

LUXBOROUGH LODGE – the St. Marylebone Workhouse

from a London County Council Welfare Committee Report 16th March 1965

Luxborough Lodge (St. Marylebone) is closed. The last residents left on 21 January 1965. It had been our objective since May 1960 to close this home by 1964 and to replace it by 14 new small homes. The new homes have not yet all been completed but, by using vacancies at other homes, large and small, it was possible to complete the transfer of the residents from Luxborough Lodge within a few weeks of our target date.

So ends a historic chapter in the social history of this part of London. The site of this large old home has filled an important place in the neighbourhood for over 200 years. It was in 1730, when St. Marylebone was a rural village, that the Overseers of the Poor gave authority for a workhouse to be built. After a number of makeshift plans such as the renting of large houses, one of which was the former Golden Lion alehouse, work began in 1745 on the first St. Marylebone workhouse, which occupied a site on the south side of Paddington Street where the recreation ground now lies. Owing to lack of money the building was not completed and occupied until 1752. It held 40 persons; more than half were unwanted children and the majority of the others were single young women with babies.

The first workhouse master was Francis Parent, a local school teacher, who was paid 1s. 6d. a head each week to feed the inmates (as, until recent times, its occupants were called) and to supervise their work. He was allowed to keep the proceeds of this. Admission was restricted to natives of St. Marylebone, but many of them preferred to die of starvation outside rather than face the hardships within.

By 1760 the workhouse was infested with rats from the nearby burial ground, the number of inmates had risen to over 200, and they were crowded together three or four to a bed. In 1775 a new workhouse was built at a cost of £40,000 to house 1,000 inmates: these were not only the poor, aged and infirm but also the sick, lunatics, orphans and abandoned children, expectant and nursing mothers and vagrants. The men's and women's sides were kept strictly separate and married couples were parted on admission. The older workhouse was still used as an infirmary but its proximity to the burial ground led to periodical fever epidemics. In 1792 a new infirmary wing was built on the north-west side (away from the burial ground). The new infirmary was

considered the finest in London and superior to many contemporary London hospitals.

By 1797 the strain on London's resources of the war against France was apparent. Numbers had risen from 300 to 1,168, and the workhouse was full. Many in need had to be granted out-relief instead of shelter in the building. The poor who were not sick were set to work by a taskmaster whose wages were a 2s. commission on each £1 of the products sold. The occupations were spinning, knitting, weaving, grinding corn on the huge treadmill - seven yards wide - for the needs of the workhouse, picking oakum, shoe repairing and carpentry as well as nursing, teaching the children, and domestic duties in the establishment. Misbehaviour was punished by whipping; idleness by tying a log to the offender's ankle. Conditions eased a little in 1828 when the taskmaster was replaced by an official with a fixed salary.

In 1846, during the Irish potato famine, the workhouse held the highest number of people ever recorded, 2,264, on account of Irish settlers whose return to Ireland would have aggravated the famine. At this date, two casual wards were opened for vagrants but these were soon closed after an outbreak of fever. In 1860 separate accommodation for children was provided in residential schools at Southall, Middlesex, and Banstead, Surrey, leaving only the very young children with their mothers in the workhouse.

In 1862 George Edward Douglas became master and held the office for 32 years. During that time the harshness of much of workhouse life was ameliorated by his understanding treatment of the inmates, and his prompt emergency measures saved the lives of many people when in 1867 the ice gave way beneath 200 skaters on the lake in Regent's Park.

By 1867 the old buildings had become outdated and unsafe. Large new buildings (which, with later additions, are those of the present day) replaced them in 1876. The community within the walls was still almost a self-contained little town of approximately 1,500 inhabitants with its own bakeries, laundries, hospital wards, workshops and so on. Besides the older children, certifiable lunatics had then been moved out; and in 1881 those in need of care in an infirmary were also moved elsewhere. Additional building works were continued until 1901 when the accommodation amounted to some 1,500 beds.

By 1914, however, the number of inmates had dropped to 1,443 and by the end of the first world war to 658. People from other areas of London whose

local institutions had become military were admitted to St. Marylebone and the numbers from then on averaged 1,200.

The London County Council became responsible for this huge establishment in 1930, as the St. Marylebone institution. Able-bodied men were sent to training centres in the country and the youngest children were placed in separate nurseries. Improvements to the building were later made despite the setbacks of war and the damage sustained during air raids.

From 1948 the home, renamed Luxborough Lodge, was used as accommodation primarily for old people, no longer as an institution with the stigma of pauperism but to provide care and attention as a welfare service. Many improvements were made and amenities provided, such as the installation of passenger lifts, the modernisation of the furniture, furnishings, lighting and decoration schemes, and the use of small dining-units combined with the sleeping and dayroom accommodation. Television and radio, books and periodicals, coach outings, film shows and seaside holidays all helped to make the old people feel part of the community. Nevertheless, with the advent of the welfare state and the changed social attitudes of which it was the expression, it was inevitable that the large institutions would be replaced by smaller homes in keeping with contemporary trends. Hence our decision in 1960 that Luxborough Lodge should be the first of the large homes then in use for old people to be closed, and since the autumn of 1963 the residents have gradually been transferred to other homes, in all parts of London. From 1 April 1965, the responsibility for these homes and their residents passes to the councils of the Inner London boroughs. We wish them well.