

HEALTHCARE IN ABINGDON BEFORE THE NHS

Before the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948, the provision of health care was initially associated with monasteries and later with the parish authorities who operated the Poor Law. In Abingdon St John's Hospital was originally a lay infirmary outside the abbey gate but after the dissolution, it was reduced to the status of an almshouse. It was common for almshouses to be styled 'hospitals' but any medical care and nursing was quite rudimentary. In the 17th century the local charity, Christ's Hospital of Abingdon, employed Joan Daniel and Robert Adshead, 'surgeon', to nurse and cure the sick poor.

It was not until the eighteenth century that modern medical hospitals were established. The Borough Corporation and the Governors of Christ's Hospital both subscribed to Oxford's first hospital, the Radcliffe Infirmary, opened in 1770. Christ's Hospital was later bound by a Charity Commissioners' Scheme (1859) to establish a dispensary to provide medicine and advice for those unable to pay. The practice of medicine had become more professional in the 19th century; the dispensary, staffed by a Consulting Physician, a Consulting Surgeon and a Dispenser, opened in 1861 opposite the King's Head and Bell, later moving to larger premises at 33 West St Helen Street.

By 1883 a committee of local dignitaries including the town's Liberal MP, John Creemer Clarke, was formed to promote the building of a Cottage Hospital in Abingdon. The foundation stone was laid in August 1885 at a site in Bath Street, once known as China Alley, and today occupied by Mercers' Court. On the day of the ceremony the streets were festooned with flags; half-day closing was the order of the day for shops and businesses. The grand procession was led by Oxford City Band, Abingdon Corporation, the Governors of Christ's Hospital, The High Steward and the Volunteer Fire Brigade. The opening of the Cottage Hospital in 1886 brought about the demise of the dispensary while benefitting from the £100 subscription it had formerly received. Subscriptions and voluntary contributions were literally the life-blood of hospitals at that time.

In 1892 the town's Medical Officer of Health, Dr Woodforde, presented a report recommending the provision of an Isolation Hospital and an apparatus to disinfect infected clothing. Approval was finally given five years later and the Abingdon Joint Hospital for Infectious Diseases, designed by J G T West, was built outside town on the Marcham Road. Four years later in 1914 a sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis, designed by West, was constructed there by Thatcher & Sons of Abingdon.

During World War I the Berkshire Branch of the Red Cross operated a temporary auxiliary hospital in a large house on the Marcham Road although patients continued to be under military control. Known as Tesdale House, the hospital treated over a thousand wounded soldiers between the March 1915 and February 1918. The Matron and Lady Superintendent was Miss Laurie Florence King. Well-to-do ladies such as Miss Estridge from the 'Square House' and the Miss Kennedy from The Vicarage in Albert Park volunteered their services. Nearby the large private house known as 'Brooklands', served as a temporary maternity hospital during World War II.

Wartime experience revealed the shortcomings of the Cottage Hospital. A search for new premises led to the purchase of a large house in the Radley Road, The Warren, a former

home of Sir George Dashwood. The purchase and conversion cost £9,000. The conversion produced a modern state of the art hospital accommodating 27 patients. There was also a children's ward with four beds and a separate operating theatre and X-ray machine which meant patients could be treated locally rather than travelling to the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. Private patients could also be accommodated in six upstairs rooms. The Management Committee were certain that a thousand annual subscribers could be achieved to guarantee the hospital's income.

The new hospital also changed the organisation of nursing locally by providing accommodation for the two district nurses employed by the Abingdon District Nursing Association which was affiliated to, and received a grant from, the county, ie Berkshire District Nursing Association. Local fundraising activities were often essential to supplement this income. District nursing associations allowed the less wealthy to subscribe a small sum annually to enable them to receive medical care from the district nurse. These 'provident' schemes remained popular until the creation of the welfare state. The new Cottage Hospital, or 'The Warren', familiar to generations of Abingdonians as the town's maternity hospital until 1968, ended its days as a geriatric hospital. The Warren was demolished in 1982 to make way for the small housing development which bears its name. Maternity services were moved to the hospital on the Marcham Road before being centralised in Oxford. Abingdon's remaining hospital, now called Abingdon Community Hospital, faces an uncertain future.

Published in the Abingdon Herald 15 March 2017

Jackie Smith