

# SHELL SHOCK

**The First World War devastated the lives of a generation of young men. But the trauma of war didn't end when the guns stopped firing ...**

Thousands of soldiers returned from the battlefields and trenches of the First World War reeling from the sheer horror of the conflict.



CASUALTIES OF WAR | Shell shock victims were traumatised by war

By the end of the war, 20,000 men were still suffering from shell shock. Thousands more had experienced its symptoms during their military service.

Inside Out Extra looks at the condition and visits Seale Haynes, a medical centre ahead of its time in dealing with the trauma of shell shock.

## On the front line

Across the country, doctors were mystified by a condition that they hadn't seen before. Soldiers were returning from the trenches blind, deaf, mute or paralysed.

But doctors couldn't find any physical damage to explain the symptoms.

The term 'shell shock' was coined in 1917 by a Medical Officer called Charles Myers. It was also known as "war neurosis", "combat stress" and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

At first shell shock was thought to be caused by soldiers being exposed to exploding shells.

Medical staff started to realise that there were deeper causes. Doctors soon found that many men suffering the symptoms of shell shock without having even been in the front lines.



80% of shell shock victims were never able to return to military duty

## A shock to the system

In the early years of World War One, shell shock was believed to be the result of a physical injury to the nerves and being exposed to heavy bombardment.

Shell shock victims often couldn't eat or sleep, whilst others continued to suffer physical symptoms.

Many soldiers found themselves re-living their experiences of combat long after the war had ended.

Officers suffered some of the worst symptoms because they were called upon to repress their emotions to set an example for their men.

War neurosis was four times higher among officers than among the regular soldiers.

The war poet Siegfried Sassoon, himself a victim, describes the psychological pain of shell shock in his poem *Survivors*.

He writes of soldiers with "dreams that drip with murder" and their "stammering, disconnected talk".

### Shell Shock - The symptoms

- Hysteria and anxiety
- Paralysis
- Limping and muscle contractions
- Blindness and deafness
- Nightmares and insomnia
- Heart palpitations
- Depression
- Dizziness and disorientation
- Loss of appetite

## Victims of shell shock

By 1916, over 40% of the casualties in fighting zones were victims of the condition.

At the end of the war over 80,000 cases of shell shock had passed through British Army medical facilities.

The huge number of shell shock cases was completely unexpected. By 1915 there was a shortage of hospital beds for sufferers.



Many county lunatic asylums, private mental institutions and disused spas were taken over and designated as hospitals for mental diseases and war neurosis. By 1918 there were over 20 such hospitals in the U.K.

Many shell shock victims felt shame on their return home, and some were treated as deserters

Many shell shock victims served at the Battle of the Somme - official figures put the figure at 16,000 but military experts say that the true figure could be much higher.

## No sympathy

At the time there was little sympathy for shell shock victims.

Shell shock was generally seen as a sign of emotional weakness or cowardice.

Many soldiers suffering from the condition were charged with desertion, cowardice, or insubordination.

The unlucky ones were subjected to a mock trial, charged, and convicted.



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Some shell shocked soldiers were shot dead by their own side after being charged with cowardice. They were not given posthumous pardons.

## The road to recovery

Shell shock victims found themselves at the mercy of the armed forces' medical officers.

Treatment was often harsh and included...

- solitary confinement
- disciplinary treatment
- electric shock treatment
- shaming and physical re-education
- emotional deprivation

The "lucky" ones were treated with a variety of "cures" including hypnosis, massage, rest and dietary treatments.

## A revolutionary treatment

But at Newton Abbott's Seale Hayne in Devon, the approach was very different.

Today the hospital is part of Plymouth University, but in its early days it was at the centre of a national crisis.

More than 80 years ago men arrived at the hospital nervous wrecks, seemingly destroyed by the terrors of the First World War



They were suffering from shell shock, and the hospital's treatment was revolutionary for its time. Treatment at Seale Hayne was radical for its day

Arthur Hurst, an army major, swept aside opposition to establish himself at Seale Hayne.

His miracle treatments meant that he was able to cure 90% of shell shocked soldiers in just one session.

## Miracle cure

Soon Hurst was being acclaimed as a miracle worker, but how did he weave his magic on the sick soldiers?

Hurst made the only film in existence about how shell shock victims were treated in Britain. These rare recordings give an insight into Hurst's dramatic techniques.

One of the films follows Private Percy Meek who was driven almost mad during a massive bombardment of the Western Front.

When he first came under Hurst's care, he'd regressed into a babylike state and was sitting in a wheelchair.



Hurst was a forceful man with a spell-binding personality

Gradually Meek recovered the physical functions he'd lost, and returned to normality under Hurst's tutelage.

## Taking the cure

Another of Hurst's techniques was to take the men to the peace and quiet of the rolling Devon countryside.

It was thought to be a place where the men could get over their hysteria through labouring on the land. The men toiled on the farm, and were encouraged to use their creative energies.

Arthur Hurst even encouraged his patients to shoot.

He also directed a reconstruction of the battlefields of Flanders on Dartmoor to help the men relive their experiences.

Back indoors, the men were encouraged to write and to produce a magazine with a gossip column called *Ward Whispers*.



Pioneering techniques helped shell shocked soldiers to recover

## Pioneering help

Arthur Hurst's son Christopher recalls his father's treatments, "The main work was occupational therapy. These soldiers, who had been shell shocked, had lost vital faculties, like walking, speaking and so on, were given jobs to do here.

"This was interspersed with intensive therapy sessions. My father... was head of a team, but he was the guiding genius here. He cured these cases by means of persuasion and hypnotism."

Hurst's pioneering methods were both humane and sympathetic. It was a miracle that literally saved the lives of dozens of shattered men.

At Seale Hayne the shell shocked soldiers were treated with humanity and dignity.



Shattered lives saved - but there are no studies of what happened to the men after their therapy

It remains a living testament to the men who survived the horrors of the First World War.