

Lord Arthur Hervey Bishop of Bath and Wells and the first Wells Hospital.

One hundred and forty five years ago on January 7th 1875 the cottage hospital in Wells opened its doors to admit its first patients.

Bishop Hervey had become convinced Wells needed a hospital when a workman broke his leg falling from the Cathedral and there was nowhere to take the injured man. So during the summer of 1874 more than one hundred and fifty Wells citizens were invited to the drawing room of the Palace to consider opening a Cottage Hospital. There the well informed and determined Bishop gave answers to all the problems in the doubters' minds before they had even asked the questions, put forward proposals for a free cottage hospital financially supported by citizens' subscriptions and donations, and gained almost unanimous agreement for his plans.

And less than six months later the Cottage Hospital had become a reality.

Based on the accepted ratio of one bed per 1000 inhabitants a six-bedded hospital with annual running costs of £150 was considered adequate for Wells.

'A good building standing high in a good situation with best air, closely bordering on the country yet just in the town' had already been identified but it required an additional £200 - £300 to furnish it as a hospital. By the time the 150 guests had been served tea in the undercroft by Lady Hervey and her three daughters, promises of £149 – 17s – 6d* had been collected, with Lord and Lady Hervey's generous contributions topping the list.

The rapid provision of hospital beds now needed patients to fill them, allowing the Bishop a private joke with his married daughter Sarah. On New Year's Day it had snowed but quickly melted. In a letter to Sarah on January 3rd 1875 the Bishop wrote;

"Our Cottage Hospital is to be opened on Thursday next. I am rather disappointed that the slippery state of things has slipped away without furnishing a broken leg or two to fill our wards with!"

Lord Hervey wasn't to be disappointed for long. By the end of June that year fourteen patients- including six accident cases - had been admitted to fill the Bishop's wards.

So it was thanks to the efforts of Lord Arthur Hervey and Lady Patience that the buildings standing just beyond St Thomas Church at the top of St Thomas Street became Wells Cottage Hospital. The hospital continued to serve Wells' inhabitants during the next 150 years until finally around 2010 work began to transform the buildings and grounds into a group of modern homes.

A stone plaque and inscription commemorating the origins of the Cottage Hospital remain visible today high on the wall facing the street.

**equivalent to about £9,400 today*

Lynda Ogborne

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