King Edward VII Convalescent Home for Officers

Osborne House, East Cowes, Isle of Wight
1904 - 2000

A short illustrated history and description
King Edward VII Convalescent Home for Officers.

In 1904, Osborne House at East Cowes on the Isle of Wight, which had been gifted to the nation by King Edward VII, opened as the Convalescent Home for Officers. It closed as a convalescent home in 2000 and most of the rooms are no longer in use or open to the public. As part of a larger arts project between ‘QuayCrafts’ – a collective of artists - and English Heritage, the photographer Zoe Barker was given access to these rooms and spaces. They give a unique insight and record of the House as a convalescent home during the 20th century. The photographs she took during this ‘residency’ were first exhibited at Osborne House in September-October 2015 and are on display at St. Mary’s Hospital, ‘Full Circle Exhibition Space’, and Newport during April – July 2016.

Osborne House.

On the death of Queen Victoria on 22nd January 1901, her favourite residence and private home Osborne House was passed to her heir King Edward VII. She had formally made it her home and moved in on 15th September 1846 and was to live there for the next 55 years. In the early days she lived there with her husband Prince Albert the Prince Consort and her nine children and the attendant Royal Household. But the last 40 years were spent there as a widow after Albert’s death on 14th December 1861, increasingly alone as her children married into other European Royal and aristocratic families and moved to live outside the British Isles across Europe and the British Empire.

Together Prince Albert and the builder Thomas Cubitt designed Osborne during 1845 as a version of a Palladian Italian villa with twin campaniles, pantile roofs, alcoves, colonnades, tiled and ornate corridors, marble busts in niches, terraced gardens with fountains and bronze statues. In construction it included innovations such as cast-iron girders instead of wooden beams, insulation layers of seashells between floors, cement and stucco. Whilst ‘Italianate’ in aesthetic it also reflected both Albert and Victoria’s strong liking for German culture – Victoria’s favourite court painter being Winterhalter and composer Mendelsohn. Around the building were extensive lands sloping down to the Solent which were re-landscaped with vistas and tree planting. Albert was reported to have described the view of Spithead down to Portsmouth Harbour reminding him of a view across the Bay of Naples.

The building comprised a Pavilion Wing completed in September 1846. On the Ground floor was the main entrance hall and stairs around which were the Drawing Room, Dining Room and Billiard room. Above on the 1st floor were the Queen’s Bedroom, Dressing Room and Sitting Room and the Prince Consort’s Dressing Room, School Room and Governess’ Sitting Room. Above this on the 2nd floor was the Nursery.

Adjoining this to the east connected by a Grand Corridor on the ground floor and an open Colonnade on the 1st floor was the Main Wing. This housed on the ground floor the Audience Room and Privy Purse Room where visitors to
the Court and on State business were received and along the corridor was the Duchess of Kent’s (mother of the Queen) suite. Above on the 1st floor were the Prince and Princesses’ bedrooms. Above this on the 2nd floor was the Prince of Wales’ Rooms.

Attached to the Main Wing was the South or Household Wing. Further to the east and across a yard were the Orangery, Chapel and Stable block together housing the extensive operation of a Royal Household.

To the west of the Pavilion Wing and built 1890-91 was the Durbar Wing and Durbar Room designed by the Indian architect Bhai Ram Singh and built to reflect her title and role as Empress of India.

The grounds were extensively landscaped and the ‘High Walk’ planted with trees leading down to a private bay where the family swam which included a pavilion, a horse-drawn bathing machine, a small pier and a private landing stage so the Queen could arrive and depart by boat without public attention. A walled kitchen garden was built to the south west with greenhouses. Prince Albert imported and erected a Swiss chalet in the grounds to be known as the ‘Swiss Cottage’ where the children received their lessons and which also housed a Museum of archaeological, historical, geological, and ethnographic artefacts as part of their education.

Over the years Osborne moved from the ‘Golden Years’ when Victoria and Albert and their children lived there as a family to the following 40 years when she lived there as a widow, with her children married and living across Europe, and becoming ever more a recluse and with the atmosphere of the Court and Osborne renowned for its sobriety and formality.

The Convalescent Home.

