CHA Visits First Ever Cottage Hospital!

The Start of the Community Hospital Movement

Dr Helen Tucker – Fellow CHA
Jo Posnette – Chair & Director CHA

Jo and I were pleased to have an opportunity to visit Cranleigh hospital the birthplace of the cottage hospital movement. We have always been fascinated by the story of how Cranleigh Village Hospital came about and were keen to see it first hand.



Jo Posnette and Helen Tucker from CHA outside the First Ever Cottage Hospital – renamed the Napper Centre

We were delighted to be invited to the hospital by Trevor Dale the Chair of the Cranleigh Heritage Trust. The charity has successfully restored the original cottage and now provides the building as a community resource. The cottage is now known as the Napper Centre in honour of Dr Albert Napper, the local founder of the cottage hospital movement.

The name of the original cottage hospital was "Cranleigh Village Hospital." The NHS has retained this name for the hospital buildings which were added subsequently and are adjacent to the original cottage. These are still in use for clinics, therapies, maternity, diagnostics and community health.

Dr Napper wanted somewhere clean and quiet where he could treat patients and carry out his operations rather than trying to provide care in homes which were often overcrowded and unclean “hovels.” In addition to treating conditions and illnesses, agricultural mechanisation had led to an increase in accidents requiring operations. The Reverend Sapte offered him a cottage near the church for a nominal rent, which he returned as a charitable donation. The cottage was converted for use as a hospital with generous support from local people, and opened in 1859.

For a building that holds such historical significance, it is a surprise to find that it is actually quite a small cottage. It was originally a medieval Hall House so would have been open plan without chimneys. When established, the first floor of the hospital comprised 2 “wards” containing a total of 4 beds and space to assess emergency patients. The operating room was a small room upstairs which was accessible by a narrow and tortuous staircase. Patients were carried upstairs, as illustrated by a mural in the renovated cottage. Lizzie Smith, a widow, was employed as a nurse and lived in a small room adjacent to the wards with her young son John.



A mock-up of the original operating theatre with an educational commentary provided

The building has been very sensitively restored, with extensive research undertaken to ensure attention to every detail. As you walk into the timber framed building with its wattle and daub walls, you have a sense of the history and its role in the past. Hidden features include the latest technology in heating and insulation, installed in a way that respects the age and history of the cottage, whilst maintaining and making it sustainable for the future.

The Napper Centre gives the building a new lease of life as an education, health and well-being centre and is a place for the community to come together. It is already being used for activities such as yoga classes, community groups and clinics. School children are being given educational tours, which have been specially designed to be informative and proactive and to make the most of their visits. The large mural setting out a timeline provides an attractive and accessible way of sharing information. The Napper Centre is open to the public regularly and is attracting considerable attention.

Local community support has rallied to the cause once more, through the establishment of a charity to renovate and re-purpose the original cottage hospital. By sharing their vision to restore the building and value its heritage charity Trustees have captured much attention. The vast majority of the funding was from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. There were also significant grants from the Architectural Heritage Fund and a number of smaller grants such as one from Surrey Historic Buildings Trust. Local people have supported this ambitious project.

The Trustees of the charity have worked in partnership with associated organisations such as the Surrey History Centre and researched thoroughly all available documentation and evidence about the hospital. The charity has benefited from contributions by experts, particularly in terms of architecture and heritage. This represents a considerable amount of work from all involved.



Trevor Dale, Chairman of the Trustees and Howard Barrett Trustee with Helen Tucker and Jo Posnette

Jo and I had an opportunity to talk with Trevor and Howard about further development of the building, and how to make its history as accessible as possible. It was good to explore ways in which the building could be used to benefit local people, for example offering support and services such as social prescribing.

The restoration of the very first cottage hospital in the UK is a remarkable achievement and recognises the history and heritage of this valued community asset. The cottage hospital was a model that was replicated widely. Within 30 years of its establishment there would be 240 cottage hospitals across the UK. This is an extraordinary change in the landscape of healthcare. Local communities gave generously through donations of land, legacies and fundraising in order to create and support their local hospital.

As we witness changes in the way community hospitals function across the UK, this example shows how cottage and community hospitals can continue to play a role in promoting health and wellbeing in their local communities.

We congratulate the Trustees and all involved in this wonderful achievement and applaud the dedication and hard work, which recognises the legacy of the pioneers who designed and provided vital health care closer to their communities.

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