

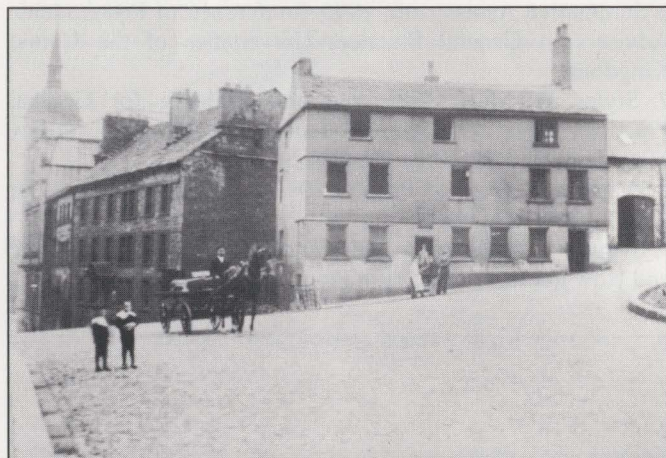
ORIGINS OF THE ROYAL LANCASTER INFIRMARY

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THE FIRST GENERAL DISPENSARY

Prior to 1781 a room in the Green Ayre was used to dispense medicines and advice to the poor, but nothing else appears to be known about it. The Green Ayre is the flat land now occupied by the bus station, both sides of Cable Street and upriver beyond the present southbound bridge. The small green park area was the site of Green Ayre station and the rail junction of the branch to Lancaster Castle station, and the line to Morecambe. One of two shipyards was located on the Green Ayre. The other shipyard was further downstream where the Lune Mills are now situated, and even in the 1950's and 1960's locals would refer to working at the shipyard, meaning Williamson's Mills.

In 1770 England's first general dispensary had been established in Aldegate, London, and in 1781 Dr David Campbell, aided by Drs Binns and Parkinson, started a dispensary in South Castle Grove, moving to larger premises at North Castle Grove four years later. Dr Campbell and his colleagues apparently met initially with ill-informed and superstitious opposition caused by reluctance to accept this new concept.



The first Lancaster Dispensary, or House of Recovery, which was demolished in 1906.

The 'Good Samaritan' stone which now appears over the door of the present infirmary originally came from the Castle Hill site, and perhaps one realises better the significance of proclaiming thus the object and aims of the charity in the face of this opposition.

According to *The History of Lancaster* (Constantine et al⁽¹⁾) there was a general demand from the wealthier residents for the establishment of a dispensary, as there was considerable distress in the working classes due to the industrial disturbance caused by the American Civil War.

In 1820, Dr Christopher Johnson wrote an account of the

old dispensary charity for the *Lonsdale Journal*. He was secretary to the charity at the time. We do not know how the original funds were raised. Possibly a public meeting was called by hand bills, as was the case in 1815 when the parallel charity, the House of Recovery, was started⁽²⁾. We do know, however, that Dr David Campbell gave a room in his own home for the dispensary, and moved to larger premises four years later. We also know there were annual subscribers from the wealthy citizens of Lancaster and the surrounding area, and outright gifts such as wines from an unknown benefactor, and later, money from legacies. No mention of institutional funding is made in Dr Johnson's review but by 1811 there were at least 13 friendly societies (the 'Good Intent Society', 'Friendship and Union Society', 'Samaritan Society' etc) formed specifically to give help when required in sickness and therefore able to act as subscribers. Finally, it was a responsibility of each parish to administer the poor rate when no other form of help was available. The phrase 'on the parish' persisted well into the inter-war years of this century, and applied particularly to vagrants, widows and children and all others not supported by friendly societies. To this extent the dispensary was a selective charity and remained so throughout its existence at Castle Hill and later Thurnham Street as the Lancaster Infirmary. There being no demand to provide a municipal hospital (except one for infectious diseases in 1876) it would therefore follow that there were sufficient charitably-minded people to maintain these facilities without local government money until the early years of this century (1903)⁽³⁾.

CHILDBIRTH

By 1807 the charity had 'lying in' facilities and subscribers giving three shillings per annum had the privilege of nominating one person. Women in childbirth were given a grant of ten shillings. There were two 'lying in' charities in relation to childbirth. One was controlled by the ladies' committee of the Girls' School in High Street. This granted three shillings and a linen bag with appropriate bed linen and child's clothes – returnable after one month, with a further grant of one shilling for washing. The second charity was attached to St Anne's chapel, supported by a collecting box in the chapel. This benevolent society was opened to all religions and not confined to parishioners. (*Author's note: St Anne's was situated off Moor Lane where the Duke's theatre is now located.*)

LIFE IN 1805

In 1805, 1,302 people were treated from a population of 3,999 males and 5,030 females in 1991 families. Skerton, then a separate township, had 607 males, 671 females in 276 families.

