

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - September 2010

### The Royal Berkshire Hospital and Battle Hospital

In September, the Wargrave Local History Society had a most interesting talk by Dr Marshall Barr - chairman of the Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre - on the history of the Royal Berkshire Hospital and Battle Hospital.

The Royal Berkshire Hospital had been founded in 1839, and got its royal patronage from William IV. The king died during the time of the construction, and so the RBH was the last place built to have his crest added to it. At that time, it was a voluntary hospital - the medical staff gave their services for free, and patients were admitted without payment, but (except in a genuine emergency) had to be recommended by a subscriber, who would give them an 'admission ticket'. The accounts for the first year show the matron was paid £30, a house surgeon £60, but the 2950 leeches used cost £27, whilst the 2000 gallons of beer used cost £91 (beer was safer to drink than the water supply). The original building housed 50 beds, but more wards were added in the 1850s, and the side wings in the 1860s.

Meanwhile, the original buildings at Battle Hospital were put up - the Oxford Road Union workhouse, and a totally separate infirmary behind that, with a fever hospital in another building further back. Most of the site was farmland, worked by the able bodied poor. Big expansion followed in the 1890s, with new wards either side of an orthopaedic operating theatre, and another building (later to become the chest clinic) as tramp wards, for vagrants. Vagrants with no money could spend the night there - but had to work for it, the site including a 'vagrant stone breaking yard'. Further big development of the hospital provision came in 1911 with the addition of a new block for the aged and infirm (quite separate from the workhouse), and an operating theatre.

At the RBH, Florence Nightingale had advised on the provision of a proper nursing service in the 1870s, and the hospital found that it could add to its income by training nurses who were then sent out to treat the 'great and the good' of the county (who were normally treated at home - the poor at the workhouse, and the RBH for those who were neither poor nor wealthy). Further buildings were added to the RBH site - including a nurses block, an out-patients building, to which was added a library for use both by the hospital doctors and the doctors of the town. A new operating theatre followed in 1895, which in 1928 became the ear nose and throat theatre (remaining such until 2 or 3 years ago). Further development saw the addition of a children's ward and ophthalmic services in 1911.

The military authorities took over the whole Oxford Road site in World War 1, occupying both the former workhouse and infirmary as Reading War Hospital No1. Here a local surgeon, Leonard Joyce, joined the team tending a steady flow of wounded soldiers returned from the trenches. The RBH also made 100 beds available to the military at that time - but when a meningitis epidemic struck, the patients were isolated under tents in the grounds.

After the war, Battle Infirmary came into being, run by Reading Council. The site still catered for the poor in addition to the sick - the large laundry being staffed by lady pauper inmates. In 1926 a nurses home was built on the RBH site. In 1931, Douglas Bader was treated at the RBH after his flying accident - Leonard Joyce being the surgeon. The hospital was granted its coat of arms in 1937 - the same year as the system of 'recommendation' was formally stopped (although in practice it had not been used for some time). Also in the 1930s, Lord Nuffield gave the money to build a new women's and children's block. The hospital, fortunately, did not suffer damage during WW2, and by 1947 the 50 bed hospital of 1839 had grown to one of 413 beds. With the coming of the National Health Service, it was decided that Battle and the RBH would constitute one general district hospital - most of the acute medicine and surgery being at the RBH

site. A maternity unit was added at Battle in 1952, and in 1972 the largest expansion at Battle took place, with the building of the Abbey Block - which brought various acute specialisms, such as urology and respiratory medicine, to Battle.

The RBH site seemed to have no space for further growth, but by the 1990s the system of 2 hospitals 2 miles apart was not working, and involved duplication of services such as x-ray. It was decided the best plan was for a single district hospital on one or other site, or a 'green field' site south of the M4. 95% of those consulted favoured a new site - but the limited budget led to the decision to concentrate everything on the RBH site - although smaller, it already housed most of the expensive equipment and was considered to have better access. The new Battle block, therefore replaced the Nuffield block, Greenlands and the nurses home.

In 1998, the Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre was formed, in the old laundry at the RBH. Including items from several local hospitals that had closed, and with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the volunteer run museum has a collection of medical, nursing and pharmaceutical equipment etc. It is open from 2 - 4.30pm on the 1st and 3rd Sunday each month - for details see [www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/museum](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/museum) where you can find some of the images Marshall Barr used in his presentation.

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The Society is currently compiling the next of its books on Wargrave. This is to be a more illustrated volume than *The Book of Wargrave* and *The Second Book of Wargrave* (both still available at either Victoria News or Sheeplands Farmshop), which we hope to publish in 2011. If anyone has any photographs or ephemera relating to the village that they think may be of interest to include in this new book, please contact either our Chairman, Peter Halman or the Secretary, Peter Delaney.

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Our next meeting is on Tuesday, October 12th, when the topic will be The Robert Piggott Junior School, when David Poynter will recount some of his memories as Headmaster there. Then on Tuesday, November 9th, Tony Weston will give his presentation on A Woman in Wax - about Madame Tussaud and her famous waxworks, whilst on Tuesday, December 14th the Society will hold its Christmas Party.