Scottish National Institution for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors

At a meeting in January 1915, the committee running the Scottish National Institution for the Blind discussed the duty devolving upon them to do something to meet the needs of Scottish soldiers and sailors who had lost or might lose their sight in the War, and the facilities for instruction in Braille which they had at West Craigmillar, Edinburgh.

It was remitted to the Chairman and Committee members to obtain particulars of Scottish soldiers and sailors blinded in the War, and to report what action the Institution should take to meet their needs in the way of blind instruction and training.

On Wednesday, 14 April 1915, at a meeting at 58 Nicolson Street, the Chairman reported that it had come to his knowledge that the National Institute for the Blind in London had appointed a collector in Edinburgh.

As a result, he had inserted an advertisement in The Scotsman, calling attention to the fact that the Scottish Institution was organizing a scheme to deal with blinded sailors and soldiers, and asking the public meantime to withhold support from the National Institute’s appeal.

He had also written a letter to the Editor of The Scotsman to the same effect.

It was noted that enquiries had been made at the Scottish Military Headquarters about the numbers of blinded soldiers, and a letter from Reverend Dr Patrick R Mackay, Chaplain to the Forces, indicated that the military authorities were to furnish the Institution with full particulars of all soldiers whose vision had suffered through the war.

The Committee recommended that the Institution establish in Edinburgh a training centre where blind Scottish sailors and soldiers could be "taught to be blind", trained to read and write in Braille, and trained in suitable handicrafts.

If necessary, a residence or hostel was to be established for the temporary accommodation of those receiving training.

The Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross Society, the various Scottish Institutions and Societies for the Blind, and the Naval and Military Authorities, were invited to co-operate in the work by reporting to the Institution all blind sailors and soldiers coming to their attention.

Application was made to the National Relief (Prince of Wales) Fund, and the Scottish Red Cross Society, for grants to meet the expenses to be incurred, and an appeal was made to the public for subscriptions.

On Thursday, 1st July a concert was held in the Central Hall for the benefit of the Scottish Women’s Hospital for work in Serbia, and the Institution's Annual Sale of Work was held at West Craigmillar on Friday, 2 July.

The concert in Central Hall raised £40.9s.9d after deductions for expenses.
The total sum handed to the Scottish Women’s Hospital for work in Serbia became £45 when £1.1 Os.3d was added from the entertainment put on by children in the Institution’s gymnasium, and a sum of £3 voted for school prizes which was given by children.

At this time the Institution was hoping to be recognised by the War Department as the training centre in Scotland for blinded soldiers and sailors. This appeal was launched in 1915.

On Thursday, 27 January 1916, approval was given by the Board for an application to the War Office for recognition of the Institution as the Scottish Training Centre for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors, and to take all steps necessary to follow up the application and to secure the recognition desired.

The Lord Advocate had agreed to receive a deputation from the Directors on the matter, the Lord Provost was taking an interest, and had offered to countersign the application as having his cordial support.

It was agreed that a deputation would go to London if thought advisable.

At a meeting at 58 Nicolson Street on Tuesday, 22 February 1916, it was recorded that the Lord Advocate had received a deputation favourably, and promised to write the Secretary for Scotland and the Under-Secretary of State for War in support of the Asylum’s application.

Members of Parliament for the City and for Leith Burghs had been approached to support the application.
At a meeting at 58 Nicolson Street on Friday, 25 February 1916, it was reported that Newington Flouse, which contained 21 rooms, and had extensive grounds and ample offices, might be secured, and an offer had been made to lease the house for five years from Whitsunday 1916, with a mutual break at the end of three years, at a rent of £200 per annum. It was understood the offer would be accepted.

In view of this it was resolved not to renew the tenancy of the hostel at 37 Grange Loan and to transfer the music students to Newington House.

The arrangements made by the Asylum were communicated to the War Department.

The Asylum’s offer to lease Newington Flouse was accepted and a letter was sent to the present tenants, Dr and Mrs Bartholomew, thanking them for the way they had helped the Institution in the matter.

Newington House was built by the distinguished Edinburgh surgeon, Benjamin Bell of Hunthill, in 1805. Many prominent people lived in the area, for example, Andrew Usher, the Edinburgh Brewer and donor of the Usher Hall. Some of the villas in the area also housed the famous - David Octavius Hill, the pioneer photographer, who helped found the Royal Scottish Academy, lived in Newington Lodge, on the corner of Mayfield Terrace and Dalkeith Road.

