

A talent for donkey work

Sunday Telegraph, April 8/90

A hospital for animals
has become Egypt's
latest tourist attraction.

Angela Humphery reports

THIS hospital has fulfilled all my dreams," wrote Dorothy Brooke in the visitors' book of the Brooke Hospital on April 10, 1937. Were she to visit today, I am sure her comment would be the same.

Our own visit to the hospital, set in the dusty backstreets of Cairo, was something of a pilgrimage. Early last year, we had read about it in *The Daily Telegraph's* Weekend Magazine and seen it on BBC-TV's 40 Minutes. Over two million others did likewise. "Within weeks we'd quadrupled our membership," said Richard Searight, Dorothy Brooke's grandson and organising secretary of the hospital's London committee, "and it certainly put us on the tourist map."

Of course, we had come to Egypt to see the Pyramids and the Sphinx, the Valley of the Kings and the Tomb of Tutankhamun, but just as important — for us — was to see for ourselves the work of the Brooke Hospital and two of its clinics.

Although there is an operating theatre, medical stores, maternity and isolation blocks, two ambulances, two mobile clinics and accommodation for up to 150 patients, this is no ordinary hospital.

Its patients are Cairo's draught animals: the horses, mules and donkeys which pull the local carts. Working in temperatures sometimes well over 100°F for long hours, they must subsist on meagre diets because the majority of their owners are poor and find great difficulty in feeding their families, let alone their animals.

Why, then, a hospital for animals in a country where human health care is at a premium? It came about more by accident than by design.

At the end of the First World War, the British Government sold off some 20,000 cavalry horses to buyers in the Middle East. Twelve years later, in 1930, Major-General Brooke was posted to Cairo with his regiment. His wife, Dorothy, one of those intrepid middle-class British women fast becoming an endangered species, was appalled by the condition of the surviving horses that she saw working in the streets.

She wrote to the *Morning Post* (now *The Daily Telegraph*) raising today's equivalent of £20,000, rented stables and over the next four years bought the remaining 5,000 cavalry



A Cairo hospital vet attends to a donkey from one of Brooke's three mobile clinics

horses still working in Egypt. Most of them, now more than 20 years old, were pitiful wrecks of the once-handsome "Walers" (so called because some had come from New South Wales in Australia) and had to be destroyed. Those in pain were put down at once, others were first given a week of creature comforts — the first and last holiday of their lives.

It was during the course of the War Horse Campaign that Dorothy Brooke discovered the plight of the native draught animals which were worked, regardless of age or injury, until they dropped. She turned her stables into a free veterinary clinic for the draught animals of the poor and in 1934 founded The Old War Horse Memorial Hospital, or The Brooke Hospital for Animals as it is now known.

Since then it has helped more than half a million animals — and the owners who depend on their horses, mules and donkeys for their livelihood. Animals are brought in

voluntarily and are not discharged until fit for work.

On leaving, they are re-shod, badly fitting harnesses are adjusted and owners are instructed on the proper care of their animals. Those too old, lame or injured to be treated are bought from their owners and given the now-traditional few days' comfort before being destroyed.

We drove through the poor quarter of Cairo into Beyram el Tonsi (formerly called "The Street of the English Lady", but renamed during the Suez Crisis) to a welcome from Dr Salah, who heads the hospital's team of five vets. As we walked around the spotlessly clean, fly-free loose-boxes and operating theatre, a seven-year-old black stallion was brought in with "knuckling" (ruptured foot tendons caused by too heavy a load). We watched as he was led out to one of the corrals where animals whinnied and brayed, nuzzled one another or lay stretched out on a bed of straw.

Each day a mobile clinic makes a tour of all the local markets, dispensing anti-tetanus injections and first aid for harness sores, and buying up any old, emaciated or lame animals for destruction.

We flew south to Luxor, where tourists bargain with the carriage-owners to be shown around the sights. At the Brooke Hospital's clinic there, Dr Yousef explained: "lameness is our worst problem, caused by carriage-drivers galloping their horses on hard roads or, more often, by bad farrier work. Old and ill-fitting shoes are too often used, but we're hoping soon to retrain a local farrier to Cairo standards."

Once a year, to encourage pride of ownership, the Brooke Hospital runs a competition in Luxor for best carriage horse. Richard Searight, who flies out to present the prizes, says: "This has become such a popular annual event that we're beginning to see a real improvement in the standard of the horses."

Our last visit was further south still, to the town of Aswan, where a new clinic was opened two years ago. Here Dr Gome holds a daily surgery, visits markets in the mobile clinic and attends to the 150 carriage horses in Idfu, as they wait patiently in the scorching sun for the tourist cruiseboats to arrive.

● Egyptian Encounter, 5 Station Street, Lymington, Hants (0590 676922) organises tours combining the main sights of Egypt with a visit to The Brooke Hospital for Animals in Cairo, and its clinics in Luxor and Aswan. The eight-night tours, which depart on May 8 and on November 6,

include Air Egypt return flight and half-board accommodation in five-star hotels. Cost £820; Egyptian visa (£22) and travel insurance are extra.

The Brooke Hospital can be contacted through British Columbia House, 1 Regent Street, SW1Y 4PA (01-930 0210).

ANGELA HUMPHERY

and if ever she comes to Japan - Mac said for way Protz