London’s medieval hospitals and the Reformation

ABSTRACT - Pre Reformation London was well provided with hospitals. However, with the dissolution of the monasteries, these establishments (all of which were linked to religious foundations) suffered. Most closed their doors permanently and their inmates were cast onto the streets. At least ten hospitals ceased to exist. St Bartholomew’s Hospital and the Savoy survived the tumultuous years of the 1540s. In 1553 The ‘Royal Group’ of five hospitals was founded, eventually comprising St Bartholomew’s Hospital, St Thomas’s Hospital, the Bethlehem, the Bridewell and Christ’s Hospital. This was achieved more by pressure from the citizens of London led by Sir Richard Gresham than by Royal beneficence.

The earliest hospitals of which we have any definite knowledge in Britain were the work of the Saxons. These were at St Albans where a hospital is mentioned in 794, and at York where King Athelstan founded St Peter’s Hospital in 937. St Peter’s was destroyed by fire in the 12th century and reconstructed by King Stephen as St Leonard’s Hospital.

The early period of Henry VIII’s reign saw the prioritisation of the standards of medical care. The Royal College of Physicians was founded in 1516. Visions of an ideal hospital service designed for the treatment of the sick, as opposed to providing hospices for the dying or the enfeebled elderly, were advanced in 1516 by Sir Thomas More in Utopia.

But first and chiefly of all, in respect of the sycke that be cured in the hospitalles. For in the circuit of the citie a little without the walls they have four hospitalles so big, so wide, so ample and so large that they may seem four little towns; which were devised of that bigness, partly to the intent the sycke, be they never so many in number, should not lie in throng or straight, and therefore uneasily or incommodiously; and partly that they which were taken and holden with contagious diseases such as would by infection to crape from one to another might be laid apart from the company of the residue. These hospitalles be so well appointed and with all things necessary to health so furnished; and moreover so diligent attendance through the continual presence of cunning physicians is given, that though no man be sent thither against his will, yet notwithstanding there is no sick person in all the citie that had not rather lie there than in his own house.

More’s utopian arrangement was built rather flatteringly on the situation prevailing at the time in London, which boasted four ‘general hospitals’ situated outside its walls: St Mary’s Spital to the east, St Bartholomew’s Hospital to the north west, The Savoy to the west and St Thomas’s at the southern end of London Bridge. This ‘utopia’ was to undergo major convulsions later in the reign of Henry VIII with the dissolution of the monasteries.

In addition to the four general hospitals, a number of ‘special hospitals’ existed. These special hospitals comprised leper hospitals and pest houses, a hospital for the blind, and hospitals for orphans, pilgrims and vagabonds as well as for the ‘distracted and lunatic’. A number of religious foundations such as St Katherine’s Priory founded by Queen Matilda, King Stephen’s wife, housed many patients in terminal care. The Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII and its site is now occupied by St Katherine’s Dock.

All the hospitals in London were associated with religious houses. Most houses appointed a professional beggar known as ‘The Proctor’ to raise funds. The Proctors traveled widely, armed with a warrant from the bishop; sometimes in return for alms they gave pardons or indulgences. The fact that the administration of these institutions was not in all cases beyond reproach was undoubtedly used to justify the changes to come.

St Bartholomew’s Hospital

St Bartholomew’s Hospital is the oldest existing hospital foundation in London. It was founded in 1123 by Rahere, an Augustinian canon of Frankish descent who had suffered from malaria while on a pilgrimage to Rome. Upon his recovery, Rahere made a vow to build a hospital in London on his return. Henry I granted him a strip of land outside the city wall for this purpose, where he founded a priory, St Bartholomew’s the Great, as well as a hospital. The hospital was run by a Master, eight brethren and four Augustinian nuns. The Master was commissioned to retain a servant ‘to wait upon the sick with diligence and care in all gentleness’.

