

The Mater Infirmorum Hospital

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INTRODUCTION

I feel honoured at having been afforded this opportunity both of giving an outline of the history of the Mater Hospital and of registering the Hospital's just pride at having shared in the teaching of medicine for 90 of the 150 years of the Belfast Medical School. I appreciate that, in the time available, I can only outline the salient points and milestones of the 103-year history of the Mater. I will focus on the main events because, with the exception of R S Casement's account,¹ the Mater has no chronicle in any way to rival the thorough histories of the Royal, City and Ulster Hospitals or of the Medical School.

HISTORY

The Mater Infirmorum Hospital may justifiably be described as the happy inspiration of Mother Mary Magdalen Malone of the Sisters of Mercy. Mother Malone came from the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Dublin and, with her small band of Sister Nuns, established St Paul's Convent on the Crumlin Road in 1854. In the grounds, the Sisters erected a grotto honouring the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes only 18 years previously. In 1876, *The Ulster Examiner* printed a devotional pamphlet on behalf of the Sisters explaining the aims of the grotto, namely the supplication of Our Lady towards the erection of a hospital for the sick poor in Belfast.

Their prayers must have been heard, for soon afterwards Bishop Patrick Dorrian (1814 – 1885) was able to purchase, for £2,300, a private property for conversion into a hospital (Fig 1). Dr Dorrian was a man of vision and energy, tackling the social and spiritual problems of the rapidly expanding population of industrial Belfast, with vigour and skill. The property which he purchased was Bedeque House on the Crumlin Road, near the then boundary of Belfast. Gordon Augustus Thompson had built this house in 1851, in the style of a South American residence, and named it after a small patrimony on Prince Edward Island, Canada. Thompson was born in Castleton in September 1799. As a young man he developed a zest for travel which took him to Africa, Australia, South America, China and Japan,² and an equal zest for collecting specimens



Fig 1. Most Reverend Patrick Dorrian (1814 – 1885), Bishop of Down and Connor, 1865 – 1885. Purchaser of Bedeque House for conversion to the Mater Infirmorum Hospital.

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from the four corners of the earth; many specimens of ethnological interest which he donated are still housed in the Ulster Museum.



Fig 2. The original Mater Infirmorum Hospital, Crumlin Road, formerly Bedeque House. Opened in 1883, it served until the new hospital was fully commissioned in 1900.

Convent (Fig 2). This Order had already proved its worth in the nursing sphere during the Crimean War. The hospital was available to all those in need. In the prospectus of the hospital is the following statement: 'This Institution is established for the relief of the sick and dying poor, without distinction of creed, and is supported by voluntary contributions. Aid is denied to no-one, so far as the funds of the Institution allow. Sickness and destitution will ever be the only necessary passport to the Wards'. The first patient, Catherine Clayton, a weaver suffering from phthisis, was admitted early in November 1883.

The original visiting staff were a reputable, often distinguished, group and included Alexander, later Sir Alexander, Dempsey, MD, LRCSI, LM, Peter O'Connell, MD, MCh, LM, Daniel McDonnell, MA, MD, MCh, MAO, LM, William M Killen, BA, MD, MCh, MAO, LM, R J Murray, MB, BCh, BAO, W McLorinan, LRCSI, LRCPI, and John McStay, LDS, RCSE. Time does not permit me to dwell on the personalities and achievements of these gentlemen or of those who followed them down the years – many leaving their own individual imprint on the hospital. Their workload must have been quite heavy even for a small hospital: thus in 1897, the year before the move to the new buildings, 6,469 patients attended the extern department and over 900 received treatment as in-patients (Fig 3).

