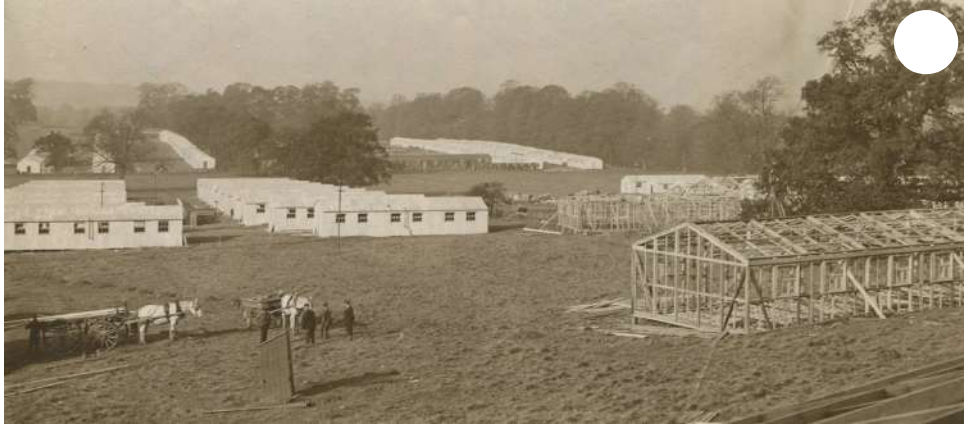

Belton Park and the First World War



Belton Camp under construction 1914 | National Trust

Adelbert, 3rd Earl Brownlow, had considerable political experience of war, not least as Under-Secretary of State for War (1889-1892). He had seen the need for a strong army and good training through Britain's involvement in the Boxer Rebellion and Second Boer War. It therefore came as no surprise that he offered the use of his estates at Belton and Ashridge to the War Office soon after war was declared in 1914.

Belton Park and the First World War

Walking across the park at Belton you'll discover a place away from the bustle of town life, where you can watch the fallow deer grazing peacefully. As you enjoy the tranquillity of this scene you may occasionally come across an old pipe, some concrete or a hollow in the ground that doesn't quite seem natural. These are the clues of a different scene 100 years ago, of Belton Park Camp when 20,000 men at a time were training before heading off to the Front Lines.

A Kitchener Camp is built

Despite the popular belief that the war would be over by Christmas, Field Marshal Kitchener, Britain's new Secretary of State for War, predicted long, drawn out hostilities, and that the British Army would need more men. On 21 August 1914, under Army Order No.324 the formation of the first six new divisions in Kitchener's New Army was authorised. One of these was the 11th (Northern) Division.

Almost 2.5 million men volunteered to join the New Army, and it wasn't long before the government realised that they didn't have the infrastructure to house and train them all. Schools and warehouses were requisitioned and locations for new, temporary training camps were sought.

It came as no surprise when Adelbert, 3rd Earl Brownlow, donated the use of his estates at both Belton and Ashridge to the War Office soon after war was declared. He was a prominent gentleman in the local community, had served as Lord Lieutenant of Lincolnshire and Mayor of Grantham, and was involved in politics throughout his long tenure as Earl Brownlow. As a Privy Counsellor (from 1887), Under-Secretary of State for War (1889-1892) and Volunteer Aide-de-Camp (from 1897) to three monarchs, Adelbert had seen the need for a strong army and good training through British involvement in the Boxer Rebellion and the Second Boer War.

The Belton estate played a significant supporting role in the First World War



National Trust

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From September 1914, bell tents were erected within Belton Park for the temporary accommodation of thousands of soldiers. By April 1915 however, a small town had been built for around 20,000 men of Kitchener's Army, a military base hospital, churches, YMCA huts, a cinema and its own railway line. New electricity, water and sewerage services were provided and, in a change from the traditional design, each regimental line had separate barracks, latrines, wash houses and mess huts.

In many ways to visualise training establishments such as Belton as camps is understating the complexity of engineering, infrastructure demands, social status, religion and recreation facilities which were required - in reality we have to view Belton as a new town, albeit one built to train men to kill.

