The House of Industry

In 1794, 23 years after the Worcester Infirmary had moved from Silver Street to Castle Street, the House of Industry was opened on the summit of Tallow Hill. "In a park like meadow overlooking the Malvern Hills".

At the time the poor were the responsibility of the parish, granted "outdoor relief with suitable work found for them wherever possible.

It was intended that the House of Industry was run as a home and occupational centre for the unemployed poor. The children were apprenticed to local industries, such as the makers of coarse woolen cloth, gloves etc.

By the time of the Poor Law Report in 1834 - This relatively philanthropic attitude had changed. Outdoor relief was no longer allowed and the poor could only receive benefits in a workhouse. So the House of Industry became - Worcester Union Workhouse, run by a Board of 22 (male) Guardians, with a reputation for harsh conditions. Admission was greatly feared by the unfortunate poor.

Considerable rebuilding in Victorian times saw enlargement into a complex of 10 blocks, with a laundry and mortuary. It was now named 'Hillborough'.

In a time capsule, discovered during demolition in 1987, we learn that the residents in 1894 comprised 40 able bodied men, 66 able bodied women, 74 old men, 8 male imbeciles, 4 couples and 20 infants.

Conditions were still oppressive, although in 1894 women were also elected to the Board of Guardians which improved the lot of the residents ; e.g. milk for all, not just the under 5 year olds. Improved clothing, leisure facilities and education of the children slowly came into being, but the spectra of the Workhouse remained very real.

During World War II residents were moved to Evesham, when Hillborough became the Headquarters of RAF Fighter Command. After their return in 1946 Hillborough was described as a Public Assistance Institution of 325 beds, including an infirmary of 24 beds.

Following re-organisation, with the advent of the NHS (1948), the complex comprised:-

- Shrub Hill Hospital - with four wards for sick and elderly patients;
- Shrub Hill Maternity Unit, of 18 beds;

In 1969 - sweeping changes began as a Government initiative - "The Victorian complex of buildings will have to be closed down" - (local newspaper 1969). Gradually transfers were made.

In 1979 - the sick, elderly patients moved to a purpose built Unit on the new District General site - as the Newtown Branch.

By 1986, demolition of the buildings began and the site was sold to Westbury Homes. The Nurses Home was converted to flats for single persons. The Board Room and Dining Room was sold to Worcester Muslim Association. The former is now a Mosque.

Significantly in 1988 the St. Paul's Hostel for the Homeless transferred to the site, a modest return of the original hopes for the House of Industry.

Some of you reading this may have worked in the post 1948 buildings. You may have been born, or perhaps had a baby there!

The development from 1794 - 2004 is an interesting look back at a valuable contribution to care in Worcester.

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