By the time of Dorrian's initiative, the existing hospital accommodation for the sick poor of Belfast was inadequate for the needs of a population which had quadrupled within the preceding 50 years. It was to boost the number of beds and the dispensary facilities that Dr Dorrian, at considerable expense, arranged for the conversion of Bedeque House into a small general hospital of 28 beds with an adjoining dispensary. It was opened on 1 November 1883, under the name of the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, and he placed it in the care of the the Sisters of Mercy of St Paul's

DISEASES TREATED IN MATER HOSPITAL.	
Diseases of the Nervous System.	Tonsillitis 16
Chorea..... 8	Diseases of Bones and Joints.
Dolium trevrens..... 5	Neurosis..... 3
Epilepsy..... 2	Periostitis..... 21
Hemiplegia..... 11	Synovitis—Acute..... 37
Neuralgia..... 10	" Chronic..... 14
Neuritis..... 5	Tubercular arthritis..... 30
Paraplegia..... 3	
Sclerosis..... 9	Diseases of the Skin.
Vertigo..... 2	E-cema..... 22
	Erysipelas..... 4
Diseases of the Genito-Urinary System.	Pityriasis rubra..... 1
Bright's Disease..... 4	Psoriasis..... 3
" Chronic..... 16	Ringworm..... 4
Cystitis..... 3	Ulcer..... 21
Varietosis..... 7	
Diseases of the Respiratory System.	Diseases of Women.
Asthma..... 2	Concav of the breast..... 15
Bronchitis—Acute..... 6	Cervical laceration..... 5
" Chronic..... 27	Endometritis..... 45
Edema..... 8	Metrorrhagia..... 20
Sciitis..... 60	Parametritis..... 10
Whooping Cough..... 9	Prolapse of uterus..... 3
Pneumonia..... 6	Retroversion..... 12
	Urethral orouch..... 5
Diseases of the Circulatory System.	Diseases of the Eye.
Aneurism..... 3	Conjunctivitis..... 2
Endocarditis..... 27	Keratitis..... 3
Pericarditis..... 5	
Diseases of the Alimentary System.	General Diseases.
Apyrexia..... 12	Anaemia..... 46
Diarrhoea..... 13	Rheumatism—Acute..... 34
" Chronic..... 23	" Chronic..... 23
Dyspepsia..... 16	Septicemia..... 12
Dysentery..... 20	Typhoid fever..... 47
Fistula in Ano..... 1	
Gastric ulcer..... 58	Injuries.
Jaundice..... 64	Burns..... 4
Hemorrhoids..... 6	Dislocations..... 11
Hepatic disease..... 8	Fractures..... 12
Jaundice..... 4	
Intestinal obstruction..... 2	900

Fig 3. Diagnoses of in-patients at the 28-bed Mater Hospital, 1897, showing the wide spread of illnesses.

Though the 28 beds were welcome additions to the general hospital pool, the total number of beds in Belfast was utterly inadequate in the context of the multitudes requiring admission. Plans, therefore, were soon formulated for a new wing to Bedeque House to accommodate 80 to 100 patients, but eventually, in 1893, this was abandoned in favour of a far more ambitious project, namely the building of an entirely new hospital. A site, described as one of the healthiest in Belfast, was bought for the hospital for £2,600, the entire sum being provided from his private coffers by Dr McAlister, Bishop of Down and Connor. Architects were invited to compete for the hospital contract and, from some 14 designs submitted, those of W J Fennell, MRIBA, were selected. Fennell also designed many other buildings in Belfast, including the Belfast Maternity Hospital and the Whitla Medical Institute, but is said to have been most proud of the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, in whose St John's Nursing Home he was to die.

The 'new' Mater Hospital was designed on the 'pavilion' system, architecturally then still *avant-garde* in relation to the more traditional 'corridor' plan, the former having the advantage of individual ward isolation, better light and maximum ventilation. The west 'pavilion' was reserved strictly for males, the east for females, a segregation which survived until the emergence of a more permissive outlook in the last few years. Some of the roofs are flat and were originally laid out as gardens, with grass plots and flower beds. Early advertisements for the hospital showed bed-ridden and bed-rest patients on the roof (no doubt many with phthisis) in observance of Dr Henry MacCormac's dictum on consumption: 'Pure, fresh, untainted air, at all hours, at all times, and in all places'.

