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online guide to East Kilbride

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Special Feature

With the arrival of the new Hairmyres Hospital, we take a look back in time at the previous hospital and it's history.



The story of Hairmyres Hospital begins in 1901. In December of that year, Lanarkshire County Council appointed a committee to report on the proposals of building a reformatory for inebriates. In May 1903 the Council acquired some land at Hairmyres near East Kilbride for this purpose.

There are many theories as to why Hairmyres is so called. The most likely is explained here: The latter part of the name, Myres, means moor, from the word mire, and the hospital is surrounded by moorland. Hair, or hoar, is a Scots word meaning grey. So the name literally means, Grey Moor. The original hospital stood on a grey limestone ridge that rose above the moor.

Building commenced on a site overlooking the East Kilbride to Eaglesham Road and the reformatory was formally opened on 1 December 1904 after being licensed by the Secretary for Scotland in November. A Lady Superintendent was appointed. A maid and a gardener assisted her. The gardener helped with the general management of the reformatory. The first patient wasn't admitted until June 1905. Two others were admitted a year later. By the end of 1910, there was only one patient remaining, and with only a handful of patients receiving treatment over the years, and the costs of running the Reformatory rising, the Lanarkshire Inebriate Reformatory was closed in February 1911. Lanarkshire County Council had already had plans for the site in 1910. In November of that year the Scottish Office was consulted about establishing a tuberculosis sanatorium and work colony there.



Work started in December 1914 and the Council purchased a nearby farm that would be used as a working farm colony. Building work continued throughout the First World War, with local workmen being assisted by German prisoners of war, and was virtually complete by the summer of 1919.

The Secretary for Scotland, Sir Robert Munro conducted the official opening of the new sanatorium and colony, on 14 June 1919. The new buildings consisted of a two-storey administration block which contained the matron's and medical superintendent's offices, pharmacy, staff dining rooms and the matron's, nurses' and maids' living quarters. On either side of the admin block were the other buildings. They were built in crescent formation, and facing south for maximum exposure to sunlight. These buildings comprised a male, female and children's pavilion and an observation block. The former reformatory building was converted for use as a school. There were now 250 beds at Hairmyres. The farm colony had a herd of tuberculin-tested Ayrshire cows, supplying milk butter and a source of income from the sale of calves. There was also a poultry farm and a piggery. The farm gave practical training in outdoor occupations to the recuperating patients.

The tuberculosis sanatorium concentrated on therapy involving a nutritious diet, exposure to fresh air and sunshine and graduated physical exercise. Hairmyres was situated on a perfect site for a sanatorium - it was accessible from major centres of population yet set in a hillside over 500 feet above sea level, deep in the country with it's own supplies of fresh food from the farm colony.

During the 1930's the Department of Health became concerned at the scarcity of hospital accommodation in Lanarkshire. The County Council expressed the need for a 400 bed general hospital for the county. In the mid 1930's, new facilities such as an orthopaedic department were added and more beds were provided. With the growth of the hospital, and the admission of more chronic cases, the nursing staff increased. By 1938 there were seven sisters, eight staff nurses, three assistant nurses and forty-one probationers. A new nurses' home was opened in 1937. By the end of the decade there was a new treatment block at Hairmyres that included two operating

theatres, accommodation for an expanding radiology department, two gymnasia and new quarters for the pharmacy.



In 1938, the Government decided to establish an Emergency Medical Service (E.M.S.) that would ensure there was an adequate national hospital service to deal with the expected influx of military and civilian casualties should the expected war with Nazi Germany commence. Hairmyres, with its rural location yet good road and rail links was considered an ideal site for an emergency hospital and in April 1939 the Department of Health decided to build nearly 400 new beds in hatted wards. By January 1941 the work was complete. There were 18 new huts at the disposal of the E.M.S. This, along with a new ward in the old reformatory building, gave Hairmyres a total of 1,090 beds.

When Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, patients were evacuated from Hairmyres in just twelve hours. During the opening months of the war, the expected mass bombing of British cities did not materialise, so the Department of Health permitted Hairmyres to receive short stay civilian patients, especially if involved with the war effort, to one quarter of the beds reserved under the E.M.S. scheme.

The first major influx of war casualties came to Hairmyres in 1940. Servicemen from Britain, France, Poland, Canada, New Zealand and Australia were patients, as were a small number of wounded German and Italian prisoners of war.

On 7 January 1942, the Canadian Orthopaedic Unit was established at Hairmyres. This unit was funded by the Canadian Red Cross in response to a request by the Department of Health for orthopaedic expertise because of the many-trained surgeons in the armed forces and the shortfall in the numbers available to man the E.M.S. hospitals. The Canadians chose to base their work at Hairmyres due to its impressive new treatment block, the ward accommodation and the pleasant country location. The unit occupied wards 9, 10 and 11 and was run by the Canadian nurses. The unit's work was mainly traumatic and reconstructive, but some staff members were skilled in skin grafting and plastic surgery. The majority of the cases were serviceman casualties. The unit performed its first operation on 14 January 1942 and the last on 18 September 1945. A total of 5,090 patients were admitted and 2,347 operations were carried out.

