



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

The Firth Provident Medical Dispensary

by Margaret Prentice

Mrs Harriet Firth of Wantage, by her will proved at Oxford 23rd June 1885, bequeathed £2,000 for the establishment and maintenance of a medical dispensary for Wantage and the neighbourhood, including particularly the parish of Letcombe Bassett. This generosity was a family tradition as Harriet Firth was the sister of Mr Percy Smith of Letcombe Bassett, the benefactor of the Cottage Hospital which opened in 1886. This provision for a dispensary was typical of the time.

Dispensaries started with the General (or Aldersgate) Dispensary in London in 1770. The physicians and surgeons attended at regular times to treat the 'sick poor', and those who were too ill to go to the dispensary were visited at home. There were no hospital beds attached to dispensaries. They were financed by voluntary subscriptions and medical men attended free. Usually they had a paid apothecary who acted as resident medical officer and dispensed the medicines. These dispensaries - at which the poor had to make no payments at all - thrived and spread rapidly through London and out into the provinces. They were formed largely because of the failure of the voluntary hospitals to meet the crisis in health associated with the industrial revolution and the rapid growth of towns.

By the early nineteenth century, new and harsher attitudes to poverty included the belief that charity degraded the poor. Against this background in the 1820s, a general practitioner, Dr Smith of Southam in Warwickshire advocated that instead of being treated free at dispensaries, the poor should subscribe a small weekly sum, partly to help with the running costs, but much more to 'preserve their dignity'. Thus the provident dispensaries were established which were partly financed by subscriptions, and partly by the contributions of patients; but the latter were usually shared amongst the attending doctors who therefore (unlike the free dispensaries) were paid for their services - and sometimes paid quite well. There had been considerable grumbling among dispensary doctors for doing all the work for nothing and gaining less prestige than hospital doctors.

Dr Smith's plan was a little slow to catch on, but in the late 1830s and 1840s the provident principle was introduced widely. Some previously free dispensaries turned themselves into provident (but by no means all). Others ran a provident and a free department side-by-side (said to be a recipe for disaster) but the largest change throughout the nineteenth century, was the establishment of many new and often very small, market town and village provident dispensaries. There were hundreds if not thousands of these, but by no means all were recorded in the official lists that were published. The Firth Dispensary was established in 1888 and became provident in 1893.

As in the case of the Cottage Hospital, the legacy was not allowed to be used for the purchase of land or building but was invested to provide a steady income. The Victoria County History of Berkshire volume 4 records that the money was invested thus:

£236 12s 9d India 3½ per cent stock; £183 London and South Western Railway 4 per cent stock; £1,237 1s 4d New Zealand 4 per cent stock and £200 secured by a mortgage at 4 per cent producing an income of £72 3s 6d annually. This income from endowment was about one third of the total income, the remainder being derived from patients' contributions. Ten guineas per annum were spent on renting a house in Newbury Street which was occupied by the book-keeper, who received the applications for relief. Nicol's Wantage and District Directory for 1898-1900 records the book-keeper as Miss E A Fox. In 1911 Miss Tosland took over this post, as the daily administrator of the dispensary. She was responsible to a committee of twenty-one members who met annually to oversee the accounts and general well-being of the charity.

The dispensary was aimed at working persons and servants, plus their wives and children, who were not in receipt of parish relief and were unable to pay for medical advice and attention in the normal way. On payment of a nominal weekly sum they and their families would receive free medical treatment at the surgeries of the local doctors and home visits if they were very ill. Strict rules for eligibility were drawn up and included the following:

1. Every Provident Member above 14 years of age shall pay 1d per week, but 3d per week will be considered sufficient for a man, his wife, and all his children under 14 years of age

2. The payments of Provident Members shall be made in advance... If any member be more than two months in arrear, his or her name shall be erased from the books.

3. No-one actually labouring under sickness shall be admitted a Provident Member unless he pay an entrance fee of 5/-...

4. If any person...shall desire to be re-admitted.... he shall pay...also a readmission fee of 2/- for a family and 1/- for a single person

5. Every Provident Member shall have the choice of whichever Medical Officer he may prefer, but he shall not make any change during the current year without the sanction of the committee.

6. Those patients who are able must attend at the Surgery of the Medical Officer chosen by them, between the hours of 9.30 and 10.30 in the morning, bringing their admission tickets. Those who are too ill to attend the Surgery must send their tickets before 9 o'clock in the morning to their Medical Officer, and he will visit at their homes. In case of accident or sudden illness, members can have the attendance of any of the Medical Officers on sending their admission ticket to his residence. Patients can only be attended at their own homes when within a distance of five miles from Wantage. Members requiring the attendance of a Medical officer at their own homes after 5 o'clock p.m., must pay a fee of 2/6 to the Medical Officer, to be returned if, in the opinion of the Medical Officer, the case be an urgent one.