The foundation stone of this 'new' Mater was laid on 8 December 1898. A memorial stone was placed near the west end of the great corridor and in the heart of the stone were placed a commemoration of the Immaculate Conception, the day being such a Feast; a brief history of the Mater Hospital from the erection of the Grotto; a copy of the *Irish News* of the day; 13 small silver medals, and a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The hospital, with a complement of 150 beds, was opened officially on Monday 23 April 1900, although the wards of the west pavilion and the laundry had been in use since 27 August 1898 for the reception of patients who were victims of the typhoid epidemic. The opening ceremony was performed by Sir Robert McConnell, Lord Mayor of Belfast, in the presence of an 'immense assembly', comprising distinguished ecclesiastics, representatives of the nobility and gentry, and prominent citizens belonging to various denominations amongst whom were His Eminence Cardinal Logue, the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, G W Wolff, MP, and Mrs (later Lady) Pirrie. A *Souvenir* of the occasion relates: 'The unique character of the function, the remarkable spirit of liberality it evoked and the interesting proceedings attending it served to make the occasion a memorable one in the history of Belfast'. Within days of the opening, the beds were in full use.

Bishop McAlister, who had launched the new Mater Hospital project, had died in 1895. His successor as Bishop of Down and Connor, the Most Reverend Dr Henry Henry, was very conscious of the need for a Catholic clinical school, or at least for Catholic clinical teaching. His ambitions for the hospital were linked to this development. The award of a University Charter to Queen's College Belfast provided an opportunity, and, in April 1909, the five Roman Catholics included in the original Senate of Queen's approached the University Commissioners requesting that something should be done to bring the Mater Infirmorum Hospital into touch with the University 'in the interests of the University, as if acted upon

we have reason to believe that they will induce large numbers of students to become members of the University who otherwise may go elsewhere'.³ The Commissioners left this for resolution by the Senate on the advice of the Faculty of Medicine and, before the year was out, the Mater was included among the hospitals recognised for teaching purposes, and a member of its medical staff was appointed as one of the four University clinical lecturers chosen each year to represent the staffs of each teaching hospital on the Faculty of Medicine and to act as internal examiners in the degree examination. This, of course, was consequent on the Irish Universities Act (1908) which established Queen's as a separate degree-giving institution. In fact, the Mater Hospital had already been recognised for clinical experience by the Royal University of Ireland — its Senate minutes of 28 July 1899 showed the list of recognised medical institutions as being amended by the addition of the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, Belfast, and the minutes of 27 October 1899 record the Lord Lieutenant's sanction to this amendment. Apparently, and quite fortuitously, William J (later Lord) Pirrie, former Lord Mayor of Belfast, upon whom the Degree of LLD (*honoris causa*) was to be conferred that day, was present at the July Senate meeting. Thus the various ambitions of the Bishop of Down and Connor, the medical staff, the Catholic senators at Queen's, the University Commissioners, and Queen's itself were all fulfilled, and the Mater became an important component in the clinical teaching curriculum.

By 1909, Sir William Whitla in his Presidential address to the BMA could record that of the 170,000 patient teaching attendances in the Belfast hospitals, some 60,000 were at the Mater and the various specialist hospitals.⁴ But it was less the quantity and more the quality of the Mater teaching which impressed: in size dwarfed by the Royal Victoria and Union Hospitals, it provided traditional general and specialist clinical teaching and introduced its own particular ethos of high principles and service to broaden the spectrum of the Belfast Medical School.

A hospital prospectus of the time guaranteed students ample opportunity for learning 'the practical side of their work': a physician and a surgeon attended daily to demonstrate the different points of each case; gynaecologists attended two days weekly, though only a limited number of students were permitted; a dental session took place weekly, at which students were taught the art of pulling teeth; and pathological and post mortem demonstrations were arranged if possible at an hour suitable to the students — seemingly the staff were amenable as well as skilled.

