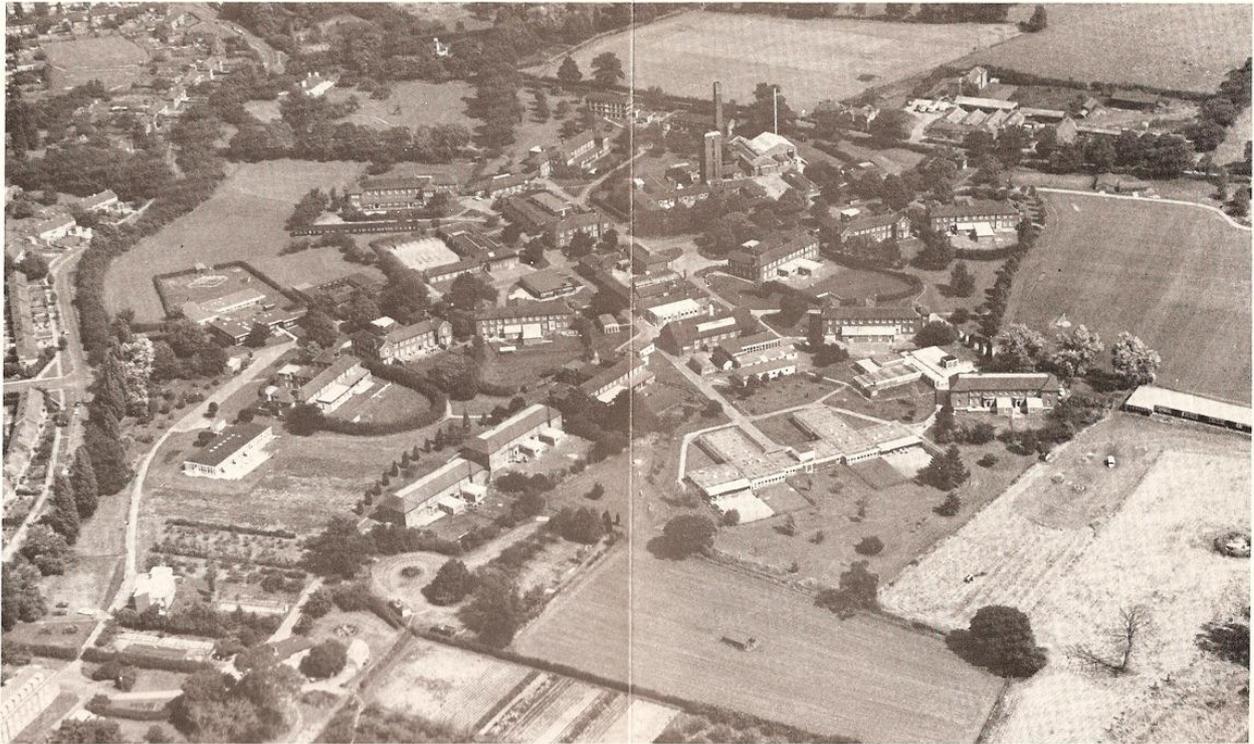


The History of the Cell Barnes Hospital Site

Part 1: Eight Centuries from Nunnery to Hospital

This article is reproduced from a pamphlet compiled by the Social Works Department of Cell Barnes Hospital as their contribution to commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Hospital in 1983. Although we have not sought their permission; for they no longer exist, I am sure they will not object!



When it all started.

Matthew Paris the 13th Century historian monk wrote that in about the year 1140 a priory dedicated to the Blessed St Mary was founded at a place called Sopwell by Geoffrey de Gorham, Abbot of St Albans. *Note: Ruins of the Nunnery can be seen along Cotton Mill Lane adjacent to the Prospect Road junction.* He framed rules for the 13 nuns who were resident, laid down that they should wear the black habit and follow the rules of St Benedict. The Abbot and other benefactors, gave properties to the nunnery, among them almost certainly Cell Barnes, in order that the rents and food grown could be used to support the nuns. The nunnery, dependent on St Albans Abbey, was called a cell (a small part) as was the custom, and we can find in the Place names of Hertfordshire that in 1332 the area later known as Cell Barnes was referred to as a Cella, in 1385 as Cellecroft and in 1436 as Sellbarne. The latter change of name is of interest as it is known that a number of barns were built in the area about that time. In 1517 there was also a Cellewood close by.

There is a record that Abbot Michael De Mentmore (1336 49) who died of the Black Death, found it necessary to make the rules stricter and to increase the nuns in residence. From then on a number of high-born ladies came to the Blessed St Mary at Sopwell.

The Famous “Boke of St Albans”

St Albans was the third printer works in England and in 1481 and again in 1486 the “Boke of St Albans” was produced. The author of at least part was Dame Juliana Berners writing on hawking, heraldry and a particular good treatise on angling. It was believed that the Dame was a Prioress of Sopwell and used the cell as her retreat where she would follow the activities that she wrote so knowledgeably about. Originally entitled the “Boke of Haukyng and Huntying” this was the first printed book in the English language that featured dogs. What is almost certain is that the section

on hunting came from her hand for it is signed alongside her words "Explicit Dam Julyans Barnes in her boke of Huntyng", Dame Julians's list of dogs reads "First there is a greyhound, a bafard, a mongrel, maftyfe, a lemor, a spanyell, kenettys, terours, bocheris houndes, mydding dogges, tryndeltayles and prikherid curris." This list remained the sole printed contribution on dogs in English until 1576.

Local feeling is the name Cell Barnes was a corruption of her name over the years Berner's cell, to Cell Barnes.

The last Prioress of Sopwell was Johanna Pigot who was paid a pension of £6 a year.

