

## CHAPTER TEN

### HOSPITAL SCHOOL

The first hospital school was established at the Walk in 1927. Resources were very limited and the teaching environment, on the wards was austere. It soon extended to the country branch at Crossways in 1929. Even at that time, the executive board of the voluntary hospital recognised the need for basic continuing education for the many long stay children at the Walk and Crossways. Teachers, like Miss Sharp - the headteacher, Mrs. Cashen and Mrs. Boyes experienced great problems as children's wards were often closed for short periods, because of infection. The war years were particularly difficult.

By the mid 40's, minimum standards for educating physically handicapped children had been established by the government and H.M.Is had advised the executive board, at the "Prince", to recognise national pay scales for teachers. In 1948 the school obtained independent status, with its own Management Board who administered the school for the Ministry of Education.

Teaching conditions vastly improved when the hospital moved to Rhydlafer in 1953. Very soon five children's wards were functioning and a further 50 long stay patients were being educated at Crossways. For ten to twelve years, the school enjoyed a period of great stability. At its peak, the school had about 150 pupils on its roll, many, of whom, were long stay patients. Children, aged between two and seventeen, were admitted from all over South And West Wales. Some came from even further afield. Their domestic and educational backgrounds varied considerably. In a strange way, however they were all bound together by the uncertainty of unfamiliar hospital surroundings and by their common physical handicaps. Although children were very rarely ill, their physical conditions were such that some required very painful pre-operation treatment. All required medical, nursing and therapeutic attention of varying degrees. Most had limbs or, indeed, most of their bodies encased in plaster and were confined to bed for very long periods. Physical deformities such as Perthes, Scoliosis, T.B. hips and Spines, Osteomyelitis and Club feet were quite common. Medical and nursing treatment of children took priority, but despite these necessary distractions, it was the responsibility of the teaching staff to create, and maintain an orderly school atmosphere; friendly and happy but well organised and purposeful.

From 1953 to 1964, there was a school staff of 15 :- a headteacher plus seven teachers, a nursery assistant and a secretary at Rhydlafer with a deputy head and four teachers at Crossways. Initially children were placed in wards according to age groups. Teaching was mainly undertaken on the wards, although, in certain circumstances, children were taken to the special school block or to the recreation hall. The school block was very well equipped with a wide variety of books, teaching material and equipment to meet the diverse educational needs of the children. Where possible, the children's

usual schools, and their parents, were consulted to ensure that their education continued from the time prior to hospital admission. Regular meetings were held between teaching and medical staff, not least to establish the expected length of stay for children. This helped in the planning of lessons. The extent of hospitalisation for conditions such as Perthes and Scoliosis ensured that for affected children, lessons could be confidently planned for some time ahead. Many children achieved considerable academic success :- some successfully taking "O" level and even "A" level exams at the hospital. The strong Christian beliefs of the headteachers: Miss Bronwen Salmon 1954-64, Mrs. Gwladys Roberts 1964-67, Miss Mair Griffiths 1967-76, Miss Avril Bowen 1967-76 and their staffs ensured that the children observed the major festivals. Patients, however incapacitated, took part in Nativity plays and carol services, Harvest thanksgivings and St. David's Day celebrations on a regular basis, during the stable years. Hospital staff and visitors from other schools enjoyed brave, costumed, performances from severely handicapped children, often in the most difficult circumstances.

By the end of the 1960's a wind of change began to affect the life of the hospital, and, consequently, that of the school. During the year 1969/70, one children's ward was closed and the school was obliged to lose its independent status. There were a number of factors which contributed to the decline in the number of child admissions at Rhydlafer. On April 1st 1974, South Glamorgan Education Authority took over the school. By this time, another children's ward had been closed and there were now three wards with fifteen children in each.

The following years were fraught with difficulties and frustration for teaching staff. Threats of further ward closures and of the complete hospital from 1977 to 1983 were thankfully lifted. The courageous effort of the hospital action committee (of which the headmistress was a member) received massive public support. Thankfully the hospital was saved from closure at that time. Soon after, a substantial programme of remedial works to several parts of the hospital were undertaken, with the aid of Welsh Office grants. Even so, at the end of the day, by 1985 only one upgraded children's ward remained in use. During these years, teaching became more onerous than during previous years, when each ward catered for different age groups. Now babies, primary and secondary school children were being grouped together. The wide age group, full education ability range and the variety of physical handicaps encountered, made organisation very difficult.

In 1987, because of the reduction in the number of children, South Glamorgan Education Authority decided to close the school. Miss Avril Bowen and the deputy headteacher, Mrs. Eluned Collins, both took early retirement and other, long serving members of staff were re-deployed. The Prince of Wales Hospital School had been in existence for sixty years. A celebration party was held to mark the anniversary and the closure of the school. Miss Bowen, who had been at the school for 35 years, paid tribute to the dedication of teaching staff, the support of hospital staff and

the courage and determination of so many children who had achieved so much, despite their disabilities.