By the 1920s the Mater had a complement of 200 beds including those at St John's Nursing Home, opened in 1912 on the south side of the Crumlin Road opposite the main hospital. The demands on services and facilities at the Mater, however, always exceeded the resources available and placed space at a premium, and, from the earliest days, plans for structural additions and remodelling were frequently before the Board. One of the important early additions was in 1929, when a new Department of Radiology was built which was soon to be both diagnostic and therapeutic. This was followed by the completion, in 1934, of the Nurses' Home adjacent to the eastern side of the hospital and in architectural harmony with it. This time the architect was F McArdle. A purpose-built extern department was opened in 1936, six years after the land had been acquired from the Government (HM Prison, Crumlin Road) by a special Act of Parliament.

Finally, during the inter-war period, and fulfilling a long-felt want, two, later three, terrace houses situated directly opposite the Nurses' Home were adapted into a Mater Maternity Unit catering for 18/19 patients, the construction and equipment costing £25,000. Opening the Unit on Tuesday, 31 July 1945, Bishop Mageean said that he 'regarded it as an earnest of something greater and finer' and, with heart somewhat ruling head, aspired of its replacement by a 'large maternity unit of 200 beds'! An adequately-sized, high-quality and efficient maternity unit has always been a high priority and the matter was frequently before the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in the 1970s after the Mater joined the NHS in 1972. This never materialised. In 1952, the Neuro-Psychiatry Department was opened. This was unique in that it was the first such Department to be integrated into a general hospital in Northern Ireland.

From its very foundation, the Mater Hospital depended for its survival mainly on the generosity of well-wishers. Worthy of mention is the Great Bazaar in aid of the hospital building fund held in the Ulster Hall from 22 to 30 November 1897, realising the enormous sum of £20,000. The Bazaar was opened by the Lord Mayor, William J Pirrie, and this, incidentally, was his last public mayoral duty. He and his wife were well known benefactors towards public causes in Belfast, and Lady Pirrie (Mrs Pirrie as she then was) had only recently raised £100,000 to build the present Royal Victoria Hospital. Entries of individual munificence punctuate the hospital accounts in the years that followed. But running and keeping up-to-date a teaching hospital purely on voluntary contributions was always difficult, and especially so in the years of rampant unemployment between the wars. For the most part the hospital, receiving no government or local authority direct grant, was maintained, albeit less dramatically and less conspicuously, by humbler but regular contributions — church and street collections, annual subscriptions, life governorships, and, of course, workers' maintenance committees from various contributing firms — all vital sources of annual income.

Following the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948 and of compulsory health insurance contributions from employee and employer, quite understandably these voluntary donations gradually but steadily dwindled. To the rescue came the Young Philanthropists' Association (the YPs as they were widely known). This Association, already existing for some years, consisted of a band of men, mostly young, who devoted time and energy to raising money for the Mater through holding dances, concerts and other social and fund-raising functions. One particularly successful concert (6 April 1954) sponsored by the YPs featured the famous Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli singing to an audience of 6,000 at the King's Hall. The following day, the local papers describing the singing waxed almost as lyrical as had Gigli himself in his rendition of the *Ave Maria*, *Una furtiva lacrima*, and even *Mother Machree*! The YPs' masterstroke, however, was their founding of the YP Pools, the proceedings of which virtually maintained the Mater through the 1950s and 60s. They were to the Mater what the Irish Hospitals' Sweepstakes were at that time to the Dublin voluntary hospitals. No praise would be too much for the activities of the Young Philanthropists.