Anne Boleyn is reputed to have come to Sopwell to avoid London and that Henry VIII courted her there and in 1553 married her somewhere close by.

The Great Upheaval

In 1531 the Cell Barnes part of Sopwell was leased to John and Nicholas Ayleward. When the nunnery of Sopwell was disbanded a Letters Patent was issued detailing a grant by Henry VIII to Sir Richard Lee and his wife Margaret of "divers messuages, tenements, land, wood, ground and hereditaments, part of the late dissolved Monastery of Sopwell." It was dated in the 30th year of Henry VIII (1539). Included in the list of properties was "one messuage and all those lands call Sell Barnes with the appertenances in the said parish of St Peter."

Built at this time, and still standing was the property, now called Little Cell Barnes, which was just outside the hospital grounds in Cell Barnes Lane and now used as a Social Club for local residents.

Famous Names Come to Light – some still locally known today.

Sir Richard died in 1575 and was buried in St Peters Church and the estate including Cell Barnes passed to his elder daughter Mary Coningsby, later Pemberton, and on her death the property passed to her sister Ann Sadlier who passed it on to her son Richard. In 1669 Thomas Saunders, who had married Helen Sadlier, sold the property, to Sir Harbottle Grimston of Gorehambury, whose descendants owned Cell Barnes for the next 260 years. During this time the land was leased and farmed by various families. Richard Thrle, in 1973 published a chronicle of his family entitled "A New Thraliana." From this book we discover that in 1646 namesake Richard Thrle married Martha Aylward (see 1531) and it is possible that Martha was left Cell Barnes in the legacy from her father.

A Farming tradition

From about 1690 Cell Barnes was farmed by members of the Thrle family until in 1736 two brothers died. We read that a niece, Anne, received household goods from Cell Barnes farmhouse. To keep the land fertile, there were cropping clauses in the lease. The first year should be fallow or turnips, the second wheat, rye or barley and the third year corn. Parts of the property were pasture. There were squabbles in the family about these conditions and about hedges and fences being ruined. In 1765 Joseph Bunn became a tenant of Cell Barnes, seven years later he was granted a 21-year lease at £75 per annum.

The first large scale map of Hertfordshire published by Drury and Andrews in 1766 includes "Sell Barnes." Close by was Sopwell Barnes and New Barnes. Between 1800-5 a large brick farmhouse was built. This was called great Cells Barn and had 208 acres. The old farm, just down the lane, was called Little Cell Barn with 140 acres.

From 1838-81 Great Cell Barnes was occupied by farmers and for the next five years Viscount Grimston is listed as occupant.

From 1901-1917 the house was the residence of the Hon. F and Mrs. F.W. Anson: Mrs. Anson was noted for her breeding of Buff Orpingtons (poultry) for show.

From 1922 the occupant of the house was Viscount Encombe.

Cell Barnes Hospital

Hill End Hospital was built in 1899 in 184 acres of grounds. An extension was built in 1907 and within a short time the Committee was searching for more land.

In the 1920's 82 acres of Cell Barnes, adjoining Hill End and belonging to the Earl of Verulam came on to the market. It was purchased by Hertfordshire County Council and a "colony for mental defectives" was built, to be run in conjunction with Hill End. On the property was Great Cell Barnes

House which was extended and used as a Nurses' Home. Original features in the house being preserved.

The layout of the grounds was carried out by the Head Gardener George Dollimore. The Victorian Gardens close to the great house were preserved with their formal rose gardens, tree fringed lake, stables and magnificent fir trees. Note: on the closure of the hospital in 1998 the Nurses Home had long been empty and eventually the ownership was transferred to St Albans Council. By the time the current tenants – Emmaus – took occupation much of the building had been vandalised and the gardens neglected. The lake – was completely silted up and was transferred to Highfield Park Trust in 1998 – see the separate information sheet - *Cell Barnes pond on this topic*.

The Hospital was officially opened on 5th October 1933 by the Minister of Health Sir E. Hilton Young and transferred to the NHS on 1st July 1948.

Maintaining the tradition, a thriving farm was managed at Cell Barnes, growing various crops, including potatoes. Cows, pigs and poultry were kept, the produce being used by the hospital. Patients helped on the farm and in the gardens. The farm was discontinued in 1965 in line with Government policy that all hospital farms should cease.

Much additional building occurred in the Hospital over the years to accommodate staff and for administration, training and recreational centres. A very active "Friends of Cell Barnes Hospital Association was formed." H.R.H The Duke of Gloucester opened the staff and Sports Social Club in May 1958.

Update: 1983 – 2008 (By John Ely Park Director 1996- 2008)

As with Hill End Hospital, changes in the treatment of the mentally ill resulted in the inevitable closure of the Cell Barnes Hospital. There was a planning agreement for new housing and the creation of 60 acres of public open space across both hospital sites. The Hospital eventually closed in 2000. However, the process of closure was well managed, patients relocated to smaller units and with the formation of the Highfield Park Trust in 1996, the Trust was able to take "ownership" of the Park area and thus manage and control the redevelopment process – so as not to inherit, as was the case at Hill End, a neglected and vandalised landscape. The Trust also salvaged wherever possible garden benches, plants (especially roses), the puddingstone etc. to create features in the Park.

Virtually every hospital building was demolished – except the still functioning - Pill Packing Unit (PPAS), the nurses home (now Emmaus), the Nurses Training Centre (now the Birch Centre and occupied by the Ladybird's Nursery), a small Occupational Therapy Unit (Rowan House occupied by The LK Partnership) and of course West Lodge (the Park Office).

Of the farming features – the orchard still survives and we still like to think of the Buff Orpingtons busily scratching away at the ground beneath the trees!