From 1987/91, the South Glamorgan Education Authority maintained a "hospital class" for the reduced number of children who had remained at Rhydlafer. Mrs. Nancy Nicholas, who had taught part-time at the school for many years, now assumed responsibility for their education. The situation remained stable until 1991, when the children's ward was finally closed at Rhydlafer and patients were transferred to the Cardiff Royal Infirmary.

CROSSWAYS COUNTRY BRANCH, near COWBRIDGE

"PLENTY OF FRESH AIR AND BED REST" was advocated for the early treatment of certain ORTHOPAEDIC CONDITIONS. Post 1920's Hospitals were encouraged to provide post operative facilities in Country locations.

As it was voluntary funded, THE PRINCE OF WALES HOSPITAL, was unable to provide this facility until 1928 when it purchased the CROSSWAYS ESTATE, nr. COWBRIDGE.

The Crossways estate comprised some 66 acres of freehold land, a large mansion and a range of useful outbuildings. The site was eminently suitable for a country branch hospital and was economically adapted to provide accommodation for 52 beds. A further 16 beds were accommodated a year later when an outdoor annexe was completed. Surgeons from the main hospital at the Walk, visited regularly. Nursing staff from Crossways and the Walk were interchangeable and the Headmistress had control over teaching at both schools. The first patients, requiring long term convalescence and rehabilitation were transferred from the Walk in May 1930. The Country branch closed in the early 1960's.

# RHYDLAFAR

Voluntary hospitals, like the Prince of Wales, relied heavily on public donations and patient's fees for essential income. Initially, as a compromise, a 10 bedded "Shelter" ward, partly open to the elements, was built in the hospital grounds. Later, in 1930, the large mansion and grounds comprising the CROSSWAYS ESTATE, NEAR COWBRIDGE, was purchased and the house converted into a convalescent annexe comprising 72 beds.

The second World War days were fraught with difficulties with threats of air raids, severe rationing, frequent ward closures and staff shortages. In the mid forties the hospital planned to build a new complex at Crossways. The growing demand for Orthopaedic treatment was such that the existing facilities at the Walk and Crossways were completely inadequate to deal with the needs of a huge catchment area. The Prince of Wales Hospital was the only specialised Orthopaedic unit in Wales at the time.

In an austere economic post war era, plans to develop Crossways were abandoned, and the hospital applied, in competition with other hospital authorities, to the Welsh Board of Health to take over the recently vacated Nissen hutt American Army Hospital at Rhydlafer, near Cardiff. Approval was granted in 1945 on the understanding that "the premises be adapted at as little cost as possible and used for "cold" orthopaedics only". The new orthopaedic hospital was finally opened in 1953, after protracted negotiations between the two authorities. Although conditions were far from perfect, the emerging complex was a vast improvement on previous accommodation.

At its peak in the 50's and 60's, the hospital accommodated nearly 300 patients in 14 wards. Each ward had its own patio area - ideal for the fresh country air conditions considered important for rehabilitation in those days. The long stay nature of treatment created a special bond between staff and patients, with a "home from home" atmosphere prevailing. The South Wales mining community had a unique affection for the hospital as many seriously injured workers received expert treatment - especially for spinal injuries.

Junior medical staff benefitted from the hospital's reputation, its diverse case load, the experience of its senior consultants and the direct historical links with the Welsh National School of Medicine

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The hospital had its own Nurse training scheme - approved by the General Nursing Council in 1954. Student nurses commenced a 2 year course - age 17 at Rhydlafer with a further 2 years at either Cardiff Royal Infirmary or Morryston Hospital.

A special school had existed at the old hospital since 1927 and expanded considerably on the transfer to Rhydlafer. At its peak it catered for up to 150 children per year with a headmistress and 15 staff. Some children passed G.C.S.E. and A level exams in very difficult personal physical circumstances.

The hospital enjoyed a relatively stable and productive period for nearly 20 years. Two additional wards had been opened in 1956 and a Hydrotherapy department opened in 1959. However the country annexe at Crossways closed in 1965, as the number of long stay child patients diminished. Generally, by the 1970's there was a greater turnover in bed occupancy as orthopaedic treatment and after care improved. In South Wales, the overall provision of hospital services had improved dramatically. A massive capital investment had created new, or improved, D.G.H.'s throughout the area; the new UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL OF WALES in CARDIFF taking pride of place. A.H.A.s then sought to rationalise services by proposing hospital closures or downgrading facilities.

In 1972, the fabric, heating and engineering services of the PRINCE OF WALES HOSPITAL required urgent repairs. The South Glamorgan A.H.A. considered that the cost of essential upgrading work far outweighed the clinical effectiveness and reputation of the hospital. It was a prime target for closure as the authority considered alternative punitive measures. On two occasions, between 1977 and 1982, the A.H.A. announced closure plans only to be thwarted by massive professional, political and public support; mobilised by a very effective Action Committee. One of the hospital's ward sisters - Miss Elsie Griffiths, gained much public recognition for her work in the long campaign for survival. In 1982, the Welsh Office finally overruled closure plans and grant aided the substantial cost of upgrading wards and engineering services and the provision of new operating theatres. Despite these significant improvements, bed capacity had reduced to 134 by the 1980's. The hospital had lost some of its regional significance as more