In 1537 the Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII and its revenues confiscated. The hospital struggled to survive and was successful in so doing for seven years despite financial difficulties. In 1544 St Bartholomew’s Hospital was re-founded by Henry VIII on the petition of Sir Richard Gresham, Lord Mayor of London. The letters patent authorising the refoundation of St Bartholomew’s decreed that it should be known as ‘The House of the Poor in West Smithfield of the Foundation of King Henry VIII’. By Act of Common Council it was endowed with 500 marks annually. The citizens of London raised a similar sum each year and also met the expenses of repairing the hospital so that it could be opened to admit 100 patients.

In 1546 the City of London authorities replaced the Master and chaplains by a Court of Governors made up of four aldermen and eight commoners. In 1549 three surgeons were appointed and in 1551 the number of sisters was increased to twelve, one to act as matron. In 1568 the first physician, Dr Roderigo Lopez, was appointed. He was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn in 1594, accused of
trying to poison Elizabeth I. Lopez is alleged to have requested 50,000 crowns from the King of Spain to poison Queen Elizabeth and had received 'a jewel in part payment' in advance.

St Mary's Spital

St Mary's Spital was founded in 1197 by Walter Brune (Brown) and his wife Rosia (Rose) on the east side of Bishopsgate on the site of Spital Square, and was originally dedicated as 'The House of God and the Blessed Virgin'. It also appears in early records as 'The New Hospital without Bishopsgate'. It was administered by the Austin canons with the help of lay brothers and sisters. In 1303 a visitation by the Archbishop of Canterbury revealed that the lamps were no longer lit between beds and the sisters had not received their allowance for food and clothes. In 1400 the hospital was again badly in debt and borrowed 300 marks from the parish of St James Garlickhythe.

At the time of the Reformation in 1534 the prior and 11 canons acknowledged the King's supremacy, but this did not prevent the dissolution of the Hospital in 1538. The closure of the hospital went ahead despite the petition of Sir Richard Gresham to the King. At the time of closure it is recorded that the hospital had 180 beds with two patients in each.

St Thomas's Hospital

St Thomas's Hospital was originally founded in about 1106 probably as part of the Priory of St Mary Overy in Southwark, and was administered by the Augustinian canons. Its name 'The Hospital of St Thomas the Martyr' must have been assumed after Thomas à Becket was canonised in 1173. In 1207 or 1212 the priory was destroyed by fire. The priory church was rebuilt and is now the Southwark Cathedral dedicated as the Cathedral Church of St Saviour and St Mary Overy, having become the Parish Church of St Saviour of Southwark after the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539.

Traces of the Norman priory church survive, including some 13th century blank arcading in the South aisle and the internal arch in the doorway of the North aisle of the nave. After the fire, St Thomas's Hospital was rebuilt on a new site on the east side of Borough High Street on land given by Peter de Rupibus, the Bishop of Winchester, in whose diocese it lay. In the 15th century Richard Whittington, Lord Mayor of London, made a 'new chamber with eight beds for young women who had done amiss, in trust of good amendment' and he commanded that 'all things done in that chamber should be kept secret ... for he would not shame no young woman in no wise for it might be the cause of their letting of their marriage'. However, all was not well with its administration and conduct, for in 1535 it was visited by Richard Layton, deputy to Thomas Cromwell, who called it 'the bawdy house of St Thomas in Southwark'.

It seems that the Master and brethren of St Thomas's managed to make some deal with the King's Remembrancer because on 2 July 1538, they granted him an annuity of twenty shillings for life in return for 'his good council'. Two days later, on 4 July 1538, one of the brethren testified that the Master of the Hospital had sold two silver parcel gilt basins, a silver holy water stoup and sprinkler, a pair of silver candlesticks and other items, saying to the witness: 'The world is naught let us take while we may'. The Master, Richard Mabott, is then alleged to have given the Brother Robert Mory £5.00 as his portion. The Master opportunely died before the case was heard in full.

