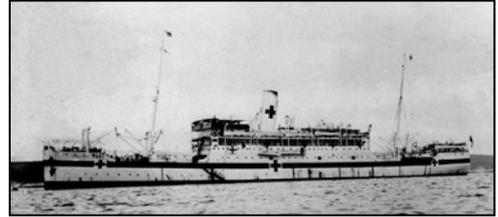


MEDICAL SERVICES IN ORKNEY DURING THE WORLD WARS

While the Grand Fleet used Scapa Flow as its main base during most of the Great War, there was relatively little infrastructure built ashore to provide services and comfort for its sailors. There were usually three or four hospital ships on station at Scapa, most using the Longhope anchorage. HMHS *Agadir* was confined to the treatment of infectious cases, while HMHS *Drina* provided treatment to Prince Albert (later King George VI) in 1915. Hospital ships also treated some local service men whose health broke down while home on leave. They included sailor Thomas Allan of Burray, who died of flu in July 1918 on the hospital ship *Karapara*.



The Orkney civilian medical facilities also treated some military patients, not only local service men. Kirkwall GP Dr George Sinclair, whose home and surgery were at 14 Queen Street [now the Business Gateway building], treated sick and injured service men there as outpatients, but also some at Kirkwall's Balfour Hospital. It had been in Main Street, Kirkwall since the 1840s, in the building that is now the West End Hotel. A significant number of service men were treated there during the Great War, when its deaths included RNR sailor Alex Moar of Birsay from pneumonia in December 1916.

A small naval hospital in St Margaret's Hope treated sailors working in the submarine mining HQ and boom defence depot there. Local Doctor James Dewar, whose home and GP surgery were at 15 Church Road, St Margaret's Hope, most likely helped in the treatment of sick or injured sailors, also some of the soldiers and marines based at the Hoxa Battery. His daughter Isabella was a nurse who served overseas in Taranto, Italy.



In March 1914 wealthy merchant Robert Garden's widow offered to fund building a new hospital, in his memory. Work started on the Garden Memorial Building on the southern outskirts of Kirkwall in New Scapa Road after the Great War. The hospital was designed by Kirkwall architect Thomas Peace and built by local contractor John Firth. When completed in 1926, its main stone building housed an operating theatre, X-ray equipment, a kitchen and stores. There were also 19 hospital beds,

in two 6-bed wards and several small rooms.

During a scarlet fever epidemic in 1920, the Scapa wartime seaplane station was used to house 30 patients. Orkney County Council paid £400 for the building two years later and it was converted into a tuberculosis hospital. The Main Street building continued in use as a fever hospital, but lost its name Balfour Hospital to the new one officially opened on 6th April 1927 by Lord Lieutenant Alfred Baikie of Tankerness. He was chairman of the board of trustees that, for 20 years with capital funds of £15,000 but otherwise relied on voluntary donations, operated and maintained the new hospital. Its many benefactors included John Flett, from Orphir but built up and ran a successful business in Georgetown, British Guiana, who on his death in 1931 left a legacy of £500 to the hospital.



Another new hospital was built in 1936 on the eastern outskirts of Kirkwall, taking the name of Eastbank. It took over the treatment of tuberculosis patients and the role of fever hospital, using three interconnected stone built blocks. The central administrative block had a kitchen and staff accommodation. The tuberculosis block had 16 beds, in rooms with 1 to 3 beds each opening off a long corridor and many on to an unsheltered balcony. The infectious diseases block had 24 beds, 16 in four wards and 8 in single rooms. The hospital also had an iron lung for polio patients and later a well-equipped laundry that served both the Kirkwall hospitals.

There was also a medical role for Kirkwall's Poor Law Institution (or the County Home), a large stone building on the western outskirts of the town. Its 50 beds housed the aged and infirm, chronic sick (including the mentally impaired) and neglected children, with also 2 beds for maternity cases. Its staff accommodation was scanty, but the home had a large dining hall with kitchen and a small laundry.



From left: pilot Hankins, engineer Macdonald & Dr Sinclair.

After serving two years as a trench mortar battery officer in France, William Sinclair completed his medical studies and joined his father's GP practice in Kirkwall in 1922. It moved to a new house and surgery at Howglen in Willowburn Road in 1927. Dr William Sinclair also had patients in the North Isles and he made several notable ambulance flights there in Rapide aircraft of Captain Fresson's Highland Airways.

