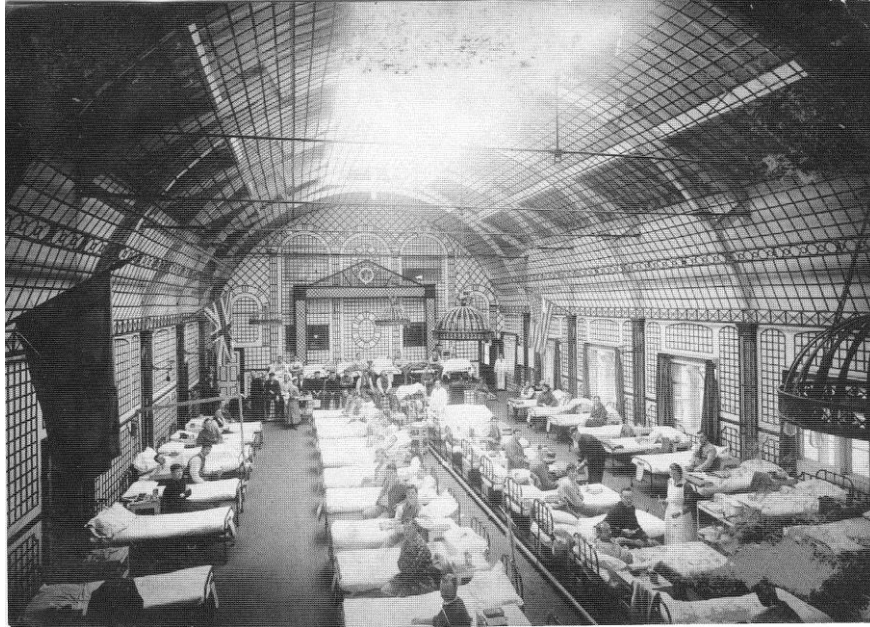


# Remembering the Strathpeffer Area:

## 5. Wartime Remains



During 2015 people gathered at Strathpeffer Community Centre and Achterneed Hall to remember the physical remains of the Strathpeffer area – Jamestown, the Heights, Strathpeffer, Achterneed and Blairninich – focussing on buildings, sites, or monuments which were new, modified or no longer there. They built on previous sessions which had begun to look at Strathpeffer. Using old maps, photographs (some more than a century old), various printed sources, and memories spanning over 80 years, information about over 350 sites was gathered.

This report pulls together the memories gathered about World War I and II in these areas. Pupils from Strathpeffer Primary School also participated in this part of the project, creating panels for our display and contacting various other people. There is still further work to be done, and details to be corroborated, but these notes provide the a starting point.

The 2015 sessions were part of a project organised by ARCH and Strathpeffer Community Centre, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Mackenzie New York Villa Trust. Funding for the smaller projects in previous years was provided by Generations Working Together and High Life Highland. Thanks also to the Highland Museum of Childhood for allowing us to see text panels from their 2009 'Hands Across the Sea' exhibition. But most of all thanks to everyone who has shared their memories and photographs, often braving difficult weather.

