Ampthill & District Archaeological

& Local History Society



Echoes Of The Past in Ampthill Great Park

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Reminders of the past in Ampthill Great Park.

Much has been written about Ampthill Great Park and its Castle in association with Henry 8th. More recently a Saxon Grubenhaus (Small rectangular building set in a shallow pit.) has been discovered. To this could be added prehistoric flints including arrow heads. They were found by diligent searching in the wood to the North of the Park by the late C. H. Woodcraft and are now in the Higgins Museum Bedford. I could recognise Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze age flints in the collection.

The Castle was traditionally considered to be where Katherine's Cross now stands, the actual location however was proved to be more central to the plateau by an ADALHS resistivity survey which fitted a contemporary plan of 1567 exactly. An earlier moated building, possibly a defended farmhouse or manor lay under the Cross. No record of this building has been found but it is clearly older than the Castle which was founded about 1420. The Grubenhaus was discovered in an excavation by Albion Archaeology following our magnetometer survey which showed ditch patterns typical of the Saxon period.

Historians and archaeologists watch out for aerial photographs which show parch marks in the grass when the conditions are right, these are not always obvious and can be confused by paths which crisscross the whole area. Occasionally the castle outline shows up on Google Earth pictures and can be seen by going through the "Historical Imagery" the best is on 12/2006.

In 2025 we had an exceptionally dry summer and the grass was badly affected, walking across the park showed many parch marks but nothing seemed to indicate any archaeology. We put up a drone fitted with a camera on August 8th. The pictures showed some evidence for the castle among the footpaths but to our surprise what did show up clearly was the footprints of what appear to be military huts. We know from research carried out by Ian Church in the Woburn Abbey Archives and reported in a booklet *Walking in Tommy's Footsteps* that around sixty huts were in the park to house volunteers for the First World War in 1914. Neither geophysical survey picked them up presumably as the effects of the huts did not penetrate deep enough. A recent LIDAR image of the park clearly shows what could be buildings in the low ground to the West of the plateau and that is where the forthcoming excavations by DigVentures will be concentrated. It also shows some faint square images on the plateau. These were not understood until compared with the drone photograph; they are clearly the same pattern as the ADALHS photographs.

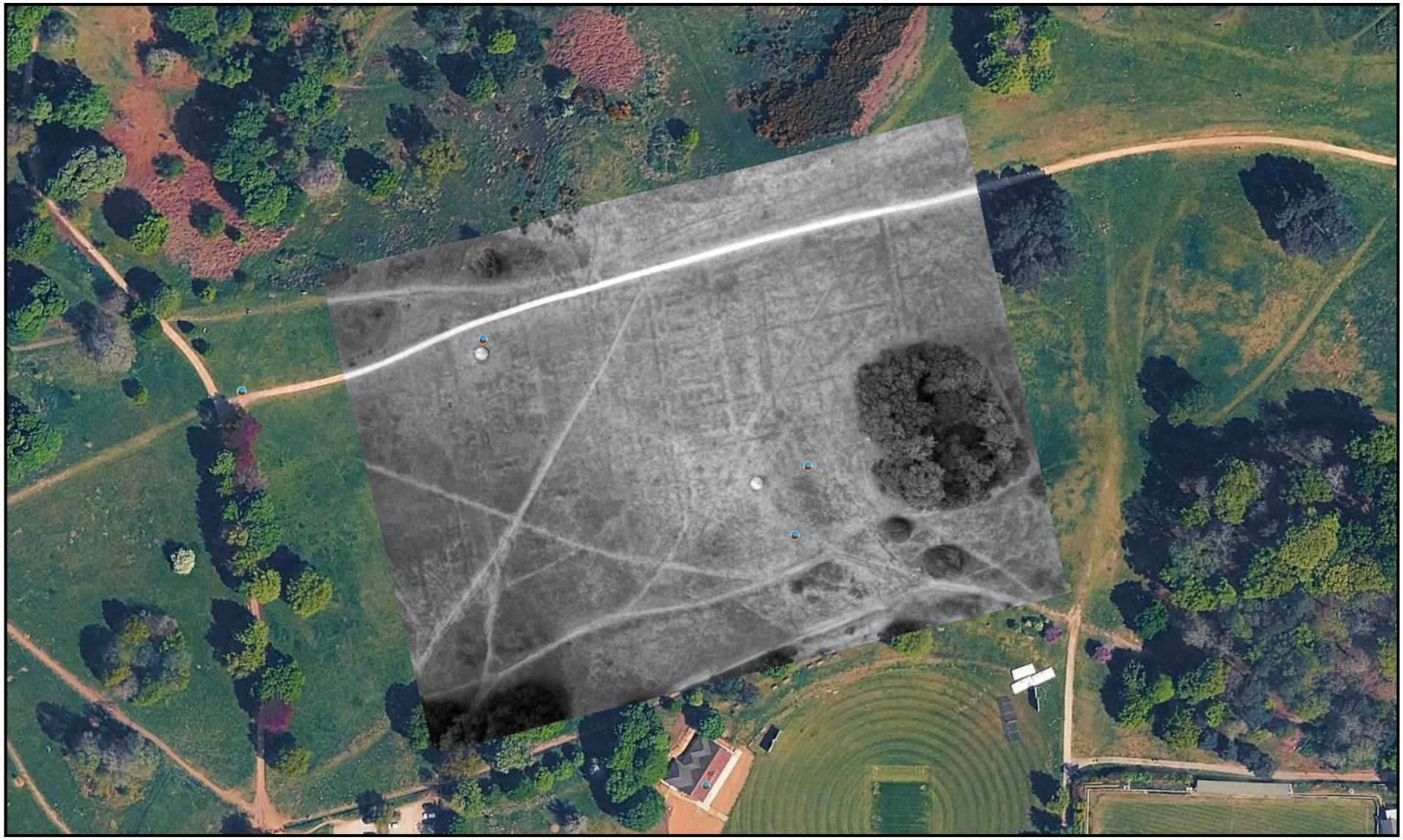
Army volunteers were trained in the park from 1914 until 1916 and served with distinction throughout the war, many took part in the battle at Gallipoli where they gained special praise and nicknamed the "Yellow Devils" after sun flashes from the brass on their kit as they advanced on the enemy.



