

A Brief History of Hill End Hospital

by Martin Booty

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In 1900 Hill End Hospital, built especially for the mentally ill of Hertfordshire, opened its doors to its first 100 male patients. The very first patient came from St Albans prison. Female patients did not arrive until later in the year. By 1902 seven male and eight female wards were open. These were separated by locked doors, not only to keep the male and female patients apart, but also the male and female staff. In fact, if a female member of staff married a male member of staff she would have to resign her post.

The Hospital continued to develop. It had its own station on the railway line (now the Alban Way) between St Albans and Hatfield. The platform can still be seen near Brandon Court. It had its own branch line, complete with turntable, which brought coal and other goods into the Hospital. Later, this was used to bring war-time casualties into the Hospital.

During the years preceding the Second World War the hospital was nearly self-sufficient. At one time the hospital had five farms and large gardens. Every morning, milk was brought into the hospital in churns from the farms by horse and cart. Then the wagon, driven by someone called Ernie! went to the station to collect any goods or parcels. The Hospital also had a water pumping station within the grounds which drew water from a large well. There was a bakery producing bread and cakes, a large laundry, tailors shop, a butcher's shop and other various workrooms.

By 1937 there were 1200 patients and they were now allowed to leave the wards and go into the corridors and grounds. Eventually wireless sets (radios to those too young to remember) were provided on each ward.

In 1936 however, the war clouds were gathering and the Ministry of Health were actively considering the likely consequences of a new World War. It decided to set up an Emergency Medical Service to control the medical resources of the nation, to empty the large London Hospitals so that they could accept a large number of casualties and to establish auxiliary hospitals within reach of London and other large cities.

It was decided that St Bartholomew's Hospital (Bart's) was to be evacuated to Hill End Hospital. Imagine the problems in trying to transfer such a great teaching hospital into a large psychiatric hospital, which covered nearly a square mile, with long corridors, wards on two floors with no lifts. Before this could happen the Hill End patients had to be transferred elsewhere. This had to be carried out in quite a short time. Many of them travelled from St Albans City Station, all with their identification detail, medical records and food for the day.

On the 31st August 1939, five sisters and 18 nurses arrived at Hill End as the Bart's advance guard. They found 1000 beds and 1000 stone hot water bottles (Government issue) but little else to enable them to nurse the sick. To convert an old mental institution to the needs of a general hospital, which would cater mainly for surgical cases must have been a Herculean task. It was some months before gas was laid on to the wards – so Primus stoves had to be used for sterilization and some cooking on the wards of some 60 beds. There was only one small operation theatre at Hill End, which was totally inadequate for the number of surgical cases expected. However, there was one very large barbers salon, which with other adjacent rooms were transformed into three operating theatres, with the necessary anaesthetic and sterilizing facilities. The barbers salon had large mirrors on the wall, which were retained throughout the war, like an emblem of the British confidence in winning the war and returning to its original use.

In October 1939 the first 230 service patients were received from France, but they were mainly the chronic sick, accepted into the Services in the rush to enlarge the Army. Although more sick and injured men were received from France during early 1940, in general it was civilians who were admitted.

Then came Dunkirk!

During the period late May to early June 1940 over 330,000 troops were evacuated from Dunkirk by an armada of naval ships and small boats of every description. In one week 600 casualties came to Hill End. On one day 321 were received in one convoy. The serious stretcher cases were taken to the Recreation Hall for immediate attention; less serious cases had to be kept in the grounds until room could be found for them. Fortunately, the weather was fine. The operating theatres were used day and night. During this time the occupancy rose to nearly one thousand.

After a short lull the work of the hospital became augmented with the reception of air-raid casualties from the London "Blitz." It is reported that a land mine dropped near the entrance to Cell Barnes Hospital, but luckily no one was killed. War has the reputation for hastening the advances of medicine and surgery. Bart's were certainly amongst the leaders. Advances were made in plastic surgery and neurosurgery to name just two. In 1944 Hill End was one of the four main centres in this country to investigate the uses of penicillin.

After the war, Bart's gradually returned to London, until in 1950 only six special units remained, and the last left in 1961. With the end of the war the Medical Superintendent was anxious to restore the hospital to the care of the mentally ill. In July 1948 the NHS took over the responsibility of running the hospital from Hertfordshire County Council.

