

THE NOTTINGHAM GENERAL HOSPITAL

TWENTY YEARS ON

'A personal reflection'

By Paul R. Swift

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Gone but not forgotten (*Rick Wakeman*)

Over the past twenty years Nottingham has seen many transformations. In all, this two decade time span has seen the mushrooming of new tower blocks, culminating with the physical alteration of Nottingham's City Centre with the revamping of the Old Market Square in 2005 and before that on the 9th March 2004, after a gap of 68 years, the reintroduction of Nottingham's Tram Network. In that same time span, tucked away in a corner adjacent to Nottingham Castle sits Royal Standard Court, the site of the former Nottingham General Hospital. Now approaching its twentieth year since closure, it's hard to imagine the buildings that remain were once central to public healthcare in Nottingham. It was a hospital that first opened its doors on 28th September 1782 and in its 210 years of existence saw all the technological innovations in healthcare we now take for granted. It was a hospital that was to see two world wars and the ensuing social changes brought about by those two periods of conflict, the most important being the inception of the National Health Service on the 5th July 1948.

Apart from its much respected school of nursing, the Nottingham General Hospital also played its part, along with other hospitals in Nottingham in the teaching of medical students from the University of Nottingham's faculty of medicine which opened in 1970. In preparation for its impending teaching status, from the mid 1960's onwards the hospital went through a period of rapid expansion beginning with the building of the nine storeys Trent Wing, which opened in 1972. Unfortunately it was this expansion programme that sealed the General Hospital's fate, as plans were already in place to build the University of Nottingham's Medical School together with the now familiar University Hospital.

My period of service at the General Hospital began in April 1980 to 1984. By then clinical services, at regular intervals were transferring to the Queen's Medical Centre. As many of the hospitals wards were now in mothball, my memory of that time was wondering how long this hospital will stay open, as even in those early years rumours were beginning to circulate of the hospitals impending closure. When anyone mentioned its closure, my reply would always be: 'How can they close a hospital like this, the General is part of Nottingham's heritage.' All rumours of closure did 'temporarily' cease after the General in 1982 celebrated its Bicentenary, followed by a successful campaign by staff and members of the public to keep the hospital open.

As I worked in the Nottingham Health Authority, Supplies Department, I was often moved to stores located about the Nottingham District and it wasn't until September 1986 that I had another sustained period of employment at the General Hospital. By then the mood was much more sombre, things had changed, nearly all the original departments, with the exception of radiotherapy had been transferred to the Q.M.C. The hospital by 1986 had entered a transitory period where departments temporarily moved in. Those departments being healthcare of the elderly in transit from former long stay wards at the City Hospital, awaiting their final move to Lings Bar Hospital.

In that same period rumours about the hospital's closure had by then reached fever pitch, rumours which were sometimes exacerbated by the local media. On a number of occasions before going to work in the morning I would switch on the local news to hear someone say: 'At a meeting last night of the Nottingham Health Authority it was announced that Nottingham's General Hospital is to close,' only to arrive at work to a rushed staff circular saying the General isn't closing. So by the time the announcement of closure in 1988 was announced, it came as some relief to all the remaining staff members, myself included, as we now knew what fate had in store for us. As for me, with closure in mind I bid my final farewell to the General Hospital in 1989 when I went to work at the

Nottingham City Hospital, where I remained in employment there until 2008 after 30 years of employment in the National Health Service

Fast forward to nearly twenty years after the closure, as you will see by the accompanying photographs, the buildings that remain have been tastefully restored but have somehow lost their familiar lived in look. In a way these buildings have become silent sentinels to their once-upon-a-time 24 hours 7 days a week existence. Although familiar from the outside, viewed from the inside their role has changed so much it's hard to imagine they were once a hospital ward or department.

What also gave the hospital its character was its people. When you think, the whole area that was once the General Hospital was very much a public area with easy 24 hour access. Now as I walk the same area, apart from the lack of activity and the accompanying hushed silence, the remaining access areas that were once free and easy to enter are now only accessible to those who live on the wards that have been converted into bedsits, or for those with the appropriate security pass or digilock number. In other words, what was once public has now become private!

As an example, just after the hospital closed and was waiting for the developers to move in I remember walking up Park Row. As it was winter, apart from the cold eerie silence that hung in the air, I most remember the gates to the hospital being closed, secured with a heavy lock and chain and an accompanying notice in red with the banner heading of: 'No entry, private property, trespasses will be prosecuted.'

With the long lens of time, knowing how the General Hospital was a much loved institution, my only wish would have been that those responsible for overseeing the General's closure had taken those affectionate views into consideration, instead of allowing the steady drip, drip, drip of rumours to take hold, which caused so much anguish amongst staff members trying to get at the truth as to what was happening.

In conclusion, there will never be another hospital like the Nottingham General Hospital – it was unique. As a resident of one of the apartments that adorn what is now Standard Court said to me: 'It's so nice living here, it's so convenient to get to the shops in town.' In my reply I said, that's just what the staff used to say about working here when it was a hospital.'