The apparent discrepancy and preponderance of females can be accounted for when the 47 sailing vessels whose home port was Lancaster are taken into consideration. They were mainly West Indian traders, possibly slavers, importing mahogany and exporting furniture, sail cloth and candles. Two shipyards built and maintained these ships. As well as a thriving marine trade, Lancaster was well connected with the rest of England. There was a daily mail coach to Carlisle and London and several daily passenger coaches to Liverpool (change at Preston for Manchester and London). Depending on the tide there was a daily coach to Ulverston. This commercial traffic brought a good number of visitors and there were three inns to cater for the traveller – the Royal Oak and the Commercial, side by side in Market Square (where the present library is), and the Royal King's Arms. Not all trade went by sea: the canal transported coal and other heavy goods from Preston to Kendal, and limestone in the reverse direction. The branch to Glasson Dock was constructed in 1824/25. The prosperity of the time led to the need for a newspaper and the Lancaster Gazette was started in 1801 by the Minshall family, and the Guardian in 1837.

THE EARLY DAYS OF THE DISPENSARY: THE WORK OF APOTHECARIES

We know the names of some of the personnel of the time:

Physicians Drs Campbell, Binns, Parkinson, McCulloch, Cassells (died 1822), Morton, Whalley, de Vitre

Surgeons Messrs Sibson, Johnson, Braithewaite, Baxendale, Harrison, Bateson, Howitt (Junior).

The dispensary was staffed by physicians, surgeons and apothecaries. Physicians and surgeons gave their services free but later the apothecaries held a paid office. The salary was £70 pa and a gratuity of £20. When the parallel charity was formed in 1815 the apothecary also took the office 'Inspector' to the Board of Health and House of Recovery with a salary of £10 pa. The apothecaries prepared medicines, effusions, lotions, ointments etc. They used their own weights and measures – 1 drachm (wt) = 60 grains = 1/8 oz: 1 drachm (fluid) = 60 minims = 1/8 fl oz. These were considered menial tasks beneath the dignity of the physicians, though the surgeons worked much more closely with them, even to the extent of becoming licensed apothecaries in addition to their surgical qualifications. The additional public health duties of the apothecary – fumigation, white-washing, transporting patients (by chair) – were very specifically laid down in the rules of the house of recovery when this was started in 1815, the year in which the Apothecaries Act was passed, giving the physicians power to inspect the work and premises of the apothecaries (see Vol 1 no 4 of this journal, January 1995).

In the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries apothecaries could treat patients on their own account and it was not until the medical act of 1858 (establishing the General Medical Council) that any legal restriction was placed on them. Finally, by the act of 1886, recruits to the medical profession had to be doubly qualified in medicine and surgery.

The dispensary's apothecary apparently changed relatively frequently, and from 1781 we have Messrs Braithewaite, Rogerson, Beulle, Padgett, Bell, Wise, Parkinson, Edmondson, Rittson, Smallwood, Ireton, Hancock, Smith, Lodge, Fish, Bragg, Seed (1816 and first Inspector of the

Board of Health), and Dobson (1818).

In 1802 Mr George Crossfield became treasurer, and it is reported that from then onwards, funds accumulated with the result that the charity never had to call on the poor rate for a grant. In 1819 the expenditure was £236. His successor, Mr Barrow, was himself replaced by Mr James Crossfield who in 1833 became a trustee of the new dispensary in Thurnham St. Drs Harrison, de Vitre and Christopher Johnson also became trustees.

The contemporary account in the Lonsdale magazine (1820, 1821 and 1822) by Christopher Johnson gives the patient numbers from 1815 to 1819, showing an increase from 1,066 to 1,877. All medicines were supplied free, and wine, when recommended, was supplied by an unknown benefactor. (This was the same position as the parallel charity – the Board of Health and the House of Recovery).

The Lonsdale magazine (1820) gives us some idea of the interest of at least two of those involved. This was a 'gentleman's magazine' published in Kirkby Lonsdale, which contained literary reviews, biographical features, articles on country houses of the area, and miscellaneous pieces such as '*Floating Island of Derwentwater*' foreign intelligence, domestic intelligence, poetic pieces, mathematical problems and obituaries. There were three volumes: 1820, 1821 and 1822. Dr Campbell contributed a fairly lengthy article (with map) to The Lonsdale Magazine on the stratification of Lancashire, which is an account of the geographical features of the county.

Dr Cassells contributed four lengthy articles to this magazine. His first was on intemperance, and in this he quoted many case histories with enlarged liver, hard liver, ascites, generalised odema, massive haematemeses, delirium tremens and so on. His second article was '*Temperance*', in which he quotes his own and other cases where abstinence from alcohol and the eating of plain, simple food were of benefit. It does not read quite so convincingly as his first article. His third contribution is on exercise, and this recounts case histories of patients taking up exercise with great benefit, horse riding and walking being the main recommendations. His fourth article is an essay on clothing, and after laying down some general advice – such as 'fresh daily linen' (underwear) – he confidently anticipates an increase in consumption due to 'the fashionable nudity of dress'. Thereafter he gave specific advice on clothing for diarrhoea and dysentery, consumption, epilepsy, gout, kidney disease, rheumatism and scarlet fever.

In all four contributions he goes to great lengths to prove his points and to quote from other doctors' experiences to emphasise that he is not just quoting his own opinion but that of many other physicians. He was acclaimed in his obituary as much for trying to correct the over-indulgences of the wealthy as for freely administering to the needy.

