*Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series*

# *Medieval Hospitals*

**by Margaret Markham**

## Introduction

The word 'hospital' derives from the Latin 'hospes', meaning a stranger, foreigner, or guest. The original function of a hospital was to provide hospitality and shelter for travelers of al1 kinds, not exclusively for the sick, but later a variety of institutions came into being to cater for the poor, the aged and the sick which bore the name 'hospital'. The change in character is illustrated by the history of St. John's Hospital, Oxford, which originally seems to have served as a hostel for the entertainment of travelers, but was refounded in 1231 as a hospital for the sick. Hospitals of all sorts became much more numerous in England as a whole after the beginning of the 12th century, but it is difficult to estimate their total number, as some were short-lived, were refounded in slightly different forms, or were amalgamated with neighbouring houses at different dates. Many survived through to the Dissolution, and, indeed, afterwards: Ewelme Hospital is an example which still survives, having been spared by the king who was an immediate patron of this house on a favourite royal manor.

## Endowments

Funds for a hospital were generally started by an endowment, usually derived from the rents of land or houses. The king sometimes granted the right to have wood from the royal forests, or hay or straw from crown lands: for example, in 1226 Henry III gave ten cartloads of dry wood to St. John's Hospital, Burford, and five years later the prior of that house was granted three oak-trees for firewood; the endowments of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Oxford, included the right to receive two loads of hay every year from the king's mead near Osney. Nobles or well-to-do merchants added bequests and contributions, and pilgrims contributed alms. In addition the pope often granted lepers the right to beg in public for alms for a certain number of days, and contributors were granted an indulgence. By this means money was raised for the repair of the hospital chapel at Burford in 1305. Another common privilege was exemption from the payment of certain kinds of tithes and subsidies.

## Diagnosis and Treatment

Leprosy appears to have been prevalent throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, although other skin diseases were probably also often mistaken for it. John of Gaddesdon, Professor of Medicine at Oxford from 1307 to 1325, described four different kinds of leprosy. Before entering a lazar-house a leper had to be examined by a priest (see Leviticus Ch. 13) or by a physician, who was ordered not to hurry the examination, but to carry it out thoroughly. Treatment was often by bathing in medicinal springs, by diet, blood-letting, plasters and ointments. A local tradition at Clattercote relates that the present canal reservoir occupies the site of the lepers' pool in which lepers from the hospital were dipped and bathed. During the 14th century leprosy was becoming less common in England indeed, it has been suggested that the Black Death removed a very high

proportion of the sick and reduced the virulence of the disease. Later foundations of hospitals were more in the nature of almshouses catering for the poor and elderly, while some of the earlier leperhouses changed their function: Clattercote was converted soon after 1246 from a leper hospital to a house of Gilbertine canons.

**Internal Life**

Medieval hospitals vary enormously in size. In exceptional cases they might house a hundred or more inmates. Most of those in Oxfordshire catered for between half-a-dozen and twenty. St. Bartholomew's Hospital in Oxford was originally founded for 12 lepers, but the number was reduced in 1316 to eight, of whom two were to be healthy enough to carry on the farming of the few acres surrounding the hospital. Although St. John's Hospital in Oxford was refounded in 1231 to cater for the sick, it was laid down in 1246 that incurable cases were not to be admitted. The later foundation of Ewelme, in contrast, was for thirteen men who were poor through age or infirmity, but no-one with leprosy or any other 'intolerable disease' was to be admitted. Preference was given to the inhabitants of the four manors from which the hospital obtained its endowment. The inmates of a hospital were in the charge of one or more priests, who sometimes also had the responsibility of running a school or maintaining a chantry. Ewelme was operated by two priests, one of whom, the master, was preferably from the University of Oxford, while the second was to teach grammar free of charge to boys from the four manors supporting the house. A grammar school was also run in connection with St. John's Hospital at Banbury from 1501. The salary of the master/chaplain of St. Bartholomew's, Oxford, was fixed in 1316 at £4 a year. The master of St. John's Hospital, Banbury, was paid a salary of £14 in 1526. Within many hospitals a strict rule of life which was almost monastic in character, involving vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, was upheld. Even at Ewelme, where the inmates were not bound to absolute poverty, anyone who came into property worth more than £4 a year had to leave the house. If he inherited less he was allowed to remain, but had to give half to the hospital, and all personal property had to go to the hospital on the death of an inmate. In many cases the occupants of a hospital had to attend daily services in the church, sometimes several times a day. In the earlier stages at least, the master was to be elected by the brethren from amongst their own number. This was the case at St. John's Hospital, Banbury, into the mid 14th century, but later on the appointment was in the hands of the bishop of Lincoln, and ultimately it became a sinecure given to canons of Lincoln or college fellows. The inmates themselves were usually allocated a fixed sum: at the early 16th century foundation of Childrey they were to receive 9d weekly each plus 2s.8d. a year for wood and coals. Special livery was also often enforced. At Ewelme the brethren were to wear cloaks with a red cross at the breast. At Childrey they received an annual payment of 9s.4d for livery; and in 1367 the rule at St. Bartholomew's, Oxford, that the brethren should not leave the hospital without their habits, was confirmed.

