

One Hundred and Twenty Eight Years Of Biggleswade Hospital

-- Ken Page --

I have compiled this article from reports in the Biggleswade Chronicle and from Trade Directories up to 1940. It is far from complete and any further information is welcome.

Biggleswade Isolation Hospital was built in 1878 at a site in Potton Road under the auspices of Biggleswade Board of Guardians. This was for cases of infectious diseases such as diphtheria and typhoid to be nursed well away from the normal overcrowded conditions then prevailing in the town. The Public Buildings Loan Board financed the work with a loan of £2,500.

A public enquiry was held at Biggleswade in 1901 after an application was made by Biggleswade Urban and Rural District Councils, for a provisional order to open a joint hospital covering the combined districts. The County Medical Officer said that the present hospital was too small.

An additional 3 roods 20 poles of land was purchased in 1903 and the Joint Hospital Board set up. The hospital was enlarged in 1904 at a total cost of £6,073. Although the old buildings were largely retained it was practically a rebuilding, with beds for 46 patients. In 1905 a number of appointments were made, a doctor for £60 per year, a nurse at 15/- (75p) per week plus board, a cook at 10/- (50p) plus board and the charwoman received 12/6d (62 ½ p) a week. The Administration block was built in 1907.

A report to Biggleswade Urban District Council in 1908 said that there were 45 cases of infectious diseases during the year 6 of diphtheria, 8 erysipelas, 25 scarlet fever, 5 enteric fever, and 1 puerperal fever.

The Joint Board consisted of six Rural District members and four Urban District members with an outside Chairman. The first of these was Rev Christopher Ewbank, Vicar of Langford until about 1925. Herbert King of Broom then Frederick Saville of Potton succeeded him. Maurice Bennett became the last chairman in 1935.

In the early days, applications for admission had to be made to Daniel Miller, Sanitary Inspector. Dr Alfred James was the first medical officer, replaced by Dr John Emmerson about 1903, then Dr Robert Welch by 1906 until 1924 when Dr Francis Bolster took over. When he died in 1941, Dr Alan Lane Connold was medical officer until it closed. Nurse Harrison was in charge in 1899; Miss Dale was matron in 1906 and Miss Brown in 1910, then Miss Hooper 1913 and Miss Volkes 1916. Miss Mabel Wright was matron from 1925 to 1940 when she was on war service abroad. Mr & Mrs Charles Edmunds were caretakers in 1898 and Mr & Mrs John Winters 1903.

I remember the diphtheria epidemic in 1937, when I was inoculated against the dreaded disease.

A report to the Joint Hospital Board in October 1942 said that there were 21 patients in the hospital 19 with scarlet fever and two diphtheria. They had recently refused to admit members of H M forces but this was rescinded. Miss Wright returned as Matron in 1945 and Miss Anthony was matron when it ceased to be an infectious diseases hospital in 1948

On 5th August 1948, the hospital passed to the Ministry of Health to be administered by the Bedford Group Hospital Management Committee. They converted it into a Hospital for long stay medical cases at a cost of £15,000.

44 bedridden folk at THE LIMES had their first glimpse at the outside world for years on Sunday 24th September 1950 when they were transferred to the newly opened Biggleswade Hospital. Members of the St John Ambulance Brigade assisted ambulance and hospital staffs. Major Simon

Whitbread Chairman of Bedford Group Hospital Management Committee performed the opening ceremony.

Among other things he said that there were 100 beds at Clapham beds at Bedford North Wing and 44 beds at Biggleswade. Miss B Shand matron Bedford South Wing Hospital was in charge with Mrs Mary Ramsey resident assistant Matron. Dr Easton would supervise the patients with Dr Lane Connold giving them day-to-day care. Mrs Ramsey soon became Matron, continuing for 21 years, succeeded by Mrs Sheila Evans in 1971. She reported in 1975 that they had seen many changes in four years.

It was announced in June 1998 that the hospital would be recommended for sure, but a stay of execution was postponed for one year. The cloud was lifted in March 1999, when Bedfordshire Heath Authority decided that it had a future after all. Campaigners raised an 8,000-name petition against closure, supported by Mid Beds District Council. The East Beds Primary Care Group was set up on 1st April and is now responsible for the hospital.

The joint Board also administered a Smallpox Hospital located at the Sheepwalk (west of the railway between Biggleswade and Langford It was built in 1902, when there was an outbreak of smallpox and five cases were admitted in the first fortnight. It cost about £650 with beds for 16 patients. Doctors and matrons were shared with the Isolation hospital. Mr & Mrs George Rogers were caretakers until about 1920. Mrs Finding was caretaker in 1925.

Mr Stonebanks secretary of the North West Metropolitan Regional Hospital board said at a meeting on 9th January 1950 that it appeared that the board "would be well shot of the hospital" It was a mile from Biggleswade and had been used since 1930. Lighting was by oil lamps and heating by coke stoves. Sewage disposal was by the pail system and there was no telephone. If an outbreak of smallpox should occur, conditions in the hospital were so of date that no one would contemplate nursing a patient there. So it closed. Sid Quince purchased the building in 1956 and he left in 1987. It was auctioned with planning permission to build a four bed-roomed detached house.

Ken Page, 16th July 2006



The first patient is taken into the Biggleswade Hospital in Potton Road when it opened in 1950. Matron Mary Ramsey is in the centre and Dr Alan Lane-Connold in spectacles.

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