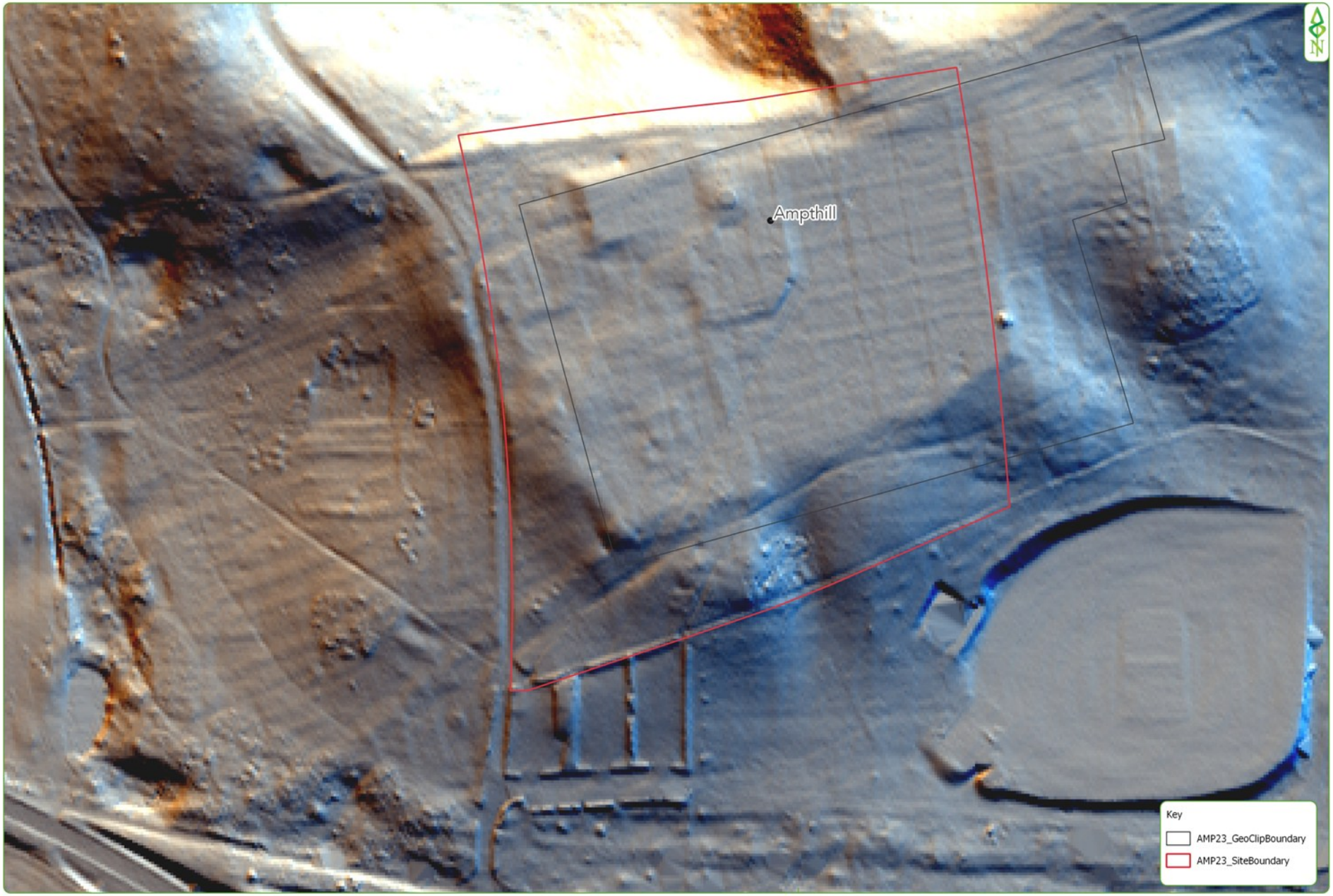
Aerial picture of the plateau, taken with a drone mounted camera. Note the oblong pattern disappears under the trees to the right of the memorial cross, proof that whatever caused the pattern was there before the fully grown trees existed.