DIRECTIONS FOR MEMBERS

1. The card must accompany *every* application for the Medical Officer, at other times it *must* be kept *at home* for his inspection.
2. Read carefully the Extract of Rules above.
3. Send for the Doctor *before* 10a.m.
4. The Rules as to *finer* will be *strictly enforced*.
5. All patients must bring their own bottles and gallipots clean to the

Surgery of their Medical Officer.

6. On Sundays, the Surgery is *only* open for *urgent cases* at 9.30a.m.
7. The Medical Officer will *not* prescribe for any Member in arrear of payment.
8. The Pay Office of the Dispensary, in Newbury Street, Wantage is open *every morning* from 10 o'clock to 12.30. and on *Thursday and Friday Evenings*, from 5.30 to 6.30,

The available records for the year 1909 show clearly in which villages there was a need for the services provided by the dispensary. The members did not have to come to Wantage to pay their weekly subscriptions, as the local vicar or his wife would collect the monies due and pay them in quarterly.

MEMBERS' PAYMENTS FOR 1909

Name of village	Population	No. of families	Amount subscribed		
			£	s	d
Ardington	406	83	21	4	4
Challow, East & West	676	53	15	2	7
Charlton	302	28	6	4	9
Childrey	489	12	3	7	2
Denchworth	172	18	6	0	4
Goosey	125	3	1	0	2
Grove	580	45	12	5	8
Hanney, East & West	772	18	5	6	6
Hendred, East	748	15	3	19	11
Hendred, West	298	23	6	13	5
Letcombe Bassett	211	12	3	3	4
Letcombe Regis	435	56	15	9	8
Lockinge & Ginge	327	60	17	3	6
Sparsholt & Westcot	339	26	7	9	4
Wantage	3766	<u>131</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>6</u>
TOTAL		582	£159	13	2

BALANCE SHEET, 1909

RECEIPTS				EXPENDITURE			
	£	s	d		£	s	d
Members' Payments	159	13	2	Book-keeper's salary	20	0	0
Income from				Printing, stationery	5	2	8
Endowment Fund	74	17	6	Postages		10	1
				Rents, Rates, Taxes			
				& Insurance	<u>11</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>0</u>
					36	18	9
				Balance divided among			
				Medical Officers	197	11	11
	<u>£234</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>8</u>		<u>£234</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>8</u>

The money shared by the local doctors was usually around £200 per annum, although in 1899 Drs Emerson, Woodhouse and Loveday shared £241. Miss Jotcham was the Hon Secretary with Mr W C Jotcham and Mrs Porter as the trustees. Subsequent Hon Secretaries included Mrs E B Ormond and Mrs Sale of Priory Road. The medical officers involved in the scheme also changed - in 1915 they were Drs Cawson, Birt and Kennedy and in 1934 Drs Squires, St Clair Mackenzie and Dawson.

As the years passed the charges for membership of the dispensary increased and The Wantage Almanack and Directory for 1934 records the following fees. Men earning over £2 and not over £3 per week paid one shilling per month; their wives with children under 14 paid two shillings per month. Men earning over £1 and not over £2 per week, paid eight pence per month; their wives with children under 14 paid 1s 4d per month. Fee for re-entry was 3s 6d, for sick entry 7s 6d and for sick re-entry 15s.

By this time the accounts were kept and monies received by Miss Burgess at 1 Newbury Street, where she lived with Mr and Mrs Gibbs who had a printer's and music shop. In 1935 the Regent Cinema (now the Regent Shopping Mall) was built on the site of Gibb's music shop. In 1937 Miss Burgess handed over the book-keeping to her niece Miss Jessie Gibbs. The office was now in the new premises of the Gibbs shop at 15-19 Mill Street (where the present travel agent and off-licence are located). Miss Gibbs acted as book-keeper for ten years and handed over to Dorothy Pates in 1947. For the last year of its existence, this dispensary for the sick poor of the Wantage area was administered from a desk in the Reading Room in Mill Street (the large brick building an the corner of Mill Street and Limborough Road). With the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948, the Firth Medical Dispensary closed its books after sixty years. But like many similar Wantage charities it has not been wound up entirely and is administered by the Newbury Street solicitors, M K Collard & Co.

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