

Basildon Park during the First World War

Basildon Park, an 18th century country estate in Berkshire, owned by the National Trust, played several important roles during the course of the First World War, contributing significantly to the war effort.

The house was built between 1776 and 1783 for Sir Francis Sykes, 1st Baronet, who made his fortune at a young age during his time in the East India Company. It was upon his return to England that he commissioned an architect, John Carr of York, to build a home that would serve as an obvious display of his wealth and status. It is designed in the Palladian architectural style which took its influence from the classical Greek and Roman temple and was very keen on the use of symmetry. The interiors are in the neoclassical "Adamesque" style. On the outbreak of the War, Basildon Park was owned by James Archibald Morrison. He had inherited the estate in 1910 from his aunt Ellen; his grandfather, James Morrison, had purchased the property from Sir Francis Sykes, 3rd Baronet, in 1838. The estate comprised of 3,522 acres and encompassed most of the villages of Upper and Lower Basildon.

James Archibald Morrison was a distinguished serving officer. With Britain's declaration of war against Germany on August 4th 1914, Morrison, aged 40, re-joined the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards on 19th August 1914. By November he was serving in France but on 13th April 1915 he was wounded by bullet in the right shoulder whilst at Neuve Chapelle and had to return to England to recover, re-joining his unit on 7th June. It was at the Battle of Loos in September 1915 that Morrison earned his Distinguished Service Order 'for distinguished service in the field' for his conduct when he took up command of his battalion of the Grenadier Guards after all his superior officers had been killed. Harold Macmillan (British Prime Minister 1957 to 1963), then a Lieutenant who served under him and friend, mentions in his biography, 'Winds of Change' how in the absence of orders, Morrison took "a very sensible decision" and joined the attack of the neighbouring Brigade. When they were driven back Captain Morrison ordered his group to lie down and crawl back but since Captain Morrison, as Macmillan recalls, was too proud and also too portly to crawl, he walked back. Macmillan concluded that if his commanding officer was not crawling, neither could he. According to Macmillan "Captain Morrison behaved throughout these proceedings with complete calm". At the Somme in 1916, Morrison was severely wounded and had to be invalided out of the Army. Issue 29694, dated 4th August 1916, records 'Capt. J. A. Morrison, DSO, Reserve of Officers relinquishes the rank of Temp. Maj. 15th June 1916'. In November 1916 he returned to service at Lt. Col. Territorial Battalion Middlesex Regiment later becoming Commandant at the School of Instruction, Tadworth, Epsom. On his retirement from the army on 10th January 1919, Captain Morrison was granted the rank of Major.

Macmillan's biography also provides an insight into Morrison's generous nature. Macmillan mentions how during his battalion's crossing from Southampton to Le Havre in August 1915 the officers were treated to a full luncheon with a fine selection of food and wine served by waiters from the Ritz, all of which was provided by Captain J. A. Morrison who he refers to as a "man of equal wealth and generosity". Nowhere is his generosity most evident than at Basildon Park.

Basildon House was lent to the Brigade of Guards for the duration of the war to be used as a 50 bed convalescent home for officers. The White House on the estate was made available to provide a similar function for local men of all ranks, having 14 beds. The whole cost of maintaining the establishments and fitting up the properties with regards to the reception of patients was borne by Morrison. Morrison was one of the many wealthy residents of Berkshire who converted their mansions into havens of rest and healing for wounded soldiers. A great many country houses were transformed into hospitals and convalescent homes in order to cope with the large number of wounded soldiers created by trench warfare. Convalescent Homes were formed from March 1915 onward to keep recovering soldiers under military control. The majority of these soldiers had minor injuries and simply required time to recuperate; country houses served the ideal setting for this, providing clean country air, fine grounds and a homely atmosphere, considered most helpful to rest and recuperation.

