

## **Report No. B4**

# **BEXHILL - ISOLATION HOSPITAL, ST MARYS LANE**

## **AN INTERPRETIVE REPORT**

**NGR REF TQ 7263 0971**

**AUGUST 2000**

### **LOCATION**

This building is situated to the north of Bexhill adjacent to the municipal cemetery on the outskirts of the built-up area. The ridge line of the building is on a south-west to north-east axis with the ancillary buildings (Buildings B,C and D) on the north-west face.

Access to the site is now by a small gate onto St Mary's Lane on the crest of the hill north east of the building. When the hospital was in use, a track to the south of the building was used and therefore the south east elevation, much the most impressive, would have been the aspect seen immediately on entering the site. This access has since been altered to form the northern entrance to the cemetery and the remaining building hidden behind high timber fence.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The typhoid epidemic of 1880 led to the first thoughts that Bexhill should have an isolation hospital. At that time the growing resort came under the Battle Board of Guardians as the rural sanitary authority. With the formation of the Local Board of Health in 1884, Bexhill became its own sanitary authority and later provided an isolation hospital erected on the Down, an area of open common land at that time on the outskirts of the town. The buildings there were Berthon type huts believed to have been invented by Edward L Berthon 1813-1899, who also devised a type of collapsible boat. The local board reported that it was difficult to recruit staff who found the location isolated and surrounded by 'a good many of the rougher element of the population'[1].

In 1893 the Local Board were donated 12 acres of land formerly part of the Highlands Estate owned by Cllr J L Walker, on which to form a cemetery and isolation hospital [2]. With some delays due to the council having to have a loan to form the cemetery, the hospital was relocated to the new site off St Mary's Lane in 1902. The Health Officer's report stated that the Berthon huts had been re-erected in a more substantial manner and accommodated 12 beds. At the same time a small brick building was constructed containing a kitchen, bedroom (for staff), larder, coal cellar and wash house. Two nurses and a charwoman were employed plus a council workman to bring fresh water in a water cart to the site everyday and to empty the earth closets in the adjoining woodland. In November 1902 an iron building was erected of two wards to house 12 patients, and cost £196 [3].

In 1903 a steam disinfector station was formed on the opposite side of St Mary's Lane from the hospital (NGR TQ 7270 0970). Equipment was purchased from Manlove, Alloit & Co. [3].

Mains water was provided to the site in 1905, a telephone line in 1906 and another corrugated iron building of 4 beds in 1907. In 1910 the site consisted of:

corrugated iron building, two wards of five beds each for scarlet fever cases, with lobby,

kitchen, nurses bedroom,

corrugated iron building same style as above, two wards of three beds each, small sitting room, kitchen and nurses bedroom,

group of three Berthon huts with zinc roofs substituted for the original canvas, four beds for typhoid fever with one hut permanently used as Matron's sitting and dining room,

small brick building connected to the centre hut by covered way, kitchen, maids bedroom and larder, small wash house attached.

Lighting was by paraffin lamps and there were a total of three earth closets [3].

The replacement of the temporary buildings and the need for an observation block was first reported in 1912. In 1913 one ward was uninhabitable due to January gales and the Scarlet Fever block was lined with 'Eternit' asbestos slabs and painted externally. The Health Officer submitted that the hospital needed permanent buildings for an observation block, separate wards for acute and convalescing patients, proper bathing facilities (patients were bathed in front of the kitchen fire), a new laundry and an administration block with accommodation for staff. An enquiry was held in March 1915 by the Local Government Board Inspector to approve the loan for the construction of the new buildings but because of the Great War, sanction was given for the observation block and drainage work only, the rest deferred until after the war. The Observation Block (buildings A and B) were constructed during 1916 although not completed and used until 1918. The Observation ward was used for all incoming suspected cases to ascertain what fever was involved before transfer to the appropriate treatment ward with each bed isolated in a single room to stop cross contamination.

Motor bus services started to the cemetery gates in 1926 when Maidstone & District's service 48 began running from Bexhill to Turkey Road, some services running through to Hooe, off-peak services terminating at the cemetery. Prior to this period, the area was very isolated from the town.

In 1929 the question of replacing the temporary buildings was again raised, this time with a plan to rebuild and serve a greater area than just Bexhill. This continued to be a theme raised by the Health Officer throughout the 1930's as the original buildings deteriorated, in 1934 Dr Dunscombe reported that 'modernisation of the hospital is an urgent matter'. Electricity had been installed to the site in 1929. By 1933 the number of patients beds had been reduced to 15 including five in the Observation Block, with the Berthon huts used as staff bedrooms. The last year that discussions with the county council are mentioned for redeveloping the site is in 1938. In November 1941 the decision was made to not take new admissions and the site was put on a care and maintenance basis, new cases being referred to Hastings Isolation Hospital [3].

One of the temporary buildings was later re-erected as a store at the municipal waterworks at Wrestwood Road, Bexhill [1].