The ADALHS interpretation of the marks. They are the outlines of WW I army training camp huts. The Castle outline can be seen underlaying the hut complex. The heavy lines are modern footpaths.

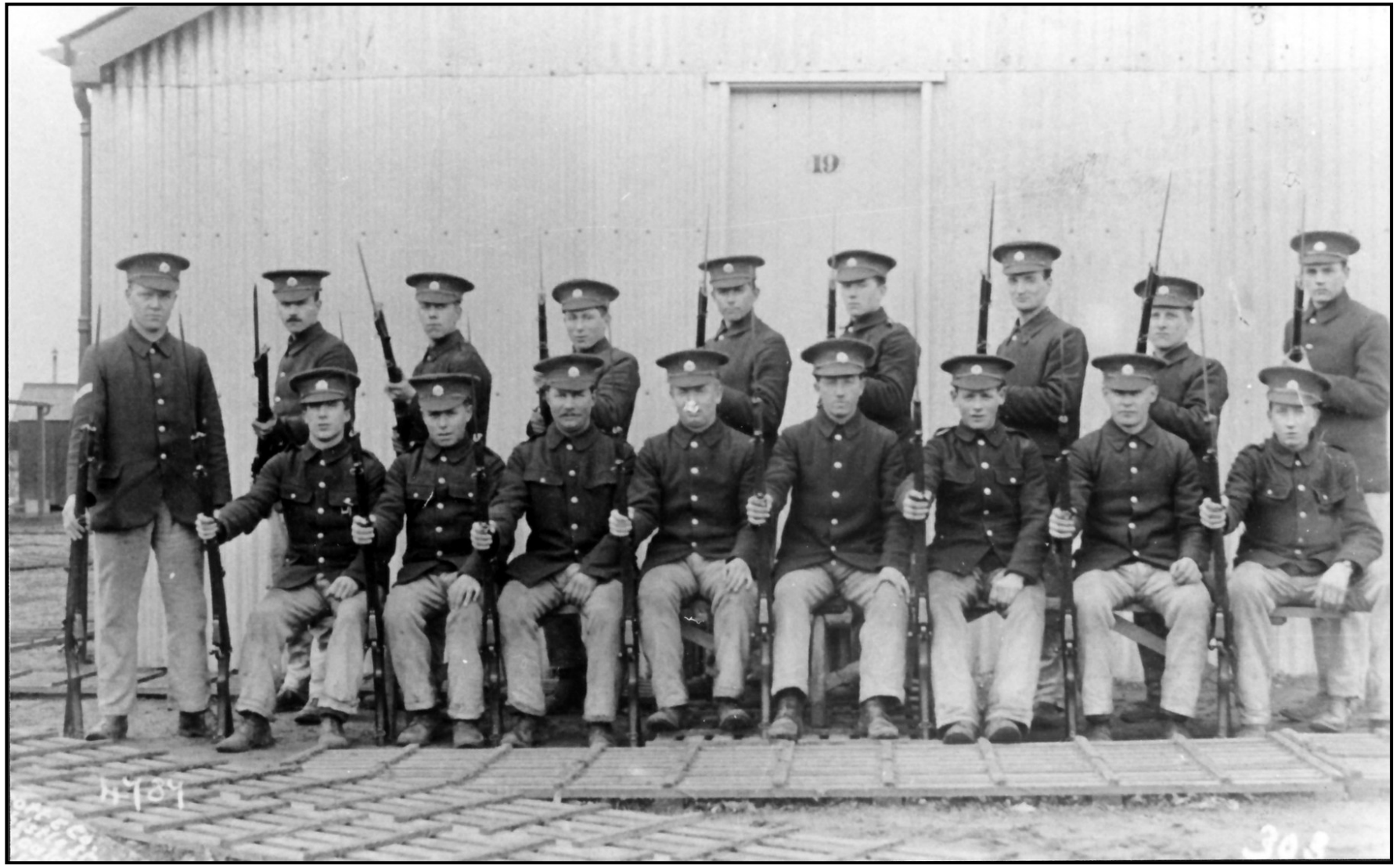


Drone photo overlaying a Google Earth image of the park. The photo has been converted to greyscale for clarity. The series of oblongs are undoubtably the foundations of the hut complexes built to house the recruits and instructors, over sixty huts altogether. Fainter squares around Kathrine's Cross would have been the Cook House. A line showing up on the ADALHS Resistivity Survey can now be identified to be the gas main for the ovens. (Not illustrated).



