

Wokingham Remembers

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OUR PAST

Stampede on the Barkham Road!

During the First World War, the War Office located a Remount Depot on the Bearwood Estate, playing a vital role in training horses for the battlefield. STEVE BACON explains how the charge of the light footed brigade owes a debt to Wokingham borough



THE Wokingham district, being part of the Windsor Forest and criss-crossed by so many Rides, has long been connected with horses.

It was a centre for hunting in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, so it was not surprising that the War Office decided to base a Remount Depot here, leasing nearly 300 acres from the Walter family's enormous Bearwood Estate in 1904.

What was surprising was the name. The depot was based around Biggs' and Ellis' Farms, and half of the land was in Barkham, while another two-fifths was in Finchampstead. Only a tenth was in Arborfield which included the main entrance, so it became 'Arborfield Remount Depot'. The 'Bramshill Hunt' pub gives a hint of how important horses have been to the area.

By 1904 most of the local gentry were members of the Garth Hunt, and local people avidly followed its every move either on foot or by reading about each hunt meeting in the local papers. As a spectator sport, it ranked second only to football in terms of newspaper column inches. The Remount Depot duly formed part of the social calendar, and the Point-to-Point meetings drew large crowds until they were suspended in 1914.

What was a Remount Depot? The Army didn't breed its own horses, but bought-in animals from dealers, taking them to depots to train them

up for service. Arborfield's weren't for the cavalry, but for transport. Many horses and mules were brought over to Wokingham Station from Britain and Ireland, and then led along Barkham Road to start their training. After deployment, some might return for treatment if injured or unwell.

The horses were dispersed about the site in order to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, and grazed in the fields. The depot's commanding officer lived within the Remount Depot at the Moat House, built in 1906 just off Biggs Lane.

The staff at the depot were mainly civilians but with serving soldiers filling the key roles, one of whom was Farrier-Major Sergeant William Clark, later becoming the landlord of the 'Swan', located in Eversley Road opposite Birch House where the Veterinary Officer was based. William was remembered as "a very strict man who retained his military bearing and discipline at all times."

On the death of Arthur Fraser Walter, his family was faced with large Death Duties. The War Office bought the site of the Remount Depot in 1911, while most of the Bearwood Estate was put up for sale at auction - though much of it including Bearwood Mansion failed to sell.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 forced a huge upheaval. The civilian employees were called-up but mostly



Horses training at the Remount Depot. The horse lying down is not dead, just resting. Above right: a newspaper advert for point-to-point racing in 1914, while below is Moat House

remained on-site, and were boosted by a more than a hundred grooms who were initially put up in tented accommodation.

It's hard to imagine the quiet of the countryside at the time. One old Arborfield resident in 1973 recalled the distant noises from the goods trains at Wokingham Station in 1910 and the clanking of the empty milk churns being brought back along Barkham Road each morning. Imagine the sounds of untrained horses being herded along that road in the dead of night to the Remount Depot.

These horses had endured a long and hard journey - imagine 500 of them charging along the Barkham road at the same time! They suddenly had freedom and caused all sorts of turmoil when exploring the cottage gardens on the way. No wonder a detachment of soldiers was stationed at the Depot to keep some sort of order; sometimes it took days to gather-up the horses that had wandered off the route.

The sheer scale of the operation had a major impact on the route between



Wokingham and Barkham; at its peak 1,000 horses and mules were brought in every week. The base had expanded by another 100 acres including Langley Common Farm, but with so many horses the depot used surrounding farms for meadows, which made them vulnerable to theft.

In a newspaper article from 1916, two men were charged with stealing two mares that had been turned out at Barkham Park, and were finally traced to Guildford. Alfred Hutt of East Heath, Wokingham, employed as a carpenter at the depot, gave evidence. Mares were valuable, some being sold back to dealers for breeding stock - but these were stolen!

The military commanders, particularly Colonel Badcock and adjutant Captain Goater, were frequently mentioned in newspaper articles. They were well integrated into the villages' social life. The depot had an annual Sports Day both for staff and for villagers.

In peacetime, the Remount Depot

1st CAVALRY BRIGADE
Point - to - Point Races,
Tuesday, March 10th, 1914.

The Course will be over 3½ miles of fair and natural Hunting country at the REMOUNT DEPOT, ARBORFIELD CROSS (nearest Station, WOKINGHAM).

HUNT and FARMERS' RACE for a Sweepstake of £1 each for entrants; Farmers free. A Cup to be presented to the winning Farmer if not less than four starters. For horses the property of Officers of the Aldershot Command and Subscribers to, or of Farmers farming within the limits of the Garth, H.H., and South Berks Hunts. Weight: 12st. 7lb. Winners under National Hunt Rules (Point-to-Point and bona-fide Hunt Meetings excepted) barred.

Entries to close to Major Browning, Queen's Bays, Stonycroft, Aldershot, by 10 p.m., March 5th.

grew further with the purchase of part of Whitehall Farm in Arborfield. Point-to-Point races returned to the social calendar, even attracting the Prince of Wales who suffered spills on the racecourse in 1923 and 1924, and newspapers expressed interest in the fashionable clothes worn by the racegoers. Newspapers also covered the annual Cottage Garden Shows held for the villagers.

In 1937, it was announced that the depot was to close. Up to 100,000 animals had passed through its gates. Even at the end there were 250 horses kept in condition ready for service.

With the mechanisation of the Army, the base became an Ordnance Depot by 1938, and the rest is REME history.

Most of the evidence of REME activity will soon disappear - leaving the Moat House and the 'Sick Lines' as a reminder of the Remount Depot era, plus numerous livery stables and riding schools in the wider area.

About Steve

Steve Bacon manages the website for www.arborfieldhistory.org.uk and has produced two features on the effects of the First and Second World Wars on the local area, compiled from contemporary newspaper reports.

Steve welcomes contributions of memories and photos of local interest. He is currently working on a series of articles for The Wokingham Paper about Bearwood: The Times in the life of the Walter family; The Sale of the Century: Bearwood Auctions 1911; and Bearwood: From Mansion to Hospital to School. Watch this space!

Steve is giving a talk on the Basingstoke-Wokingham Railway on Wednesday, June 24, 7.30pm at Sindlesham Baptist Church to the Model Railway Club. All are welcome.



The Remount Depot, just off Biggs Lane, was a hive of activity during the First World War.

Don't forget Father's Day!

On Sunday, June 21, it's Father's Day, but what do we buy for Dad? Here's an idea: call into the Information Centre at the Town hall this week, lay out £3.50 and buy one of the superb local history books which are on sale. Jim Bell has just published a new set of stories and they are also offered by the town's library. Embrook Post Office on the Reading Road sell Peter Shilham's series on the village of Emmbrook.

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