Work had started on Orkney's defences several years before the Second World War broke out in September 1939. The sick quarters at the main shore base being built up at Lyness then consisted of only two small wooden huts. One was divided into two: with one part used as a surgery and dispensary, the other as offices and a consulting room. The second hut had a ward with four double bunk beds on either side end-to-end. Patients had to wait for attention in the open air.

Early in 1940 the hospital ships *Amarapoor*, *Vasna*, and *Isle of Jersey* arrived at Scapa. The latter two left in 1941, replaced by the hospital carriers *St. Julian* and *Dinard*. They carried out periodical evacuation south of the hospital cases in the Orkney Command and naval patients were transferred to RN auxiliary hospitals, military patients to Old Mill Hospital, Aberdeen.



Hospital Ship *Isle of Jersey* in Scapa Flow

When the Q Plan was drawn up to significantly increase the defences at Scapa, after the sinking of HMS *Royal Oak* and the October 1939 air raids, steps were also taken to increase hospital provision for the Royal Navy and the much increased Army infantry, coast and anti-aircraft artillery units.

A military hospital was built beside the Balfour Hospital in Kirkwall in 1940, with 84 beds in wooden huts [on the Health Centre site and car park between it and Balfour Hospital]. During 1941 a chemical warfare decontamination centre was added. There were extra huts to private accommodation for the staff, including nurses and the resident surgeon. He was Ian McLure, an RNVR officer in the Great War who transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service and with it to the RAF in 1918, when his right foot was amputated in June after he was wounded over Flanders.



North Ness Hospital on Hoy

The work force and base strength ashore at Lyness reached 10,000 in the summer of 1940, requiring its own hospital. It was built at North Ness, 3½ miles from Lyness with a south facing aspect. When opened in October 1940 it had 66 beds, later 114, in two medical and two surgical wards, with operating and X-ray facilities, also a dispensary and laboratory.

It was an early concern that air raids on Kirkwall and Lyness could hit the only significant military hospitals. The Army Regimental Aid Posts at Kirbister, the Temperance Hall in Stromness and at Longhope were converted into reception hospitals in summer of 1940, then field hospitals with establishment fixed in May 1941 at 50 beds, with 12 RAMC other ranks and 21 VADs staff. The Army opened sick bays at St Margaret's Hope and at Stanger Head on Flotta, the Navy one at Haybrake. The Royal Marines sick bay at Lyness had a large ward of 12 beds and a smaller one of 4. Civilian sick bays were also opened at Lyness, where Balfour Beatty's Camp had 7 beds and Baldry's 10 beds. The RAMC opened a Skin Diseases Hospital in Dounby in the summer of 1940, while the Navy opened isolation quarters at Houton in November 1941. When the field hospital units left Orkney in late 1941, military hospitals were retained at Kirbister and Stromness.

Woodwick House in Evie was used by the Royal Navy as a convalescent home. The hospital ship *Isle of Jersey* arrived back at Scapa in late 1942, to become the only hospital carrier when *Amarapoora* was withdrawn in 1943. Shortly after the first batch of Wrens arrived at Lyness in January 1943 their sick bay opened with a ward of 7 beds, increased to 14 in November, and cabins for 2 officers.



WRNS parade at Lyness

By the middle of 1943 Orkney's wartime medical facilities, like the islands' military garrison, had reached their peak. Both slowly declined, as the war's emphasis moved from a mainly UK defensive posture to a strongly offensive one, with a successful campaign in NW Europe.

Sources: Books & publications:

Howard Hazell, *THE ORCADIAN BOOKS OF THE 20th CENTURY*, Kirkwall Press, 2000 & 2010.
Geoffrey Stell, *Orkney at War: Defending Scapa Flow, Volume 1, World War 1*, Kirkwall Press, 2011.
Department of Health for Scotland, *Scottish Hospitals Survey, NE Region*, HMSO, Edinburgh, 1945.

Sources: War Diaries at the National Archives, Kew:

ADM 116/5790 Main Fleet Base – Scapa Flow Development 1937-1946 (Editor: Patrick Macnamara).
WO 166/1234 Orkney & Shetland Defences HQ, 1939-40.
WO 177/301 ADMS Orkney & Shetlands, 1941 May-June, Aug-Dec.
WO 212/116 OSDef Order of Battle 1942.