At a date in the 1950's the Observation Block (buildings A, B and C) were converted to a residence called Woodside. In 1966 planning permission for extensions and conversion to form two dwellings were passed but do not seem to have been completed. By January 2000 the building was in a ruined state having suffered from a fire and vandalism. Recording was considered desirable as the site was for sale with planning permission for demolition and replacement for two dwellings [4].

## **SUMMARY**

A good example of a small municipal building echoing a local period style both in its materials and appearance. As the only permanent building of the hospital it remains the only reminder of the earlier use of the site and the importance of isolation of a variety of fever infections in the Edwardian period and after. The building illustrates the very basic provisions made for treatment considered normal at the time and contrasts with the current design and expectations from today's hospitals, the most striking feature must always have been the view over the adjacent cemetery. It also contrasts with firstly, the tuberculosis sanatoriums of the period, such as Benenden in Kent where the latest ideas and architecture were incorporated and secondly, with the large convalescent homes being built in Bexhill at the time by many London boroughs for their residents.

## **PHASE I (1916-18)**

### **Building A**

#### **Layout**

The main building of the Observation Block consisted of five rooms, two rooms either side of a central room which projects forward from the main wall on the south-east side. Each of the four bedrooms had a fireplace and separate external doors.

#### **Wall design**

External walling was of 225mm brick inner skin, 50 mm cavity and 110mm outer skin of brickwork with a pebbledash render externally and sand/cement render and plaster internal finish. Brickwork was exposed externally at quoins and window/door jambs. A 50mm chamfered plinth was incorporated externally, approximately level with the floor, walling below this was of face brickwork. External walls had received a coating of white paint which only survived where in sheltered positions and therefore could date from the hospital use. Window openings were formed with a two course brick cambered arch over and a moulded brick sub-cill.

Internal walling, where surviving, was of 225mm brickwork with render and plaster finish.

#### **Windows and doorways**

Windows were of timber framing with opening side casements, those to the south-east elevation had an opening toplight above. All internal and external doors and frames had been removed before the time of survey.

#### **Floors**

Flooring was concrete with a sand/cement screed.

#### **Roof**

Double pitched roof of approx 30° pitch, 125 x 50 ridgeboard, 100 x 50mm rafters with 150 x 150 mm purlins at mid span (all dimensions approx.). Roof covering of battens and natural slate. Ceilings of 100 x 50 mm joists, finish probably of lath and plaster but all traces had been removed by the time of the survey. The roof was extended at the eaves and gables to form a wide overhang. The gable roof over the projecting centre room was of approx pitch to maintain the eaves and ridge level of the main building and was supported on valley boards. Construction was

identical to the main roof. A lower level canopy roof on the north-west side of the building can be seen on the 1916 newspaper photograph, no evidence for this existed on site as it would have had to be demolished prior to construction of the Phase II and III extensions.

### **Chimney/heating system**

The four main rooms were heated by open fireplaces set in chimney breasts angled in alternate corners to form two chimney stacks above ceiling level. Chimney stacks were of approx 755 x 430mm in plan, cappings of two oversailing courses and three courses of rendered brickwork. Each stack would originally have had two terracotta pots although these had been removed by the time of survey.

### **Quality and Decor**

The building was of substantial construction, of particular note are the external wall thickness. Unfortunately most of the fixtures and finishes had been removed by the time of survey.

### **Building B**

This outbuilding is clearly shown on the 1916 newspaper photograph and consisted of two rooms, walling was of brickwork with pebbledash render matching building A but without the external plinth. Unfortunately, the walls had been demolished to approx 1.5m high but evidence showed the windows to be timber casement type with brick sub-cills. Internally the remains of a solid fuel boiler remained utilising the brick chimney at the junction with building C. As the brickwork did not match either building and is not present on the 1916 photograph, it is considered that this is a later installation but whether it was before the building ceased hospital use cannot be determined. Roofing would have been a flat decked type but had been removed before the survey. Overall, it is considered that this building would have been a wash-house and probably the bathroom mentioned in the 1933 report.

## **PHASE II (c.1933)**

### **Building C - Kitchen Block**

In 1933 the Health Reports stated that the Observation Block (Phase I) had been improved over the preceding year by the construction of a kitchen and bathroom. It is our opinion that this outbuilding on the north corner of the original building is that extension.

### **Layout**

A two roomed building entered from the south-east. At the same time or before, the main roof of building A was extended to form a lean-to canopy covering the space between buildings A, B and C and replaced the smaller canopy shown on the 1916 photograph.

### **Wall design**

Generally as Building A including external finishes, brick plinth and window jambs, cills and arches.

**Windows**

Timber casement windows, top lights with one horizontal and two vertical glazing bars.

**Floors**

Concrete flooring, finish not checked due to debris.

**Roof**

Flat roof deck with flush eaves. Internal finish of tongued and grooved boarding.

**Quality and decor**

This building is similar in design and finishes to building A to which it was attached and used in conjunction with.

