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Hospital Services in Epsom and Ewell

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A CENTURY before the Downs saw the first established horse-race, Epsom was a health resort, where the aristocratic and the wealthy took the waters and otherwise amused themselves. The health giving substance in the waters became known as Epsom salt. Although other spa waters contain this substance, and Epsom has other claims to renown, it is a singular thing that only the name of Epsom is attached to the salt and to the mineral, Epsomite, from which it can be derived, and which is found in such widely scattered places as Chile and Kentucky. Although the spa had a short life, the health-giving and health-seeking traditions established then in Epsom have continued in other ways.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the London County Council, needing increased accommodation for the mentally sick, bought the mansion house and 1,000-acre estate of the manor of Horton and began to establish a number of hospitals on the land. The first hospital was the mansion house itself, supplemented by a number of corrugated-iron buildings, intended to be temporary but which have remained. This hospital, which could accommodate about 700 patients, received its first admissions in June, 1899. Plans were then in hand for Horton Hospital which was eventually opened in 1901 to accommodate over 2,000 patients. The hospital now known as St. Ebba's was opened in 1903 to receive the epileptic insane. This was the first villa type of institution provided in the London area. It has been extended by modern buildings of very advanced type and is now "a modern villa colony for the more recent and recoverable types of mental disorder" The second large mental hospital to be built on the Horton estate was Long Grove, which was opened in 1907 with accommodation for about 2,200 patients.

The first World War interrupted the building of West Park Hospital. Built at the southern end of the estate and completed in 1924, on what were then very modern lines, with detached buildings joined together by covered corridors, the design of this hospital was much in advance of any others, although now it would be regarded as "old-style". It also has accommodation for about 2,200 patients.

The first hospital in the manor house buildings and precincts ceased to be a hospital for psychotics and in 1922 began to receive high-grade mental defectives who were regarded as being trainable and capable of being put to certain types of work. This hospital has been expanded, and now as the Manor Hospital has accommodation patients, for about 1,200 many of whom work in the town.

With the coming of the National Health Service in 1948, all these were taken over by the State. Their present accommodation for patients is about 8,400 almost all from the Metropolis, probably the highest concentration of hospitals for people suffering from mental disorders to be found anywhere. These hospitals are to be noted not only for their size, but also for their most excellent work. They have kept in the forefront of developments in mental treatment. Much pioneer work has been done ; for example, the treatment and rehabilitation of mental defectives at the Manor, the specialised treatment of certain forms of mental

disorder at Horton, done in association with the malaria investigation laboratory established at Horton by the Medical Research Council, and, at St. Ebba's in particular, much work has been done in relation to early, recoverable diseases, and is still being done in special applications of new forms of treatment.

In recent years, the attitude of governing authorities and of the general public towards mental disease has undergone a very significant change. Mental hospitals are no longer regarded as prisons in which are incarcerated people popularly regarded as dangerous or little better than animals best pushed away and forgotten. They are now rightly regarded as places where those for whom the stresses of life have pressed unduly heavily can undergo forms of treatment which will restore them to full health and to normal activity. Like many other mental hospitals, these hospitals are encumbered by problems of size and design of buildings. The modern psychiatrist would prefer to have smaller hospitals, with more attractive buildings, better spaced, with fewer beds less herded together, but present economic circumstances prevent this enlightened development, and he has to work the best he can with the premises which he has inherited. Never the less he has used every endeavour to modernise them premises, to make attractive by redecoration and, by opening doors, to let patients have more freedom. Better results are thus being found on every hand. In these aspects, the Epsom hospitals have been in the vanguard of progress.

One other feature of the mental hospital service in Epsom should have mention. In 1896 London County Council found that it was necessary to establish a laboratory for the service of their mental hospitals. By force of war, the headquarters of this laboratory service was transferred to premises at West Park Hospital, and when the last World War was over, a new Laboratory was established for the service of the mental hospitals in this area. This Laboratory, also taken over by the National Health Service, now serves most of the mental hospitals in the county of Surrey.

Turning to other aspects of medical life in the town, there are two hospitals where patients with general bodily disease are received. The Epsom and Ewell Cottage Hospital, with 40 beds, first established in 1887 as a voluntary hospital, is now part of the Epsom group of hospitals under the National Health Service. Epsom District Hospital, with 300 beds, was formerly an institution converted to a general hospital and improved by adding a modern obstetric unit. New premises, opened in 1955, house a laboratory, X-ray, out-patient and various treatment departments.

Finally, Epsom is the centre of one area of the M.R.C. Public Health Laboratory Services. During the war, in order to cope with possible epidemics, a widespread service of emergency public health laboratories was established under the Medical Research council. One of these was in Epsom and from premises at West Hill House it continues to give effective service over a large area.

Summing up then, although the bias of hospital work in the Borough is in the direction of mental diseases, the rest of medical requirements are not left uncatered for, and the Burgesses can content themselves on being well served for their own needs and congratulate themselves on accommodating a large number of sick people to whom they can show sympathy by serving as "Friends" of the various hospitals.