THURNHAM STREET

Several factors combined to cause the Castle Hill dispensary and the House of Recovery to unite in new larger premises in Thurnham Street. The most important was the cholera epidemic of 1832, which was widespread in the country and very severe among the patients of the county mental hospital. Only five isolation beds were available in the Rose Street premises of the House of Recovery. Parliament, by orders in council, gave authority to form a special board of health, with

powers to remove nuisances (ie infective patients) and also to raise money by a local levy, for such expense as was required. By this time, Dr Christopher Johnson was mayor of the city as well as being the most senior and influential member of the above committees. He called a public meeting to approve the formation of a 'public hospital or infirmary, and attaching the present dispensary and fever hospital (House of Recovery) to it.'

The meeting approved the resolution and also a request that 'the proceeds of this year's charity ball be allocated to this cause'. (*Author's note:* this is the only reference I can find to a charity ball but the wording alone suggests it was a regular event supporting all charities). Finally all present were enrolled to solicit contributions. As a result, the Thurnham Street site (now the Royal Hotel) was purchased for £1,100 from the Gillow family trustees as 'the general dispensary and house of recovery'. It was not until 1881 that this rather grandiose title was officially changed to 'Lancaster Infirmary'.

Initially there were 38 beds, but a new wing was added in 1850 to satisfy increasing demand.

1876 saw an epidemic of smallpox which spread from patients to staff the following year. As a consequence the city built the Marsh Point isolation hospital (12 beds) to accommodate infectious diseases. (*Author's note:* this was the hospital which in 1927 was overwhelmed by a high Lune tide resulting in the drowning of patients. Beaumont Hospital (1938) was the replacement isolation hospital for both Lancaster and Morecambe).

In 1881 the Thurnham St dispensary officially adopted the simpler title of the Lancaster Infirmary. The introduction of anaesthesia by Simpson around 1847 and Lister's demonstration of the use of carbolic acid to permit aseptic surgery in 1865, were two giant strides which increased the scope and therefore the demand for surgical beds. The Thurnham St site was manifestly too small to meet the increased work load.

THE ROYAL LANCASTER INFIRMARY ON ASHTON ROAD

In 1881 the committee purchased Springfield Park and started campaigning to raise money to build a new infirmary.

The workpeoples' committee responded by promising a halfpenny per week per person towards the building fund⁽⁴⁾. Many gifts were given as is recorded on the donations board in the foyer of the infirmary.

Work commenced in 1892 at a ceremony at which Lord Ashton (who had given £10,000, more than a third of the total raised) laid the foundation stone. The new infirmary was completed and officially opened on 24th March 1896. This ceremony was performed by the then Duke and Duchess of York, later King George V and Queen Mary. Queen Victoria granted the title *Royal Lancaster Infirmary* and this was confirmed by her heirs. (*Author's note:* In conversation in the 1950s with the daughter of a man who was prominent in business at this period, she informed me that her father told her that many subscribers were very discontented at the committee's decision not to ask Lord Ashton. In the event, Lord Ashton did feel he had been snubbed and his subsequent philanthropy was lavished on Lytham St Anne's).

Exactly 100 years later the city of Lancaster now has a

new site for its Royal Infirmary. The Centenary Building was opened to patients in January 1996 with all the attendant paraphernalia of modern medical practice. Yet, if one looks at one of the poetic pieces published in the Lonsdale Magazine of 1820, it is plain to see that some things have never changed.

The Village Doctor

*Luckless is he whom hard fate urge on
To practise as a country surgeon,
To drag a heavy galling chain,
The slave of all for paltry gain,
To ride, regardless of all weather,
Through frost, snow and hail together,
To smile and bow when sick and tired,
Consider'd as a servant hir'd,
At every quarter of the compass,
A surly patient makes a rumpus,
Because he is not seen the first,
(for each man thinks his case is the worst)
And oft at two points diametric
Called to a business obstetric,
There lies a man with broken limb,
A lady here with nervous whim,
Who, at the acme of her fever
Calls him a savage if he leave her,
For days and nights in some lone cottage
Condem'd to live on crust and pottage,
To kick his heel and spin his brains,
Waiting forsooth for labour pains,
And, that job over, happy he
If he squeeze out a guinea fee,
Then worn like culprit on the wheel,
He sits him down to hasty meal;
He sits – when lo! a patient comes
With rotten tooth and putrid gums,
The doctor takes his dentist-tools,
Fixes the screw, and tugs and pulls;
His dinner cool, his hands this mess in,
All for a shilling – or a blessing.
Now comes the night, with toil opprest,
He sees his bed in hope of rest,
Vain hope – his slumbers are no more,
Loud sounds the knocker at the door,
A farmer's wife at ten miles distance
Groaning calls for his assistance,
Fretting and fuming in the dark
He in the timber strikes a spark,
And as he yawning heaves his breeches
Envies his neighbour blessed with riches*

Author unknown

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- 3 Minutes of the Medical Advisory Committee Lancaster Royal Infirmary 1896-1948
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FURTHER SOURCES

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