When the NHS was introduced, for reasons primarily of Canon Law and the impossibility of guaranteeing that the hospital be run along Catholic ethical principles, the Mater Trustees opted to retain the hospital's voluntary status under existing Catholic Trusteeship. The price was high: no subventions for services

rendered would be forthcoming, since, unlike the situation in Britain, where the policy regarding 'disclaimed' hospitals, mostly small, was different, no such provision was made in the Northern Ireland Health Services Act of 1948. The Mater Hospital was to remain in this precarious financial position for 21 years, during which discussions and negotiations between Government and Hospital Trustees, led by its Chairman, Bishop Philbin, flowed and ebbed, and during which the position of the Mater Hospital was frequently debated in both Houses at Stormont. Matters of high principle were invoked on both sides though these were not untinged by local relationships. Finally, on 1 December 1971, it was announced that agreement between Government and Trustees had been reached and that the Mater would participate fully in the Health Service from 1 January 1972, with terms of settlement safeguarding the 'character and association' of the hospital and about which a defeasance clause was contained in the lease of transfer of the hospital. Ending his speech in the House of Commons at Stormont, the then Minister of Health and Social Services, Mr W K Fitzsimmons, said of the Mater: 'Henceforth, it will shine not as a single star, but as a member of a bright constellation'.

After the first five years of the Mater's integration into the Health Service, the *Irish Times* investigated, albeit light-heartedly, whether the Catholic character of the hospital had been affected. It uncovered no concrete evidence other than of some Protestant staff being somewhat lax in refilling the holy water fonts! It did, however, report a pleasant admixture of Catholic and Protestant staff and felt able to reassure its readers that 'the day Dr Philbin's finger relaxes on the Hospital's pulse will be the day Ian Paisley buys drink all round'.

A plight — if that is the word — which the Mater has suffered from its entry into the NHS is the change in administration, rapid and at times bewildering; from a Hospital Board of Trustees chaired by the Bishop and of ecclesiastical slant, through a lay Hospitals Authority with a Hospital Management Committee, a Health and Social Services Board with hospital cogwheel divisions, to today's General Managers, AETs, and Unit of Management Groups: all within a space of fifteen years. Most will sympathise with the Pavlovian bewilderment that bedevils many of the staff from time to time.

Throughout roughly the same period, the Mater Hospital, like other hospitals in Northern Ireland, has had to deal with victims of 'The Troubles', scoring, unfortunately, some unwelcome 'firsts'. It was the first hospital in Northern Ireland to care for injured British soldiers in October 1969. In October 1976, it was the first hospital where a patient was murdered in a hospital bed. Medical or, rather, obstetric history was made when, on 2 July 1976, baby Gilmore was shot whilst still *in utero*, the bullet hitting the fetal sacrum. Luckily, baby Gilmore was presenting by the breech otherwise the bullet would have lodged in her brain. Unwelcome as these are, they were not the first casualties of intercommunal and political violence to reach the Mater. Many will remember the German blitzes on Belfast of 1941: in the first, on Easter Tuesday, a landmine exploded in the immediate vicinity of the hospital, and doctors and nurses worked practically without break for 36 hours. The casualties were so numerous that bodies had to be stacked high against the jail wall near the mortuary, simply because there was nowhere else to put them. During war as in peace, the Mater has tried, and I believe successfully, to play its full role as a supplier of medical services within the best traditions of the Christian ethic (Fig 4).



Fig 4. The Mater Infirmorum Hospital as it has stood since 1900.

EPILOGUE

The Mater Hospital is entering a new phase in its proud history. A start has been made on the new block, planned to be finished by 1989, and containing departments of Accident and Emergency and Out-Patients, and of Radiology, an operating theatre suite and a 35-bedded maternity unit in addition to various ancillary facilities. True enough, at present there is little more than just a hole in the ground. Nevertheless, to those working at

the Mater it is a most promising and delectable hole.

Some at least of the advantages of being in the Health Service have come about; not all the fears and doubts of some at the time of joining the Health Service have been justified. The special ethos and traditions of the Mater have been largely maintained and its role as a vital component of the clinical teaching resources of the Belfast Medical School is as strong as ever.

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