After Victoria’s death the Household at Osborne dwindled and the furniture in the Pavilion Wing as elsewhere was draped with covers and doors to the rooms locked with a sepulchral silence settling on the House. King Edward VII lived at Sandringham. He had few happy memories of Osborne. Queen Victoria’s will expressed the hope that Osborne would remain in the family who would each retain a share in the property. However no one wanted it. King Edward offered it to Prince George and Princess May. Both turned it down. So on his Coronation Day 11th August 1902 the King wrote to his Prime Minister Mr. Balfour …‘The King feels he is unable to make adequate use of Osborne as a Royal Residence, and accordingly he has determined to offer the property in the Isle of Wight as a gift to the Nation’.

It was from thereon the King’s intention that Osborne should be used as a Convalescent Home for Officers of the Army and Navy. As a consequence Osborne House’s character fundamentally changed fulfilling this role for the next 98 years until 18th October 2000. Under Parliament’s ‘Osborne Estate Act 1902’ Osborne was placed under the management of the Commissioner of Works (building) and Commissioner of Crown Lands (estate) and opened in
its new role of a Convalescent Home for Officers in January 1904. Management passed to the Department of the Environment in the mid C20th and then to the Civil Service Benevolent Fund in 1985 and after its closure by them on 18th October 2000 to its current owners, English Heritage.

The ‘Osborne Estate Act’ also directed that, as a memorial to Queen Victoria, the private State apartments that had been in the personal occupation of the Queen were to be preserved for public viewing in the summer months whilst the remainder of Osborne House and the grounds were to be used for the benefit of officers of His Majesty’s Naval and Military forces or their wives, widows or families. In effect this meant the rooms on the ground floor and first floor of the Pavilion Wing and the Durbar Room were preserved for public viewing and kept intact as regards furniture and décor - and remain as so today. The remainder of the building all came to be converted and occupied as the Convalescent Home - including the 2nd floor of the Pavilion Wing (nursery) which became the Convalescent Home’s Governor’s and family quarters – and comprising the Main Wing, Household Wing, 2nd floor of the Durbar Wing, Orangery and Stable blocks as well as most of the grounds of Osborne House – 1500 acres.

Under the ‘Osborne Estate Act, 1914’ those eligible as ‘classes of persons’ to be admitted to the Convalescent Home was extended to Civil Servants and retired Civil Servants who had served abroad; Established members (men) of the Civil Services of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; cadets and certain subordinate officers of His Majesty’s forces. After the formation of the Royal Air Force eligibility was also extended to RAF officers as well as those of the Army and Navy.

The Osborne Convalescent Home provided accommodation for serving, retired and invalided Army, Navy and Air Force Officers and their families. 45 convalescents was the regular number of admissions. However it could rise to 50 persons. There was a formal application process for Admission. The relevant Armed Forces Medical Authority would recommend sick leave to the House Governor. Members of the Civil Service in Great Britain and the permanent and retired members of the civil, diplomatic or consular services in Overseas Territories applied through the Head of their Department to the House Governor. Precedence was given to Officers and Civil Servants on active duty although there were exceptions in certain categories for retired persons whose disease or injury was ‘directly attributable to Service’. Persons suffering from contagious, infectious or incurable diseases could not be admitted whilst those persons accepted for convalescence had to have reached a stage in their condition where they were able to look after themselves ‘in every way’.

The British Medical Journal of January 30th 1904 reported; “It may be said at once that the plan of the house has been found to lend itself singularly well to the purpose to which it is henceforth to be devoted. The structural alterations have been comparatively few, and are now complete; the internal sanitary arrangements have been reconstructed on modern
principles, the decorations are now nearly finished, and the furniture will soon be in place."

“The parts of the house in which the convalescents will be accommodated are the main wing, the south wing, and the cross passage. There are here three stories and a basement. Most of the bedrooms are on the two upper floors; the dining room, sitting rooms, and recreation rooms on the ground floor; and the kitchens, pantries, and servant's mess rooms in the basement.”

“The uppermost floor of the two wings and the cross passage will provide bedrooms, one patient to each. The walls are painted a cool light green with a white dado, the floors are covered with linoleum, and every room is well lighted by lofty sash windows. Each patient has a telephone at his bedside and an electric emergency bell for use at night. Both the telephone and the night bell communicate with a telephone exchange on the first floor.”

