

THE HISTORY OF THE MEMORIAL NURSES HOME

A brief summary by a former resident Sarah Greaves R.G.N.

As a former student nurse undertaking State Registration Training at Nottingham School of Nursing back in October 1982, I was lucky enough and in retrospect, privileged enough to have lived at the Memorial Nurses Home within the grounds of the General Hospital. I had been allocated room No. 12 on the third floor. My bedroom window directly overlooked Nottingham Castle, much to the envy of the other nurses whose view out of their bedroom windows on the other side of the building mainly included the unsightly boiler house and the rather ugly aspect of the Trent Wing Extension.

The Memorial Home commanded wonderful views across the city. The south façade of the building, itself a spectacular sight with its strong architectural characteristics dominated the landscape when seen from the castle grounds. When on a visit to Nottingham Castle last year, the sight of my old bedroom window brought back many memories for me. It was then that I decided to research the historical background of, what was for me, such a special piece of architecture. Three volumes of information were compiled with all the relevant literature including copies of the original architects' plans dating back to 1921. This article is a summary of all that information I collated.

Tracing back through the minutes of the Hospital Board meetings from 1919 onwards gave very detailed accounts of how the concept of such a building was initiated, outlining the various tenders and contractors and finalising the arrangements for the opening ceremony in 1923. The architect was the respected Robert Evans junior F.R.I.B.A of Evans Clark and Woollatt, then at Eldon Chambers, Wheeler Gate. He had the assistance of Dr. D.J. Mackintosh C.B. of Western Infirmary, Glasgow who was a well-known authority on hospital planning and management. The nurses' home was to be adopted as a war memorial for the County and City of Nottingham and to be paid for by public subscription.

The contract for laying the foundations was awarded to Mr. James Wright of Wilford Crescent Works. An excellent site had been found on land adjoining Lenton Road but it would mean demolishing the Castle Houses. These premises were being used to treat phthisical patients at the time (those who had contracted consumption - better known these days as tuberculosis). Once

these patients had been transferred to other locations, work could begin. Considerable difficulties were met during the excavation of the foundations owing to the old buildings on this site being at different levels and to several old wells and caves in the rock possibly associated with the Outer Bailey wall of the original castle.

It was decided by the *Extension Committee*, chaired by Mr. W.G. Player, to accept the tender of Mr. Fred Evans & Sons of Highbury Vale, Bulwell for the actual construction of the nurses' home. This commenced in 1921 and the handsome building was completed in 1923 at a cost of £75,000. It was formally opened by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales K.G. (later to become the Duke of Windsor) on Wednesday 1st August on his visit to the City of Nottingham. This schedule had been planned with such military precision that his visit to the hospital had been allocated only 20 minutes and looking through the Hospital Board accounts revealed the expenditure of the royal visit had amounted to £313 9s 2d!

The nurse home was designed on Renaissance lines using Portland stone and Staffordshire brindled bricks. The retaining walls to the terraces are of Weldon stone from Lord Winchelsea's quarries. Later, conservationists would comment that "the composition of the memorial building is clearly intended to recall the architectural vocabulary of Nottingham Castle to the south through the use of details such as corner pilasters. It is a good example of the way in which a building in different materials and on a different scale can blend in harmoniously with a prominent neighbouring structure through the sensitive use of common details and classical proportions".

The new building which had four stories and a flat roof was about 250 feet long, 40 feet wide and 50 feet high. The 130 bedrooms were distributed on the various floors either side of a main corridor approx. six feet wide. There was a central concrete stairway and one either end of the building too. The bedrooms were of uniform size being eight feet nine inches by thirteen feet. The necessary bathrooms and lavatory accommodation were provided on each floor. The building was entered on the North side on the first floor via an entrance porch above which bore a bronze memorial plaque with the following inscription:

"This building was erected by public subscription as a Nottingham and Notts Memorial of the noble men and women of the City and County who gave their lives during the Great War 1914-1918"

Directly opposite the entrance was a large sitting room 54 feet long by 27 feet wide screened off from the main corridor by glazed mahogany and walnut sliding screens which could have been moved away to form a large recreation room when required. Unfortunately these screens are no longer in existence due to restrictions imposed by modern fire legislation when refurbishment work was being considered. Lecture rooms and laundry facilities occupied much of the ground floor.

The south facing façade revealed a symmetrical design having a central stone portico with four ionic columns. Above this was a heavy entablature carrying an inscription commemorating the Great War. The original flagstaff is no longer a feature.

The third floor of the portico remains open forming a balcony with simple railings on three sides. My bedroom window opened out onto a stone parapet approximately two feet wide running the entire length of the building. It was an ideal place to air those rather odorous duty shoes after a busy day on the wards! Some other residents used to sunbathe on here or crawl along the ledge and back in through an open sash window if they had accidentally locked themselves out of their bedroom. Had they slipped it was at least a 40 feet drop onto the terrace below!

A further storey was added in the form of a Mansard roof in 1927. This provided further accommodation for another 40 nurses at a cost of £10,000. The lower section of the attic windows were set into a battered wall of Westmoreland slate, closely resembling the roof arrangement of the Jubilee Wing which was added in 1929. Six chimney stacks are visible on the roof. Part of my bedroom wall incorporated one of these. Unfortunately the splendid *Adams* fireplaces situated in the various sitting rooms have not survived. A prominent lift tower was situated at the east end of the building.

This remarkable building became home for generations of nurses whilst working at the General Hospital, each one no doubt with her own private memories. I was one of the last groups of student nurses to live at the Memorial Home since plans were underway to close the General Hospital as more beds were commissioned at the Queens Medical Centre, University

Hospital. After the last residents moved out in 1984/85 the building became Memorial House, the headquarters of the Nottingham Community Unit (which later became the Nottingham Community NHS Trust). Minor internal work had been carried out to create larger office space for administrative staff by removal of some partition walls. My bedroom was now the "Vaccination and Immunization Records Office".

By 1994 plans were underway to redevelop the General Hospital site and staff working at Memorial House were transferred to other premises. The former nurses' home then became a site office for Mowlem Midlands Construction Company during the demolition of Trent Wing and redevelopment of the site. Today the *Memorial Nurses Home* has a new lease of life as *Royal Standard House* having undergone extensive internal refurbishment work to create 30 prestigious apartments for Crosby Homes (East Midlands) designed by the Nottingham architects Maber Associates. Four luxury penthouses now occupy the fourth floor mansard roof level with the other four floors having a combination of nine, one bedroomed apartments; 14, two bedroomed apartments and three, three bedroomed apartments, many having ensuite facilities. The selling agents F.P.D. Savills provided sales specifications in a stylish brochure, which outlined each apartment layout and the list of prices. The first residents moved in early in 1999 and by late summer only two apartments remained unsold.

As the building was listed Grade II there were very tight restrictions on any external alterations. However approval was given to remove the drainpipes, undertake minor alterations to window frames to improve symmetry, and to reduce the height of the lift tower at the east end of the building. All of which have greatly enhanced the appearance of the North façade.

I have been very privileged to have been granted unprecedented access to the refurbishment work taking place and my most nostalgic moment was a final visit with my husband and young son to see my former bedroom which has now been converted into the master bedroom of unit No.23. The lavish internal refurbishment makes the building unrecognizable from its previous institutionalized setting. I hope that the new residents share with me a sense of pride in belonging to a building originally paid for by public subscription as a memorial to those local people who made the ultimate sacrifice.