

INTRODUCTION

When the war broke out on August 4th, 1914, the British Army had barrack space for around 175,000 men. By January 1915 a million volunteers had enlisted and so new camps and training areas were desperately needed. The Earl of Lichfield generously offered his land on Cannock Chase and work began immediately. Between Autumn 1914 and May 1915 two camps were built, along with rail links, a power station, water and sewage systems and a road network. Brocton & Rugeley Camps could hold 20,000 men each, along with thousands of horses, and over 500,000 soldiers had been trained there by the end of hostilities in November 1918. They came from all over the United Kingdom and later in the war from New Zealand.

At the time, the pine forests and many of the birch trees you see today did not exist. Large areas had been impacted by grazing and the Chase continued to be managed as a hunting estate with open heathland, wood pasture and the occasional ancient stand of coppiced woodland. The Chase was a bleak and windswept upland heath and you will need to use your imagination to picture the scene. The view into the Sherbrook Valley from around the water tower site will give you a feeling for what the troops saw as they disembarked from their train, far from home and fearful of what was to come. The peaceful landscape of today where deer roam and buzzards soar is very different from the one where the barking of orders and the crackle of rifle fire filled the days, friendships were forged and men regularly marched off, heading for France and a very uncertain future.

After the war the camps were dismantled and nature has reclaimed much of the landscape, but with this guide's help you can discover hidden remains that offer a poignant reminder of those times 100 years ago.



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The map shows the location of the camps and pinpoints some of the key sites. Most are very close to car parks, but the rifle range and pumping station are in traffic-free areas and you should allow up to an hour to visit each of them. Please wear suitable footwear for walking on stony tracks and dress appropriately for the weather. Many of the places you will explore are home to rare or endangered plants, animals and birds so please take nothing but photographs and leave behind nothing but footprints.

You will get the most out of your visit if you keep to the main paths and take time to reflect on what life was like for the soldiers who were stationed here. Practice trenches exist everywhere so don't stray from the paths; many are hidden by heather and bilberry and can trap the unwary. Close your eyes and imagine the sounds and smells, open them and see what is left. Many local people helped around the camps and if someone in your family was involved we would love to hear from you. If you have images from the time, please contact past.track@staffordshire.gov.uk who have an extensive archive from the period.

www.staffordshiregreatwar.com is another site to visit where you can learn more about the county's contribution to the war effort.

Other sites for you to discover further include: Museum of Cannock Chase, www.museumofcannockchase.org Cannock Chase AONB Partnership www.cannock-chase.co.uk, the Imperial War Museum www.iwm.org.uk and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission www.cwgc.org. There are also numerous books and publications for those who wish to delve deeper into this topic.

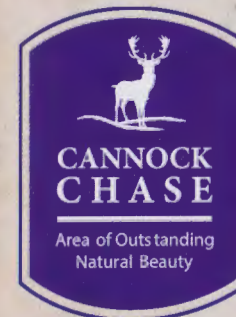


Leaflet produced by THE FRIENDS OF CANNOCK CHASE, funded by HLF and created by DISCOVERY TRAILS

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"Lest We Forget"

the key role of Cannock Chase
in the First World War



Explore the sites that
tell the story of
Brocton and
Rugeley Camps

EXPLORING THE CAMPS

The map overleaf shows the locations of some key sites for you to visit, where to park and the paths and tracks to reach them. These short descriptions will help you understand more and allow you to compare what you see before you with the sights of 1914-18. Time moves on, but visualising the past keeps the memories alive. The church, theatre, bakery, YMCA and huts may have gone, but their footprints are everywhere for those who take the time to look.

GLACIAL BOULDER & WATER TOWER

The highest point of Brocton Camp was dominated by the water tower. Today, the concrete bases for the legs can be easily seen surrounding a granite boulder that was brought to the area during the last Ice Age and erected on this spot by the Friends of Cannock Chase. The water originally came from the Sherbrook stream in the valley below you where the soldiers trained for war. Shortly after three large wells were sunk close to the water tower and water was pumped to the surface powered by the nearby power station.

FREDA'S GRAVE

By 1917 elements of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade (NZRB) were stationed at Brocton Camp within the NZRB Reserve Depot close to the German Prisoner of War Camp in Brocton Coppice. Here recruits were trained in the latest skills, including operating with the new-fangled tanks that were beginning to appear. Like many units they had an animal mascot, in their case a Harlequin Great Dane named Freda. Sadly, Freda died in 1918 and her grave is now a site of pilgrimage for many visitors.

