Plymouth’s Military Hospitals:  See PPP series WD MH

Military expeditions had been sailing from the port of Plymouth since medieval times and there were occasions when the number of men assembled exceeded the civilian population. A growing concern was the care of returning sick and wounded seamen, marines and soldiers. Plymouth was the first home port for ships arriving in the English Channel from the Western Approaches and, for many years, there was nowhere to accommodate and treat these men.

This situation began to improve in the 18th century when buildings were commandeered for temporary use as hospitals. These were generally located to the east side of Sutton Pool, around Coxside and Shepherd’s Wharf; the same or nearby buildings were sometimes also used for keeping prisoners of war (POW). On occasions, hulks were used as temporary hospitals, such as HMS Canterbury which was stationed in the Hamoaze in 1757. The established POW prison at Millbay also appears to have had some medical provision.

The Admiralty finally accepted that it needed to take a more active role in treating their seamen, and in 1758 purchased Mill Field and Gubb’s Field on the south bank of Stonehouse Creek. Here they built the Royal Hospital for the Sick and Hurt Seamen and Marines. This was first used in 1762 and eventually became known as Stonehouse Naval Hospital. The new buildings set the standard for providing accommodation and suitable medical treatment. The layout separated the ward blocks and linked them with open colonnades; a model design that was copied and used elsewhere. The hospital closed on 31st March 1995 but the hospital buildings survive in mixed use occupation as ‘Millfields’.

Perhaps surprisingly, this is one of just two significant military establishments across Plymouth which does not have stones to mark its boundaries. This may indicate that the marking of the boundaries for all military establishments was introduced after 1762 – but nor was the Royal Naval Hospital boundary marked retrospectively, as seems to have been the case with the Royal Citadel. In case you are wondering – the other site without boundary stones is the Royal Naval Armaments Depot at Ernesettle.

There was still no significant provision for sick and wounded soldiers. Some were put into temporary buildings, such as the old Friary building in Exeter Street and a part of the army barracks in Frankfort Street. A purpose built Military Hospital was finally provided in 1797. It was located on the north shore of Stonehouse Creek, opposite the Naval Hospital. Parts remained in military use until 1933 and the buildings are now home to Devonport High School for Boys.

The Military Hospital does have boundary stones. These are set into the corners of the perimeter wall and, unusually, they are in numbered pairs. Pictured left are ‘stones’ WD MH 1-1 and WD MH 1-2.