

THE HISTORY OF COTTAGE HOSPITALS IN MOLESEY

Part of a talk by Dr. Ken Brown to the Molesey Local History Society on 6 March 2008.

(Dr. Brown acknowledges Rowland Baker's booklet entitled "The Story of Molesey Hospital" as the source of much of what follows)

There have been three Cottage Hospitals and an Isolation Hospital in Molesey:

- The first Cottage hospital was in Manor Road and opened in 1890.
- The second, in Pemberton Road, opened in 1894.
- Molesey Isolation Hospital was in High Street, West Molesey and opened in 1911. It was converted to the third and present Cottage Hospital in 1936.

The first Molesey Cottage Hospital in Manor Road

The first Cottage Hospital in England was established in 1859 at Cranleigh.

In 1874 an attempt was made to provide a Cottage Hospital in Molesey. A committee was set up, funds were raised and there was the promise of a rent free house from a Lady Harriet Hoste of Hampton Court Palace. The proposal was unfortunately opposed by local property owners including Francis Jackson Kent, who owned over 100 acres in East Molesey. They feared that such an establishment in a respectable area would reduce property values and the campaign collapsed.

In 1889 a second attempt was made and met the same opposition but this time the campaign was saved from collapse by the Dowager Lady Barrow who lived in Kent Road. Although in her 80th year, she had sufficient social and political clout to get the project through.

With her formidable support, the East and West Molesey and Hampton Court Cottage Hospital was opened in May 1890. It was at Waverley Cottage, 19, Manor Road.

The building was set behind the other houses and backed onto the Methodist Church Hall. There was a lane leading to it and on the corner with Manor Road the name plate is still there.

There is no record of the number of beds but in less than 2 years from its opening some 70 patients had been treated there. The building was proving too small for the work being carried out and in 1894 the Cottage Hospital was transferred to 55, Pemberton Road.

The house in Manor Road reverted to a private dwelling but later fell into disrepair and was condemned as unfit for habitation. It was then used as a builder's yard and eventually demolished within only the last 10 years. It was replaced by a pair of semi-detached houses which have never been completed or occupied.

The second Cottage Hospital in Pemberton Road

The second Cottage Hospital was located at 55 Pemberton Road and was opened in 1894. A photograph of it hangs in the corridor of the present Molesey Hospital.

Initially there were 5 beds but in 1897 a further bed was endowed in memory of Tom Tagg, a well-known local waterman, boat builder and hotelier. This bed was for general use in the hospital but preference was to be given whenever possible to watermen or those deriving their living from the River Thames. Later a cot was added for children.

In World War I there had been an Auxiliary Hospital at Hampton Court Green for war wounded. In 1921 this was shut down and the sum of £1,032 from surplus funds was donated

to the Cottage Hospital to endow a further bed to be reserved for relatives or dependents of servicemen.

In 1922 the Committee fixed the visiting hours at 2 to 4pm on three days per week only – Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday. Perhaps a bit severe but, in my opinion today's visiting hours are far too long and can be very tiring for patients and visitors and must interfere with the running of the wards.

In 1925 the Cottage Hospital became the first in Surrey to be equipped with a wireless at every bedside through the generosity of an anonymous donor. He also installed the equipment himself – presumably incognito.

In 1927 the owner of 55, Pemberton Road, Mrs. Margaret Fuller, died and left the freehold of the house to the Hospital Trustees in memory of her late husband, James Fuller, who had been the licensee of both the Albion and the former Castle Hotel in Bridge Road. There is a plaque at the entrance of the present hospital commemorating this generous gift.

My old senior partner, Dr. Humble, used to describe consultants coming down from London to see patients and carry out some operations at the Hospital. Mr. Fred Witch remembers having his tonsils out as a day case and Dr. Humble coming round to see him at home in Bridge Road at 11-00pm that evening to check that he was alright.

