

7. Romsey Remount Depot

Horse Power in World War I

When World War I started in 1914, the country was covered by a network of railways, and the internal combustion engine had arrived. Nevertheless, horse-power was still the prime method of moving the Army and its supplies. Indeed, horse-power remained an essential part of every army until the mid-20th century.

Until the late 19th century every regiment provided for itself. Then the Army Remount Service was created, its objective being to procure horses, mules, donkeys and even camels for the whole Army. The Boer War proved that this new scheme was a success, and it was developed. The Service made surveys of the horse population, and also investigated the possibilities of purchasing animals from overseas.

By the start of the 1914-18 war, the Remount Service was surprisingly well prepared. Romsey became one of its key centres for the duration. Construction of a camp, at the top of Pouncefoot Hill, began in November 1914. Throughout the war, until his promotion a few weeks before Armistice Day, the commandant was Col. Sir H.M. Jessel, MP, who kept a detailed diary which he later published.

The camp covered nearly 500 acres, centred around Ranvilles Farm, and was built by private contractors, who employed some 800 men. It was designed in two sections, North Camp and South Camp, with the officers' quarters and the military hospital between the two.

By 1916 there were over 2,000 men stationed at this camp. They were divided into ten squadrons, each squadron containing about 40 'rough riders', who broke in young horses, a farrier sergeant, shoeing smiths and saddlers. As the war progressed, it became increasingly difficult to find suitable men for these trades, especially as many men were medically upgraded as fit to fight at the front.

There were often more than 4,000 horses and mules in the care of the ten squadrons at Romsey. Starting with the arrival of just two horses in March 1915, as many as 830 horses might be

received in a day. The length of stay was probably about a month, either for training or recuperation. At the outbreak of war the British Army possessed 19,000 horses and by the end had purchased another 468,000 in the UK and 688,000 from North America.

In Romsey the horses from distant parts arrived by train; in the up-side goods yard two sidings were laid down with a horse dock. The horses were then walked through the town to the camp, one man to three horses. A steady stream of horses walked from Romsey to Southampton Docks. In March 1917, 1,200 Romsey horses were embarked from Southampton in three days, and another 1,000 in the following week.

Other aspects of the camp included the cultivation of some 40 acres of potatoes, and the saving of old horse-shoes, horse hair, hoof parings, jam jars, old wire and string - all sold to raise money for the camp. The sale of manure raised £4,000 from 1916 to 1918. On the social side the Depot Band became a well known feature of life in the town.

In February 1920 480 huts and 68 horse shelters were advertised for sale at the Remount Camp. Hard core from the site was used in the establishment of the Town Memorial Park. Walking along the old road now from Cutters Barn through to Ridge Farm there is absolutely no indication of the 2,000 men and 5,000 horses that once filled the acres round about.

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