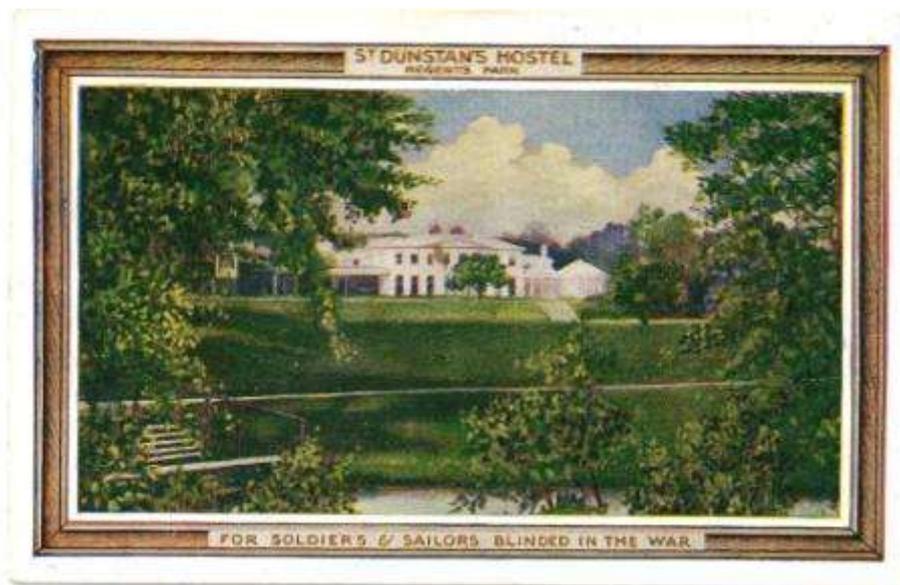


St Dunstan's (Blind Veterans' UK) & St Marylebone



St Dunstan's, now Blind Veterans' UK, was founded in the parish of St Marylebone during World War I. Every Sunday, blinded soldiers and those who cared for them, would walk from St Dunstan's Lodge to the parish church for worship. Today, Blind Veterans' UK still holds an annual Christmas Carol service at the parish church and its headquarters are in nearby Harcourt Street.

www.blindveteransblog.co.uk

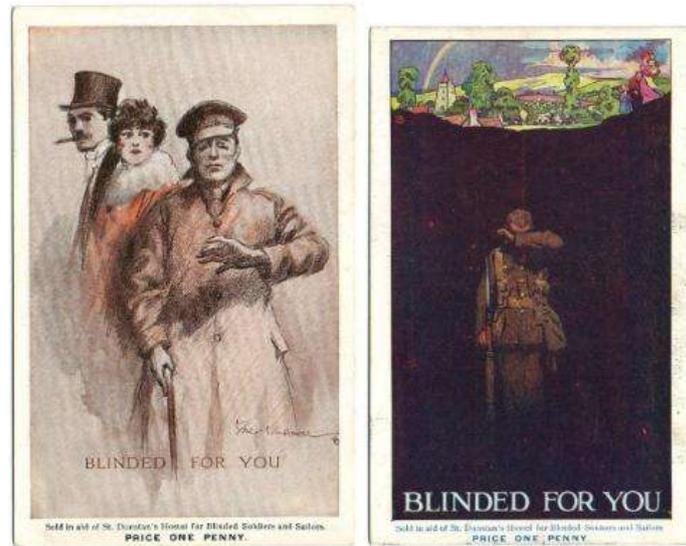


This card, titled "St. Dunstan's Hostel, Regent's Park, for Soldiers & Sailors Blinded in the War" was one of a set of six. It has this caption on the back, "These men, who have given so much for the Empire are living not the passive half-life which is usually held to be the life of the blind, but a full life of interest and endeavour."

In February 1915 a Blinded Soldiers' and Sailors' Hostel opened in London. Initially numbers were small, but soon became clear that the quantity of men blinded in the war would continue to grow. Otto Kahn, an American businessman, loaned his house in Regent's Park with its 6 hectares of ground to Sir Arthur Pearson, himself recently blind from glaucoma, as a place to train the newly blinded men. Although accommodation was provided in other locations including Brighton and Torquay, it is the house in Regent's Park that became closely associated with the blind men from the wars and gave the organisation the name of St Dunstan's, by which it would remain known until the change in 2012 to Blind Veterans UK.

St Dunstan is not, as is often presumed, the patron saint of blindness. The name instead came about through an association with a popular architectural feature, which had originally been located in another part of London. The church of St Dunstan's in Fleet Street had a projecting clock, and the public would go

to see the small wooden men strike the quarter hour with their clubs. In 1830, the Marquis of Hertford bought the clock when the church was demolished and installed it in the house built for him in Regent's Park. From then on the house, designed by Decimus Burton, was known as St Dunstan's Villa and later St Dunstan Lodge.