In 1951 a service was held at the Chapel (now the Trestle Arts Base) to commemorate the faithful service given by the staff of Barts and Hill End during the war years. The Dedication was by the Lord Bishop of St Albans. Another service was held in 1957 of combined hospitals to commemorate Florence Nightingale. In this service a lamp was passed down from Matrons, Sisters, Nurses and Students to the Chaplain and then the Bishop for Dedication. The passing of the lamp from hand to hand to symbolize the undying spirit of service displayed by Florence

Nightingale. The lamp, which had been loaned by Miss Anna Neagle, was subsequently given by her to the hospital and was kept in the Chapel.

During the 1950's most of the changes revolved around the re-opening of the wards for psychiatric patients. In 1955 it was approved as a training school for male nurses, approval for female nurses followed in 1956. In 1958 it was reported that most of the ward doors had been opened, previously they had always been kept locked. Most of the signage was painted in brighter colours and most of the symbols of the "Asylum" were relegated to the dustbin or a museum.

Also in 1958 the hospital farms closed down, but the gardens remained and horticulture was added to the therapeutic activities. Hill End also set up "factories" where patients did work for outside firms.

This decade also saw evidence in increasing success in the treatment of mental illness with drugs etc. A varied programme of entertainment for patients was started, with film shows, whist drives and dances. One highlight each year was a pantomime performed by the staff, which was also attended by members of the public. 1954 saw the introduction of televisions to some wards. In 1958/9 the wards were renamed using the names of famous people.

1960 saw the introduction of the new Mental Health Act, which laid down special criteria for the detention of patients, and informal patients (previously known as voluntary patients) could discharge themselves in the same way as patients in a general hospital. The last of Barts returned to London in 1961 and in that year Hill End opened its first Day Hospital where patients returned home each evening.

In 1962 a Nucleus Unit was opened in preparation for the opening of a new hospital at Welwyn Garden City to be called the Queen Elizabeth II hospital in 1963. During the early 1960's Hill End was specifically mentioned for its pioneer work in Community Care. In 1967 the General Nursing Council gave further approval to Hill End as a training school for admission to the register of mental nurses (RMN's) also the training of SRN's in psychiatry and psychiatric nursing experience to student nurses from Bart's. This School of Nursing issued a special badge to nurses on completion of their training depicting Pandora opening her box. In Greek mythology Pandora was sent to Earth by Zeus with a box containing evils. She opened the box and all the evils flew out except hope, which was left inside as a consolation. 1963 saw the Cemetery re-named as a "Garden of Rest" when it was also decided that in future it would be used for the scattering of ashes following cremation.

A new Adolescent Unit was opened in 1969. The 1970's saw further improvements being made to the wards. With better furniture and floor coverings with carpet or PVC. A purpose built Chiropody Unit was installed. An outside ward was converted into a Day Hospital for the elderly, mentally frail. This complimented the existing Day Centre used for younger more acute patients. Later, this Day Hospital for the elderly was improved to include beds for assessment purposes. A patients clothing department was developed to provide individual personal clothing for all medium and long stay patients.

Because of the condition of the boilers at Hill End, the boiler at Cell Barnes Hospital nearby were enlarged to enable it to provide steam to Hill End via a pipe link both above and below ground level. Hill End boilers were finally closed down in 1974.

Further improvements were made including better recreational facilities, Industrial Therapy and Art Therapy. The number of in-patients began to decrease during the 1970's (561 in 1974 to 426 in 1980). The early 1980's saw the building of a large central store on a site previously used by the garden department.

A new Mental Health Act (1983) came into force, which included improvements for the rights of detained patients. The 1980's also saw the development of programmes to prepare patients for living outside in the community. By the mid-eighties it was evident that Hill End would be closed down as soon as possible and the number of patients were considerably reduced.

Demolition of unused building began and in 1994 the building of the first houses on the site started. Just before the actual closure on November 29th 1995 a special exhibition was held in the Alexandra Ward commemorating the life of Hill End. This was followed by a special function for Hill End staff past and present.

Footnote

The Highfield Park Trust and the NHS Partnership Trust have erected an information board in the Hill End Commemorative Garden with the layout of the Hill End Hospital, photographs and a brief history. The Garden is also a “touchstone” where former staff, patients and relatives can quietly reflect on the life and times of Hill End and their part in it.