LiDAR of Ampthill Park

LIDAR survey of Ampthill Great Park showing possible stable foundations in valley to the west of the plateau. Similar patterns to the aerial photograph can be seen on the plateau.



“Hut 19”, one of at least 62 rapidly erected in the Park to house the volunteers and their instructors. Note the corrugated iron cladding on the hut and the wooden duckboards to walk on. A squad of trainees sit proudly with fixed bayonets on their rifles expecting to be “Home for Christmas”.



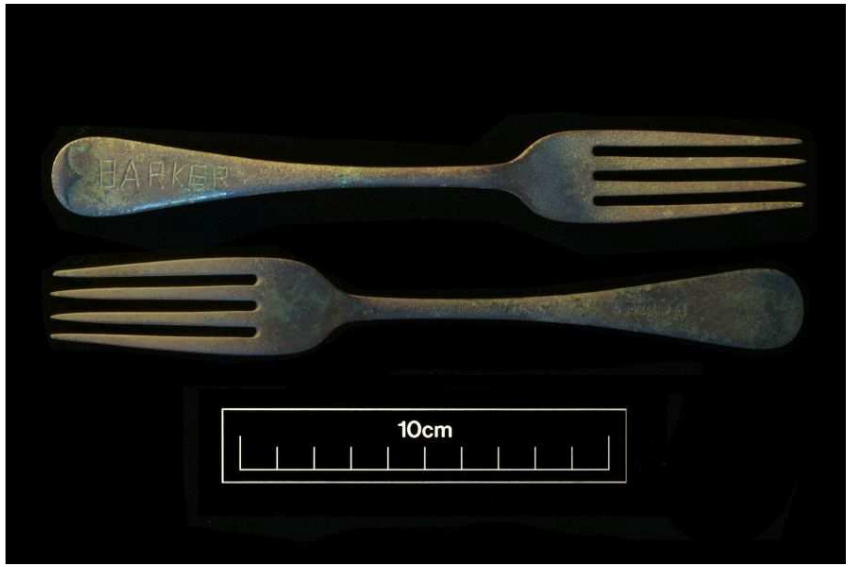
The recruits were well fed. The field kitchen boilers are in the back-ground.