The card on the left was "Sold in aid of St. Dunstan's Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and sailors." Part of the text on the back reads, "The inmates are living, not the half-life which is usually held to be the lot of the blind, but a life probably fuller than they have ever known but for their blindness . . . These brave men have been blinded for you. Will you not contribute towards their future welfare?" The card on the right was the third in the set of three. Part of the text on the back reads ". . . they are learning things which we with seeing eyes might well believe that no man could ever learn."

As the space was not purpose-built, modifications had to be made to accommodate the blind men. They were simple, yet ingenious ways designed to improve the men's confidence as they 'learned to be blind'. Throughout the house, handrails were installed along the walls with knobs to indicate turns, which provided assistance with negotiating the wide hallways. In the large rooms, paths of linoleum ran across the carpets to help the men move from one side to the other without having to skirt round their perimeters. In the large rooms, visitors were warned to stay on the carpets as the men gained confidence and rapidly walked through the rooms. For the unwary visitor or a newly blinded man, collisions on the pathways were a common occurrence.

Outside the house, guide pathways strung from wire provided the men with the means to cross the wide expanse of terraces and lawns around the house. Wooden boards led into the gravel at the tops and bottom of steps and in front of walls ensured that the number of falls were limited. A slope in the garden meant that the man was approaching Regent's Park Lake.

This card was the first in a set of three and V.C., who studied braille and typewriting at University when the war broke out and in became articled to a firm of solicitors in Frazer, "I am still very fit and have plenty to



was dedicated to Captain Angus Buchanan St Dunstan's. He was a student at Oxford 1919 went back there to study law. He Gloucestershire. In 1942, he told Ian do." He died two years later.

The proximity of the lake to the house provided a recreational space for the men to take up sports such as rowing, and the grounds allowed them to take up activities such as walking and running. St Dunstan location within a public park mean that the men were exposed to an audience who marvelled at their sporting prowess as they participated in competitions that included running, towing and climbing.

Covered walkways with handrails were built to guide the men to temporary buildings erected in the grounds. These housed classrooms and workshops that were designed by Pearson in an E shape, possibly to facilitate ease of movement. The men were taught a range of skills including Braille and were also trained for a diverse range of jobs including masseur and telephone operator.

The end of the First World War inevitably saw a decline in the numbers of men admitted and requiring training, although new cases of blindness continued, some as a result of delayed effects of exposure to gas. As a result training and rehabilitation activities moved in 1927 from Regent's Park to West House in Brighton, which was still caring for those who required longer-term convalescence and providing holiday breaks for those who had completed training. By 1935, however, it was apparent that West House could no longer cope with all these functions. The decision was taken to move to a new, larger and purpose-built centre.



St Dunstan's at Ovingdean, Brighton, opened in 1938

The new building was on the outskirts of Brighton, at Ovingdean. Its design was influenced by knowledge of the success and deficiencies of the previous buildings at Regent's Park, West House and elsewhere, and by those who would be using it: the Chairman, Ian Fraser, wrote to all members to ask for their thoughts and practical suggestions. The responses ranged from broad practicalities such as the number of lavatories to more particular elements of design and layout – for example, requests for the use of rugs rather than linoleum strips in the bedrooms.

The architect was Francis Lorne of the Brunet, Tait and Lorne partnership. He designed a striking six-storey art deco building (now listed Grade II) of fireproof steel and brick, which from a distance looked like an aeroplane. A large amount of glass was used, in order to catch sunlight and heat. Each floor was almost identical, with straight passages and rounded corners. The stairs had self-closing swing gates. A scale model of the building was placed near the entrance, so that newcomers could learn the size, shape and relative positions of the rooms and corridors. As Fraser later wrote: 'Ovingdean was designed to meet the specific needs of the blind more completely than had been done anywhere in the world'.

The centre opened in 1938 and would soon also be needed for a new generation of war-blinded men and women. The grounds, whilst not comparable with the expanse of Regent's Park, nevertheless afforded space for a wide variety of sporting activities. Some of these were also pursued indoors, especially after an extension in 1975 added facilities including a swimming pool and a bowling rink.



Henry Ellingham

Born: June 6, 1896, Upper Clapton

Died: July 18, 2009, Ovingdean

Ovingdean has catered not only for the Second World War generation but also the smaller but still significant numbers blinded in subsequent conflicts up to including the current Afghanistan campaign. Following a change in construction in 2000 it can also now help those who have lost their sight for reasons unconnected with military service, such as macular degeneration. Those who had served in the First World War continued for decades thereafter to join the charity, several hundred of them during the Second World War. The last of all was Henry Allingham, who joined in 2004 at the age of 108, became a permanent resident at Ovingdean, and died there at the age of 113 in 2009. Now one of the three regional centres of Blind Veterans UK, the building celebrates its 75th anniversary this year (2014).



Blind Veterans' UK at St Marylebone Parish Church in December 2013

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