On 14 January 1540, one month after Dr Thomas Thurleby (later Bishop of Westminster) was appointed Master, the hospital was surrendered to King Henry VIII, who promptly closed it and decanonised Thomas Becket. A petition from Gresham to the King for the City of London to take over the running of the hospital was refused. However, in 1551 the buildings were granted to the Lord Mayor and citizens of London by Edward VI and the refurbished hospital with 260 beds reopened with the title 'Hospital of St Thomas the Apostle'.

The Savoy Palace

The Savoy Palace in the Strand was built in the early 13th century. In 1246, Henry III granted it (for an annual rent of three barbed arrows) to his wife's uncle, Peter, the future Count of Savoy, who bequeathed it to the monastery of St Bernard, Mountjoux, Savoie. In 1270 it was bought by Queen Eleanor, wife of Edward I, for 300 marks for her son Edmund of Lancaster. In 1361 the palace was inherited by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. In 1377 it was attacked by a mob because of John of Gaunt's support for John Wycliffe, the reformer and translator of the Bible, who was charged with heresy by the Bishop of London. Little damage was done on this occasion, but the palace was again attacked on 13 June 1381 by Wat Tyler's followers in the Peasants' Revolt. At this time a fire, started by drunken followers of Tyler, caused the explosion of a box of gunpowder which brought down the Great Hall. Thereafter the Palace was no longer usable, although some of its buildings remained standing.

In 1505 Henry VII ordered the palace to be rebuilt as a hospital for the poor with 100 beds and endowed it with land from which an income of 500 marks (£334) per year was derived. The hospital was functional by 1515 or 1517. On the gate to the hospital from the Strand was a statue of St John the Baptist to whom the hospital was dedicated.

The main part of the hospital was on the ground plan of a church with a long axis running east-west. What might be termed the nave had 12 bays and was 200ft long. The chancel was 80ft long and the transepts measured 220ft north-south. The interior of this huge building, which was called the Great Dormitory, was thought to have had two floors. Thus in general appearance, the Great Dormitory must have closely resembled the well known view of the

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old sick wards of St John's Hospital, Bruges, painted by Jan Beerblock circa 1778.

The matron of the hospital was paid £4-6s-8d per year and was responsible for 12 sisters who had to be over 36 years of age and unmarried. If any married she was to leave the hospital within one month.

William Holgill was appointed the first Master in 1517, and in 1535 an enquiry was held into his management. One of the questions asked was 'whether any poore man do lie in any shetes unwatched that any lay in before'. Despite the enquiry, William Holgill remained Master until 1548.

In 1553 the hospital was suppressed by Edward VI, the Master dismissed, and its land given to the City of London to endow the Bridewell; the furniture and bedding being divided between the Bridewell and St Thomas's Hospital. In 1556 Queen Mary refounded the hospital and reinstated the fifth Master, Ralph Jackson, who was first appointed and later dismissed in 1553. Jackson remained Master until 1559 when he was depose by Elizabeth I and replaced by Thomas Thurland who remained Master until 1574. In 1570 a Bill of Complaint stated that Thurland's relations were maintained by the hospital, he had appropriated £2,500 of hospital funds, he never went to church and had sexual relations with the hospital staff. He survived these complaints.

In 1644, during the Civil War and again in 1675, the hospital was requisitioned for use by wounded soldiers. In 1679 the Great Dormitory and sisters' dwellings were requisitioned as a barracks for 600 foot soldiers. The barracks burned down in 1776. The only remaining part of this building is The Chapel of the Savoy, now the chapel of the Royal Victorian Order. The rest of the buildings were demolished in 1815.

The leper hospitals and pest houses

In 1370 it was estimated that there were about 200 leper hospitals or lazars houses in England. A leper hospital on the site of St James's Palace was said by John Stow (1598) to have existed on this site before the Norman conquest11, but the first definite record of its existence is from documents of Henry II's reign. In 1267 the Papal Legate and the Abbot of Westminster limited the inmates of the foundation to eight brothers and 16 sisters who were to follow the rule of St Augustine. In 1290 Edward I granted the hospital the right to hold an annual fair from the eve of St James' Day for seven days. The fair was held outside the leper hospital, now dedicated to St James the Less. St James' Fair continued until it was suppressed in 1664 because of its riotous nature, but was reinstiuated by James II in 1689 to be held on 1 May for 14 days – hence the name Mayfair for this area of London.

