

The Worthys Local History Group, Thursday, November 13, 2014

### The Morn Hill Camps of the Great War

Tony Dowland presented a talk on the Morn Hill Camps – a subject which has interested him ever since he visited the site with his granny in 1942; and he has recently been speaking both on television and radio about this period. Tony is of course a longstanding member of this group.

Although the name Morn Hill has been used by locals for a long time it does not seem to appear on any maps. The site has, however, a long history of being used by the militia right back to the 1760s and possibly even earlier; and there are photos of the Hampshire volunteers there in 1905 mainly in tents although there were a few permanent buildings.

In 1914 the British Expeditionary Force, which comprised much of the small regular army, suffered enormous casualties in the first months of the war. As a result other divisions were rapidly withdrawn from across the British Empire, with territorial units being sent out to replace them.

Two of these divisions the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> were assembled on Morn Hill under canvas in what became appalling conditions in a very severe winter. The situation was aggravated by the fact that they were still in their tropical kit. Conditions eventually became so bad that 10,000 troops had to be billeted in Winchester, in schools, church halls and private houses.

Huts were rapidly constructed, eventually sufficient to house 50,000 men, but there were still tents in 1915 as the camp gradually extended

eastwards. Other facilities were built, including those run by the YMCA and the Salvation Army, and there are photos of water tanks arriving to be installed.

The two divisions were marched on their way to France in an enormous column apparently extending all the way from Morn Hill to Southampton. After that the camp became a transit camp with most troops just staying for a matter of days.

In 1917 American troops started to arrive. Many will have gone directly to France. However, enormous numbers started to arrive at Liverpool and passed through Morn Hill, staying briefly before travelling on to Southampton.

The Americans built a 250 bed hospital for these troops, and an Officers Mess, which is now the private house opposite the gates to the cemetery. They even built a 2.5 mile railway line up to the camp, which was intended to transport stores. However, it was only completed in October 1918 a month before the Armistice.

553 American soldiers and nurses were buried in the cemetery, many doubtless from the 1919 influenza epidemic, although their remains were subsequently repatriated or moved in the early 1920s.

The only other building, apart from the Officers Mess, which has survived is the forage store which is now used by a fencing company. However, at the end of the war the huts were sold off very cheaply and a number were re-erected along Springvale as temporary housing.