Internal Influences in the
Making of the English Military Hospital:
The Early-Eighteenth-Century Greenwich

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This chapter uses records at the Royal Greenwich Hospital for ex-sailors to analyse the nature of care, and to uncover how the chronically disabled patients themselves experienced the hospital. Greenwich became a 'reverse' institution, in that the ex-servicemen were closely regulated and treated like unruly visitors, while only officers and medics had free movement and influence. Although initially the inner workings of the Hospital owed much to almshouse and shipboard models, over time medical considerations became paramount. Physicians and surgeons became involved actively in governance and discipline, promoting environmental and dietary changes.

Whereas much has been written about the architecture of the Royal Greenwich Hospital, its inner life remains unexamined. This chapter utilises the minutes of the Council that administered discipline at Greenwich to explore how its chronically disabled patients experienced the hospital.

The Greenwich Council met regularly and recorded the Hospital’s internal regime in detail, including accusations brought against patients, nurses and officers, punishments meted out, as well as regulations made and amended as a result of the ongoing life of the institution. These records have never been examined systematically by historians. This chapter supplements them with other materials such as letters from the Admiralty about patient petitions.

Initially the inner life of the institution owed much to almshouse, monastic, and shipboard influences. Increasingly, however, medical considerations became influential, and a new type of institution for the chronically disabled took shape.
Relief of disabled servicemen, 1590–1700

Over four hundred years ago the English Parliament created Europe’s first state system of benefits for rank-and-file disabled sailors and soldiers. A 1593 act created a county-based pension scheme that lasted, with changes, until 1679. During the 1640s and 1650s Parliament ran a central fund that provided three hundred and fifty hospital places at the Savoy and Ely House, as well as 6,500 out-pensions to ex-servicemen, war widows, and orphans. With the Restoration, this central parliamentary provision ended. In the late seventeenth-century, the Royal Hospitals of Chelsea and Greenwich were created.

Historians who have considered the state’s relief of disabled ex-servicemen in the early-modern period have tended to concentrate on the Royal Hospitals and give relatively scant attention to the county schemes. John Keevil, in *Medicine and the Navy*, dismisses the county system as ‘no more than thinly disguised and inefficiently administered charity’. Instead he concentrates on tracing developments ‘which would in time lead to hospitals built exclusively for the sick and wounded of the fighting services’. Thus the Savoy and Ely House hospitals created by Parliament in the mid-seventeenth century, ‘afforded a striking contrast’ to previous provision for the men which ‘must have supplied many official arguments for the permanent retention of such state provision’ and ‘in their later use as homes for pensioners... were prototypes of the great hospitals at Chelsea and Greenwich founded at the end of the seventeenth century’.

C.H. Firth in a chapter on the ‘Provision for the sick and wounded and for old soldiers’ maintained that the Long Parliament, in its creation of the two national military hospitals of the Savoy and Ely House, had thus ‘recognised the moral obligation of the State to those who suffered in its service, and it was the first English government to do so’. He argued that these hospitals were necessary in order to supplement the county pension scheme that, although revamped in the 1640s, was inadequate for the nation’s needs. G. Hutt in *Papers Illustrative of the Origins and Early History of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea*, using the state papers to examine the county scheme at some length, comes to a similar conclusion to that of Firth. Parliament’s national hospitals were an improvement on the county system and hence the Restoration brought detrimental change because these national hospitals were closed, the county pension scheme continuing in a new form from 1662 to 1679. For both these scholars, with the creation of the army hospital at Chelsea in the 1680s, and the Greenwich hospital at the turn of the century, ‘the example for the Long Parliament bore fruit’.

C. Lloyd and J. Coulter, in the third volume of *Medicine and the Navy*, took Keevil’s lead, arguing that the Greenwich hospital was a good thing for