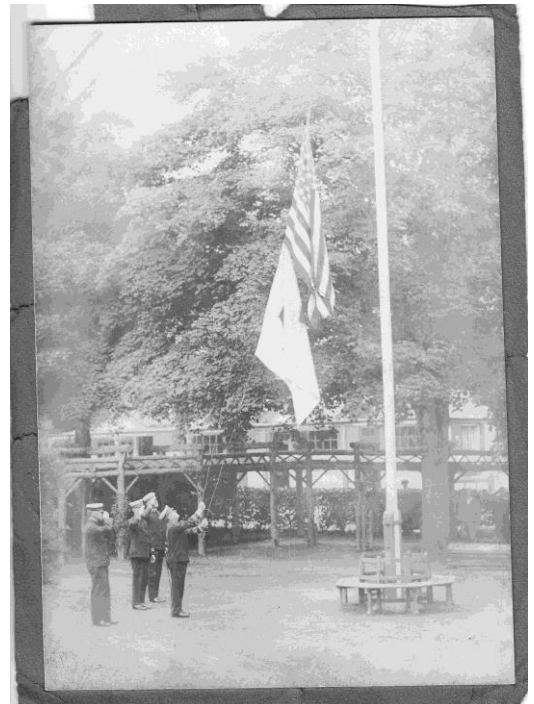
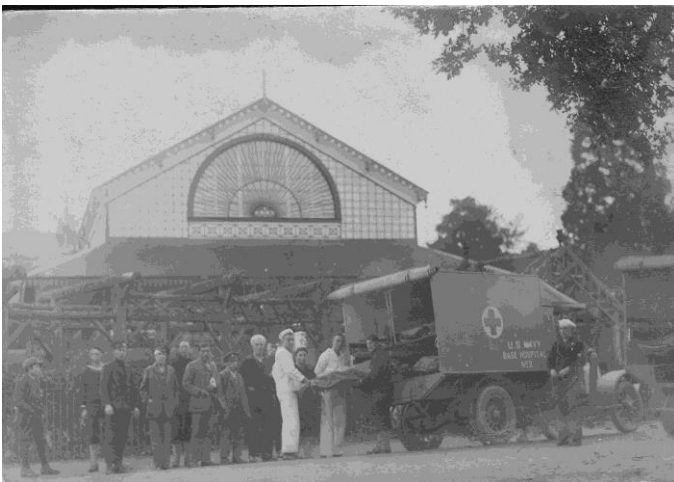
Any additions or corrections should be sent to ARCH at [info@archhighland.org.uk](mailto:info@archhighland.org.uk) or The Goods Shed, The Old Station, Strathpeffer, IV14 9DH. This version: March 2016.

## Remembering the Strathpeffer Area: Wartime Remains

### World War I

We have not managed to gather much information about World War I. The U.S. Navy took over the Pavilion for a hospital, and photographs in the collection of Roseann Christie show patients, patient transports on the train, and even raising the U.S. flag in the Pavilion Gardens. After the war, many items left behind were sold. One local resident has a clock from the sales. The photographs show that the Highland Hotel was also used as a hospital. The Nicholson Mackenzie was a Red Cross auxiliary hospital for the military. Youth hostel documents record that Elsie House was used for nurses' accommodation.

It is likely that other buildings in Strathpeffer were probably taken over. However, the only evidence we have so far is that Kildonan Hotel was a convalescent home (information from the Hands Across the Sea exhibition, 2009).



Photos courtesy Roseann Christie

## World War II

During World War II, Strathpeffer was part of a restricted area, requiring passes to travel. The accommodation available in the Spa town must have made it attractive to the military. The impression is that a large number of residences were either taken over or had military personnel billeted, but we have only included below places where we have information.

### Military Personnel

Military papers at the National Archives mention units at Strathpeffer during the war. From November 1941 the headquarters for all of Sutherland Sub Area (stretching from Caithness to Badenoch & Strathspey) was situated at **MackKay's Hotel** in Strathpeffer.

There were also women in an A.T.S. Clerks' School, some staying in hotels including the Highland Hotel and Richmond Hotel, and also possibly in tents near Cahoochies in Blairninich. According to the *Ross-shire Journal* they helped evacuate patients when the Spa Hotel burnt down in 1942. Local tradition is that they were being trained for secret activities.

Other units include the Mobile Force 152 brigade (1941), the Royal Army Ordnance Corps 24 Mobile Laundry at 'Hope's Hotel' (1942), the Army Dental Corps Centre no. 280 (1942-1945) at Summerhill, no. 6 Beach Group (1943), no. 11 Infantry Holding Brigade, some at the Highland Hotel (1945), and Royal Army Service Corps with officers at Fife Lodge (1945).

