



Durrington
In The News
-from Australia

SALISBURY PLAIN

WHERE DIGGERS LIVED

PLACE OF SILENCE

Ten years ago most of the Salisbury Plain, from Heytesbury to Weyhill, and from Rushall to Old Sarum was given over to the Diggers. Australian and New Zealand, with a few Canadian and Imperial units, says a writer in the Auckland "Star".

To-day the visitor finds nothing to recall the men of the Southern Cross but the cemeteries at Durrington and Tidworth, where the names of the men from overseas outnumber the British and German by ten to one.

Archaeologists can deduce a lot of things about Stonehenge, that magnet to every soldier who trained in Wiltshire – that some of the largest stones were rolled on tree-trunks from distant Wales; that it was not built by Druids, but by men who lived nearly 2000 years B.C. and so on. But it is doubtful if any one today could deduce from the dumb evidence of Nature that an army from the South had ever set foot on the Plain. Nearly all traces of those virile strangers from overseas have been obliterated. One needs to have known them in their habit as they lived, and to have known them well, to be able to reconstruct any of their old haunts.

A PICTURE FROM THE PAST

The gim-crack metropolis of this little home service kingdom was Lark Hill. Picture it as it was in another autumn. The rain is falling gently, darkly, persistently, as it mostly does in this part of England during about nine months of the year. Out of the grey mists that shroud the crossroads leading respectively to Durrington, Bulford, Amesbury and Lark Hill emerges the garish new property of the Portsmouth Untied Breweries.

From this house of call, along the Packway to Lark Hill and beyond it stretches, in this other autumn, an almost unbroken line of temporary buildings. Black, one-storied, wooden, with the simple architectural design of dog-kennels, they crawl up and down hill as shops, drill-halls, church institutes, officers' and sergeants' messes, "clinks," and other requisites of the military life.

At all hours of the day and well into the night, an unending line of tall, free-striding troops from beyond the seas moves restlessly to and fro. They walk, singly or in pairs, or they ride furiously on horseback; they drive in cars, in lorries, and in G.S. wagons. Drafts marching distrustfully in, pass drafts marching joyously out to France.

Comes an Imperial subaltern looking self-conscious for the salute that he knows in his heart he will never achieve. As it happens, he is wrong. A martial roar is heard, and a dozen flaxen-haired, bullet-

headed men down shovels and spring to cast-iron attention. He has been observed by a feld-webel in charge of a German working party.

PLACE OF SILENCE

To-day Lark Hill is a place of silence. Some R.F.A. batteries use it; but the British Tommy, where he is not a Guardsman, has a genius for making himself inconspicuous and in the course of a motor drive from Amesbury to the old military post office south of Normanton Down, not half a dozen of the breed were to be seen. Four-fifths of the hutments have been swept away altogether, and only such landmarks as the cinema, the Anglican Hall in which ecclesiastics as eminent as the Bishop of London sometimes preached and the chief paper shop remain.

Utter ruin has overtaken the camp. The murky wooden building which was the headquarters, from whose verandah hung the piece of iron which was beaten nine times as a signal that the morning parade was begun, and in whose super-heated orderly-room the aged disciplinarian heard with never-failing rage and amazement of the "crimes" perpetrated by his men, re-sounds no more with martial noises. It is empty and falling into decay.

A SWING ON THE PARADE GROUND

On the parade ground which once attracted curious spectators from miles away, that parade ground where on almost any wet morning between 9.00 and 9.15 a thousand officers and men might have been seen leaping up and down (in the mud) to the order "Double mark time," a degrading innovation has been introduced. On the very spot where the C.O. and his glittering staff used to take up their positions, some civilian vandal has erected a swing and two small see-saws.

Bulford, ten years ago, housed some A.I.F. artillery units, a New Zealand training brigade and what was euphemistically known as a Dermatological Hospital. Its warmest admirer did not stress its beauty; in fact, it had none. It straggled and was unkempt. To-day the R.F.A. and R.E. run it and it is as neat as a box of toys. Each street is mathematically straight and the same width as the next.

"DEAD NOW"

Each one of the one-storied wooden houses or messes, or lecture halls resembles its opposite number, and each little garden might be a replica of the next. The parade grounds on which the Diggers grew foodstuffs, in accordance with the rationing orders of their day, are as hard and flat as concrete can make them.

But everywhere there is a depressing atmosphere of emptiness to one who remembers the teeming life of a decade back. It is discernible in all the little villages of the Avon and Nadder which used to be thronged with large and friendly Colonials, in the bigger towns of Amesbury, where the free-spending visitors caused businesses to spring up that are now forever dead and even in Salisbury, which rarely sees a soldier, in or out of uniform, nowadays.

There are Wiltshire natives to whom every yard of the ____ landscape is peopled with stalwart overseas ghosts. "The Plain was alive when they were her," observed a gloomy inhabitant of Warminster. "It's as dead now as it was in my grandfather's day – and will be until there's another war, and the Colonial boys come over to help us again."

(*Cairns Post* (Queensland), Saturday 23rd April, 1927)