

Astley Ainslie Hospital

The large green site, with its gardens, was from the beginning considered as an important contributor to the improved health of patients referred from the Royal Infirmary. The care of the grounds and the provision of fresh vegetables was a particular concern of those responsible for the management of the hospital.

The original one-storey pavilions were built with enough south facing verandah space for all the beds to be outside and most patients very quickly learned to prefer staying out all the time, even in winter. They could ask for as many blankets as they wanted and hot bottles were provided whenever asked for. In bad weather, tarpaulins covered the blankets and could be tied down in windy weather. Patients in bed were only wheeled in for bed making, bathing and treatment. The staff were the people who had to become hardy! The rows of red blankets were a familiar sight to walkers on Blackford Hill, who probably did not realize that patients with binoculars found them a constant source of interest and entertainment.

Once up and about, the patients were encouraged to make use of their surroundings: walking, playing croquet, putting, and bowls and - under supervision - helping in the gardens. In 1929, when the development of the hospital was about to begin, the grounds of the old houses were still being managed as separate estates with their walled gardens. There were extensive greenhouses where peaches, vines, figs and some exotic fruits were grown as well as camellias and orchids, etc. Two of the old gardeners, both in their nineties, were still employed and one of them used to visit his 'glass' every Sunday morning dressed in a frock coat and silk hat.

There were many old wells on the site and one was found under the dining room floor of Millbank. Care was taken to preserve the mature trees and as a matter of policy most of the old garden walls were retained. The Head Gardener was well qualified; he had trained at Floors Castle and then at the Botanic Gardens. He was responsible for developing the new grounds to the south which had been a ladies nine hole golf course. There was also a Deputy Head, two under-gardeners and twelve labourers, proof of the interest of the Board of Governors.

South Bank, the house which was built for the Medical Superintendent, beside the Memorial gates, was a delightful family home. With its large garden and tennis court, entertaining staff as well as family friends became a regular activity. There was an annual New Year dinner party for senior staff, at which boisterous games were played using the front and back staircases. The Matron, in particular, had to be prevented from cheating and several of the young doctors involved are now retired from distinguished medical careers and professorial chairs.

Having been the main area to which plague victims were brought in the Middle Ages, relics still come to light when digging. There have been several episodes when the finding of human bones has been reported and the Professor of Forensic Medicine has come rushing out to investigate a suspected murder.

The outbreak of war brought about changes in the use of the hospital. In the expectation of many civilian casualties and possible poison gas attacks, the hospital became a centre for the collection and decontamination of casualties. The amount of glass was a problem so it was decided to sandbag all possible windows. Volunteers from the hospital and University students were called for. In three weeks, the volunteers, probation nurses and other women staff members filled 8,000 sandbags with 700 tons of sand and built walls up to 15 feet high. It was hard work, done at speed. To save time, lunch was provided daily followed by a short rest lying on the grass in the sun. In the vacuum before war was declared, everyone was glad to have something useful to do - not to mention the fun the volunteers had among themselves.

The expected casualties did not materialise, but the extreme cold of the winter of 1939 caused many cases of exposure and pneumonia among the reservists called up to man searchlights and ack ack guns on the hill tops. Although it was a military hospital, the civilian medical staff remained. In the Services, one was either sick or well with no half measures, which was very different from our rehabilitation nursing. We had E.N.S.A. concerts and other entertainments; some were excellent, others the reverse.

Two in particular stand out. Waldo Lanchester (brother of Elsa, the film star) came with his 30" marionettes and the effect on the troops of the little figures walking about among them was extraordinary - they were completely fascinated. The other unforgettable evening was a 'Recital' by Sybil Thorndyke. Staff were very nervous, first, whether anyone would turn up - and second, if they did, would they stay? Staff were posted at the doors to prevent an exodus of the sparse audience. The recital began with poems and a scene from Macbeth in which she played all the parts. Several men got up and made for the door but when asked to stay, they said they were going to collect their friends who 'were missing something'. There were no empty seats after half an hour!

To mark V.E. Day a tree, Cedar Atlanticus, was ceremonially planted and there was a party for all staff and patients. Some patients were allowed passes up to 8pm. At 9pm, the Matron went on her rounds to see that all had returned. Only one man, still dressed, was sitting on the edge of his bed, rather muzzy but very cheerful. She said '. . . get into bed at once'; the patient rocking backwards and forwards looked at her medal ribbons and said 'You've been in twa wars, maybe three, but y're no such a bad-looking old girl - I'll get into bed for ye if ye dinna mak a fourth'. This was all round the hospital by next morning, to everyone's delight - not least the Matron's.

The hospital was handed back by the Army late in 1945 and after a period of returning to its prewar form, resumed its civilian function of providing rehabilitation services for Royal Infirmary patients. It took a little time to get used to treating civilians instead of servicemen, but we soon did and began looking forward to developing our ideas and techniques, as well as preparing for the great changes which would come with the introduction of the National Health Service.

Mary Cunningham, daughter of former Medical Superintendent, via Dorothy Ryle