

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2022

Reading's Hospitals - Lionel Williams

The January meeting of Wargrave Local History Society was an illustrated presentation on Reading's Hospitals, by Lionel Williams. Lionel was well qualified to recount their history, having worked at the Royal Berkshire Hospital from 1964 until 2004, and is now a trustee of the Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre.

The first hospital in Reading was that which existed as part of Reading Abbey, founded by Henry I in 1121. It provided for the care of the monks who lived there, rather than the local population, although may have catered for others at the time of the Black Death plague in 1348. Although for most of the abbey site only the ruins of some of the walls remain, the building known as the hospitium is now used as a children's nursery.

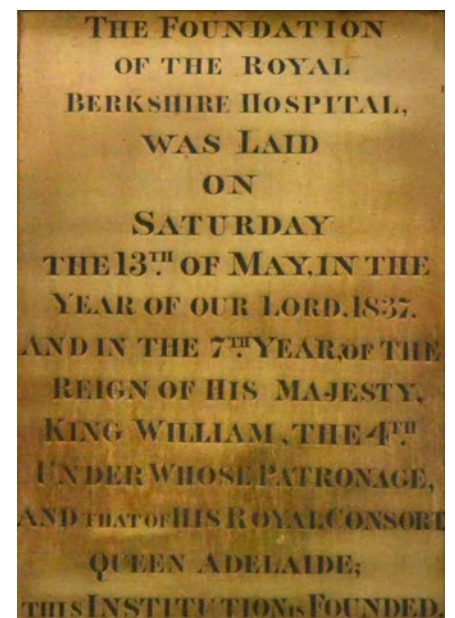
Following the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1537, there was no treatment available for the poor in England, except in London where St Bart's and St Thomas's hospitals gave some provision for the poor – both also having begun in the 12th century as part of a priory.

By the early 18th century, it was felt that something should be done by those who could do so to help the less well off in time of medical need. One of these philanthropic benefactors was Thomas Guy, who founded a hospital for incurable patients from St Thomas's.

In the local area, the first provision for the poorer members of the community was at the Reading Dispensary, which was established in 1802 to "administer advice and medicines to the industrious poor".

Founded by 3 local doctors, it was funded by voluntary subscriptions – a wealthy person who gave a donation of 10 guineas being able to nominate up to 3 poor people for treatment. It had premises in Chain Street (until the site was incorporated in the extensions to Heelas store in the 1970s. With improvements to medical provision generally in the early 20th century, the Dispensary changed its name to the Reading Medical Society, and changed its role to providing support for those needing medical care, rather than the treatment itself.

In 1836, Richard Benyon, who owned the large Englefield Estate to the west of Reading, offered funds towards the establishment of a hospital for the area. He was so proud of his donation of £1,000 that he had a view of the new hospital included in the background when his portrait was painted. Local landowners, Lord and Lady Sidmouth, then offered a 4-acre site for a hospital to be created. Lord Sidmouth was the former Prime Minister, Henry Addington, the son of a Reading physician. The process nearly failed, as those establishing the hospital enquired about the price of the land – it was not being sold, but was being offered to be either accepted or rejected. A competition to design the new hospital attracted 54 entries, the winning design being by Henry Briant, a local builder. William IV and Queen Adelaide agreed to become patrons of the new hospital, and so it became named the Royal Berkshire Hospital. The foundation stone was due to be laid in May 1836, and a plaque exists to commemorate the official event – except that due to



various postponements, that never actually happened!

The hospital was formally opened on 27th May 1839, the frontage of ionic columns, surmounted by a pediment bearing the coat of arms of William IV (who had died 2 years earlier). Although the estimated cost when building started was £6,000, by the time the hospital opened the figure had risen to £9,000.

This was at the start of Queen Victoria's reign, and the era when Brunel's Great Western Railway was being built across Berkshire. Amongst the important matters to be discussed at the first meeting of the hospital's governors was the salary for the matron (decided to be £30 per year). The advertisement for the post declared that she was to be 'free of the care of children or family'. The lady appointed, Mrs Hogg, was not what one might expect a matron to be now, but was more of a domestic superintendent. It was stipulated that it was expected that the matron and the house surgeon should take breakfast and dinner together each day – presumably so that they could keep each other up to date on various aspects of the operation of the hospital.

The first patient recorded in the admissions book was George Earley, aged 15. – one of several who had accidents whilst working to build the railway, which was forming Sonning cutting at the time. George had to have an arm amputated at the shoulder – and did survive the procedure. The GWR helped the Royal Berkshire Hospital by making a donation of 100 guineas, followed by a subscription of 10 guineas per year. Of the 75 operations carried out in the first 5 years of the hospital's existence, just 50% were successful. There was no anaesthetic available (such only being discovered in 1846). The records show that the hospital spent more on ale than on drugs at that time – in part as the quality of the water was poor, and the ale was the less alcoholic 'small beer'. One local brewery, Dymore Brown and Co, later even advertised that they were suppliers of pale ale to the Royal Berkshire Hospital



The original frontage of the Royal Berkshire Hospital in the 19th century

Having surgery was still hazardous at that time, and the best surgeons were those who completed a procedure in the fastest time. The first surgeon at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, George May, wrote a book of tragedies that occurred in the operating theatre. One operation led to the death of not only the patient, but the surgeon's assistant and a visiting doctor who was observing the process.

Unless they were what we would now refer to as an accident and emergency case, someone would need an admission ticket to be accepted as a patient. These were distributed by benefactors, who could sponsor a number of patients in return for their donation. A number of the local clergy were amongst those who acted in this way.