The Black Death of 1348–9 killed 20,000 citizens of London (half its population) and all the inmates of St James' Hospital except William de Weston, who became the Master but was deposed two years later.

In 1448 Henry VI gave the hospital, by now a leper hospital for young women, to Eton College at Windsor. In 1531 Henry VIII acquired the hospital as a site for St James's Palace. Eton College was recompensed with other lands, and the four remaining sisters pensioned off at £6-13s-4d per year each. The fate of the lepers is unknown.

In 1101, Matilda, wife of Henry I, founded a leper hospital dedicated to St Giles, the patron saint of outcasts. At her behest 'a cup of charity' was given to condemned prisoners as they passed the door of the hospital on their way to execution at Tyburn. By the 13th century the chapel of the hospital had come to serve parishioners and patients alike. The church continued its parochial role in the Soho area even after the hospital's closure by Henry VIII in 1539. The area of Soho belonged jointly to the Abbot and Convent of Abingdon, Oxfordshire and to the Master of the Hospital of Burton St Lazar in Leicestershire, the latter being the custodian of St Giles' Hospital. It was surrendered in 1536 to Henry VIII to create a Royal Park for Whitehall Palace, but even this involuntary 'gift' did not save the hospital from closure.

In 1623 a new church was built on the site of St Giles in the Fields and consecrated by Archbishop Laud. The Great Plague of London started in the parish of St Giles in 1665 and the foundations of this church were undermined by the excessive number of burials – 3,216 in the year of the plague alone. A new church had to be built and was designed by the architect Henry Fitchart; it still stands as the parish church of St Giles in the Fields14,21.

A third leper hospital is known to have existed, dedicated to St Anthony. The current base of the Whittington Stone on Highgate Hill is thought to be the base of a pre-Reformation wayside cross which stood outside the Lazar House27.

The Lock Hospital at Southwark was originally a leper hospital probably built in the 12th century, and its existence was first recorded on a patent roll of 1315. The lock Hospital appears to have been the only leper hospital to survive the turmoils of the 1540s unscathed. Many lazars houses came to be known as lock hospitals. In 1549 St Bartholomew's Hospital took over the administration of the Lock Hospital, Southwark27. By the 18th century leprosy was extinct in England and the Lock Hospital was used to treat patients with venereal diseases. The Southwark Lock Hospital was closed in 1760. At least two other leper hospitals are known to have existed in London, one at Knightsbridge and the other at Mile End.

People suffering from various forms of plague, including smallpox, when prevalent were not admitted to hospitals. Instead, towns provided small pest houses. The pest houses for London were at St Giles Cripplegate, outside London Wall, and Tothill Fields, Westminster12.

Special hospitals

Certain hospitals associated with religious foundations provided specialist services, among the most prominent...
being the Bethlehem Royal Hospital for the mentally sick and Elsping Spital for the Blind.

In 1247 Sheriff Simon Fitz Mary founded the Priory of St Mary Bethlehem outside Bishopsgate on the site now occupied by the Great Eastern Hotel. The priory was designed as a convent for monks who were obliged to receive and entertain the Bishop of Bethlehem or his Nuncio whenever either should be in London. The priory is known to have had a hospital for 'general conditions' attached to it in 1329. It was not until 1377 that 'distracted' patients were being looked after, that is to say, were kept chained to the wall by leg or ankle and, when violent, immersed in cold water or whipped.

In 1547 when the priory was dissolved, the Mayor and Corporation of London under the leadership of Sir Richard Gresham petitioned King Henry VIII, bought the site from the King and re-established the hospital as a lunatic asylum. In 1553 the asylum was placed by Edward VI under a collective chapter for the 'correction of idle vagabonds', along with Bridewell, St Thomas's Hospital and Christ's Hospital for Orphans. All were given to the City of London to administer, together with the revenues of the Palace of the Savoy, decreeing that their governance should be vested in the Lord Mayor and the Court of Aldermen, and that the election of governors should take place annually on St Matthew's Day at Christ's Hospital. In 1557 St Bartholomew's Hospital was added to this group, which became known as the Royal Hospitals. However, the five units gradually grew to regard themselves as independent and after 1587 the statutory annual meeting was abolished.