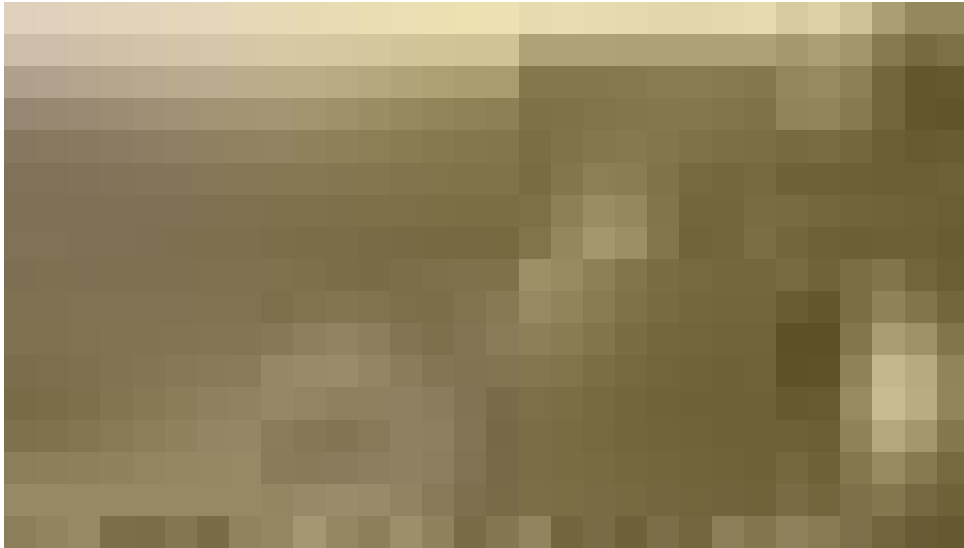
- Stewart Ainsworth, Visiting Professor of Landscape Archaeology, University of Chester

Recruits head off to war

By late spring 1915, the recruits of the 11th (Northern) Division were judged ready and during June and July the division left Grantham and set sail for Gallipoli.

Belton Park Camp then became the base depot and headquarters of the war raised Machine Gun Corps from October 1915, closing in 1922.

11th Northern Division leaving Belton's Machine Gun Corps camp



National Trust

11th Northern Division leaving Belton's Machine Gun Corps camp

The Machine Gun Corps

The First World War was a new type of war, one of trenches and newly developed technologies such as the machine gun. The generals soon found out how important the machine gun was going to be and worked quickly to match the German army's use of this ordnance.

The Machine Gun Corps (MGC) was created by Royal Warrant on 14 October 1915, followed by an Army Order on 22 October. The Base Depot and HQ in England were established at Belton Park and Harrowby Camps with an additional Base Depot in France at Camiers.

Brigadier General Henry Cecil de la Mantague Hill, CB CMG, took command of Belton Park Camp on 18th October 1915 and by November he had 230 officers, 163 guns, 4 wagons, 60 cooks and 3,123 men. There were several 'schools' at Belton Park, from the Machine Gun Corps to Signalling and a Cooks School. The men of the MGC were taught the mathematics of the machine gun, firing, map reading and the use of semaphore flags.

Between 1915 and 1922 around 170,500 officers and men served with the MGC, each man spending a minimum of five weeks in training before being posted to frontlines around the world.

Belton Park Military Hospital

Belton's military hospital [<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/belton-house/features/belton-park-military-hospital>] was run by the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and purpose built within the parkland. Similar in size and structure to hospitals close to the Western Front, it was built to care for men returning from active service. This hospital was the penultimate stop on a soldier's journey home after being wounded on the front lines. However, given the size of the Belton Park Camp, the hospital was also kept busy with the medical needs of soldiers in training.

The RAMC doctors, supported by nurses and volunteers, were seeing patients at the very beginning of 1915. With several wards, operating rooms, an X-ray room and dispensary, this modern hospital could hold 670 patients at a time.

Belton Park Military Hospital, 7 July 1918



National Trust

Belton Park Military Hospital, 7 July 1918

The YMCA

The YMCA was a constant feature of the recreational side of army life during the First World War, providing a home away from home for the soldiers. There were two such huts at Belton Park, run by volunteers that included Adelaide, Countess Brownlow. With weekly sing-a-longs, comic sketches, variety acts, competitions and games there was always something to keep the soldier entertained.

Refreshments were available with hot tea and coffee and dolly cakes (thought to be smaller versions of cakes). They provided notepaper and envelopes to encourage letters home and as many as 1500 letters were posted from Belton Park each day. At the end of every day, the hut would be full of soldiers at Family Prayers that included a hymn, a brief bible reading and a prayer.

