

NORDRACH-SUR-MENDIP

Most people will know about the old Somerset and Wells Lunatic Asylum which was situated on the Bath Road but very few will be aware that there used to be a TB Sanatorium at Charterhouse. A most unusual place to build a hospital, so high on the Mendips, but it was thought that the clean open air would help to cure the disease.

The hospital was opened at the former Willoughby's Farm in 1899 by two doctors, Rowland Thurman and Neville Gwyn. The full name of the sanatorium was Nordrach-sur-Mendip but it was usually referred to as just Nordrach. It was named after the first sanatorium which was established by Dr Otto Walther in the Black Forest. He was the first to promote the open air cures for TB plus a diet of dairy products and fresh fruit and vegetables. The two doctors had themselves been treated successfully at Dr Walther's clinic in the Black Forest and they decided to open their own clinic in England. They toured the countryside on bicycles looking for a suitable location and eventually chose Charterhouse, high on the Mendips, with plenty of non polluted fresh air, away from towns and cities. They most likely chose the West Country because Dr Thurman's mother and aunts lived in Clifton.

Beryl Thame who had been a trainee staff nurse at the hospital from 1948-1950 describes the buildings. 'The main building was of local stone and it still exists today under private ownership. As you entered through the large oak door on the ground floor Matron's office was on the left with the Almoner's office next door to it. The Doctor's consulting room was opposite the main door, the kitchen to the right and the store room to the right of the kitchen. The upper floor housed the personal rooms of Matron, Doctor, Sister, Staff Nurse and nurse. The domestic staff lived at the local farm.

The patients' buildings were wooden in structure, similar to stables or extended garden sheds, with stable doors and often referred to as chalets. The upper half of the door was windowed and these doors were only closed when the weather was too bad for them to be open – fresh air being part of the healing process.



Wooden Chalet for TB Patients

There were three or four of these blocks, as they were called, and they housed about 30 patients. One of the blocks was slightly smaller and was used as the Occupational Therapy and Physical Training block. It doubled up as a chapel at weekends for visiting clergy and a place for visitors to be private with the patient. It also served as a social room where patients would entertain or be entertained by the local people. There was no heating in these blocks - if you were cold you just put on extra clothing. This rule applied to staff as well as to patients. The patients used the O/T room for handicrafts and they would make things to sell at the occasional open days that were held at the hospital.' All the wooden buildings have now disappeared.

The staff at this time consisted of Matron, Doctor, Sister, Staff Nurse and Trainee Staff Nurse and one Nursing Orderly. There were also five domestic orderlies, one male orderly for the heavy work, a chef and a gardener. The domestic staff were either Estonian or Polish refugees, posted to England at the end of WWII, because of the lack of work in their own country. They were classed as displaced people.



Matron Tratt



Doctor Hayes

The patients' diet was mainly high protein with plenty of dairy products as well as fresh fruit and vegetables. The local farms provided the milk and dairy produce but Nordrach employed its own gardeners to grow the fruit and vegetables in the greenhouses and the gardens. During the 1930s the headmistress's husband Mr Lukins was the gardener at Nordrach. Mary Small, who lived at Tynings Farm, remembers her grandfather supplying Nordrach with fresh milk from his farm at Paywell and her granny and her eldest daughter making cream, butter and cheese for the hospital.



Chef and his family

When Mary was a little girl she used to go with Dick, who worked for her grand father, to deliver the churns of milk to Nordrach with their dog following the cart.

There was always a great fear of infection from TB and the chalets had been built away from the centre of the village. The patients were allowed out for walks in the fresh air but they would only walk along the lane as far as Netherwood Cottage and no further. Mary's mother worked as a nurse at Nordrach for a while during the 1920s and she told a friend who said she would never drink a cup of tea there that she had drunk hundreds of cups of tea and she had been fine

Twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays, visitors would come from Bristol by bus to see their family and friends. About once a month there would be a service in the little Church of St Hugh and staff and the fitter patients would either cycle or walk down from the hospital, which was situated near where the main road is now.

With the introduction of the NHS in 1948, Nordrach became the progressive patient department of Ham Green Hospital in Bristol and it catered for just female patients. Ham Green was where patients were admitted for assessment and treatment in the various stages of TB. When they were regarded as well enough they were transferred to Charterhouse to await discharge. Basic treatment at this time was mainly fresh air and rest. The more severe cases had complete bed rest lying flat on their backs or fronts with the foot of the bed raised higher than the head. As the patient slowly

recovered they were allowed up for one-two hours per day gradually increasing to six hours. When they were fit enough to be classed as walking they were transferred to Nordrach to complete their recovery, but they still had a daily rest hour between 2.00-3.00 pm.

During WWII Nordrach ceased to be a TB hospital for a while and the Bristol Children's Hospital was evacuated there. But after the war it returned to treating TB patients again until 1956 when it closed. It soon reopened for refugees from the Hungarian uprising and then it was sold into private ownership in 1958. For a short while it was a Country Club but now, from the outside at least, you would never know that there had been a hospital in the Mendip Hills which had treated TB patients for nearly 60 years. After the Country Club closed the house returned to private ownership and was owned by the Stokes family (established South West grocers) for 25 years before the present owners bought it in 2005. It actually came up for sale at the beginning of 2009 and it is interesting to see that some of the original features have been retained – the gothic windows, dado and picture rails and some of the hospital's cupboards which used to house medicines, have been reused to create a family kitchen. The basic structure of the house has not been changed so on the inside it is possible to see how it functioned as a hospital.



The Gardeners with some of the patients

Sources of Information:

- 1 Beryl Thame who was a trainee staff nurse at Nordrach Hospital
- 2 Mary Small who lived at Tynings Farm
- 3 The Mendip Society Newsletter
- 4 The Mendip Times
- 5 Photos from Beryl Thame

Jean Birks