Dr Joseph Bell, the inspiring teacher of Arthur Conan Doyle and, allegedly, an early model for Sherlock Holmes, was the first resident of 44 Blacket Place. Newington House on Blacket Avenue, was occupied by Dr John Bartholomew of the famous map-making firm, whose Edinburgh Geological Institute was opened in nearby Duncan Street in 1911. From 1915 Newington House became the centre for the Scottish National Institute for the War Blinded but eventually fell into disrepair and was demolished in the 1960s (The site was then purchased by the University of Edinburgh, which built student flats there).
A public meeting in support of the Institution's scheme for dealing with Blinded Scottish Soldiers and Sailors was arranged to be held in the Council Chambers on Tuesday, 7 March, at 3 pm, under the chairmanship of the Lord Provost.

In May 1916 a deputation went to London and had meetings with the Scottish Members of Parliament, the Lord Advocate, and the Secretary for Scotland, and afterwards had an interview with the Under-Secretary of State for War and the Secretary of the Army Council. The Asylum deputation had been sympathetically received in all quarters, and it was expected that recognition would be granted.

In July 1916, the death was recorded of the Institution’s physician, Dr Melville Dunlop. For 27 years he had enjoyed the full confidence of the Directors for the way he fulfilled his duties towards the workers, by whom he was trusted. In 1915 his services were required by the military authorities for work among the soldiers at the Front, and the Directors had granted him leave of absence, which, because of his services at a Base Hospital in France, had to be extended on two occasions. His health was undermined as a result of his devotion to duty.

In October 1916, a letter was received from Lord Derby recognising Newington House as the Scottish National Institution for training blinded soldiers. Scottish military hospitals were now advising the superintendent of Newington House of all blinded men entering these hospitals. A special paid representative of Newington House was appointed in London, with full powers to make all arrangements necessary to secure the transfer of blinded men from London to Newington House.

Subsequent annual reports give a good picture of the work being carried out at Newington House.

**Scottish Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors**

**1916 Annual Report**

**Newington House**

The Directors are happy to report that this scheme has been successfully launched.

A very generous response has been made to their appeal to the Scottish public to provide in Scotland for Scotsmen blinded in the war. Newington House, to which entry was obtained at Whitsunday, is admirably adapted as a residence and training centre for the men. It is comfortable and commodious and the grounds by which it is surrounded are exceedingly beautiful.

The principal Outdoor Teaching Societies have been invited to co-operate in carrying out the scheme, and representatives of the Edinburgh Society for Teaching the Blind to Read, the Fife and Kinross Society for Teaching the Blind, and the Aberdeen Association for Teaching the Blind have joined the Committee. Sir Robert K Inches has also become a Member of Committee, and the Directors take this opportunity of acknowledging the invaluable services which, as Lord Provost of the City, he has rendered to the furthering of the scheme.
It is gratifying also to record that the War Office has recognised Newington House as the Scottish National Centre for the training and instruction of blinded soldiers and sailors.

Quite a number of men have already been benefitted by the scheme. There has, however, been some little unavoidable delay in completing the arrangements for getting in touch with the men at No 2 General Hospital, Chelsea, where men whose sight has been destroyed or injured are, as far as possible, sent. The Scottish Command has also arranged for Newington House to be advised of all blinded men in Scottish military hospitals. It is expected, therefore, that the accommodation at Newington House will be fully utilized shortly.

While the instruction and training which the blinded men will receive immediately after reception loom largest in the public eye meantime - and perhaps also in the minds of the men themselves - the Directors would emphasise that such instruction and training are but the beginning of the work. The aftercare of the men will be the real burden. When the training is completed there will remain a long, long vista of years - for all our soldiers are young men - during which they will have to be provided with work, cared for and cheered. And the glamour of wartime will then be over, the enthusiasm for war charities will have vanished; but the men will remain, the sightless eyes will remain, and the need will probably be as great 10 years, 15 years hence, as today. Nay, perhaps greater as Scotsmen trained elsewhere will in later years gravitate back to Scotland.

It is for this later and permanent burden, as well as the present need, that the Newington House scheme is intended to provide. The Directors would very earnestly urge that it is of the utmost importance that a Large Permanent Fund should be provided now, so that in days to come, when public interest is elsewhere, Scotland's blinded sons may rest secure without fear of pinch or poverty.

