

Health Matters

The growth of Bicester is closely associated with the medieval Augustinian Priory, whose Priors are known to have been skilled in the use of herbs and natural remedies. Add to this, holy wells and relics, and for hundreds of years the Priory was the centre of healthcare in the town. Local historian, Peter Chivers, looks at the history of healthcare.

Bicester has moved on a great deal since its early days and the latest step in a long history of healthcare - news of a planning application for a state of the art Community Hospital on the site of the old Cottage Hospital - is a boost for the town.

The town and surrounding villages have had their share of plague and pestilence. As early as the twelfth century, Augustinian Priors made provision for the sick and poor within the Priory confines situated in Old Place Yard. It is believed a hospital was located near the Old Priory residence in Priory Lane.

In 1355, a hospital opened in an area between North Street and St John's Street, a medieval building that stood until the 1980s, when it was damaged by fire and subsequently demolished. Residents and visitors were also drawn to the medicinal properties of the waters from local wells, namely, Crockwell and St Edburg's Well. Older residents of the town still recall being sent to fetch water from Crockwell to treat illnesses at home. There have been dark days. In 1349, the Black Death decimated the population, as it did all over Europe. Plague was responsible for a large increase in the death rate in the mid-1600s. Smallpox killed forty-two residents in 1707. A cholera epidemic in 1832 accounted for sixty-four deaths over a six-week period. A memorial tablet located in St Edburg's Churchyard still commemorates these victims. Public hygiene was not well understood until the nineteenth century and cholera and typhoid were a regular occurrence, before appropriate measures were taken. A pest house was constructed in Jarvis Lane, near the present site of Homebase,



Bicester Red Cross Hospital War wounded at Bicester Hall

along the Launton Road. A Victorian fever hospital was built adjoining the Union Workhouse at Highfield. Poor sanitation standards were responsible for tainting drinking wells in the town in 1895, resulting in a typhoid epidemic. The situation was relieved with the introduction of a piped water supply in the early 1900s. The current hospital was built in 1908 to replace an earlier Nursing Home and was extended in 1927. In 1948 it was absorbed into the new National Health Service and is now run by NHS Oxfordshire. Many residents fondly remember the maternity facilities as the place where future generations were born and nurtured!

Hometree House at the junction of Launton Road and London Road was a Red Cross Hospital that treated casualties from the Western Front during the First World War. Large country houses at Middleton Stoney, Tusmore and Stratton Audley were requisitioned for similar purposes during World War II. Health services have expanded with new medical centres and GP services being established. However, it is remarkable to think that Bicester still has the same hospital it built over 100 years ago. Improved hospital provision must surely make sense to cope with a rising and aging population. We all have a vested interest that the present plans reach fruition.



Kings End 1912 Oxford Road Cottage Hospital



Launton Road 1900s Jarvis Lane Pest House



North Street 1975 St John Hospital