In 1675 the Bethlehem Royal Hospital was moved to a building in Moorfields designed by Robert Hooke at a cost of £17,000. In the 18th century funds were raised for the hospital by charging visitors a fee to see the spectacle of the bizarre behaviour of the insane. In 1815, 122 patients were moved from the Moorfields site to a new site at Lambeth. The central block of the third Bethlehem Royal Hospital in 1936 became the Imperial War Museum.  

The Priory Hospital of St Mary's within Crippllegate was founded in about 1329 by William de Elsing, a mercer, as a hospital for 100 blind men and women on the site of a former nunnery. It was initially administered by a rector and four secular priests, but by 1342 five Augustinian canons were substituted. Elsing became the first prior. In 1534 the prior and canons acknowledged the King's supremacy but in 1536 the hospital was closed. The fate of the blind patients is unknown except that they were discharged. Besant imagines them 'thrown onto the streets to stumble along and beg'. The prior, however, became the King's chaplain. The chapel of the priory was given to the parishioners of St Alfege, London Wall, who moved to it from their own church which was in a ruinous state.

St Anthony's Hospital was a unique establishment. In 1242 Henry III gave a former synagogue on the north side of Threadneedle Street to brothers from the hospital of St Antoine de Viennois. The brothers had come to England to collect alms for the French hospital where people were treated for ergotism (St Anthony's Fire) caused by eating rye contaminated with *Claviceps purpurea*. Whether any patients with this condition were admitted to St Anthony's Hospital is uncertain.

**Discussion**

The Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries affected every hospital in London since all were attached to religious foundations. With the exception of St Bartholomew's Hospital and the Savoy, the patients were all discharged as the hospitals were shut down, and in most cases there is no record of what happened to the patients. However, the streets of London were stated to be blocked with 'lazars and the lame' to the extent that Henry VIII ordered the Lord Mayor to have them all removed and confined. Again, however, there is no record of where they were to be sent or how the problem was to be remedied.

It was public outcry and the civic spirit of the citizens of London, led by Sir Richard Gresham, that led to the provison of the five Royal Hospitals to replace those originally founded as acts of religious charity. These were St Bartholomew's, St Thomas's, The Bethlehem Royal, Christ's Hospital and the Bridewell which Henry VIII and Edward VI laid claim to have refounded.

Only two of these cared for the physically sick, one for the mentally ill, one was an orphanage and the Bridewell was, to all intents and purposes, a prison. Christ's Hospital was maintained for the purpose for which Edward IV had founded it in 1553 (with the help of public subscriptions), namely the care of 400 orphan children from the City of London. Christ's Hospital was housed in the old Grey Friars monastery building. The Palace of Bridewell was donated to the City of London to be used for 'the segregation of all idle rogues who needed correction'. Edward VI handed over the property, which he 'did no longer like on account of the filthy stynkyng dycht which runneth along side of it' (a reference to the now covered-over river Fleet).

However, these five refoundations did not replace in breadth or scope or number the institutions that had been shut down. Political expediency, religious dogma and greed did the damage, and sustained pressure from the citizens of London for over a decade (1540–1553) mitigated what could have been a disastrous situation for the public well being. Besant describes these changes: 'If the London of Edward III was a city of Palaces that of Queen Elizabeth was a city of ruins. Ruins everywhere! Ruins of cloisters, halls, dormitories, courts, chapels, churches, hospitals'.

A proper provision for London's needs for hospitals did not occur until the 18th century, which saw the foundation of the Westminster Hospital (1720), Guy's (1724), St George's (1733), the London (1740) and the Middlesex (1745).

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