

## **Kinmel Park Military Camp and the Canadian Riots in WW1**

Members of the Denbigh and District Probus Club and their guests enjoyed a wonderful lunch at the Oriel Hotel, St Asaph at their first meeting of 2024 in January. The speaker after lunch was Celia Drew.

Following a 50-year career as a nurse, Celia retired to indulge in her main interest - local history. She is a member of many of the local history groups and is Secretary of the Flintshire Historical Society. Her main areas of interest are the history of Deeside and Buckley, and local families (the Gladstones, the Summers, the Hurlbutts etc). Family history led to an interest in the experiences of WW1 soldiers, and she became a researcher for [Flintshirewarmemorials.com](http://Flintshirewarmemorials.com). She was also a trench guide in the Bodelwyddan WW1 trenches for a number of years.

Celia spoke about the **Kinmel Park Military Camp and the Canadian Riots in WW1** initially giving a background to the history of the camp which was built in 1914 by McAlpine's and was the largest army camp in Wales. It was established by Kitchener for the new army to train new soldiers. Later on, in the war it was utilised for the wounded, alien internees, conscientious objectors as well as cadet officer battalions.

The camp had 20 sub camps, a "Tin Town" ('tin' huts built next to the army camp early in the war where local residents set up small shops, where troops could buy basic items), as well as a narrow-gauge railway 2.5 miles in length from Foryd station to the camp which was connected to the Vale of Clwyd Railway line – Rhyl to Denbigh.

There were huts as living quarters, the headquarters, stores, post office, bakery, theatre/cinema, Wesleyan Chapel, Free Church, Salvation Army, YMCA buildings, bandstand, writing room, and a hospital (a large military hospital with 890 beds). Many of the deaths were due to chest infections, meningitis, accidents, and suicides.

After the war ended/Armistice, the issue of demobilisation of so many troops was discussed and it was decided that many of the Canadian Expeditionary Force which had 260 infantry battalions and other units would not be sent home directly from France but they would come via the UK to demobilisation camps as so many had relatives here (there were 628,00 men in the CEF in 1918).

In 1919 the Kinmel Park Military Camp was passed over to the Canadian forces. The 19,000 soldiers were accommodated in 22 camps on site with names such as Toronto and Ontario, Quebec, Montreal, Manitoba, Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia & Prince Edward Island. Etc

There was unrest in the camp with contributory factors such as it was the coldest winter in living memory, 42 men were housed per hut in ones designed for 30, most only had 1 blanket, food was inadequate and unpalatable, there were strikes in Britain, the Spanish flu came back again etc (there are about 80 graves in St Margaret's Church, Bodelwyddan, the Marble Church, but only 4 of them are of those killed in the riot).

The men had poor pay, they were hungry, cold, and broke, the camp was a sea of mud and their days were filled with exercises that seemed meaningless, route marches, military discipline etc and this coupled with delayed repatriation due to issues with the ships to transport them, led to major unrest on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1919 which started with rumours that all the canteens were to be raided and then there were men refusing to go on route marches on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> March. Camp Commandant Colonel Malcolm A. Colquhoun appealed to the government for help but none was forthcoming initially.

The soldiers at Kinmel Park Camp had believed they would return to Canada on the basis of "first over, first back." They were anxious to return, not only to see loved ones but also to increase their chances of finding employment on their return, but news had reached Kinmel Park Camp that ships allocated for Canadians had been reassigned to the Americans, who had not been in Europe as long.

That evening crowds of angry soldiers raided and looted canteens, stores and officers' and sergeants' messes. They did not touch The Salvation Army canteen as they knew it was the one place where they could get a coffee and a snack even when penniless. The disturbances spread to Tin Town, where fires broke out and looters carried off thousands of pounds worth of beer and spirits, cigarettes, clothing and equipment. Some staff officers tried to intervene, but they were not successful as they were largely inexperienced.

On the morning of 5 March, the Camp Commandant Colonel Malcolm A. Colquhoun ordered that all of the ammunition should be collected and placed under guard. He also ordered the Canadian Reserve Cavalry Regiment to put together a reserve of 25 mounted troopers. A defensive perimeter was set up, and ammunition was issued to 40 officers and soldiers who were considered trustworthy. The rioters had only a few firearms, but many had armed themselves with makeshift weapons such as stones, broom handles, sticks etc.

The camp defenders clashed with the rioters and seized 20 men. An attempt to free the prisoners was stopped. The violence continued with shots being fired, and the two sides engaged in hand-to-hand fighting that included the use of bayonets. The

rioters finally surrendered after three of them were killed or mortally wounded. Two guards also died during the riot. Twenty-three men were wounded.

In total, 78 soldiers were arrested, of whom 59 faced court martial under the British Army Act. Twenty-five were convicted and sentenced to terms ranging from 90 days in detention to ten years in prison for one soldier. Some of the more severe penalties were later reduced. No one was charged for the deaths, as inquiries were inconclusive. The government surged into action following the riots and most of the men in Kinmel Park Camp were sent home by the end of March 1919. Early newspaper reports were inaccurate and the Government tried to hush up all the details. Kinmel Park Camp was demolished in the 20's and was rebuilt in the 30's as a training base.

Celia's talk was based on the article by Julian Putkowski, published in the Flintshire Historical Society volume 32 (1989), and reprinted by the Society. Reprints available at £6.50 from the Society or from the Marble Church.

The next Denbigh and District Probus Club meeting will be on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February when Rufus Adams' talk is 'From Vancouver to Toronto'. The following meeting will be on Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March when Tony Griffiths will give a talk titled "Back to the 1950's"

New members are always warmly welcomed.

For further information have a look at the club web site [denbighprobus.com](http://denbighprobus.com) or contact –

Membership Officer Andrew Faulkner for more details prior to an introductory visit to a Probus meeting.

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