“The furniture has been specially designed by Mr. R. Bailey. M.V.O. Controller of the Stores, Office of Works, in accordance with valuable suggestions furnished by Miss McCaul. We are familiar in the construction of the hospital wards, with the idea of avoiding all angles and corners where dust and dirt can collect and into which the duster or scrubbing brush cannot easily penetrate; this has been the governing idea in the design of the Osborne furniture, and it has been admirably carried out and as the cost has not been increased it is probable that the new furniture will set a standard of excellence for the future, not for hospitals only but for the bedrooms of private houses. It has been made by Maple and Co.”

“The larger rooms at Osborne contain a dressing-table, wardrobe, washstand, writing table, chairs, of which one is a deck chair with a washing cretonne cover, bedside cupboard, and screen. In some of the smaller rooms the number of separate pieces has been reduced by various ingenious combinations. All the furniture is painted with a white hard enamel surface, and is so designed that each part can be easily and thoroughly cleaned. The wardrobes, for instance, take into four pieces: cornice which has a flat flush top, hanging cupboard, drawers, and under piece. The drawers in all the furniture have rounded internal corners; there is no useless under boarding, and by taking the drawer out the housemaid can quickly pass her duster round every part of the table or cupboard, both above and below. All doors can be lifted off, all shelves pull out easily for cleaning, and the back of the bed-cupboard is of slats with air spaces between. The screen is washable, and each article of furniture is mounted on practicable rollers so that it can be easily pulled away from the wall. The floors are covered with linoleum, each room has a drop and standard light, and a whether by day or night is a model of lightness and comfort.”

“The general plan and arrangement of the first floor are similar to those of the second, except there are ten married quarters, each consisting of a bedroom and dressing room, as shown in the block plan of this floor, and which we are able to reproduce by the courtesy of the architect, Mr. H.N Hawks. The plan shows very well the general arrangement of the two wings and the cross
passage; it shows also the loggia, which we foresee will in the summer be of the greatest use for giving air to those patients, who may be well enough to leave their rooms, though not sufficiently recovered to take outdoor exercise. As, however there is a lift from the ground floor to the top of the house, large enough to admit a couch, it will be easy to take patients unable to walk into the terrace garden on fine days. The decorations on this floor are pink and white. There are two ward kitchens on the first and second floors, and there is also ample bathroom and lavatory accommodation on both floors. The linen room is on the first floor.”

“On the ground floor where the rooms are decorated in blue, there is a large dining room with two fireplaces, a dinner lift, and hot plate. Adjoining this is a smaller dining room which can be used when the house is full. Nearby, on the other side of the corridor, is the Sister’s dining room. Writing and billiard rooms, as well as a cloak and locker room, are provided on this floor. The Victoria Hall, which is approached by a long corridor and a flight of stairs, will be used as a Library and music room for the convalescents, and will also be fitted with writing tables. A room has been converted for a small dispensary for stock medications, and has been furnished with a bench, sink, and testing apparatus for the use of the medical attendant, Dr. H.E.W. Hoffmeister of Cowes. The nursing staff will consist of the Matron, Miss Haines, and four Sisters; three, one for each floor, for day duty, and one for the night duty. The general attendance on the patients will be provided by commissionaires, in the proportion of one to every six officers.”

“Accommodation for the nurses is provided on the upper story of the Durbar wing, where the Matron and each Sister will have a large and airy bed-sitting room. There will also be a common sitting room, and two bedrooms have been set apart for extra nurses, should their services be required. The nursing quarters communicate with the ground floor of the convalescent home by a corridor, and also directly with the first floor by way of the loggia.”

“The servant’s rooms, in two semi-detached buildings to the east, have been remodelled, and contain quarters for the male and female staff respectively. “All the internal sanitary fittings have been very carefully considered, and the apparatus throughout is of the newest and best patterns; the lavatories are tiled; there are altogether eleven bathrooms, seventeen w.c, five bedpan sinks, and an infected linen tank on each floor. The sewage is disposed of in a septic tank, special arrangements being made for dealing with storm water. The high ground on which Osborne stands is covered with plateau gravel. Water is supplied from the Carisbrooke Waterworks, the source being a deep well in the chalk about four miles south of Newport. It is of a high standard of purity, though, like all the waters of the district, rather hard.”