The hospital was a voluntary organisation. Patients were charged for treatment according to their means but fundraising was essential for the continuance of the hospital. This was a major community effort involving friendly societies, who arranged an annual fund raising parade through Molesey, pub slate clubs, stalls at Hampton Court Station and Molesey Lock selling home produce, sports meetings, silver foil collection, dances, whist drives, a cavalcade of decorated bicycles and even motor cycle races at The Grove , West Molesey.

On one occasion a donkey was raffled to raise funds and one patient gave a pig in settlement of his hospital bill.

“Pound days” were organised in which girls dressed as nurses went round collecting money or gifts of goods by pound weight. Groceries were especially welcome.

The first “Pound Day” took place in 1907 and produced an astonishing yield:-

£21-6s-9d in cash

Half a ton of coal

Over 1500lbs of groceries including:-

153.5 lbs of tea

326 lbs of sugar

125 lbs of jams and jellies

82 lbs of raisins and currants

262 lbs of rice

196 lbs of sago and tapioca

60 lbs of soap

The most popular event was the annual Molesey Carnival with Carnival Queen, which continues today. The floats and costumes appear to have been much more elaborate in the past. Cigarette Island was the venue for the Carnival for a time.

The workload of the hospital increased and, as early as 1910, the managing committee were seeking larger premises. Sites were considered in Beauchamp Road, Vine Road and Arnison Road but, in each case, the proposals were blocked by local property owners with arguments

such as "It would entirely spoil one of the most open and healthy roads in East Molesey and render it almost intolerable to its present inhabitants"

In 1934/5, 559 patients were treated at Pemberton Road in one year and larger premises were becoming imperative when by good fortune Molesey Isolation Hospital in High Street, West Molesey became available.

In a Local Government reorganisation in 1933, East and West Molesey, Esher, the Dittons, Cobham and Stoke D'Abernon were all amalgamated to form the new Esher Urban District. Arrangements were made for all infectious cases from the combined district to be treated at Tolworth Hospital and Molesey Isolation Hospital was no longer required.

Prompted mainly by Dr. Humble and Dr. Bowling, the committee entered into negotiations with Esher Council.

In 1910 the Isolation Hospital had cost just over £5,000 to build. Esher Council very generously offered to sell it to the Trustees of the Cottage Hospital for the amount still outstanding on the original loan - £900 and six shillings. This figure was immediately volunteered to the Trustees as a gift by Mr. Harold Wesley of "The Wilderness", Molesey Park Road.

The new site was far from central in Molesey but it was at least in a position that could not possibly be claimed to be detrimental to the value of anyone's property.

The new Molesey Cottage Hospital was opened in 1936 and 55, Pemberton Road reverted to residential accommodation in the form of three flats.

In the early hours of 8th August 1944, a V I flying bomb fell on the house opposite killing three people and injuring many more. The old hospital was so badly damaged that it had to be demolished and replaced by a new building after the War.

The Molesey Isolation Hospital

In 1889 Parliament passed two acts aimed at controlling infectious disease by compulsory notification of cases and by isolation of infectious patients.

At that time West Molesey was part of the Kingston Rural Sanitary Authority and infectious patients could be isolated at Tolworth Hospital.

East Molesey had its own Local Board, which Rowland Baker describes as a particularly backward and parsimonious body. It was suggested that East Molesey should join the Tolworth scheme but that would have meant a penny on the rates which was considered too burdensome. Joining a scheme with Teddington, Hampton and Hampton Wick to provide a joint isolation hospital was also turned down on grounds of cost.

The members of the Board had a statutory duty to isolate infectious cases but were not willing to spend any money and so they decided that infectious patients were to be isolated at home. They put the responsibility on householders to prevent anyone going in or out until the infection was clear. This meant that, at a time when there was no social security system, no one in the house could go out to work. The Board relented to the extent of allowing one person living in the house to go out to work but they had to lodge elsewhere. This was an additional expense for the household and the Board then agreed to make a small payment to the family for the time of their isolation on the pretext of employing the parents as nurses to the children.