What was so special about the Nottingham General Hospital?

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To all former members of staff and to members of the public who frequented its many portals; as nearly twenty years have passed since its closure, the question I ask: 'What was so special about a collection of grade two listed buildings on the fringes of the Park Estate that was once the Nottingham General Hospital?'

What was it about the place when during its bicentenary celebrations in 1982 the word hospital closure was mentioned, did members of staff and public fight a campaign that persuaded those in authority to keep the place open, at least for a little longer?

Also why is there a tendency to reminisce about the old place as representative of some golden age, when it's many generations of consultants, matrons, and managers were God fearing, and when opinions of those in authority were respected and never challenged?

To begin answering this question, although the General Hospital complex looked totally out of place to house modern healthcare facilities, could it be that at heart we are all sentimentalists. In other words, is it that we love old buildings rather in the same way as we love steam engines?

Although physical reminders still remain and have been scoured of all the elements, what is it about standing in the same spot where the Trent Wing once stood that can hold those who were its employee's in a trance as memories of the old place come flooding back?

Could it be that the General Hospital was special because of its convenience? Were we as its patients, visitors and employees spoilt by its location - right in the heart of Nottingham? Take as an example the convenience of the hospital's Casualty Department; no inconvenient hike across town to the Q.M.C., just one bus journey, taxi fare or dare I say ambulance ride to the top of Park Row.

For its employees too there was the convenience of shopping in town during lunchtime. No need to expend your precious hour walking all the way to the Victoria or Broad Marsh Centre's, just a short walk down Park Row to the Co-op on Upper Parliament Street or to the shops adorning Chapel Bar and the West End Arcade.

It is interesting to note, since the closure of the General Hospital all those small shops and businesses outlets including the Co-op have all long since gone.

People may accuse me of describing the former Nottingham General Hospital as something utopian, that isn't so. A hospital, whether as a member of staff or public, is a place where the emotions of happiness and sadness come in equal measures. The General was just like any other hospital, some days were good whilst others not so.

What separated the General from all other hospitals, especially its neighbour across the other side of town, the City Hospital, when the General was opened on September 18th 1782, it was always a hospital. In other words, it began life as a hospital and remained so until its closure in 1993. Unlike the City Hospital that began life as a Poor Law 'Institution.'

As regards to its seniority, it could be said the City Hospital is older by 57 years, as it can trace its historical roots to 1725 to a Workhouse on York Street, when in actual fact the City Hospital we know today was opened on March 18 1903.

What also separated the General from the City Hospital was that the General was established entirely on private and charitable donations, whereas the City was founded on government legislation. Consequently, many of its presidents were members of the aristocracy; people like Lord Middleton who lived in Wollaton Hall and the Duke of Newcastle who lived in the present day Nottingham Castle, and who, during the hospitals construction, donated an acre of land.

Apart from the association of members of the aristocracy, it also attracted local industrialists as well. These were industrialists like Sir Jesse Boot and Sir Thomas Shipstone and of course the Player family.

It was the Player family that provided the funding for many extensions to Nottingham's Hospitals. Giving money not just to the General Hospital but to the former Women's Hospital on Peel Street and the former Children's Hospital at Forest House as well.

Apart from its charitable status, what also gave the hospital its air of regality was that its consultants were given the jealously guarded title of honorary.

The air of regality that the General portrayed extended itself to local business directories as well. In an official pre-1939 Nottingham Handbook under the title of 'Principle Hospitals' it says:

'Nottingham General Hospital stands on Standard Hill, and owes its foundations to public munificence towards the close of the eighteenth century. It commenced its work of mercy in 1782, and its buildings have been frequently enlarged since then to cope with increased appeals for its services.'

It goes on to say:

'The hospital depends largely upon subscriptions, donations and legacies and the income from a small capital investment. In addition to the resident medical staff, a large honorary staff of physicians and consultants attend daily to see out-patients.'

This grand narrative of 'public munificence' and 'its work of mercy', comes in stark contrast to the one sentence devoted to the Nottingham City Hospital, that goes on to say:

'CITY HOSPITAL – a large well appointed general hospital of 985 beds, formerly the Poor Law Infirmary, but now undertaking every type of medical and surgical work for all classes in the community.'

When contrasting the two very different descriptions, one can now begin to see the esteem the General Hospital was held in. With charitable donations being its main source of income, before the inception of the N.H.S. in 1948, hospitals similar to the General were referred to as 'Voluntary Hospitals.' In essence, voluntary hospitals were the most prestigious; they aimed to provide quality of care to a number of patients. They were generally well managed and had the ability to choose their staff and maintain discipline.

Finally, and to encapsulate all that has been written, what made the General so special; firstly it was its pre-1948 voluntary status that gave it its air of superiority, secondly the General Hospital represented an age of deference; an age which was more formal, where rank and status were treated with equal amounts respect. Thirdly, and like our love of old buildings and steam engines, the General Hospital represented a kinder world that revolved at a much slower pace than it does today.