There were also Norwegians at Coul House and Brahan Castle, with the latter their headquarters. The officers were in the house, and the bases for the Norwegian huts are still said to be visible in the grounds. At Coul was a Mountain Brigade, with mules and ponies; in 1944 this consisted of 5 officers and 75 other ranks. King Haakon visited during the war, inspecting the Norwegian troops on the Castle Leod shinty field. The ponies were kept part of the time at Fairburn, where Jimmy Pirie took hay to them. A Norwegian surgeon also worked at Ross Memorial Hospital in Dingwall – and saved Kenny Stewart's finger.

The Canadian Forestry Corps had a sawmill at Orrin Bridge, with narrow gauge railway to move timber around, and they cut Strathgarve (big timber) and Strathconon to the Devil's Bridge (near Conon Bridge). There was also a Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit (Newfies) who had a sawmill at Fairburn and large camp at Aultgowrie; they were also cutting near Ullapool. They also later occupied the Orrin Bridge camp. Honduran woodcutters worked near Achanalt. Lumberjills were also in the area. The Canadians had superior equipment. Lumberjills were also in the area., including at Kinellan. One married John Rose, the timber merchant in Contin.

Guards were remembered in parts of the village, for example outside the Balmoral Hotel.

There were huts behind the houses on Blackwell Street in Dingwall where several landgirls stayed, and they worked on local farms where needed. After the war the huts were taken over by the local government, becoming civil defense offices, and then weights and measures office. They are now gone, but one at least survived in the 1960s.

### Hospitals

During WWII the Spa Hotel was used as a hospital. A *Ross-shire Journal* article describes the fire which destroyed the building in May 1942, recording that the hotel had been taken over by the County Council as an Infectious Diseases Hospital two years earlier. All 25 patients were evacuated

safely. According to the newspaper, the central buildings were completely destroyed, but the annex and surrounding buildings were saved. Members of the A.T.S. Clerks' School came to assist the firemen, along with other servicemen. Patients were taken to Elsick House, and it became a Fever Home.

The Kildonan Hotel had been a convalescent home in WWI, and is said to have also been used as such during World War II.

### **Accommodation**

Soldiers were accommodated in hotels, guesthouses and private homes.

**The Highland Hotel** was used in WWII to house military families, as well as female service personnel who were attending classes at the Ben Wyvis hotel. Norwegians soldiers may also have been housed there. The interior panelling was covered up to protect it during the war, when the hotel was used to house troops. Army families were still there after the war, and there was a nursery school in the hotel, and so many children that they had to be split between Fodderty and Contin schools. Military families and personnel continued to reside there after the war. In 1948 there was a NAAFI at the back of the hotel in a separate hut, as well as a small sawmill where Displaced Persons from Brahan camp cut wood for heating. A mobile cinema used to come to show films. A shooting range and jail was in the basement. Thomas Houston was a driver in 1948, taking children still from the Highland Hotel to school in Contin and Fodderty. When Jessie MacDonald was at Fodderty school in 1951 there were still some children from the Highland.

**The Ben Wyvis Hotel** was used for training, but also for accommodation and as a jail. During WWII the top floor of the Ben Wyvis Hotel was a jankers (jail). Kate MacPherson later met someone who had been a jailor there. People remember that the hotel was taken over by soldiers during WWII, including Seaforth Highlanders, but more information is needed. There were trenches built to the east of the hotel in the war. Military families were still there in 1953-4.

At **Dunbeath** a lady called Mrs MacDonald lived in the Croftcrunie part of the house and all but one room was requisitioned by the army. At **Windsor Lodge** officers and batsmen of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Seaforths were lodged, followed by A.T.S. women. The family at **Craigellachie** moved into a cottage behind the house when it was taken over by a senior officer in the army. At **Tara/Summerhill**, there are walls with holes in them, said to have been caused by billeted troops playing darts. Summerhill also housed the army dentist. **Craigvar** also provided military accommodation, housing amongst others the Norwegian chaplain. **Fife Lodge** housed the officers of the Royal Army Service Corp. Other places said to have housed soldiers are possibly the **Kildonan Hotel**. **Midhope** (now **Brunstane Lodge**) was taken over as an officer's mess and the **Richmond Hotel** as a sergeant's mess. In Dec 1943 personnel from the headquarters attended a demonstration of Mess Tin Cooking at the Richmond. **Balmoral** (now **Strathallan**) was also used by the military.