The District Auditor disallowed these payments as unlawful and surcharged the 15 members of the Board and their clerk personally for the full amount. They failed to pay up and were taken to court.

All this carry-on provoked a scathing editorial in the Times.

Meanwhile a Local Government Act in 1894 united East and West Molesey to form a new Molesey Urban District Council and abolished the old rural sanitary authorities. West Molesey residents were now no longer qualified to use Tolworth Hospital. A sum of £1,400 was paid to the new Molesey Council in settlement of the contribution West Molesey residents had made through their rates towards the costs of Tolworth Hospital. This money could only be used to provide isolation hospital accommodation and the new Molesey Council was then finally forced to provide an isolation hospital for Molesey.

The foundation stone was laid in 1910 by Mr. James Ray, the Chairman of the Council, and the Isolation Hospital opened in 1911, more than 20 years later than it should have done.

The hospital consisted of four separate blocks and was completely surrounded by fields. From the site, not a single house could be seen in any direction.

Fred Witch was born in Bridge Road in 1920 and still lives there.

He remembers his sister being admitted to the Isolation Hospital with scarlet fever.

He remembers two buildings on either side of a yard – scarlet fever cases on one side and diphtheria cases on the other. Visitors could speak to patients through a window but were not allowed to go into the building.

An old black ambulance stood at the hospital and went out to pick up patients. Children were scared stiff of the ambulance and would not go anywhere near it. Even adults would pass on the other side of the road.

As we have said already, Tolworth Hospital took over as the Isolation Hospital in 1933 and Molesey Isolation Hospital was no longer needed. It did not stand empty for long and was converted into the present Molesey Hospital in 1936.

The present Molesey Cottage Hospital

Mrs. Wesley of the Wilderness, Molesey Park Road was asked to perform the opening ceremony but declined for reasons of modesty and so the new Cottage hospital was opened in 1936 by Lady Firth of Hatchford Park, Cobham.

Sir William and Lady Firth had been the previous owners of The Wilderness and, when she lived in Molesey, Lady Firth had served on the committee of the old Cottage Hospital and on the old Molesey Council.

The new hospital was financed mainly by the sale of 55, Pemberton Road and the gift from Mr. Harold Wesley but there were many other generous gifts of money and in kind – for example one donor supplied bread free to the hospital for one year. It was still a voluntary hospital and needed donations to survive and these came mainly from Molesey Carnival.

The new hospital was much bigger than its predecessors and had 20 adult beds, three beds for children and 4 private beds. There was a nurses' home, a kitchen serving the patients and the nursing staff and an operating theatre.

Mrs Nan Whyte, who lives in Hampton Court Avenue, remembers being admitted to the hospital in 1938. She was a Surrey County tennis player but developed pleurisy with an

effusion and a specialist came down from Harley Street and drew off the fluid. She was told to take no exercise for the next year and that was the end of her tennis career.

Fred Witch remembers the first bombs that fell on Molesey in World War II. He was a Post Office van driver and was doing an afternoon postal collection when the sirens sounded. He was also a member of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade and went up to Molesey Hospital to offer help. Drs Humble, Bowling and Rodger were already there preparing to receive casualties. Bombs fell on High Street and Beauchamp Road and casualties were brought in for treatment including one man who nearly lost his leg. Fred remembers a tremendous noise from anti-aircraft guns, which were set up on railway wagons and were moved around by a steam locomotive and so they were not dependent on electricity supplies, which might fail during an air raid.

In 1948 Molesey Cottage Hospital was transferred, along with all the other voluntary hospitals in Britain, to the National Health Service. It was no longer dependent on local fundraising and the word "Cottage" was dropped from its title.

All this long history explains why many people feel that Molesey Hospital truly belongs to the people of Molesey. I sincerely hope that decisions about the future of the hospital are not taken in some remote office by administrators looking only at figures. The history of the hospital, the work and money local people have put into it and the support it has in the community must all be taken fully into account.