“An external emergency iron staircase has been built at the end of the convalescent wings”

“All the rooms are fitted with electric light, and heated by hot water. In the sitting rooms and bedrooms there are open fireplaces.”
“Taking them altogether it may be said that the alterations have converted the wings of Osborne House into an ideal convalescent home.”

Medical attendance was free but there were extra charges for specialist nursing and special medicines and drugs. The length of stay was determined by the House Governor and a member of the Consulting Staff. There was a fully-qualified resident Masseur in charge of Electro-Therapy at a charge of 6d a day or part of – costs from Admissions Booklet of 1938. Treatment included Massage, Remedial Exercises, Paraffin Wax-baths, Faradism, Galvanism, Ionisation, Diathermy, Radiant Heat, Ultra-Violet ray and Infra-Red Ray treatments.

Facilities at Osborne included a 9-hole Golf Course, with resident professional. There were also Tennis Courts, Croquet lawns, a Bowls Lawn, Badminton Court and a Recreation Room with piano, gramophone, wireless and Cinema where theatricals and dances were also held. There was also a Photographic darkroom. Residents were also honorary members of the Royal London Yacht Club Cowes, the Royal Victoria Yacht Club Ryde, the Island Sailing Club Cowes, the Seaview Yacht Club Seaview, the Royal Albert Yacht Club Southsea and the Royal Naval Club Portsmouth. Yachts could be hired at reasonable rates.

The Admissions booklet of 1938 states the charges to stay at the Convalescent Home ranged from 4s 6d to 6s per day dependent on category of Officer and 10s per day for Civil Servants. Charges include full board and lodging. Dinner jacket or Mess dress was required for Dinner. Alcoholic drinks, cigars etc. were available in addition at ‘moderate prices’. Laundry costs were extra. Persons were also expected to contribute 3s per week to the ‘Sports Fund’ which covered the costs of use to the Library, all games except golf, entertainments, wireless, cinema and concerts. Members were eligible for membership to Osborne Golf club at an additional 3s per week. All accounts had to be paid weekly and upon presentation.

Wives, Relatives and Friends of Convalescents could stay nearby at the Private Hostel at New Barn Cottage in the grounds of Osborne House for 3 Guineas per week or 10s 6d per day. Dogs were not allowed and a Sunbeam Saloon car was available for Excursions at moderate charges. 4d was charged in addition for early morning tea and 6d for trays to rooms. Wives of Officers were permitted to have tea at Osborne and share the amenities. There was a relative’s Sitting room. ‘Picnic’ baskets for Lunch and Tea were available to Residents with advance notice.

There was a full range of supporting staff that also lived in. The Governor’s quarters were on the top floor of the Pavilion Wing whilst the Matron lived on the top floor of the Durbar Wing. In the Stable block there was a Dormitory for a live-in team of 15 Housemaids (figures from 1955); each had a small room and shared bathrooms and toilets. Also in the Dormitory were 6 Parlour maids and the Governor’s maid. There was a separate Dormitory for the Cooks and Kitchen maids. The two groups didn’t mix with separate Sitting and Dining
rooms. There was a Men’s Dormitory for the Valets and Porters also with separate Sitting and Dining Room. There was also a block of six flats as married quarters for the Stoker, two Porters, Gardener and Office Clerk who managed the maintenance and contracted workmen, and the Chauffeur who collected the convalescing Officers and Civil Servants in a limousine from Ryde and Cowes. The Prince of Wales Lodge at the entrance to Osborne housed the PT instructor and family and buildings and cottages from the former Naval College housed the Night Watchman, another Clerk, the Occupational Therapist and the Head Gardener and their families. The Caretaker lived at the ‘Swiss Cottage’.

