

Section 386

The Remount Service

The Demand for Horses

When the First World War broke out there was an enormous demand for horses by the military. Hunters were wanted for use by officers, dray horses were needed to haul waggons and guns and mules and ponies were needed to carry loads. To address the problem Remount Depots were set up around the country. At first the Berkshire Yeomanry took on the task and set up two depots in the Reading area, at the GWR Hotel meadow and at Arborfield. The depots acted as collecting points for horses from farms, businesses and hunt and riding stables. These needed to be re-equipped and retrained for their new tasks. For the most parts the horses collected were out of employment as their riders and drivers were going off to war. The depots were also collecting harnesses and tack for re-equipping the horses for their new role. Later hunts and other riding establishments joined in and set up their own depots.

Feed for the Horses

The military were also intent on buying up supplies. Feed for horses was in great demand and they were offering to buy supplies from local farmers. One named Chilton refused to sell at the price the War Office were offering so they took him to court where the judge fixed the price at £3665 or 92s 3d a ton which was less than the military had been offering. In addition he had to pay costs and a fine.

Enormous quantities of fodder and supplies for the horses were collected and ferried across to France. It has been estimated that the volume of fodder for the cavalry alone was equivalent to the total losses by Britain due to submarine action.

The Purley Remount Depot

In Purley Cecil Aldin had been asked to take over as Master of the South Berks Hunt and though the hunt continued to function throughout the war it was on a reduced scale with all the hunt's own horses having been made over to the army. Aldin had been appointed purchasing officer for Berkshire, and, as there was considerable spare capacity

he had been using the facilities to stable horses at Purley. Aldin's hunting connections proved invaluable and he was able to both identify useful horses and persuade their owners to part with them. He had already set a good example by handing over the hunt's horses. The horses were put into four categories R1 - suitable for the cavalry and officers chargers, R2 - smaller horses for riding, HD - for heavy draft work and LD - for light draft work. Soon he had exhausted the supplies in Berkshire and began to get horses from all over Britain and even from Canada.



Inside the Purley Barn used as Remount Depot (IWM)

His wife, Rita, and daughter, Gwen, were roped into help with the cleaning and feeding of the horses but with most of the hunt staff away at the war the work load was too much for them and when he tried to recruit local men they knew almost nothing about horses and were not young and fit enough anyway. He realised that there were many women around who were expert horsewomen so he began to hire them to help out, giving them a week's trial before appointing them as stable hands and riders.

He was assisted at Purley by A J Munnings who was later to become President of the Royal Academy but who was also an expert horseman. He was unfit for active service owing to the loss of an eye and chose to work with horses rather than go with a labour battalion to France. He proved a dab hand at treating many animals and spent much of his time at Purley looking for mange and applying a foul smelling oily mixture supplied by the Veterinary department of the War Office.

The Holyport Depot

As there were many more applicants than jobs at Purley Aldin decided to experiment with an all female Remount Depot which he set up near Maidenhead and which opened in September 1915. To run the enterprise he hired a notable writer from Lancashire named Eleanor Horricks who took over some thirteen of the female staff and recruited further local women reaching a peak of 20.

This staff was supplemented by dozens of volunteers, mainly titled ladies and the daughters of farmers and hunt servants who all worked well together despite the enormous class differences. Eleanor was described by Cecil Aldin as very efficient and enthusiastic. She was paid £2 a week and the other women 25s. She was injured by the horses on at least two occasions, once when she was kicked on the head and once when she was crushed against the side of a stall.



The female staff of the Holyport Depot

She seemed to have been very unlucky in this regard as prior to working for Cecil Aldin she had been working with the King's trainer at Newmarket and been laid up for five weeks after being kicked. Then she took a job as a driver for a west end firm and fell under the horse when she was thrown from the van. However she overcame all her injuries and used to carry on despite the pain. Eventually the supply of horses had dwindled to the extent that the new depot had to be closed in 1916. Eleanor was out of a job.

She was very keen on continuing with the work she had been doing and many of her women also wanted to carry on. She contacted the Rev H D S Sweetapple and borrowed money from him to provide a guarantee to the War Office that she could continue to run a remount depot in Holyport near Maidenhead. She also borrowed money from other people on the same basis. She had been living in Horsham and also offered her services as a buyer for the local War Hospital Supply Depot and wrote to many firms using as her address the Remount Depot in Holyport and marked her letters OHMS. She received money from the committee of the Hospital Supply Depot but instead of paying the suppliers she pocketed the money.

The reasons why the depots had closed were basically the same in Purley as in Maidenhead. Horses were being replaced by lorries for hauling, tanks were being introduced and many of the cavalry units were being dismounted as being unsuitable for modern warfare. Thus the War Office was not interested in her proposals and were not prepared to even accept the guarantees let alone promise to repay them at the end of the war. The result was that one of her creditors sued her for the return of the money and found there was no money to repay the loan. So a criminal prosecution was started and Eleanor was taken to the Quarter Sessions in Reading on Monday 2nd June 1917. She pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three months in prison whereupon she collapsed in the dock.