During the war some families evacuated from the south were housed in the area, including at homes of Neil MacDonald and Kenny Stewart on the Heights.

### **Training**

The Drill Hall in Strathpeffer was situated in a wooden building across the little road from the Victory Hall, next to Macgregor's tattie store (which now has Nicholson Court flats built on the site). Army cadets was held there. It was a low, long wooden building, rectangular in shape, probably with a corrugated iron roof. It is not on the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> edition OS maps, but its date of construction and demolition are unknown. A drill hall is also remembered in Blairninich, at the saw mill.

There were two rifle ranges. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (surveyed 1904) shows a rifle range with length of 300 yards and target to the north of Loch Kinellan and west of the golf course. Shells and old cartridges have been found from the area. In 2015 the bomb disposal unit was called and there was a controlled explosion. It is not known whether the firing range was for Coul Estate or perhaps the Territorials. The other firing range was behind Castle Leod. It had a steel target in the shape of a deer.

The land around Strathpeffer was used for training for the army. Jock Watt and Neil MacDonald remember WWII manoeuvres in the hills by the castle. Norwegians practiced skiing in the area. Mortars were also fired into the hill for practice. Soldiers billeted in Strathpeffer during WWII used to come up to the Heights of Achterneed for training. They never used to open the gate at Kenny Stewart's croft, simply running over it. His mother went to the Colonel in the Highland Hotel about five times to get money to replace the gates. Tanks are also remembered practicing up near the golf course, and driving down Golf Course Road. Military war diaries record a Light Signals Demo in Strathpeffer in 1941 and Home Guard exercises in Strathpeffer in 1942.

### **Entertainment and Sports**

In World War II the Pavilion was used for PE for the troops, and also appears to have been an entertainment venue. Jennifer Haslem was told the servicemen came from Evanton airfield to dances at the Pavilion.

There were cinemas in the large hotels, but also one at the back of Kinnettass Steading (now Spa Motors).

An outdoor swimming pool was built for soldiers near Kinnettass Square before tennis courts were built there. No locals were allowed to use it. It was dismantled after the war, gone by 1948. Its exact location not known.

Shinty was played at Castle Leod. Nurses skated on Jubilee Pond in their spare time.

According to military records, the Church of Scotland ran a canteen in the church hall in 1945.

### **Defences**

There are pillboxes surviving on the road going into Garve near Tarvie. They are at three levels. There was also a rail block. This was considered a vulnerable point, and in the event of invasion, would be protected by the 1<sup>st</sup> Ross-shire Brigade Home Guard.

The Kyle Line was important for the military. Mines were brought up and stored on the railway near the junction of the Strathpeffer branch line. Further information can be found on the Highland Historic Environment Record MHG56041 (<http://her.highland.gov.uk>). Different troops were said to have guarded the mines: Norwegians, military police and black soldiers; it is of course possible that all were used at different times. Some stayed in the steading at Fodderty Farm or at Kilvannie Manor.

The school log books mention trenches at Fodderty school, and a brick-built semi-underground air raid shelter is also remembered in the girl's playground. No other shelters are remembered in the village, although there are stories of others being at Kinellan and at Coul House. The air raid bell, with ARP on it, was preserved by Alistair Thomson, and now Jennifer Haslam. Air raid shelters were also beside the old Dingwall Academy – at least three are remembered, and there were some bricked up storerooms.