**The Buildings**

The model for the hospital buildings probably came from the dormitories of the greater monastic houses. The plan included a long hall for the sick, which could be divided by wooden screens. By the 13th century the common dormitory was giving way to separate rooms. St. Helen's Hospital at Abingdon, for example, was rebuilt with thirteen separate chambers in 1446. The hospital chapel would normally be at the east end of this range. Upkeep of chapels is often recorded in the documents, e.g. in 1232 the king granted an oak to the master of Crowmarsh hospital to make shingles for the roof of the church. There would also be separate rooms or a separate house for the warden or nurses in charge of the whole. In 1229 the king granted to the prior of St. John's Hospital, Banbury, old timber

from Warwick gaol to build a house, and the surviving 15th-century hall-house at Fyfield, now the White Hart Inn, is probably the house of the chantry priest responsible for the hospital. Most hospitals had their own burial ground: that belonging to St. John's Hospital in Oxford came to light during renovations to Magdalen College in 1976-7. This hospital also had a large kitchen, which is now incorporated into the college. The most complete assemblage surviving is at St Bartholomews Hospital, Oxford which has a separate chapel and almshouses.

**Dedications**

St. Lazarus was chosen as the patron saint of lepers the original was the Lazarus who lay at the rich man's gate in the parable, but later he was confused with Lazarus of Bethany, who was raised from the tomb. Other dedications of hospitals in Oxfordshire include St. Leonard of Limousin, patron of prisoners and diseased people (Banbury, Clattercote); St. Giles, patron of cripples (Cold Norton, Oxford), St. John the Baptist, who himself led a wandering life (Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Oxford, Wallingford); and St. Mary Magdalene (Abingdon, Crowmarsh, Woodstock).

**Location of hospitals**

Medieval hospitals were closely linked with town life, and in Oxfordshire the greatest concentration was within Oxford itself, with most of the remainder in the smaller market towns. They usually have marginal locations, outside the town walls or gates, or on the outskirts. This is partly because they came as latecomers to the town plan, but the position also suited both leper houses and hospitals.

Abingdon St. Helen's Hospital: Founded in association with the Guild of the Holy Cross in 1442 for support of 7 poor men and 6 women, with 2 chaplains. Dissolved 1548, but refounded as Christ's Hospital 5 years later by Sir John Mason, who had bought up much of the former Guild property. Hospital premises, much altered in 16th17th centuries, survive in Long Alley Almshouses.

Abingdon St. John's Hospital: Site by St. Nicholas's church, just outside main gate of Abingdon Abbey. Probably founded by Abbot Vincent c.1120. Suppressed 1538. Part of hospital incorporated into the Guildhall and Roysse's School.

Abingdon Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene: Site by Ock Bridge, founded before 1336. Still housed 20 poor people after Dissolution of Monasteries, maintained by townspeople's charity. No remains.

Banbury St. John's Hospital: Site on east side of Oxford Road outside the town's South Bar. Founded before 1225 as a hostel for travellers. After 1501 closely associated with a grammar school, which, in 1549, when the hospital was dissolved, seems to have occupied the same premises. Crucifix found on site now in Banbury Museum.

Banbury St. Leonard's Hospital: Leper hospital recorded on several occasions between 1265 and 1398. In 1319 said to be 'near the bridge of Banbury', but actual location probably presumed by name of Spital Farm, half a mile to southeast. No remains.

Bicester Hospital of St. John Baptist: An earlier hospital refounded in 1355 by Nicholas Jurdan in connection with chapel of St. John Baptist, of which he was warden. No later record of hospital known. Chapel stood at north end of Sheep Street, demolished in 15th century.

Burford Hospital of St. John The Evangelist: First recorded 1226, had its own chapel by 1305. Dissolved 1538. In late 16th century Sir Lawrence Tanfield built a great house on the site, now called Burford Priory, incorporating surviving fragments of the medieval hospital.