The roll call of persons who convalesced at Osborne naturally contains some recognisable names:

Captain Robert Graves, writer poet and novelist, was a convalescent in 1917 having seen action and injury in World War1. In 1916 he was wounded at the Battle of the Somme. Hit by shell splinters, one of which punctured his lung, he was not expected to survive – his mother was actually sent a telegram informing her of his death. However he made a remarkable recovery and several months later, against medical advice returned to the front where during a bitter winter he contracted severe bronchitis. After hospital treatment he was invalided to Osborne House. He didn’t enjoy his stay there. He was also suffering from severe ‘neurasthenia’ – shell shock. In his autobiography he describes sleeping in the Royal Night Nursery – normally used as the House Governor’s Sitting Room but converted into a bedroom to cope with the extra influx of officers.

Lieutenant Colonel Guy Armstrong. He lived in India and served under Louis Mountbatten in Burma where he saw action in World War 2. He helped relieve the infamous Changi Jail in Singapore in 1945. He retired from the Army in 1960 and was ordained the next year. He first stayed at Osborne in 1983 recovering from a heart bypass, and then stayed there again on several occasions until 1999. He was Honorary Chaplain at Osborne. He described Osborne as rather like a Gentlemen’s’ Club where friends would arrange to coincide their stay and ‘holiday’ together.

Other convalescents included:
Field Marshall Slim; Major Clement Atlee who became Prime Minister 1945 – 1952; Admiral Bonham Carter; Sir Adrian Boult conductor; Stewart Granger actor; Lord Justice Denning; Roger Bannister athlete and Douglas Bader were both visitors.

Since the Convalescent Home closed in 2000, most of the rooms have been closed to the public and their future use is currently under discussion. Selected pieces of furniture have been kept with a view to re-creating a ‘typical room’ of the Convalescent Home at some time in the future.

In Spring 2015, photographer Zoe Barker was given permission to photograph the rooms of the former Convalescent Home as they now are – vacant and yet unaltered. This exhibition of 22 photographs is a contemporary response
to the situation, condition and environment of that part of Osborne House that was a Convalescent Home during the 20th century and echoes of that time still remain.

The Royal Naval College.

From 1903 – 1921, again at the wish of King Edward VII, a Royal Naval College under the supervision of the Admiralty was established at Osborne House to train naval cadets – boys from the age of 13 years. This was located at the Coach House which was converted and extended and renamed ‘St Vincent’ and the stables became the classrooms.

The Illustrated London News reported on 14 August 1903 – ‘The College in the Isle of Wight is utilitarian to the last degree; so much so as to render any criticism of the buildings from an artistic point of view quite out of the question…The stables at Osborne House formed the nucleus of the new building; and in close proximity to these, which were promptly adapted for various purposes – there were run up a series of bungalow erections – dormitories, officer’s quarters, and so on – constructed of timber…They are very well fitted and up to date. There are twenty five beds in a dormitory; each cadet’s chest stands at the foot of his bed, and a wash-basin beside it; there is a plunge bath, with three ordinary ones, at the end of the dormitory, and a capital lavatory system, for use in the day time’. The land between Osborne and Barton Manor were used for games fields.

Whilst the naval training and educational standards following an inspection by His Majesty’s Inspector of Schools over three days in 1912 was favourable and the education reported on as comprehensive and sound there were flaws. The College acquired a record of strict discipline and at times excessive corporal punishment. The health record at Osborne Naval College did not stand careful investigation. From 1907 there were regular deaths each term from conditions such as pneumonia. Conjunctivitis was endemic, attributed to the cadets living in the former stable block, and a new Isolation Hospital was built at Kingston Farm to deal with regular flu, measles and mumps epidemics. In 1911 there were 383 cases of infectious illness amongst the 440 cadets. At Easter 1917 there were six deaths reported from measles.

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 there was a sudden and unprecedented demand for young naval officers with at one point 500 cadets passing through Osborne in a year. One of these cadets was the grandson of Princess Alice (Victoria’s 3rd child) Louis Earl Mountbatten of Burma.

After 1918 the demand for naval officers dramatically reduced and by 1920 there were only 50 cadets and the Naval College at Dartmouth could meet the Navy’s full training requirements and Osborne Naval College closed on 20th May 1921. Today the site of the Naval College has been largely dismantled and transformed for the Visitor car park whilst the surviving buildings have been converted into the adjacent Industrial site and Units.
With thanks and acknowledgement of source material from:

- ‘Serving life at Osborne 1955 -2000’. Kathy Barter

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King Edward VII Convalescent Home for Officers

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