



Chelsea Pensioners in ceremonial full dress. From the official guide, "The Royal Hospital Chelsea: The Royal Hospital Chelsea: The Place and the People."

CHELSEA PENSIONERS

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

James H. Hillestad pays homage to the Royal Hospital Chelsea's residents, who have become celebrated figures in the world of military miniatures

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales has written, "I believe that for Londoners and visitors alike, one of the most evocative moments in our capital is to glimpse one of the 350 or so Chelsea Pensioners nattily

attired in their scarlet or navy-blue-clad coats, parading down the King's Road from their home at the Royal Hospital."

Chelsea Pensioners are an integral part of the London scene. As a result, they have become a popular subject for producers of 54-mm painted metal toy figures through the years.

Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd., Drill Square, Under Two Flags, Rank & File Ltd., John Eden

Studios, Blenheim Military Models Ltd., W. Britain and Sparblack Miniatures are just some of the manufacturers who have made the Chelsea Pensioners celebrated figures through the years.

OAK APPLE DAY

The Royal Hospital Chelsea was founded by King Charles II in 1682 to provide accommodation and care for soldiers who had become unfit for duty after 20 years of service or as a result of wounds. The English hospital was inspired by the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris, built by French King Louis XIV in 1670 to house 5,000 elderly soldiers.

The Royal Hospital was designed by Sir Christopher Wren, the celebrated architect whose masterwork was St. Paul's Cathedral. After the red brick building was finished in 1692, the first 476 old soldiers moved in.

To this day the Pensioners honor the hospital's founder on Oak Apple Day, May 29: Charles II's birthday and the date of his restoration to the throne in 1660. Each Pensioner wears oak leaves in celebration of how Charles hid up an oak tree at Boscobel House to avoid being captured by Parliamentary forces after the Battle of Worcester in 1651 during the English Civil War.

During the event, known locally as Founder's Day, members of the Royal Family review the Pensioners in Figure Court, which takes its name from the gilded statue of Charles II located there. For this special day, the statue is decked out in oak branches.

INTERNET & EAGLES

Through the years the hospital has undergone numerous renovations and modifications.

The private "berth," or bedroom, of each Pensioner has been enlarged to 9 feet by 9 feet in size. Each berth is furnished with a bed, table, chair, wardrobe and chest of drawers. The berths are also equipped with radio and television outlets. In addition, Pensioners now have access to an Internet cafe!

The hospital's museum contains artifacts left by deceased Pensioners, including



The "Special Delivery!" set by Sparblack Miniatures portrays Pensioners in a sleigh taking Christmas presents to an orphanage. This is one of the U.S.-based Toy Soldier Museum's limited edition sets for Christmas 2009. It is reviewed elsewhere in this edition.



Reviewing stand and marching figure sets by Rank & File Ltd. are combined to depict the Founder's Day Parade at the Royal Hospital
(Photo by Tony Little).

a fine collection of medals.

The Entrance Hall is dedicated to the memory of the Duke of Wellington. A variety of objects associated with him are on display, including six French Eagles.

ELIGIBILITY RULES

Since the first Pensioners were admitted in 1692, some 25,000 have lived at "Chelsea."

Currently 350 people have accommodations there. Their average age is more than 80. The average number of years spent as a resident is 7.

To be considered for admission as an "in-Pensioner," a candidate must be:

- A former non-commissioned officer or soldier of the British Army.
- In receipt of an Army Service or War Disability Pension.
- Age 65 or older, though this may be waived if the candidate has a seriously disabling, incurable, but not immediately life-

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"A Respectful Greeting" by Drill Square.



Chelsea Pensioner by Blenheim.



"Cheers to the Sergeant Major!" by John Eden Studios.



A statue of a Pensioner stands outside the Royal Hospital's North Front. (Photo by Editor Stuart A. Hessney)



"Out for a Stroll" by Under Two Flags.

TRADITIONAL DRESS

The Pensioners' dress has changed little since the 19th century.

The scarlet coat is worn at ceremonies and on special

occasions, such as when a Pensioner might travel beyond a 1-mile radius of the hospital.

Whether a badge of rank is worn on the coat depends on if the Pensioner was discharged



"A Spring Bouquet" by Trophy.



"Time for Reflection" vignette by Trophy.

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threatening condition which requires long-term care.

- Free from the obligation to support a spouse, partner or family

In return for lodging, food, beer, clothing, and health care, Pensioners must surrender their Army pensions, retaining only a small portion as pocket money.



Two Pensioners by W. Britain. The one at left wears a shako with a sergeant's rank badge. Note the gold braid on his cuffs and pocket flaps. The figure at right wears full dress for Founder's Day, including a green oak leaf.



Figure Court with the gilded statue of Royal Hospital founder King Charles II. From the official guide, "The Royal Hospital Chelsea: The Royal Hospital Chelsea: The Place and the People."

from the Regular Army in the rank of sergeant or above. If so, the coat pocket flaps and the tops of the Pensioner's blue cuffs are edged in gold braid.

For informal wear around the hospital, a blue undress uniform is worn.

As for headgear, within the hospital grounds, a Pensioner

may wear a peaked "lounge cap" with the cap badge of the regiment to which he belonged. Outside the grounds they wear a pillbox shako bearing the letters "RH" for Royal Hospital.

On ceremonial occasions, Pensioners wear full dress uniform, which consists of the scarlet coat with medals and a tricorn hat.

“The first women Pensioners were admitted in March 2009. They wear the same uniforms as the men, though without the need for tailoring of the so-called 'Chelsea chest' -- the elderly gentlemen's portly stomachs -- unless it would be to place it slightly higher up. A Pensioner's handbag is under consideration.”



A captain of invalids, a warrant officer and four Chelsea Pensioners in scarlet (from left) on parade during Founder's Day. Set by Rank & File Ltd. (Photo by Tony Little)



"Christmas Presents" by Trophy.

NEW LEASE ON LIFE

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Pensioner John Jones, when asked his feelings about life in the Royal Hospital Chelsea, said, "You put another lease on life. You get an extra 10 years of life being here."

As for being required to wear the uniform, another Pensioner said, "I've never met so many women! It opens doors and frequently you are not allowed to buy a drink in a pub." ■

SOURCES

- Dan Cruickshank, "The Royal Hospital Chelsea: The Place and the People."
- Richard Pailthorpe, "The Royal Hospital Chelsea: Home of the Chelsea Pensioners."

ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.