

---

## Cheltenham Eye, Ear and Throat Infirmary 1889 – 1902

by Brian Torode (copyright Cheltenham Local History Society)

### Published in the Newsletter for Summer 2002, Cheltenham And North Cotswolds Eye Therapy Trust

‘...some historical details that give a fascinating insight to eye care in the past from local historian The Reverend Brian Torode....’

The Cheltenham Eye, Ear and Throat Infirmary was established at 2, North Place, Cheltenham in 1889. It was a Public, Charitable Institution for the “gratuitous relief of really indigent persons suffering from diseases of the eye, ear, throat and nose.” The Infirmary was governed by the annual subscribers who elected a committee of seven, comprised mainly of local gentry and professionals.

Professional medical attention was provided by a team of volunteers, the surgeons having to be qualified at least to FRCS or MRCS standards, with a minimum of one year’s experience on a hospital ophthalmic ward. Staffing consisted of two consulting surgeons, an assistant surgeon, a surgeon dentist, an optician and a medical dispenser. From the beginning there was a salaried matron who was paid £39 per annum, and from 1896, two nurses were employed paid from a special fund. The positions of Treasurer, Secretary and Collector were voluntary.

Treatment was available to both in and out-patients and a Register of name, address, complaint, treatment subscriber and discharge was kept. Only those who could not pay for advice or medicine could be seen and they had to be recommended by an annual subscriber, who was able to nominate patients in proportion to the amount he or she subscribed :- 2gns permitted four out-patients per month or one in-patient every three weeks. Acceptance as a patient was by means of a voucher supplied by the subscriber. Although potential in-patients had to be refused treatment without a voucher, no out-patient injury was ever turned away, but this leniency was frequently abused. The regulations governing admission of patients make amusing reading today:

**In-patients** must be clean in person and must bring a suitable change of linen.

**Out-patients** will be seen on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning from 10 am. They must bring with them two bottles, one large and one small for such medicines as may be needed for their treatment.

Diseases treated bear some similarity with many treated today:

**The eye:** cataracts, glaucoma, foreign bodies, atrophy of eyeball, retinitis, inflamed eyelid, eczema of eye, lime in eye, warts on eyelid.

**The ear:** catarrhal inflammation of inner ear, abscess, foreign body, tinnitus, eczema, benign tumour and polypus.

**The throat:** goitre, catarrh, tonsillitis, enlargement of lymph glands, disease of tongue, cleft palate, uvulitis, lupus of neck, foreign body.

**The nose:** polypi, foreign body, rhinitis, sinus, eczema, lupus of nose.

Patients were accepted not only from Cheltenham and its immediate vicinity but from Gloucester, Stroud, Monmouth, Tewkesbury, Malmesbury, Cirencester, Kemerton, Bredon and Newnham, in fact from wherever a subscriber nominated someone. Locally a large number of out-patients were paupers of the Cheltenham Union Workhouse, and the Infirmary Committee questioned the right for them to receive treatment as the Board of Guardians did not subscribe to the Infirmary but to Cheltenham General Hospital. This challenge prompted the Guardians to begin subscriptions to the Infirmary from 1895. In 1897 demand for treatment eased somewhat as Gloucester Eye Infirmary began treating out-patients, as did the Cheltenham Home for Sick Children, but numbers soon picked up again in later years especially after the Infirmary became a “Free Hospital” in 1902 rather than one with voucher admissions only.

Volunteer work was encouraged and frequent appeals were made for people to read to in-patients with eye problems and for “Ladies” to undertake visiting of patients. As is the case today, the range and value of treatment provided depended upon funds available, and donations were always accepted with delight – basins, sinks, instrument cases, medicine chests, blankets, coverlets, pillow cases, dusters and beds; free advertising was given by the local press in Stroud, Tewkesbury and Cirencester; financial one off donations and legacies were sometimes received and of course there was as there always will be, fund raising! This took many forms – sales of work and rummage sales, (1894); collecting boxes in town shops, £4.16.03 in 1895; concerts by the Cheltenham Dramatic Society and the Teachers; Drama Society, 1895-1898; and a Ladies’ Bicycle Gymkhana which raised over £77 in 1896. Many local churches also donated the collections taken at the annual Hospital Sunday services from 1895 – the first year that the Infirmary ended up not in the red.

From its inception the Infirmary had run on a shoe-string. In 1892, although the forecast budget of £250 – £300 would have covered all expenses, there was a deficit of just over £45- the matron’s salary of £40 and the rent of premises £35 absorbing much of the income. In 1898 a house was bought by the Committee Vice-Chairman with the intention of renting it to the Infirmary. This he did, but in 1900 he moved to Taunton and sold the property to the Committee for the market price of £900 donating £100 towards the purchase price. The house in question was named Edmonstone House, only yards away from and almost opposite, the original Infirmary of 1889. Edmonstone was next to Livorno Lodge which later became Pates Junior School. It must not be confused with Idmiston House in the Lower High Street, once the Cheltenham Hospital.

Edmonstone House now became the Eye Ear and Throat Free Hospital and thanks to two substantial legacies in the wills of Mr Isaac Solomon and Mr J Hay, final purchase of the house

was made in 1901. In 1898 private beds had been introduced and this too helped with funding for the house purchase.

Expenditure for 1901 makes fascinating reading in the Provisions Account: Milk, £34; fish, poultry etc. £6; butter, cheese etc. £8; eggs, £1; milk, £18; bread, flour etc., £9.; grocery, £21; vegetables, £6.; malt liquors, £1.

The average stay of in-patients was 8.9 days (1900) and the first death of an in-patient happened in 1899.

*(Summarised from Annual Reports, courtesy Cheltenham Reference Library. 2002.)*

**STATISTICS 1889 – 1902:**

YEAR	ATTENDANCE	OPERATIONS	IN	OUT/PATIENTS
1892.	5635	194	56	777
1893.	5713	201	57	776
1894.	4184	137	18	619
1895.	2911	67	5	369
1896.	3644	68	18	522
1897.	3204	38	26	540
1898.	3532	97	43	592
1899.	3375	122	97	616
1900.	4943	176		
1901.	4412	142		

ATTENDANCES refers to the number of times an individual patient attended for treatment. The average for 1896 was 6.9 times and 1897, 5.1 times, from which year double quantities of medicine were given if appropriate to cut down on the number of visits made for what amounted to “topping up” attendances.

Brian Torode