The British Home Front during the First and Second World Wars

During the two world wars Britain became an island fortress and a base for equipping and training troops and launching land, sea and air operations. In both conflicts, the skies above the island and the seas that surround her became the scene of fierce fighting involving aircraft, submarines and warships. Britain was also the main centre for the medical care of men and women serving in the armed forces. Thousands of hospitals located across the country were used to treat service personnel who were wounded, fell victim to disease, or were injured in accidents at home or overseas.

Many of the servicemen buried in the United Kingdom were killed in action in the air while defending the home front. Others, mostly naval men, drowned in British coastal waters. However, the majority were wounded or contracted disease on active service, were transported back to Britain, and subsequently died while undergoing hospital treatment or recovering in private homes.

Today over 170,000 men and women who died in the United Kingdom, while serving in the armed forces during the First and Second World Wars, are buried in cemeteries and churchyards throughout the country. Some burials form small war graves plots within larger cemeteries, but the majority are scattered throughout cemetery grounds. In all, there are Commonwealth war graves in almost 12,500 different locations throughout the United Kingdom.

Haslar Royal Naval Cemetery

The Royal Hospital Haslar opened to patients in October 1753 and for the next century all those who died there, or aboard ships at Spithead or in Portsmouth Harbour, were buried in the grounds of the hospital. The Haslar Cemetery closed in 1859 and the Clayhall Cemetery opened for the internment of naval personnel. Funeral processions went regularly from the hospital to the cemetery and the road running the length of the hospital became known as ‘Dead Man’s Lane’. During the First World War the hospital had 2,000 beds and served Gosport, which was a significant seaport and naval depot, as well as the No. 5 Squadron Royal Flying Corps, which was based there. During the Second World War the town acted as a base to No. 17 Group Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy Light Coastal Forces.

Haslar Royal Naval Cemetery contains over 770 service burials dating from the First World War, of which two are unidentified. Most of the graves are scattered throughout the cemetery but 42 officers and men of HM Submarine L.55, whose bodies were brought back from the Baltic in 1928, lie buried in a collective grave and their names appear on a screen wall memorial.

A significant number of the men buried in this cemetery fell victim to influenza or ‘Spanish Flu’, a global pandemic that killed between 3-6 per cent of the entire global population between 1918 and 1920. It is estimated that as many 250,000 people in Britain died as a result of the disease. The distinctive grave-markers dating from the period of the First World War differ from standard Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstones and are known as ‘admiralty crosses.’

During the Second World War the Royal Naval Hospital once again played an important role in the treatment of military and civilian casualties. The nearby ports were targeted by the Luftwaffe and, as air-raids became frequent, an operating theatre was set up in the basement for the treatment of emergency cases. During the Allied invasion of France in June 1944, which was known as Operation Overlord, hospital staff worked ceaselessly caring for wounded men evacuated straight from the beaches of Normandy.

The cemetery is the final resting place of over 600 Commonwealth servicemen and women who lost their lives during the Second World War, 36 with name unknown. There are also seven foreign national war burials.