Documents record that the Local Invasion Committee for Strathpeffer was chaired by Mr. Miller at Overdale, and the Women's Voluntary Services by Mrs. Mackenzie at Beaconsfield. Lt. D. McIntosh at Milnain, 1<sup>st</sup> Ross-shire Home Guard as the Military member on the committee.

There was a Home Guard Hut situated behind the Common on the Heights. It could hold 6-8 men at a time, and many men on the Heights were there on a rota, looking out for enemy parachutists. All wore uniforms when manning the hut. The Officer in charge was named McArthur. The local men decided where to site the hut, to have the best view (and near the deer fencing to allow the occasional deer to be shot). A similar Home Guard hut with similar purpose was at Knockfarrell/Loch Ussie. After the war Neil MacDonald's father took the Heights hut for re-use as a henhouse at New House croft. The site is just a hole in the ground now.

### **Growing and Production for the war effort**

At Kinellan Farm Mr MacKay grew vegetables for locals and soldiers, and for the Canadian Timber Corp based near Loch Luichart.

POWs from Brahan Camp worked at many of the local farms, including Brae, Ardival and Achterneed. An Italian POW is said to have lived at Drynie farm. Italian POWs made paintings, some still in local collections. People working the crofts/farms were expected to plough a minimum amount, and people helped one another. Fordson tractors were originally orange, but during the war were green so they wouldn't stand out from the air.

Mica was mined at several places in the area during the war, including Little Scatwell and Carn Gorm near Garve. The official story was that it was to provide cockpit windscreens for spitfire fighter aircraft, However, in fact it was instead used for insulators on valves, eg for radios. The mica was sent to Pitlochry for processing which was done by travelling women (research by Alan Crombie, reported to Andy Moffat). The mica occurs in a pegmatite which is a coarse grained vein of granite related material.

### **Other**

The army is said to have thrown bombs into the quarry behind Castle Leod during or after the war.

The War Memorial was one of the last to be built, and strangely is not located in the village. The first plan was to put it in the square in Strathpeffer. Then there was a plan to put it on Knockfarrel. A stone base was put there with a wooden memorial which blew down. Then it was decided to put it in at Fodderty cemetery. A local committee used to look after it, with one representative from the Heights, one from Knockfarrel, one from Strathpeffer village and the Earl of Cromartie and the school master. A mason's firm from Aberdeen built it.

After the war surplus military buildings were purchased and erected in the Heights including 2 nissen huts at Va-taan (from Evanton airfield), a hut (from Invergordon) at Blackmuir House and a nissen hut at Duran (source not known).

### **Military Sources**

The Sutherland Sub Area War Diaries are held by the National Archives in London: WO 166/128, WO 166/1322, WO 166/6778, WO 166/10829, WO 166/11009, WO 166/14552, WO 166/16584.

### **Life in the area during WWII**

The Strathpeffer Primary School P7 class asked a number of questions to participants about life in the area during World War II.

What games did you play?

- Shinty. Kids had to make their clubs (from ash) and sometimes their balls.
- Girls did skipping and hop scotch
- There were separate playgrounds at Fodderty school for boys and girls.

Food and supplies

- Butter, sugar, milk, eggs, tinned foods were rationed, and rationing coupons were needed
- Furniture had utility stamp.
- Cardboard wedding cakes
- Wedding dresses made from parachute silk

What was used for transport?

- Trains to the academy
- Bikes ( a bike from Cahoochie's in Blairninich cost £7)
- Walking – lots more than!
- Lorries
- Passes were needed to travel north of Inverness

What chores did you have to do?

- Mucking out the byre and feeding cattle and sheep

What clothes did you wear?

- Mainly hand-me-downs. Lots of patching and darning and repairs.
- There was no school uniform
- And we had to carry gasmasks everywhere
- Many children came to school without shoes.

What did you have at school?

- Desks in rows, fixed to the floor, with a hole for the inkwell
- Slates – and some jotters, but the paper was very poor.
- During the war the windows were taped

What pets did you have?

- Dogs tended to be working dogs