Childrey Hospital: Almshouse for 3 poor men founded 1526 by William Fettiplace. Dole administered by chantry priest. Fettiplace's chantry-house, almshouse and school still standing near church in 1824. Present schoolmaster's house incorporates late 16th century building.

Clattercote St. Leonard's Hospital: Leper hospital probably founded mid 12th century by Robert de Chesney, Bishop of Lincoln. Soon after 1246, converted to priory of Gilbertine canons. Remains of priory incorporated into present house. A barn said locally to represent part of the earlier hospital buildings contains nothing obviously medieval. Canal reservoir nearby is said to occupy site of former "lepers' pool", where the inmates of the hospital were bathed.

Cold Norton St. Giles's Hospital: Hospital and Augustinian priory of Cold Norton both founded in 1150's by Avelina, Lady of Norton, remained closely connected throughout their existence. This hospital was the only one in Oxfordshire recorded in list drawn up Roy Genase of Canterbury, c.1200.

Crowmarsh Gifford Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene: Leper hospital beyond east end of Wallingford Bridge, founded before 1142. The small Norman church which remains was probably the hospital's free chapel. Dissolved 1547.

Ewelme Hospital: Licence given to William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, in 1437, to found an almshouse in Ewelme to house 13 poor, aged and infirm men in the charge of a priest. The foundation escaped the Dissolution, and the original almshouse remains intact, one of the earliest brick buildings in Oxfordshire.

Eynsham Hospital: Known only from a single reference in the Eynsham Abbey cartulary. Fyfield Hospital: Founded in conjunction with a chantry in Fyfield parish church by Sir John Golafre in 1442. The 15thcentury White Hart Inn was probably the original chantry house.

Gosford Hospital: Nuns of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem were in charge of a hospital at Gosford from c.1140 - 1180. In 1279 the Knights Hospitallers of Clanfield had their own manorial courts and a chapel there, and a house belonging to the Order remained until 1547. Premises subsequently became an asylum or poorhouse known as 'Louse Hall', and then an alehouse. A 15th-century window, possibly from the hospital, was found under the floor of the King's Arms at Gosford during alterations in 1948, and is preserved in the St. John Ambulance headquarters at Kidlington.

Oxford St. Bartholomew's Hospital: Leper hospital for 12 sick persons and a chaplain, founded on Cowley Marsh before 1129 by Henry I. Number of inmates reduced in 1316 from 12 to 8, of which 2 were to be healthy enough to farm the few acres surrounding the hospital. The hospital was granted to Oriel College in 1328, and increasingly became used as a rest house where sick members of the college could retire for a change of air. The existing chapel was built soon after its acquisition by Oriel. The main hospital range north of the chapel, destroyed in the Civil War, was rebuilt as a row of 4 almshouses by the college in 1649, and is now Bartlemas House. Bartlemas Farm, to the west, incorporates further 16th century hospital buildings.

Oxford St. Clement's Hospital: Known only from a single grant of alms in 1345.

Oxford St. Giles's Hospital: Site by St. Giles's church recorded several times from 1330 to 1390. No remains.

Oxford Hospital of St. John Baptist: Originally a hostel for entertaining travellers, first mentioned in Godstow Cartulary in 1180. Refounded as a hospital for the sick by Henry III in 1231, with a grant of the garden of the Jews outside the East Gate. In 1294 the brethren received permission to enclose a vacant plot measuring 100 yards by 30 yards south of the road passing their churchyard, to use as a burial ground, this may have been the former Jewish cemetery, unused since their banishment in 1290. In 1457 the hospital and its endowments were granted to William Waynfleet for the foundation of Magdalen College. Fragments of the extensive hospital buildings are incorporated into the college kitchens and the High Street range. Part of the hospital burial-ground was uncovered during renovations in 1976-7.

Oxford St. Peter's Hospital: Probably occupied part of site of New College. Known only from a single reference in 1338. Wallingford Hospital of St. John Baptist: Site on Lower Green, outside the South Gate. First recorded 1224, many later deeds survive in Wallingford Corporation muniments. Hospital chapel mentioned 1546. Dissolved 1547. Rubble wall and other fragments remain, incorporated into existing buildings.

Woodstock Hospital of Holy Cross: Leper hospital outside town, known only from grants of royal protection made to its brethren in 1231-2.

Woodstock Hospital for Leprous Women: Known only from a royal grant of fuel in 1235.

Woodstock St. Mary's Hospital: In 1220 Henry III ordered the rebuilding of an almshouse within the court place of Woodstock. This may be the same establishment as the Hospital of St Mary to which Edward III granted a licence to seek alms in 1339. No remains.



Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com