**PHASE III (c.1955) - Building D**

Only the exterior of this building could be examined due to demolition debris. The walling was of 225mm brickwork in English bond with one timber window in the north-west elevation. Roof of timber decking with a mineralised felt finish. Due to the workmanship and general style of this building it is assigned a date post hospital use and therefore when the building had been converted to residential use.

## APPENDIX A

### **The number of cases and types of fevers treated at the Hospital taken from the annual Health Officer's Reports.**

Infectious diseases were identified in the Infectious Diseases Act of 1890 and the Infectious Diseases Notification Act 1889 as small pox, cholera, diphtheria, membranous croup, erysipelas, scarlet fever or scarletina, measles and fevers which included typhus, typhoid or enteric, relapsing, continued and puerperal (spellings taken from contemporary reports) [3].

1902 Within the Bexhill area 445 cases had been notified, 361 of which were measles. It was considered that the lack of isolation of cases greatly increased to the spread of the diseases especially amongst children.

1903 Hospital opened end of July. By the end of the year 26 cases had been admitted, all of scarlet fever.

1904 9 cases of diphtheria treated.

1905 4 cases of diphtheria, 12 of scarlet fever

1906 2 cases of diphtheria, 11 of scarlet fever and 1 typhoid

1907 4 cases of diphtheria, 15 of scarlet fever

1908 3 cases of diphtheria, 31 of scarlet fever

1909 4 cases of diphtheria, 13 of scarlet fever and 1 typhoid

1910 20 cases of diphtheria (2 deaths), 23 of scarlet fever

1911 4 cases of diphtheria, 4 of scarlet fever and 2 enteric fever (both died)

1912 6 cases of diphtheria, 7 of scarlet fever, 1 membraneous croup, 1 enteric fever, 1 measles

1913 1 case of diphtheria, 33 of scarlet fever

1914 5 cases of diphtheria, 21 scarlet fever, 1 measles

1916 Total 23 cases treated, 19 civilian and 2 soldiers from Cooden Camp. 203 soldiers were bathed at the Disinfector station who were verminous or suffering from scabies.

1917 Total 17 cases, 12 civilian, 5 soldiers from Cooden Camp. Cases included scarlet fever, diphtheria, cerebo spinal meningitis and tonsillitis. 199 soldiers bathed at the Disinfector.

1918 Total 24 cases, 18 civilian, 6 soldiers, (2 civilian deaths).

1919 Total 18 cases included scarlet fever, diphtheria and typhoid fever.

1920 Total 70 cases of scarlet fever and diphtheria (3 deaths).

1922 3 cases of diphtheria, 6 of scarlet fever

1923 1 case of diphtheria, 5 of scarlet fever

1924 3 cases of diphtheria, 9 of scarlet fever

1925 6 cases of diphtheria, 7 of scarlet fever

1926 9 cases of scarlet fever, 1 death from diphtheria

1927 8 cases of scarlet fever only

1928 8 cases of diphtheria (1 death), 20 of scarlet fever, 2 of patatyphoid

1929-39 no data given but hospital open

The number of deaths is significantly low and indicates that the hospital was effective in its treatment of the diseases despite its basic facilities.

Tuberculosis cases were referred to the County Council Sanatorium at Darvell Bank,

Robertsbridge but other places at Hastings, Eastbourne, Midhurst, London, Kent, Isle of Wight, Surrey and Hampshire were used. Cases of small pox were referred to Hastings Corporation Hospital at Brede.

## APPENDIX B

### Occupants of building after conversion to dwelling taken from the Electoral Rolls:

<1955-1958	John & Joyce Burns John, Jean & Violet Leeves
1958-1959	John & Violet Leeves
1960-1964	Frederick & Dorothy Sharp
1965	vacant
1966-1967	F Sharpe
1968	vacant
1969-1974	Jeffrey Atkin
1974	Peter Pigeon

## REFERENCES

1. Bexhill Museum Archives, Bartley, L J *Bexhill on Sea Observer* undated cutting c.1970.
2. Bexhill Museum Archives, *Bexhill Chronicle* 3 February 1893
3. Bexhill Museum Archives, Borough of Bexhill Medical Officer of Health's Annual Reports 1902-1945.
4. Rother District Council, Town and Country Planning Records

## ATTACHMENTS

- Map 1 Extract from Ordnance Survey 6" to 1 mile plan of 1910 showing location of the hospital site and the Bexhill Down.
- Map 2 Extract from Ordnance Survey 25" to 1 mile plan of 1910 showing the early buildings on the site and the Disinfector Station.
- Map 3 Extract from Ordnance Survey 6" to 1 mile plan showing the surviving building before its conversion to a dwelling. Note: earlier buildings not shown although still in use until 1939.
- Drawing no. 1 Plan of Observation Block
- Drawing no. 2 Elevations of Observation Block
- Drawing no. 3 Elevations of Observation Block
- Plates 1 & 2 Building A 1918 exterior and 2000 exterior
- Plates 3 & 4 Interior building A 2000 and exterior building C 2000

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