

HISTORICAL FACTSHEET No 8

Open-sided Wards

Agnes Hunt began her nurse training at the Royal Alexandra Hospital Rhyl in 1885, where she came under the influence of matron Miss Graham, who had trained at Great Ormond Street. The Royal Alexandra Hospital, under Miss Graham's leadership, was the first hospital to advocate fresh air as an integral part of patient treatment. When Agnes Hunt and Emily Goodford opened their convalescent home for children at Baschurch in 1900, the child patients were housed in two wards on the upper floor of the building, but these could only be reached by means of a steep staircase. This made it dangerous to transport children with limited mobility. It was therefore decided to build a shed, open on one side, in the garden to house the children unable to walk, thus increasing safety and giving the children the benefit of fresh air. From that time on, all new patient accommodation was constructed on the open-air principle. Due to Agnes Hunt's influence on the development of treatment for orthopaedic conditions, open-air hospitals on the same lines as Baschurch sprang up all over the country, the first ones being at Birmingham and Pinner, Middlesex.

When the hospital moved to its present site near Oswestry in 1921, the existing wards from the former military hospital were converted for open-air use. In the 1920s, no curtains were allowed along the open side; these came later, and were only drawn when privacy was really necessary. By the mid 1920s, all beds had been fitted with wheels, so that they could be pushed out into the hospital grounds, or even further afield, directly from the ward. In good weather, patients spent much time outside, and often became very sun-tanned, but in bad weather, there was limited protection from the elements. In a severe winter, as much as half the ward floor could be covered in snow overnight, and a patient's only protection would be to pull up the sheet over his face. Patients were kept warm with blankets and hot-water bottles, and nurses, especially the night staff, were allowed to dress in woollen jumpers and trousers under their uniforms, and to wear mittens and boots. The new wards built under the hospital reconstruction programme during the 1930s were all open-sided. During the fire of January 1948, the whole hospital was evacuated, and this task was made easier by the open-sided wards.

When the wards were first opened up, exposure to fresh air was seen as particularly beneficial to children coming from poor housing conditions. However, opinion on its value changed over the years, as it was never proved scientifically that open air conditions played a definitive role in the treatment of orthopaedic diseases. Consequently, two of the wards rebuilt after the fire, Wrekin and Kenyon, were made to be closeable, with glass folding doors. Over the following years, arrangements were made to close in all the existing wards, and by the beginning of the 1960s, the era of open air treatment at Oswestry had come to an end.

Sources

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5. *Buildings Sub-committee Minutes 1955*