MESSINES MODEL

Elements of the NZRB served on the opening day of the Battle of Messines Ridge (7th-14th June 1917) as part of the 2nd British Army. The capture of Messines itself was their objective, one they had achieved by around 11:30AM. The success at Messines in 1917 was due in no small part to the amount of training and preparation in advance of the attack including the construction of huge 3D models of the battlefield: On their return to Brocton, the NZRB units were ordered to build a similar model to train Officers and NCO's in map reading. They chose to accurately depict the Messines battlefield and it is clear that the model quickly became an act of commemoration as much as a training aid.

MILITARY CEMETERIES

Unlike France and Belgium, there are few military cemeteries in the UK. Cannock Chase has two, including the principal German Cemetery in the country. The Commonwealth Cemetery commemorates both New Zealand and German casualties.

In 1967, the remains of 4,929 German soldiers from the Great War and the Second World War (and internees) who had died on UK soil were buried at a new cemetery on Cannock Chase. Of this figure, 2,143 soldiers who died in the UK during the Great War are buried here including the remains of four airship crews. Stand here for a few minutes and reflect on the sacrifices made by those whose final resting place is here.



THE GREAT WAR HUT

After the solemnity of the cemeteries you may need a lift so head to Marquis Drive Visitors' Centre and a hut that has survived the last 100 years. It has been fitted out as it would have been when enlisted men occupied it, whilst the officers enjoyed a greater degree of comfort. Hundreds of similar huts were erected at both camps, only to be removed in the 1920's and used for a wide range of purposes, from houses to sheds, farm buildings to village halls.



THE RIFLE RANGES

From Range Corner you need to take the bumpy, unsurfaced road and park beside the modern brick buildings when you can go no further. From here it is around an hour's round trip to walk to the range, explore around it and return. The track is good but stony and can be muddy after rain so please wear suitable footwear and check the weather forecast first. This is Forestry Commission land so please keep to the tracks; there are mining fissures here and forestry operations may be taking place. Go past the steel barrier at the bottom of the car park and follow the obvious track as far as the white concrete trig point. Keep straight ahead on the right hand of the two tracks before you and you will soon come to the 300 yard long earth bank that dominates this area. By day this would have been a place of constant gunshots and along with the grenade practice it must have seemed like a battlefield to those preparing to go to war. Walk through the woods behind the bank, turn right when you reach the other end and return to your car. Look left as you walk and you may spot some of the other ranges in the area.

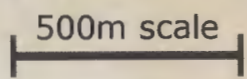
BRINDLEY HOSPITAL

When the camps were first built the local Sister Dora hospital tended to casualties. However, it became clear that a larger hospital was needed and by January 1916 work was underway to build a 1,000 bed hospital at Brindley Heath. The majority of patients had either suffered from poison gas or from what was called shellshock; the Chase may seem peaceful now, but they would still have been able to hear the rifles and machine guns practicing on the ranges and heard the explosion of grenades, so their recovery must have been very traumatic for some.

THE WHITE HOUSE HUTS

A few hundred yards from Marquis Drive is the White House, now a Christian centre. From the car park opposite it is only a few steps to the base of a number of huts, one has the base of a single stove; these were built as part of the World War Two Hednesford RAF Camp. The track itself was probably laid during the Great War, elsewhere smaller concrete blocks once supported Great War barrack huts while another hut remnant has a series of square bases that identify it as an ablutions block. This area was close to No.12 Parade [ground] and lay on the western limit of Rugeley camp. As you look around, more and more bases peek through the grasses and heather and it is not hard to imagine them extending for hundreds of yards in all directions.

To Milford



- Parking
- Cafe/Toilet Facilities
- Remains to be found
- Roads
- Railway Line
- Camps
- Footpaths/walking



Freda's Grave

Pumping Station

Brocton Camp

Glacial Boulder Site of Water Tower

Rifle Range

Open Heathland

Brocton

Brocton Coppice

Oldacre Lane

Water tower and Brocton Camp

A Chase road today

The Rifle Range Target Butts

Rifle Range Camp



The barren heath & Brocton Camp



Hospital

To Cannock

To Hednesford

RUGELEY CAMP