

Erith Cottage or District Hospital

The work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War (1854-6) had awakened new interest in nursing and hospitals.

Small towns in rural areas considered creating small hospitals utilising cottages. Bromley used six cottages. Erith and Bexley were inspired to acquire similar small premises but there the similarity ends. Erith was content to use cottages and to rely on public help; Bexley wanted a new building and was late in getting one because it was not so interested in public help as in trusting to its connections with the Wax Chandlers Company.

In 1871 interested patrons bought two cottages, named the Sun Cottages, situated in Crayford Road, Erith, then considered a small riverside village. There were six beds, the first patient being a girl of thirteen years suffering from gastric fever. These beds were never empty and ladies gave time and aid in ordering diets. Money came from church offertories, a club from the Iron Works paid £25 so that workmen and families could benefit, while the Board of Guardians paid weekly towards the support of the poor.

It was soon evident that this hospital was inadequate and donations were put towards a Building Fund. In 1875 Col. Wheatley, an Erith landowner, offered a site at nominal rent. This was in the High Street, later occupied by the Classic Cinema. Another well-known Erith family were the Beadles who worked hard to obtain new premises. The new hospital had beds for nine adults and three children, though at first attendance was restricted to six adults and two children until it was seen whether expenses could be met. In 1876 a Provident Dispensary was attached.

Long before the First World War the building revealed faults. The population of Erith was growing fast from 8,000 in 1871 to 28,000 in 1911, ceasing to be mainly agricultural and was being dominated by industry. The number of beds was increased to twelve but usually there were no vacancies, so long journeys had to be made to larger hospitals. The actual construction of the interior was faulty. The four upstairs rooms had three beds each, even though they were not more than fourteen feet square, were not lofty and had poor ventilation. Male and female wards were too close to each other and the accident

wards were too far from the nurses' room. Narrow, twisting stairs forbade the use of stretchers and patients were carried up in blankets. Moreover, surgery and operating rooms were so small that stretcher cases were admitted with difficulty and assistance was therefore very restricted. Sanitary arrangements were impossible with one bath for patients, nurses and other staff. Staff bedrooms were in underground cellars, close to the mortuary. As the hospital was on a main road next to a coal-truck shunting yard it was noisy.

Patients were charged anything up to 10/6d per week. Expenses were kept to a minimum, for example, two nurses received between them £19.19s.0d per annum. It is recorded that after the first year the hospital had a balance of £53 despite milk bills of £4.9s.11d, and wine and beer bills of £8.13s.6d. This latter sum was only 30s.0d less than the annual bills for medicines. Nevertheless, the hospital, with all its imperfections was very much needed. Between 1921 and 1924 1,031 patients were treated.

All the supporters of the hospital were very keen to have a new one. Nothing was possible during the First World War but in 1922 a Building Committee was formed, spurred on by Mr G.H. Gunning who had given a site of two acres at the top of Park Crescent. This site was considered very healthy because it was so high and, in those days, open with grand views of the river. An additional piece of land was bought for £228 but acute trade depression reduced public subscriptions. However, firms likely to benefit from this scheme encouraged the hospital's erection.

On 19 November 1924 the new hospital was opened by the Prince of Wales amid great public enthusiasm. The fund had reached £13,500 though £15,000 was needed. The Beadle family was still interested. Fred Beadle contributed £1,000 and Charles Beadle £500. A Mr. G.H. Thuxton also gave £1,000.

The planning of the hospital was supervised by Mr. Wallace Merchant, a leading hospital architect. He aimed at a simple building, economical to run. There were twenty one beds, sixteen in the two main wards (one male, one female), three for special cases in another ward and two single bed wards for patients willing to pay extra for privacy. The operating theatre was simple in design but contained all the essentials; there were modern bedrooms and sun balconies for

each main ward. There was a nurses' home and their comfort and that of the domestic staff was considered.

In 1935 there were additions, including a children's ward with thirteen cots, more modern equipment for the Casualty Room, an Anaesthetic Room and a new Nurses' Home. All this cost £10,000 with £2,500 extra for extensions for the X-Ray and Electro Medical departments. So much secretarial work was necessary to facilitate the smooth running of the hospital that a paid Secretary was appointed in 1936.

During the Second World War the hospital remained open and the number of beds was increased to fifty. Before the war the hospital had been classed 1B but its efficient work and number of beds altered the classification to 1A. So certain patients did not have to be evacuated to other hospitals.

In July 1948, the hospital became part of the Woolwich Group Hospital Management Committee. Certain alterations were still necessary, for example, the large air raid shelter was adapted to accommodate a more modern X-ray department and ward balconies were enclosed, and heated for all year use. The Out-Patients Department was under continual review and extension, especially as during the war clinics had been housed in a wooden building. Today, there is a fine roomy outdoor building. In 1972, the Erith District Hospital built a general medical and surgical unit which could be staffed by visiting consultants and local G.P.s The equipment was completely up-to-date. The hospital is still functioning as clinics and is known beyond the confines of the Borough of Bexley.