Post war, and the reform of Britain's health services was a major political issue. The Beveridge Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, published in 1942, stated that "medical treatment covering all requirements will be provided for all citizens by a national health service organised under health departments..." The details of the proposed national health service were not settled by the end of the war, although it was clear that a significant amount of state funding and control was inevitable.

In 1945, the Scottish Hospitals' Survey recommended that Hairmyres should continue as a general hospital with 750 beds, with a proportion of beds and wards used for treating tuberculosis and chest diseases, and for orthopaedics. The waiting list for tuberculosis cases was long in the aftermath of the war with many service personnel and civilians requiring continued treatment. The introduction of the antibiotic streptomycin, which had been discovered in the U.S.A. in 1942, was enabling previously ill patients to become fit for surgery. The first patient to receive streptomycin in Hairmyres, and in Scotland, was the author and journalist, George Orwell.

Orwell was admitted to Hairmyres under his real name, Eric Blair, on Christmas Eve 1946. He suffered from tuberculosis in one lung. At the time of his admission he was busy writing his novel "1984". The staff, insisting that complete physical and mental rest was essential for effective treatment, confiscated his typewriter. With rest his health improved to some extent but attempts to rest his badly affected lung by simple surgical procedures were not very successful. He suffered severe side effects from his treatment, and although the disease was responding, it had to be stopped after fifty days. The remaining supplies of streptomycin were administered, with success, to two other patients. Orwell's typewriter was returned to him in May 1948 and he spent the remainder of his stay in Hairmyres writing, walking in the grounds and playing croquet. In July 1947 he returned to his rented house on Jura but his health gradually deteriorated and so he moved to a sanatorium in the Cotswolds. "1984" was published while he was a patient there. He was finally admitted to University College Hospital in London, where he died in January 1950, aged 46.



The National Health Service (Scotland) Act of 1947 provided for the creation of five regional boards to administer hospital services and other specialist services in Scotland. On 5 July 1948, Hairmyres Hospital was transferred from the control of Lanarkshire County Council to the Western Regional Hospital Board. In the years following the war, there was little investment in the

reconstruction and renovation of hospital buildings in Britain and so the proposed plans to upgrade Hairmyres to District General status, as envisaged in the 1945 survey, were shelved. By 1950 the number of beds had fallen to 450, about two-thirds of the number suggested in the survey.

In August 1947 East Kilbride Development Corporation was established and was to take charge of a project to build a new town in and around the village of East Kilbride. Building work began the following year and over the next decade several large industries had settled in the town, and the first 5,340 houses were occupied. Hairmyres Hospital was now situated within a mile of one of Scotland's fastest growing towns and could no longer be considered remote. The hospital, however, continued to provide first class healthcare to the community.

In 1966 the Lanarkshire Hospital Development Plan proposed two district hospitals, one in Motherwell and the other in Airdrie. There were no major development plans for Hairmyres. However, the hospital was to continue to have acute admitting facilities and there was to be "a functional relationship" with a Glasgow teaching hospital. This news depressed morale throughout Hairmyres but the calls upon the regional board's resources was very great because of their widespread commitments. East Kilbride New Town was steadily growing and was requiring and expecting an expansion in local services, and so there was a growing feeling among staff that dependence on Glasgow teaching hospitals for essential services was unsatisfactory. Hairmyres had to wait until the establishment of Lanarkshire Health Board before any major redevelopment could begin.



The National Health Service's complicated administrative structure came under fire during the 1960's. The Western Regional Hospital Board's responsibilities covered a huge area, from Solway in the south to Ardnamurchan in the north, and so were less responsive to local needs. The National Health Service (Scotland) Act of 1972 swept away the regional boards, hospital boards of management, executive councils and local government health authorities, and a new organisation was established on 1 April 1974. The new Lanarkshire Health Board was one of fifteen new health boards, delegated by the Secretary of State for Scotland and operated within the approximate boundaries of the new regions and districts created by the Local Government Act, 1975. Hopes were high that this new localised board would result in a more sensitive approach to the needs of Hairmyres Hospital. The board, over the years, transformed the status of the hospital to the great advantage of the local community. This, in turn, raised the morale of the staff.

Lanarkshire Health Board made great financial investment at Hairmyres during the 70's, 80's and 90's, both in staff and facilities. Consultant and paramedical posts increased significantly with a consequent rise in the clinical output and there was an increase in specialisation so that the hospital could carry out procedures which had previously necessitated a patient attending one of the teaching hospitals. The board was also responsible for funding and installing, among other things, a new gymnasium, opening a new Haematology and Bacteriology building, a new Pathology building, a cardiac investigation and bronchoscopy unit and creating an emergency theatre in the surgical complex.



On 1 April 1994 Hairmyres Hospital officially acquired trust status and thoughts were turning to the planned phased redevelopment of the hospital on the ground behind the Nurses' Home...

Bibliography - Campbell, Allan: Hairmyres - The History of the Hospital. Lanarkshire Health Board. 1994

Quick links to other sites



NHS Hairmyres Website: The official website for Hairmyres Hospital

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