In the mid-19th century, the Poor Law Inspectors noted that the parish workhouses were inconvenient. To improve on this situation in Reading, an 8½ acre site was purchased in the Oxford Road, and the new Oxford Road Union Workhouse built there was opened on July 26th 1867. It had an infirmary on site, and in due course this became Battle Hospital – although it retained a block for vagrants, who were employed in stone crushing sheds on the site. The name Battle Hospital derived from the Abbot of Battle, who had had a church in Reading in medieval times.

By the early 1880s, the buildings at the Royal Berkshire Hospital site had been extended, with a laundry added in 1881, and a chapel and library in 1881-2. The library, which includes books from the early 17th century, is now in the care of the Reading Pathological Society – one of the oldest such groups, whilst the old laundry now houses the Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre's museum.

By 1886, the Royal Berkshire was carrying out 186 operations in a year – but even though antiseptics had started to become available from 1867, the mortality rate was still high, and for example none of those who had a tracheotomy survived.

Towards the end of the century, the facilities at the Royal Berkshire were expanded. A new operating theatre – which later became the ear nose and throat theatre - was opened in 1895, whilst in 1897 Huntley and Palmers gave £7,000 to endow a ward (which carried their name) at the hospital, The following year, the hospital was honoured with a visit by the Prince of Wales, and then in 1899 a Rontgen X-ray apparatus was installed. As the X-ray process had only been discovered in 1895, this was 'state of the art' at the time. At the end of the century, the hospital was still entirely dependent on voluntary subscriptions and donations for its funding, and to help with this, fetes and similar events were organised to raise money.

In a different part of Reading, the Liebenrood family had sold their property at Prospect Park to the Borough of Reading in 1906. The Council decided that there was a need for an isolation hospital, and this was built in the grounds. Its 40 beds provided for patients suffering from scarlet fever or diphtheria – by 1947 this had grown to provide 104 beds. Relatives, however, were not allowed to visit patients on the wards, but could only speak to them through the windows. In the 1970s, a nurses' accommodation block was also built at Prospect Park.

Further extensions were made at the Royal Berkshire site, with a new wing opened by Lady Wantage in May 1912, and an ophthalmic theatre was also provided – the first time that a department had a facility dedicated to their specific use. The 1914-18 war, however, put a great strain on the hospital provision in the town. Battle Hospital became Reading No 1 Hospital, and the Royal Berkshire became Reading Hospital No 6. The other 4 hospitals were created by taking over 4 local schools, with 3,500 children needing to be found space elsewhere. Most of the medical teams were surgeons from the Royal Berkshire. A meningitis epidemic in 1915 put an added strain on bed space, and so tents were put up on the lawns at the back of the Royal Berkshire – fortunately there were few deaths from the epidemic at the Royal Berkshire.

In 1928 a large house alongside the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Greenlands, was acquired to provide wards for paying patients, and these included probably the most famous of the Royal Berkshire's patients, Douglas Bader. He had been flying from Woodley Airfield in December 1931 when he crashed his plane. He later said that if it had not been for the skills of an extremely good surgeon at the Royal Berkshire, Leonard Joyce, he would not have survived.

It was at about this time that a further hospital was created for the Reading area. Located on a 5½ acre site at Tilehurst, the Blagrove Hospital was used to treat cases of tuberculosis – those patients often having their beds moved onto the veranda for fresh air – and for patients convalescing from surgery. The land was later sold for housing, and no trace now survives of the hospital.

Further additional buildings were added to the Royal Berkshire, when Lord Nuffield gave £30,000 for a new block on the site, opened by Princess Alice in 1937 – the centenary year of the hospital's foundation. By that time, over 3600 operations were being done each year. This took buildings to the end of the original site – which would not be enlarged until the 1960s. Some facilities, though, were still fairly basic – for example 'ventilation' in an operating theatre was by opening the window.

By 1947, when the local hospitals became part of the newly formed NHS, the Royal Berkshire had 413 beds, and treated 6648 in patients and 28445 out patients in a year. Additional facilities were created in the post war era with some hut-like buildings on the Redlands Road side of the site - although meant to be temporary, they were only taken down in the last year or so!

Further expansion came in the 1960s, when land at Greenlands was used to build a new eye block, whilst in 1966-68 a maternity block was added. Some senior consultants had sufficient influence at that time to promote such projects. The south block, nearer the Addington Road end of the extended site – now some 19 acres – followed, and a further phase of building work in the 1980s and 90s. then a new centre block in 1999-2002. Medical services were now concentrated at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, and so Battle Hospital was closed in 2005.

Lionel also recalled a number of medical advances associated with the Royal Berkshire. One was the “Halo”, which was developed to immobilise broken jaws, and later for work on necks. Another was the pioneering work done by Harold Hopkins, a Reading University physicist who specialised in optics and had developed the zoom lens. He went on to develop a rod lens, and then fibre optics. Internal examinations of organs such as the stomach had needed something like the ‘sword swallowing trick’ and doctors were very lucky if they saw anything. With fibre optics, a flexible gastroscope could be made, a camera attached to the open end, and a detailed examination made. A similar system then led to the possibility of keyhole surgery – often treating patients by day surgery rather than as long term cases. Other notable medical developments associated with the Royal Berkshire Hospital have included a laryngeal mask, inserted into the throat to keep the airway clear, which was invented by Dr Archie Brain in the 1980s (much of the work being done in his garden shed!) and has now been used successfully over 300 million times worldwide, and the Copeland shoulder prosthesis, which was developed for use in reconstructive surgery at the joint between the upper arm and the shoulder.

The Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre was formed, in 1998. It is currently closed, due to pandemic restrictions, but it is hoped to re-open it to the public in the late spring.
