

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2004

The Wargrave Surgery

There was a packed Hannen Room at the November meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society to hear Dr Sandra Swan gave a most enjoyable talk about her time at The Wargrave Surgery.

She began by commenting that looking at the audience was rather like looking at the surgery waiting room again !

There had been many changes to the practice in her 30 years here. Many people in the village would remember Dr McCrea, who was the doctor here in the 1930s and 40s, with a surgery at his house, Lisna, in School Lane. He was noted for having a very clear tremor - especially obvious if he was trying to insert a needle into his patient. Soon after the end of World War 2, Dr Black joined him in the practice. When, in due course, Dr McCrea retired, Dr Black then had a house built - Treetops - complete with a surgery attached. In 1953, Dr Paton joined him there, and was the situation for the next 20 years - each doctor having to take surgery every other evening, and being on call every other weekend. But eventually the time came when they decided they 'some young blood' in the practice.

Dr Swan applied, and arrived for interview, in her white Triumph Herald - as Dr Paton also had a white Triumph Herald, and the practice already had a Geordie and a Scot, she thought that she might well fit in. Sandra was shown the surgery, which was quite small, with a tiny waiting room - the patients moving round as their turn approached to see the doctor. There was also a tiny 'cupboard' where the records were kept, and where also would be found Lucy Jones - who was the telephonist, receptionist and nurse.

Doctors Black and Paton decided to take Sandra Swan on - they were 'of their time' in having a female doctor, and as such she became a 'factor' who doctors from Twyford or Henley would come to see. Sandra was very much the 'junior partner' - she had the last pick of the holiday dates, and would always be on duty on a Friday evening, when Doctor Black might be seen from the surgery window relaxing with friends ! That, however, was the accepted pattern in those days - and became somewhat more democratic when Sandra in due course became the senior partner. Surgery times were from 9 - 10 am, and from 6 - 7 pm, and as now, without an 'appointment' system. One of the changes that Sandra introduced was to have the evening surgery time brought forwards - as otherwise it might be 9 pm before the doctor taking surgery would get home. The 'equipment' in the surgery was minimal - a stethoscope and a pen - but the doctors did have time to talk to each other. One would take surgery whilst another would make visits. There were also two 'branch surgeries' - that at Waltham St Lawrence was held in the village hall, but at Knowl Hill it would be in the Seven Stars pub. There a Mrs Trivett would look after the 'waiting room' including the tablets for patients that had been sent up from Wargrave. If the patient did not call to collect their prescription, Mrs Trivett would take the tablets home - and if Lucy had not put

“ Smith” medication into the box, she might say “mind, Mrs Bloggs has quite a lot - and give Mrs Smith some of those!”

In those days, Townlands Hospital would be called upon quite a lot. - it still having a maternity unit. Dr Paton seemed to often start ladies in labour on a Friday morning - but was he there when the baby arrived on a Friday evening, when Sandra was on duty ?! There were no mobile phones or ‘bleeps’ then, and it was quite possible to go all the way to Shurlock Row and back to discover another call was needed there. Even the branch surgery did not have a phone - on one occasion a ‘bleep’ went whilst at the Waltham surgery - and rushed to the phone box by the pub -- to be asked by her family if she could get some sausages on the way home ! There used to be much more home visiting at that time - it being difficult to take a sick child to the surgery if the family did not have a car.

Medically, things have changed greatly. Heart problems were treated with ‘rest’ and no ‘intervention’ - although at that time consultants did make domiciliary visits, whilst there was no argument if they wanted to get a patient into hospital, as there were beds available. Similarly, asthma treatment could only be treated by a slow injection - difficult in the pitch black of power cuts during the ‘3 day week’ - something changed by the introduction of nebulisers.

In 1976, the doctors moved to the New Surgery, and they wondered what they would do with all the space - with 2 consulting rooms - although only 1 was used for some time. Subsequently, the surgery has been extended 3 times. Record keeping has changed dramatically - whereas one sheet would suffice for maternity cases, now a book is needed, whilst a simple note saying ‘infection, no penicillin’ would not suffice, but more defensive notes are made, ‘no evidence of this or that’ It is a shame that doctors no longer do their own night work , for although they are working harder during the day, the 24 hour care of the ‘Dr Cameron’ type is what general practice was all about.