The Newington House Fund is of course kept entirely separate and administered apart, from the General Funds of The Royal Blind Asylum and School.

A 1916 Report on Newington House

One of the most interesting developments of the work of the Royal Blind Asylum during the past year has been the effort made to assist sailors and soldiers blinded in the war.

The exigencies of transport and the necessity for finding accommodation for casualties from the battlefield have resulted in the distribution of wounded men throughout the hospitals of this country, in the first instance, without regard to their nationality, domicile, or proper military headquarters. Thus the majority of Scotsmen suffering from injury to their eyes and eyesight have been treated in English hospitals, while many Englishmen have at first been committed to the care of Scottish surgeons. Although at a later stage those who are sufficiently recovered to return to duty have been gradually drafted back to their own regimental depots, the more seriously damaged, when discharged as unfit for further service, may still be far from home.
Under these circumstances, several Scottish soldiers blinded in the earlier stages of the war have found their way to the institution organised at St Dunstan's, Regent's Park, London, by Sir Arthur Pearson.

The Directors of the Blind Asylum are well aware of the difficulty which we have had in Edinburgh of getting into communication with those of our gallant fellow-countrymen whom we have been most anxious to assist.

No special record of cases suitable for Newington House is kept at the military headquarters in Edinburgh, nor can the committee in London, charged with the preparation of medical statistics supply, as yet, the requisite information; but a list was obtained from the authorities of Chelsea Hospital, of Scottish soldiers who have been discharged on pension on account of loss of eyesight.

It was found that most of these were already at St Dunstan's, but immediate steps were taken to communicate with the others who were not thus provided for, with the following results.

**Private John Martin** (34), Reservist of the HLI, was recalled to his Regiment at the beginning of the war. He fought at Mons and the Aisne, and was then sent to Flanders. In November 1914 he was seriously wounded at Ypres by the bursting of a hand grenade. His face was cut, his lower jaw fractured, his right eye totally destroyed, and his left so seriously injured that a cataract formed in it, and even after this was extracted the eye remained for a long time irritable. And the vision so defective, that he was discharged from the Army as no longer fit for service. He came under my care after his return to Edinburgh, and underwent a further operation upon his surviving eye, with the happy result that now, with the aid of glasses, he is able to go about freely, and can read comparatively small print. As at one time there seemed a risk that his vision might not be so well restored, he was placed for a time under the care of Mr Stone, and received instruction in reading from Braille. Every effort was made to see that he was well cared for until he was able to maintain himself by sighted occupation. He now has charge of the rooms of the Australasian Students’ club, where he resides with his wife and children.

**Private Benjamin Mackenzie** (30) of the Seaforth Highlanders was a farm labourer prior to his enlistment in July 1905. In December 1914 he was wounded at Neuve Chapelle upon the left side of the face by a piece of shell casing, which destroyed his left eye, and while still lying in the motor ambulance before leaving the firing line, he was struck by a shrapnel bullet behind the right ear. He was discharged from the Army as unfit for further service. The right side of his face was paralysed and he could not close his eye properly. The left side of his face was greatly disfigured by the loss of the eye and eversion of the lower lid. A lady kindly visited him in Forres at my request, and he was invited by Mr Scott to come to Edinburgh, which he did, and was given accommodation at the Hostel. It was found that he had good enough vision in the right eye to enable him to pursue sighted occupation. He was admitted to the Deaconess Hospital, where I performed an operation which considerably diminished the disfigurement on the left side of his face. He was assisted to find employment with the Tramway Company.
Company Sergeant Major J E A Forsyth (31) comes of a family whose honourable tradition for generations has been to have at least one son in the Army. He was wounded at Loos, in the face, by a piece of shrapnel, and ten days later his right eye had to be removed. The left eye showed no appearance of damage externally, but unfortunately a haemorrhage into the retina, at the most sensitive area at the back of the eye, had greatly reduced its visual power, and necessitated his discharge from the Army. He was at once placed in communication with Mr Stone, who undertook his instruction in typewriting and being a man of quick intelligence, he has proved a most apt pupil. He is also at present engaged as Instructor in Physical Exercises at Craigmillar.

