

# PRINCE OF WALES'S HOSPITAL

Prompted by the reaction to his previous article about the patronage of hospitals in earlier times, Tony Smith draws the curtain back again — but this time the focus is more on the hospital itself rather than its royal patrons. It is the story of how a proud name, the Prince of Wales's Hospital, has become a reference number on a London planner's blueprint that may ultimately decide the hospital's future.

## Prince and pauper

**T**he hospital was the Prince of Wales's at Tottenham and I became interested in its past when I was involved in the centenary celebrations in 1967. I was charged with establishing the exact date for the centenary and soon found myself in the local museum spending many interesting hours reading newspapers and other documents of the 1860s trying to find out how it all began.

We set up a committee at the hospital and soon had plans in hand for an inter-denominational church service, a commemorative plaque, lunch for 400 guests, historical exhibition, tours of the hospital including the showing of an old newsreel film of the opening of the outpatients' department by HRH in 1932, improvements to the hospital grounds, and a special postmark. The local parks department agreed to lay out the hospital badge in carpet bedding on the green in front of the hospital, and arrangements were made for the history of the hospital to be written by a young journalist called Brian Watkin who was, we had been assured, 'well thought of'.

### Ensuring success

We established a travelling scholarship for trained nurses and later in the year the Duchess of Kent came to the nurses' prizegiving. Altogether it was a good year, reminiscent of those earlier days when all members of staff were expected to be involved in one way or another in ensuring the success of the hospital.

Practically all our staff were involved in some way in the centenary arrangements, as were some retired staff who came back and gave freely of their time as did members of the League of Friends, and the hospital management committee. It is a tribute to them all that the centenary was so

memorable.

The origins of the hospital lay in a girls' industrial orphan home founded in nearby Edmonton by Dr Michael Laseron and his wife. We tried very hard to find a descendant of theirs to take part in the celebrations — but without success. It came as a great surprise and coincidence therefore when there was a telephone call, four days after the centenary, from Dr Morris S. Lazaron of Blowing Rock, North Carolina, who was visiting London with his family. He was a great-nephew of Michael Laseron, and had a wealth of information for us about the founder's early days and the subsequent fortunes of the family in both USA and Australia. He had not known about the centenary celebrations and was extremely disappointed, as we were, that he had missed them.

### A promise kept

Michael Laseron had been impressed by the work of the deaconesses' institution at Kaiserswerth where Florence Nightingale had spent some time. He founded the Evangelical Protestant Deaconesses' Institution and Training Hospital, as a result, with the declared intention of training girls from his orphanage, together with those from 'good families', in the nursing of the sick and other charitable/evangelical works.

The institution promised to look after the deaconesses, even after retirement, and the hospital continued to do so long after the EPDI ceased to exist. When I started at the hospital the last of the deaconesses still lived there, and when she died we honoured that original promise and arranged for her burial in a grave reserved by the institution all those years before.

In 1892 a select committee of the

House of Lords reviewed the Metropolitan hospitals and recorded that at Tottenham there was one physician with 22 beds and two surgeons each with 24 beds, and they each received 'nil honoraria'. There was also a resident medical officer who had a salary of £80 plus board and lodging and washing, but 'no alcohol'. Health and safety had its place, even in those days. An inspection was made daily by the director, who was responsible for the sanitary conditions of the institution, and under the heading of fire precautions it was recorded '... there is a fire escape'.

### Design competition

Before that, in 1882, a competition had been held for the design of a new hospital, and by 1887 the main building had been completed and was very much as it is now. Somewhere down in the basement there is still an old-fashioned metal cabinet marked 'EPDI — plans for new hospital'. No doubt they had a project team as well. The final part of the hospital was opened in 1887 by the Princess of Wales, accompanied by the Prince and their three daughters, and that was the first of many royal visits in the years ahead.

### A new name

Following Dr Laseron's death in 1894 much discussion and, eventually change, took place culminating in the separation of the management of the hospital from the institution in 1899, and it being renamed 'The Tottenham Hospital'.

May 7, 1907, was a red letter day. The Prince and Princess of Wales, later King George V and Queen Mary, came to Tottenham 'in semi-state, with four postillioned horses, preceded by a

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mounted escort of the Hertfordshire Yeomanry'. The route half a mile along the road from the hospital was decorated with venetian masts, festoons of flags, escutcheons, banners, and devices of various kinds. Local schoolchildren had been given a special holiday and they, with thousands of other persons, lined the route to welcome the royal couple.