In the first 13 months the home was open upwards of 500 cases were dealt with. An article written at the time provides a valuable insight into life within the home at Christmas. The property was reportedly "tastefully" decorated, including a Christmas tree, by Steward Mr G. W. Busby. Officers were given presents including cigarette cases, pipes, tinder lighters, tobacco, cigars and looking glasses for the trenches by local residents such as Mrs Harter from the Grotto in Lower Basildon and an American friend of Dr Tribe, the resident medical officer and commandant of the home. On Christmas Eve the officers were treated to a concert, performed by some of the staff, such as Mr Telfer, the forester on the estate, this was preceded with a dance. Christmas Day began with a service conducted by Rev. E. A. Phillips, followed by a dinner of turkey, plum puddings and mince pies, finishing with a night of games and dancing. Colonel Magull, organising secretary of the Red Cross, inspected the property on Christmas Eve and reportedly expressed his great satisfaction. Outings were also arranged for convalescents by local residents such as to Hartslock Woods in Gatehampton, then part of the Basildon estate, by Mrs Harter, among others. It was not all fun and games; an article in The Reading Standard, 1918, reveals Morrison transformed Basildon Park into a training centre for disabled soldiers and sailors to learn a variety of trades, such as basket making. Those attending would receive their weekly payment of 27s 6d from the Pensions Ministry but Morrison proposed to make that up to 32s. 6d. a week. As a result of his initiative, Basildon had a small basket-making business for a number of years after the War. Albert Kay (1905-1994) became a salesman, cycling around the local villages selling the baskets and earning a good salary of 35s a week.

The grounds of Basildon Park were also transformed as a result of the war. Traditionally the land had been focused on producing and maintaining pedigree herds of cattle, pigs and a flock of sheep, which Morrison had won many trophies for in the past. The main resources of the land were now directed towards essential national supplies including the production of food and the manufacture of "necessary articles". With all the able-bodied men serving in the forces, the Basildon estate was run by the Women's Land Army which had been established by the Board of Agriculture in 1915.

Increasing food production was on the government's top list of priorities. Britain produced only 35% of the food it consumed at the start of the war, making the country more self-sufficient in food was thus essential to avoid the likelihood of starvation through naval blockades. It was not until the end of 1916 the Germans introduced unrestricted submarine warfare and merchant ships were sunk with great frequency. The shortage of food led to the government, in 1917, to take over 2.5 million

acres of land for farming. By January 1918 the Ministry of Food decided to introduce rationing. At Basildon Park large areas of land were turned over to food production; there were 3000 fruit trees and 4 acres of kitchen garden. The grounds were also home to large quantity of livestock, many of which were there prior to the outbreak of war with the exception of a herd of milking goats which were introduced on the estate with the specific purpose to supply milk to the poor in the local community. The estate produced large quantities of cheese, butter, eggs, bacon and fruit and what was not required for home or hospitable consumption was sold to the village co-operative society which Morrison presided over. This was mainly down to the work of the 60 women from the WLA who worked on the estate, undertaking a number of roles, such as, caring for livestock, making cheese, drying fruit and vegetables and so forth. At harvest time they were assisted by local schools, including the Mercers' School, Repton School and Bradfield College.

The WLA were also set with the task of manufacturing "necessary articles" items which were in demand due to the war. One such item was coal, by October 1916, coal was in such short supply that it was rationed by the number of rooms a family had in its house. Charcoal provided an alternative source of fuel and this was readily available at Basildon Park as the estate had over 2 million trees; many of WLA were thus involved in charcoal burning, assisting greatly with the national shortage of coal. The estate also produced a significant quantity of much needed timber; beech was the most favoured. Planting kept pace with felling. In the winter of 1917 alone, 100,000 trees were planted. A 20 acre osier bed (rapidly growing willows) was developed during the conflict; these had fallen in value to almost zero prior to the outbreak of war but they were by then hunted for all over the country. Their value lied in their ability to produce a range of objects which were otherwise difficult to acquire due to disturbances in trade. As a result basket-making became re-established as a village industry; the WLA, convalescents and the local visually impaired were all involved producing a variety of objects, such as, strong bushel and half-bushel hampers for the Food Production Department. They also undertook hurdle-making as circumstances had led to a demand for both wattle and rail hurdles. An article in Country Life, 1918 reports two women of the WLA at Basildon Park turned out an average of 3000 bricks weekly. By May 1919, 23,000 women had become official members of the WLA, a small but significant part of the 300,000 women who by 1918 were working on the land. In 1919 the WLA was disbanded as men returned home and imports resumed.

Basildon Park played an important role in the local community during the War, providing a place for local soldiers to recuperate and to learn new skills that they could use to build their own businesses after the War. It also provided for the wider community, providing food at a time when it was at most in demand by local residents as well as producing numerous materials which were at a national shortage. Basildon Park's owner, mansion and grounds together with all the medical staff, members of the WLA and other volunteers who worked on the estate during the conflict contributed significantly to the war effort, improving the circumstances for people in the local community and nationwide.

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