Private D Douglas lost his right eye by an accident in boyhood, but managed to join the Army Service Corps in October 1915. He was employed as labourer on a boat on the river at Rouen, when he was injured by an explosion. Though a native of Leith, he was sent to St Margaret's Hospital, Chelsea, suffering from shock. He was then sent to the Catterick Camp in Yorkshire, and was discharged shortly after, suffering from heart weakness and greatly impaired vision. After that he was sent for a short time to St Dunstan's Training School. As his eyesight improved he returned home to Leith. Here he was visited by Mr Stone, as well as examined by myself, and assisted to obtain occupation. He is now working with a relative on a farm in Galloway. An offer of assistance was also made to Private J Kennedy, formerly of the Royal Scots, who now resides at Blairgowrie, but in the meantime this has not been accepted, as he is unwilling to leave his wife and his home.

I have been enabled to place two other sufferers in communication with Mr Stone, but they are not yet able to avail themselves of the benefits offered to them. One is still in the Eye Wards of the Royal Infirmary here, and the other in the War Hospital at Bangour.

George Mackay. MD, FRCSE, Ophthalmic Surgeon
17th October 1916

1917 Annual Report
Scottish Blinded Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Hostel
Newington House, Edinburgh

Great progress has been made in the development of this Scheme initiated by the Institution in 1915 for the purpose of training in Scotland and providing for blinded Scottish servicemen.

By arrangement with the Ministry of Pensions, Newington House has undertaken the training and aftercare of all Scotsmen who lose their sight in the service of their country, and the Pension Department has recognised Newington House as the Scottish National Institution for this purpose.

The Hostel is working in co-operation with St Dunstan's Hostel, London, and by arrangement with that Hostel, has undertaken the care of all men settled in Scotland who have been trained at St Dunstan's.
During the year the Hostel has been the means of benefiting many of our blinded heroes, and from present indications the available accommodation will soon all be required. Splendid work is being accomplished. The increased numbers have necessitated the provision of new workshops, and these are in course of erection in the grounds of Newington House.

The financial support has been generous, a sum of £18,971 having been received up to 30th September 1917. One of the happiest features has been the exceedingly generous support which Newington House has received from Scotsmen and Scotswomen abroad.

Very large sums in particular have been subscribed through Scottish Societies in America. But all the money which has been received, and much more, will be needed, for the care and employment of the men will be a lasting burden, extending over many years.

1918 Report on Training at Newington House

There has been great development in this branch of the Institution's work during the year. Commodious workshops have been erected and been in use for some time, and many new occupations for blinded servicemen have been introduced.

The men can now receive instruction in basket making, mat making, boot and shoe repairing, machine-knitting, net making, carpentry, poultry farming, piano tuning and music.

Poultry farming has been especially developed under the instruction of Miss Newbigin of the Edinburgh and East of Scotland College of Agriculture.

Two aftercare supervisors have been appointed and are taking charge of the men trained at St Dunstan's, or Newington House, who are settled in Scotland. This branch of the work will become more important as time progresses.

The aftercare of the many blinded Scotsmen will be a heavy undertaking and one which will make a steady call upon the funds which have been provided by Scotsmen, the world over, for their blinded fellow-countrymen.

A sum of £36,000 has been received up to 30th September, a splendid token of the loyalty of Scotsmen to this Scottish National Institution for the care of Scottish servicemen.
Troops blinded by tear gas await treatment at an Advanced Dressing Station
near Bethune during the Battle of Estaires, 10 April 1918

Forty men have received instruction at Newington House during the year, and there are now 23 men under the charge of its aftercare department.

1918 Annual Report

The Scottish Blinded Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Hostel
Newington House, Edinburgh

The work of the Hostel has been carried out during the year with great success. The accommodation has been taxed to the uttermost, but as a number of men have recently completed their training and been settled in homes of their own, the pressure has been somewhat relieved. Men, however, whose sight has been lost or impaired in the service of their country, are still coming forward for training, and there are at present 25 men under instruction at Newington House. Upwards of 70 men have received instruction or benefitted from Newington House - men from all parts of Scotland - from Stornoway and Inverness to Dumfries, from all Scottish Regiments, the Royal Field Artillery, Royal Garrison Artillery, Royal Engineers, Tanks, Army Service Corps, Labour Corps. In different parts of Scotland men have been settled in poultry farms or in business. Other men have been returned to their homes to practice in a smaller way other trades and occupations. The Hostel provides each man with a sum of at least £150 to set him up on completing his training. There are two Aftercare Inspectors, who regularly visit the outside men and advise and help them in every way possible. The aftercare work will in due course of time become the more important part of the Hostel.

The total sum provided for the upkeep of the Hostel since the inception of the scheme, including all subscriptions, donations and legacies, and a grant from the National Relief Fund, amounts to £82,855.