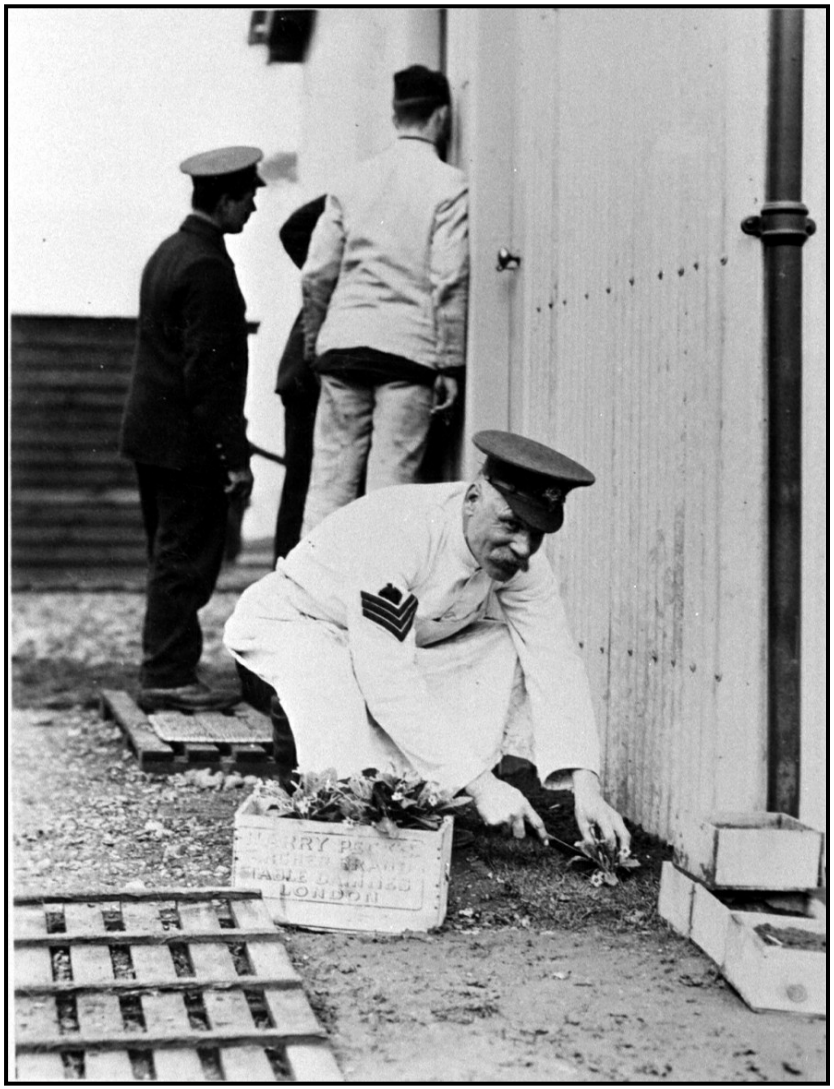
“Ready to serve”. Many of the recruits had never had such good fair.



Hole found by Northamptonshire Archaeology in their excava-tion in 2003. It was filled with clinker and broken glazed pottery. Probably from a field kitchen boiler as above. Authors photograph.



Dinner fork found by Albion Archaeology inscribed with the name Barker.



An almost kindly looking Sargeant Major planting primulas in his “garden”.



Not all work, in this case three regular soldiers enjoying a pint, probably in the “Wet house”, where beer was served behind Kathrine’s Cross.



Marching “at ease” in full kit, they are being led by a bugle band and their officers. Were they on a route march or off to war?



Recently restored, following vandalism the Memorial Cross on the South-West corner of the plateau. It shows 707 names of volunteers who did not return to Ampthill.

One of Ampthill's "lucky" recruits.

A man I can clearly remember as a child in the 1940's was Earnest Woodland, who lived in Saunders Piece with his wife Gertrude, they met while he was stationed in Norwich during WWI. He was a kindly man with a somewhat fierce expression, although childless himself he was very good with children. I never heard him mention his experiences in WW1, but he loved talking about aircraft recognition he perfected as a Leading Observer in WW2 and he showed me the silhouettes of aircraft both friendly and German. I later found out he was on duty at Mike2 Post in Ampthill firs on 24th February 1945 and was tracking a Mosquito MKNFXV11 HK304 as it circled and crashed in Woodside field Flitwick killing the pilot and navigator. He was the principal witness.

His history from press reports.

Bedfordshire Standard December 7th 1917.

"Mr. and Mrs J Woodland have been to Stockport to see their eldest son Lance Corporal E. Woodland who is in hospital recovering from five wounds". (I know the family believe this is the furthest James and Matilda Woodland moved out of Bedfordshire in their lives. It was a worrying experience repeated by parents and relatives all over the country.

Bedfordshire Standard, Bedfordshire Times, June 1919.

"**Lance Corporal Earnest Woodland (Bedfordshire Regiment) of Dunstable Street, who has been stationed at the Command Depot for some time, has received his discharge from the Army and is now at home. He went through the Dardanelles Campaign with the 1/5th Bedford's and was badly wounded in France. He has been playing in the Command Depot Olympia Hall Cinema Bijon Orchestra".**

I remember he was an accomplished violinist and had played in an Orchestra but had no idea where it was.

Sources and relevant information.

Local publication: Walking in Tommy's Footsteps author Ian Church.

Newspaper Records: Bedfordshire Standard, Bedfordshire Times 1914-1919.

Reports in www.adalhs.org.uk

1/. WWI Troops in Ampthill Park

A Small Exhibition.

2/. Story of the First-Fifth Bedford's.

A small Exhibition in Honour of the First-Fifth Bedford's In WWl.

3/. Ampthill Castle

Part 1. Resistance Survey of the area believed to be the site of Ampthill Castle in the County of Bedfordshire. TL026385

September 2002 & April 2003. Revised January 2011.

LIDAR image Envirnonment Agency data, after DigVentures processed it in house in 2022.

Drone pilot William Fadden.

Some information is from the authors memory having lived in the area all his life.