

Wareham in the First World War 1914-1918

No 1 Wareham Camp



View of Wareham Camp from Worgret in 1915/16. The building left of centre is Robert Christmas House (then the workhouse), Arne Hill is in the centre, and the railway is in the cutting in the foreground.

At the time of the outbreak of the war, Wareham was a small town of just over 2,000 people. The town was transformed during the war by the huge military camp built on the outskirts of the town, on both sides of the Worgret Road. It was known as Wareham Camp or Worgret Camp. Military training for units of the Territorial Army had taken place in the Wareham area for more than 50 years, because of the wide open spaces and easy access by train. These camps were tented, and temporary; the wartime Wareham Camp was built of wooden huts and existed for about eight years.

Wareham was chosen as the site of a major camp in early September 1914, a month after Britain declared war on Germany. It was to be used as a base for training new recruits. The first arrivals were volunteers from Yorkshire, who had responded to Lord Kitchener's famous call to sign up, "YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU."

Six hundred men arrived by train in Wareham to find that no preparations had been made for them. It was raining heavily and they were all soaked. Until tents arrived, they were accommodated in halls, churches, schools and private houses, and the townspeople provided blankets, food and cigarettes.



WAREHAM. — Worgret Road.
The "Garrison Cinema Theatre" and the YMCA clubhouse on Worgret Road, looking towards Worgret. The buildings were on the left side of the entrance to what is now the site of Wareham Middle School.

The men were trained in trench warfare at Seven Barrows Farm, north of the town, and at Gallows Hill near Bere Regis; horse-riding, including driving wagons (motor transport hardly existed then); bridge building on the rivers, and marching.

At the end of the war the camp was used as a "tank park" for tanks returning from France. Tanks (which had been invented in Britain in 1915) were delivered to the camp by train, via a specially-built siding from the main railway line at the Worgret end of the camp. Tank crews were trained at the camp.

The camp closed in about 1922 and its operations transferred to Bovington. Many of the huts were sold off to be used as village halls in the area. Few traces of the camp survive, but the route of the railway siding and parts of the sewage works can still be seen.



An Army Service Corps field bakery at Wareham Camp in 1915.

By December 1914, the tents had been replaced by wooden huts. The camp included a hospital with 185 beds, a cinema (used as a church on Sundays), a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) clubhouse, sewage works, and stables for horses. The camp was one of the largest in Dorset and it was described as "the finest in England". There were camps nearby at Bovington, Lulworth and Swanage.

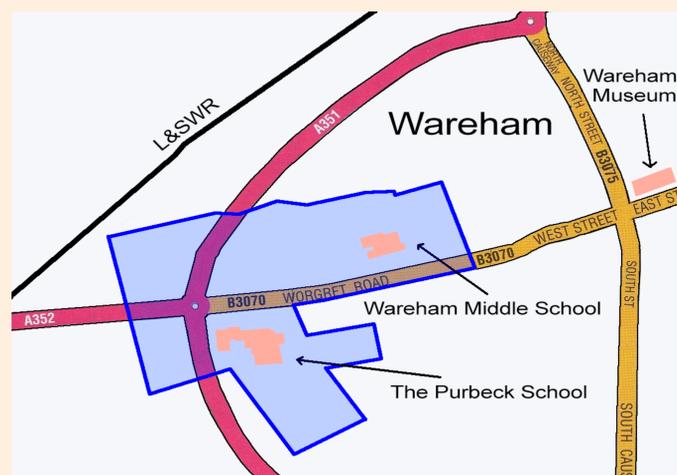
Regiments from all over England, also from Australia and New Zealand (Anzacs), were based at the camp at various times during the war.



West Yorks Transport at Wareham Camp in 1915.



A group of soldiers at Wareham Camp.



Map showing location of Wareham Camp



View along the siding serving the camp, to its terminus on Wareham Common. Tanks were driven off railway trucks at the two unloading ramps, marked by the bushes. Robert Christmas House is on the right. (photo: Ben Buxton)