“He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark, And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey…”, So begins Wilfred Owen’s 1917 poem “Disabled.” This was the poet’s response to the increasing number of First World War veterans left with some form of disability. He was not alone, Siegfried Sassoon poses the question, “Does it matter—losing your legs…?” echoing Owen’s sentiments in his dark poem “Does it Matter?” Commemorations marking the Great War inevitably focus on those that made the ultimate sacrifice; however there were many more that carried the scars of war, both physical and mental, for the rest of their lives. It is thought that almost two million men were left dealing with some form of disability in Great Britain after the War. Fathers, husbands and sons returned to their families transformed, back into homes all across Britain. Society was forced to change its attitude towards the disabled, the infirm and the impaired. This was a significant shift in attitude, before the War many believed that those with afflictions were a burden on Society.

The 2nd Northern General Hospital was opened on the site of the City of Leeds Training College at Beckett Park in August 1914; it was one of 24 Territorial Force stations spread across the country. The College had only just been built a couple of years previously and because of its size and location had been quickly earmarked as a potential location for the Territorial Force hospital in the city. During its 13 year existence the hospital was embraced by the people of Leeds; many of its new extensions and medical functions were made possible by public subscriptions. Women were often at the forefront of initiatives to raise funds for new treatment centres, entertainment at the hospital and providing support groups for the patients.

By 1916 the hospital recognised that there was an increasing number of men who had recovered from their initial injuries but were left with a range of disabilities that still required treatment. An orthopaedic department was set up to address this situation, rolling out treatments not all hospitals could provide. The department developed rapidly so much so that by 1917 the whole hospital had been designated a specialist surgical hospital. Casualties from the Front were rerouted to satellite hospitals such as East Leeds War Hospital and the hospital became a centre of excellence housing pioneering curative, orthopaedic, jaw and face injury departments.

Nerve injuries, distorted joints and bone deformities were treated by a variety of orthopaedic treatments among them massage, paraffin baths, physical exercise and gymnastics. Pioneering techniques were developed in the re-education of muscle, which attracted much interest from the medical community. Similarly, advances in maxillofacial surgery and treatments, face and jaw reconstruction, were being made. Jaw Wards were opened in 1916 and almost all jaw and face cases, under the authority of Northern Command, were sent to Beckett Park Hospital. An increasingly important function of the hospital was the rehabilitation of injured men; curative workshops were equipped to train patients in a varied number of trades including weaving, basket-making, tailoring, blacksmithing and clerical work. Another element in the recovery of wounded men was to provide a wide variety of entertainment, which included musical soirees, pierrot troupes, music hall entertainers and film shows, even as late as 1925 the Wounded Warrior Welfare Committee were ensuring old cinema equipment at the hospital was being brought up to date with newer models.

The need for continuing medical treatment of the injured endured long after hostilities had ended. In 1923 there were 400 patients still receiving treatment in hospital with a further 2000 outpatients. After much debate and anguish the last wards were closed down in 1927. Leeds had invested time, people and money into the hospital; it had after all provided respite for the injured, many of them local men, men broken by war. Our archivist and resident historian, Keith Rowntree, remembers the countless British servicemen who were left disabled by the conflicts of the First World War, many of whom were rehabilitated at the 2nd Northern General Hospital; a military hospital which once stood on our University’s Headingley Campus.

“"The 2nd Northern General Hospital was opened on the site of the City of Leeds Training College at Beckett Park in August 1914. It was one of 24 Territorial Force stations spread across the country.""