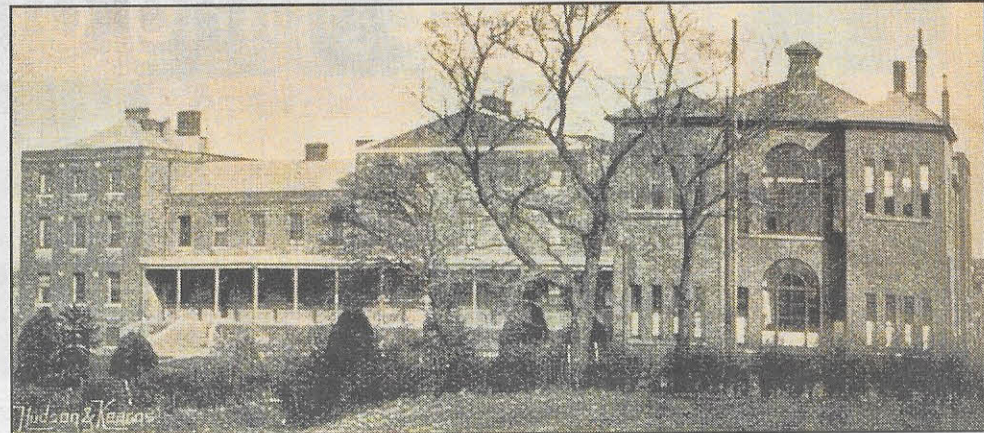


# THE WAY WE WERE

## Biggest threat to our military was venereal disease

### 'Itch ward' was hospital's busiest area



ARMY TOWN: Canterbury Military Hospital was built in 1811

#### Way We Were



**David Lewis**  
Canterbury  
Historical and  
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Society

DURING the 19th century Canterbury had a large military presence in the barracks constructed in the late 1790s along the Sturry Road.

Troop numbers varied from year to year, but probably reached over 3,000 at the start of the century and around 2,000 for most of the rest.

So how did this massive influx of squaddies and officers affect city life?

On the plus side, it added colour and excitement across the

social spectrum. The 100-plus different regiments stationed here during the 1800s participated in sporting events, band parades, theatrical events and mass troop manoeuvres on Barham Down. Blondin came to give a tightrope display.

The barracks also brought employment to cleaners, washerwomen, builders and even dung removers for over 1,000 horses.

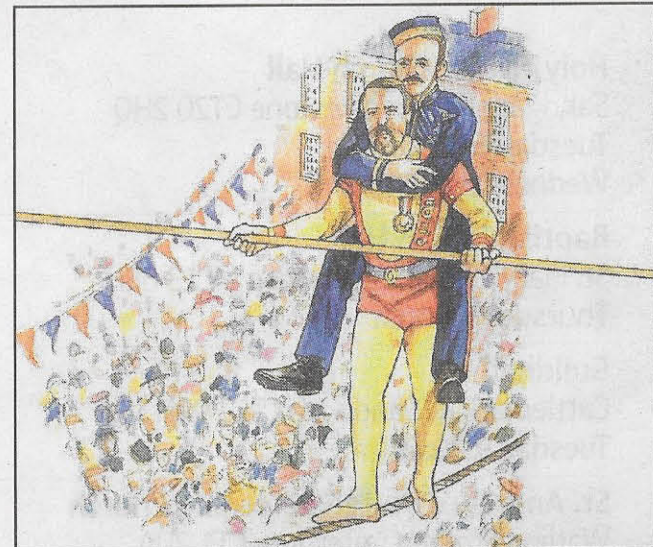
It also brought business for those who could supply food rations, horse forage, boots and gloves, or services including accommodation, clubs and pubs.

The disadvantages of the military presence were fairly obvious. Rowdy behaviour in pubs and clubs, drunkenness, and of course the perennial problem of prostitution.

By the 1860s, around a third of all admissions to military hospitals were for venereal disease, primarily syphilis and gonorrhoea.

In Canterbury military hospital the busy treatment area was known as the 'itch ward'.

These disorders meant a real reduction in the military strength of our army.



TIGHTROPE WALKER: Charles Blondin performed at Canterbury's barracks in 1871

signs of infection. Infected cases were taken to lock up hospitals for compulsory treatment that lasted several months.

Thereafter they had to turn up for regular checks to ensure they remained free of infection.

received no food.

The scheme bore hard on the poor, the uneducated, and of course totally on women. Some of the examined were as young as 14 years old.

Finally, the location of the



EXAMINATION: Hawks Lane, where city prostitutes were brought for checks

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### New approach

The result was the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. These made provision for a new approach to combating venereal disease in the military towns – initially Aldershot and Chatham, but extended in 1866 to more towns, including Canterbury.

Under the new scheme, groups of plain clothed policemen kept an eye on back streets, pubs and brothels in order to identify 'common prostitutes'.

The women picked up in this way were taken to 'examination stations' where they underwent a mandatory detailed physical examination to determine whether or not they showed



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The city set up its examination station in Hawks Lane, off Stour Street.

Many local politicians and dignitaries clearly disapproved of the new arrangements, some because it increased costs for rate payers, but others on grounds of principle.

It seemed unfair that police attention and compulsion focussed wholly on the women and in no way on the men.

The definition of a 'common prostitute' was laughably vague and required no evidence of soliciting or frequenting a brothel.

The physical examinations were heavy-handed and invasive. Those placed in the lockup often

received no food.

The scheme bore hard on the poor, the uneducated, and of course totally on women. Some of the examined were as young as 14 years old.

Finally, the location of the examination station in the centre of the city where bystanders and children would witness the bundling of unwilling women and girls into the building, seemed wholly wrong.

Some women refused to be examined, others refused to turn up for checks, some turned up drunk or simply absconded to other towns.

One Canterbury girl reported that the bench which sentenced her included a councillor who'd recently paid for her services.

Following a brave campaign by philanthropists, the Act was suspended (1883) and abandoned (1886). After 20 years, the failed experiment was over.



**ENTERTAINING TROOPS:** Garrison Theatre was built in the 1860s

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