The Machine Gun Corps was based at Belton Park during the Frist World War



National Trust

The Machine Gun Corps was based at Belton Park during the Frist World War

Throughout Belton Park and Harrowby Camps you would have heard a variety of accents and seen a number of different uniforms. Each Commonwealth army had its own Machine Gun unit that was similar to and worked closely with the British MGC. From accounts in Grantham Journal, personal papers and local Commonwealth War Graves, it's known that Australian, New Zealander and Canadian soldiers, and nurses, were stationed at Belton Park Camp, with many also being patients within the military hospital.

A camp for the Commonwealth

*“They come from earth’s remotest bounds-
Canadian snows and Austral’s plains;
From isles where the roaring trade wind sounds,
And rivers swollen by tropic rains.
Ever they list to the stirring call,
Daring and dauntless night and day;
At danger’s sign into line they fall:
Freely, oh, freely, they price they pay.”*

The price we pay (4th stanza) Sergt. J. Hayes, MGC. Date unknown

A German Prisoner of War Camp

Grantham Camp opened on 30 April 1917 as a summer War Working Camp with 300 German Prisoners of War (POWs). Within the 80 yard square enclosure were 34 tents housing the prisoners, with each prisoner provided with three blankets and a straw paliasse, identical to those supplied to British soldiers. Surrounding these a few gardens were laid out by the German soldiers. Their dining and recreation hall was a large marquee and there were also four or five sheds used for offices, a kitchen and other bits. The exact location of this section within the wider camp is currently un-identified.

Working 48 hours a week, these POWs were employed by the Government in construction and quarrying work. The men were paid 1d an hour (4s a week) and non-commissioned officers received 1½d an hour (6s a week). Much of this could be used in the canteen to buy items like tooth powder (5d per tin) and tea (2s 6d per lb).

The many kindnesses of Countess Brownlow

Lady Adelaide, Countess Brownlow was a well-loved and respected member of the local Belton and Grantham community and, as a friend once said, she “was not satisfied unless she knew every soul in [the village], their characters and peculiarities, their troubles and difficulties”. With Kitchener’s Army and then the Machine Gun Corps based in Belton Park, Adelaide became heavily involved in the war effort.

As President of the Lincolnshire Branch of the Red Cross Society, she was influential in raising funds and gifts for wounded soldiers, recruiting and supporting Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment workers, and helped with events like 'Happy Thought Day'. She sat on the Local Women's War Committee and opened two soldiers' rest homes in Grantham.

Her many kindnesses were recorded in the Grantham Journal, and included providing a hot drink and a meat pie to each man leaving Grantham for the Front, opening the Belton gardens as a respite for soldiers and local residents, and volunteering in the YMCA huts.

The archaeology of the camp

Two archaeological investigations have been carried out on the site of Belton Park Camp. Channel 4's Time Team examined the site as part of their 20th series in 2012. Later in 2015, further investigations took place as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Young Roots programme [<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/belton-house/features/lest-we-forget-beltons-bravest>]. During the archaeological surveys Belton's conservation teams gained an increased understanding of the significance of the site. The combination of the history of the site and the survival of archaeological remains makes it of national as well as local significance.

The landscape archaeological remains are a unique survival of this type of archaeology. As well as the clear layout of the building shapes, there are distinct archaeological remains not shown on the contemporary plan of the site created at the time of the camp, including an officer's sand pit, bayonet practice sites and other landmarks.

I was staggered by the richness of the evidence and physical survival of many of the components of this camp and how closely these remains, mostly evidenced by low earthworks, matched the layout on the maps and photographs. The reason I was surprised by this richness, is that it is very rare for the archaeological evidence for camps of this period and size to survive in any form above ground on the scale that is exhibited at Belton Park.

- Stewart Ainsworth, Visiting Professor of Landscape Archaeology, University of Chester

Finding out more

Sadly many of the official records of Belton Park Camp, the Machine Gun Corps and Belton Park Military Hospital no longer exist. More detailed information is however contained in 'An introduction to the Machine Gun Corps at Belton House' written by volunteers of the Belton House Research Group, which can be purchased from Belton's Gift Shop.

If you have any information to share about any aspect of Belton Park Camp, please email belton@nationaltrust.org.uk
[mailto:belton@nationaltrust.org.uk?subject=Belton%20Park%20Camp].

If you require more information about individuals who served in the Machine Gun Corps, please contact [The Machine Gun Corps Old Comrades Association](http://www.machineguncorps.co.uk) [http://www.machineguncorps.co.uk].

