

HISTORICAL FACTSHEET No 10

The Fire of 1948

On 27 January 1948, between 6.20 pm and 8.25 pm, a fire started in the dispensary towards the eastern end of the hospital. The flames soon spread to the roof space, and from there along the main corridor, and into the adjoining buildings. The Oswestry Fire Brigade was called at 8.34 pm. The army from neighbouring Park Hall Camp also gave its resources to fight the fire and help remove patients.

After several hours, the fire was brought under control opposite the concert hall by volunteers breaking into the corridor roof to create a barrier. By this time, the following had been set on fire: kitchen, stores, dispensary, laboratory and dental surgery, and the departments of electrotherapy, massage and clinical records. Four wards rebuilt during the 1930s reconstruction programme were also affected: Goodford, Kenyon, Gladstone and Wrekin. Altogether, one half of the hospital was either destroyed or severely damaged. The exact cause of the fire was never established.

Thankfully, there were no casualties. 100 patients were rescued from the burning buildings, and the whole hospital was evacuated, a task made easier by the open-sided wards and the fact that all beds were fitted with wheels. Patients were pushed along the narrow country lanes by staff, soldiers and volunteers, and taken to the neighbouring Derwen Training College and Park Hall Camp. Within one and a half hours, over 400 hundred patients had been transferred to safety.

Within a week, two thirds of the patients were back in their beds at the hospital, housed in the unaffected wards, and on the seventh day operations were resumed. On their return to the hospital the patients sent the following letter to the Chairman of the Board of Management:

"We, whose signatures are appended, patients at the Orthopaedic Hospital, Oswestry, at the time of the destructive fire which broke out at 8.30 pm on Tuesday 27 January 1948, desire to express our gratitude to all who were so thoughtfully concerned about the safety and comfort of all those who were unable to help themselves. We fully realise that had it not been for the hospital staff and other willing helpers, the welfare of the patients would have suffered considerably. We also desire that a copy of our signatures be preserved amongst the records of this hospital."

A book containing 223 patient signatures is kept in the archives, providing a fascinating snapshot of how far some patients travelled in those days to be treated at the hospital. One patient from Hereford wrote: "Well done, doctors and staff. Your work...reached heights on the night of January 27 1948 which will never be excelled."

The Board of Management very quickly decided that the hospital should remain on its present site. John Menzies, the chief administrator, realised that it was vital to start rebuilding straight away, before doubts over the hospital's future could set in. Within days, an appeal was launched by local newspaper publisher the Caxton Press, and due to massive public support, £45,000 was raised within a year. The rebuilt wards and departments were opened officially by hospital Patron the Duchess of Kent in 1952.

Sources

1. *Carter, Marie. Healing & hope: 100 years of 'The Orthopaedic'. Oswestry: The Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic and District Hospital NHS Trust, 2000*
2. *Orthopaedic Illustrated No 12 1971, p 11, 13*
3. *The Heritage of Oswestry: the origin and development of the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital, Oswestry 1900-1975. 3^d ed. Oswestry: The Hospital, 1975, p 86-91*