The Directors acknowledge with sincere thanks the following legacies to the Hostel received during the year.
Miss Mary Mackay, Pollokshaws, Glasgow £500. 0. 0
Miss Jane Wilkie, Edinburgh £100. 0. 0
Mrs Janet Love, 7 Ronald Street, Coatbridge £26.13. 11
Miss Helen Somerville Shaw, Strathallan, Hope Terrace, Edinburgh £101. 0. 10
Mrs Elizabeth Hunter Blair, 11 Ainslie Place, Edinburgh £3,000. 0. 0
Mrs Fisher, Corrievinn, Gordon Terrace, Edinburgh £100. 0. 0
£3,827. 14. 9

On 21st November, 1918, His Majesty the King, who was accompanied by Her Majesty the Queen and HRH the Prince of Wales, honoured the work of the Hostel by arranging a stoppage at Salisbury Place in the course of his progress through the City, and addressing the men from the Hostel, who were drawn up to receive them.

Field Marshall Earl Haig and General Baron Horne also paid a visit to the Hostel on 29th May 1919. The visit gave great pleasure to the men. In the course of the year many others - official representatives and noblemen - visited the Hostel and were greatly delighted with the manner in which the men were cared for and trained at Newington House.

By Order of the Board of Directors
Thomas Burns, DD, Chairman
Edinburgh, December 1919

Report for Six Months to 31st March 1920

Scottish National Institution for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors
Newington House, Edinburgh

The work of this Institution has been carried on with much success in all Departments during the past six months. A good many men have completed their training during this period and have been satisfactorily settled in business on their own account.

Their places have been filled by others. There is still a steady influx of men whose sight has been so injured or impaired by the War that they are not able to follow ordinary sighted occupations. It was thought that as soon as the actual fighting stopped, the stream of sightless and disabled men would stop also.

But, alas, no; still they come! Happily, Newington House is able to deal with all blinded servicemen desiring admission, and it must be a great satisfaction to the subscribers to know that the necessary training is available in Scotland.

At 31st March there were 35 men under training at the Institution and Department.

The total sum provided for the upkeep of the Hostel, including all subscriptions, donations, and legacies, amounts £93,915.

The Directors gratefully acknowledge the following legacies.
Mrs Alfred Goldsmid, 45 Ennismore Gardens, London £150. 0. 0
Mr David Halley, Murray Park, Crieff £250. 0. 0
Mr John Storrie, 17 Wester Coates Gardens, Edinburgh £50. 0. 0
Sir Andrew McDonald, 40 Lauder Road, Edinburgh £500. 0. 0
"From a Friend" £136.16. 7
£1,086.16. 7

Company Sergeant Major Robert Middlemiss, 2nd Kings Own Scottish Borderers, born at Edinburgh in 1880, he was the fifth son of John Middlemiss, a Dairy and Provision Merchant, and Catherine Gray Middlemiss, of 12 East Arthur Place, Edinburgh. He enlisted at Edinburgh in 1898 and was medically discharged in 1915 when he was blinded by shrapnel during the Galipolli campaign. He then went to St Dunstan's to "Learn to be Blind". In 1916, he was asked by the Permanent Blind Relief War Fund to go to America and Canada on a year-long lecture and fund-raising tour. On 3 May 1916, Robert and his wife, Beatrice, set sail for the USA on the SS Adriatic. On the tour they met many influential statesmen, authors and actors and visited many cities including New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, Nashville, Cleveland and in Canada, Toronto. The Middlemiss' returned in May 1917.

A report in the Review said, "The Sergeant Major's eloquence bore wonderful fruit among the Americans".

Rob Baker, Collection and Archives Officer of Blind Veterans UK, said, "The time he spent there represents a remarkable commitment for someone who, having enlisted at age 18, had no background in public speaking or fund-raising".

In this photograph Sergeant Major Robert Middlemiss is explaining a knitting board to Helen Keller at the Headquarters of the BFB Permanent Blind Relief Fund.

Robert was employed as a Warehouseman before enlisting and his siblings were John, Thomas, Joseph, Jane and James.
Photographs were used to illustrate what blinded men could do in the world of industry and commerce.

In the photograph on the left, a blinded workman, without any kind of special training, is seen operating a drill press in a large electrical works.

In the photograph on the right, a sightless man is seen making cases for shipping products - a job in which eyesight might well be expected as a requisite.