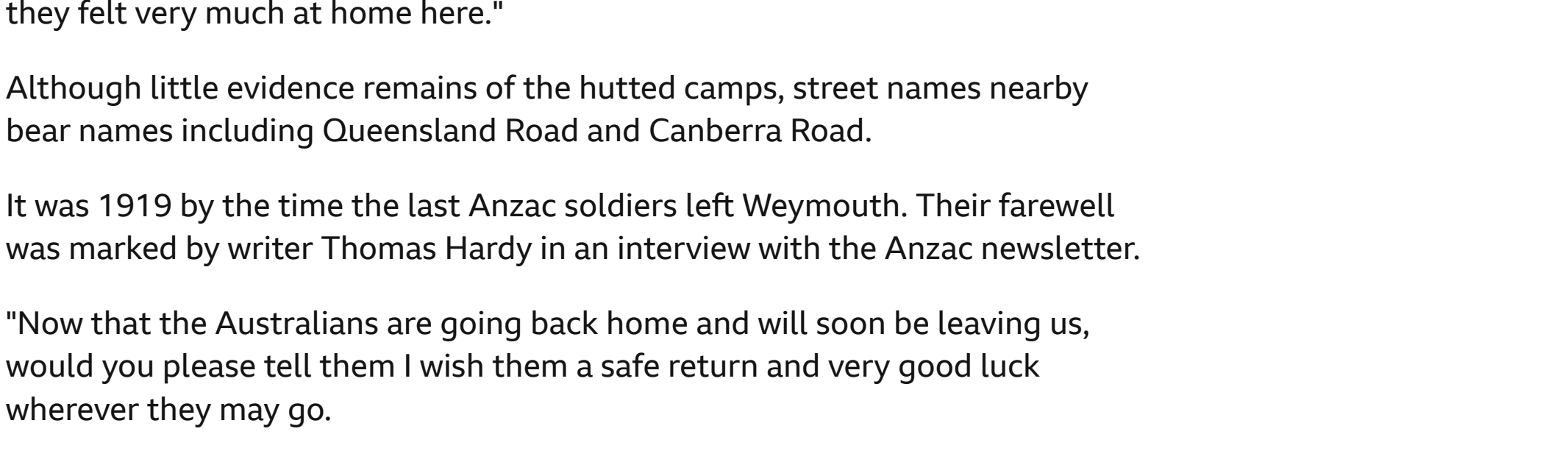
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Australian and New Zealand troops attended dances at the YMCA in Weymouth

"You could hear the different accents - it was more relaxed and trying to pull the Pommey's legs - it was just part of the relationship between the two people," she said.

"All the girls would be eyeing them, as they had the best overcoats and had more money.

"Every night apparently they used to have a punch up, up Boot Hill between the British soldiers and the Australians - it was never very serious.



PETER BARR

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The Anzac soldiers are commemorated on a Portland stone memorial on Weymouth seafront

"They would have loved the Fleet (lagoon behind Chesil Beach) as that reminded them of Queensland - with the lagoons and the more open skies, they felt very much at home here."

Although little evidence remains of the hutted camps, street names nearby bear names including Queensland Road and Canberra Road.

It was 1919 by the time the last Anzac soldiers left Weymouth. Their farewell was marked by writer Thomas Hardy in an interview with the Anzac newsletter.

"Now that the Australians are going back home and will soon be leaving us, would you please tell them I wish them a safe return and very good luck wherever they may go.

"We shall always be glad to see them, to welcome them and hold out the hand of not only friendship, but kinship and fraternal greeting," he said.