## Red letter day

The Prince had come to open an extension to the hospital together with a new operating theatre said by the Governors to be 'where the most modern conditions of medical science may be exercised with the most beneficent effects'. The most important part of the ceremony however was when the Prince, replying to the address of welcome, announced, 'I have much pleasure in agreeing to the hospital being called 'The Prince of Wales's General Hospital, Tottenham', and I am proud to think that for the future it will thus bear my name'.

A proud day indeed which set the royal seal of approval on the hospital in no uncertain way. The Prince had been welcomed by his aunt, Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll, sister of Edward VII. She was an interested and active president of the hospital for nearly 40 years and she later welcomed a third Prince, the future Edward VIII, when he came in 1918 and on other occasions. All of these visits, coupled with the personal interest taken by the Duchess, helped to make those associated with the hospital feel that in some way it was a rather special institution.

## Satisfaction

Small wonder the centenary was seen as an opportunity to look back with satisfaction at a hundred years of service to the local community. At the time of the centenary, plans were well ahead for a new Prince of Wales's General Hospital on the site of its sister hospital, St Ann's, a mile and a half away. This was a prestige development destined to be the pride and joy of the region and, as befitted such a scheme, all the chief officers at RHB headquarters were personally on the project team.

Brian Watkin summed it all up in the concluding lines of his history of the hospital '... it could be that the story



*The frontage of the Prince of Wales's Hospital still hints at the elegance of a past that has seen a royal visit with postillioned horses and a mounted escort.*

related in these pages had been only the beginning, the best may be yet to come'.

## Celebrations

How uncertain is the course of history. The best was not to come. Far from it. One by one the principal officers withdrew from the project team, handing over to their subordinates, and soon after that it was announced that the plans for the new hospital had been abandoned. Of course we fought the decision. How we fought, but it was no good. The group secretary had an architect's model of the new hospital which he proudly showed

to all our visitors, especially at the centenary celebrations. The day he had it moved from his office, we knew it was all over.

By the time of the 1974 re-organisation the principle of working in equal partnership with the North Middlesex Hospital, a few miles down the road, was declared but it was only a short step from that for the newly prepared area/district plan to imply a supportive rather than a partnership role. Even the name was changed. The long established 'General' was dropped and it became, simply, 'The Prince of Wales's Hospital'.

The accident and emergency

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department was closed at night from February 1981, with complete closure due to follow soon after. The surgical services were centred mainly at the larger hospital and the total occupancy dropped to below that of 1892. The nurses' school, which gave its proud welcome to the Duchess of Kent in the centenary year, lost its identity in the 1974 reorganisation to become part of the area school of nursing. Now, in 1981, no more nurses in training are to be accepted at the hospital.

## Piecemeal destruction

Such was the public outcry at the piecemeal destruction of all that the hospital had stood for that the Minister for Health was persuaded to visit Tottenham in February, 1981. No more change is to take place, he declared, until the new district health authority has the opportunity to consider what it wants to do after the take-over in April 1982.

Of course all the events described are related to the hard economic facts of life — plus the fact that priorities today are decided by committees, and individuals,

who are not connected with, and do not know, the hospitals whose fate they decide. The new DHA may say 'enough is enough, let us rebuild what is gone'. But the policy makers in far off Eastbourne Terrace, where the hospital is known as Ref: 52/111, may think otherwise in this age of harsh impersonal logic.

## Grassroots

It would be foolish to suggest that our hospitals should still be run in the old ways. Standards had to be improved and more money made available than was ever seen in the past. A national health service was the inevitable answer; but something seems to have gone wrong along the way as can be seen in the story of the Prince of Wales's General Hospital.

The reorganisation ahead of us is intended to bring the decision-making nearer the grassroots. But what difference will that make now to the Prince? It is much too late, the damage has been done.

What would Dr Laseron have thought of it all?

*The future Edward VIII was the third Prince of Wales to visit the Tottenham hospital.*

*The beginning of the end? The notice that went up earlier this year to inform the public of the cut in opening hours at the casualty department.*

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