

November 2021

Mediaeval Monasteries, Medicine and Care

Speaker: Sandra Gann

Our speaker, Sandra Gann, had worked as a Lady Almoner, known now as a medical social worker, at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Her role was to relieve the social, emotional, practical or financial stress of patients and their families in the belief that stress impedes recovery. Since retirement she has studied ancient medicine and mediaeval cookery so was well versed to portray the mediaeval systems of health care.

Sandra described the spread of mediaeval hospitals following the Norman Conquest, saying that most care took place in monastic hospitals, such as St Bartholomew's Hospital in the City of London – the oldest hospital from 1123 and the only one still offering health care on its foundation site. St Thomas' Hospital was founded 4 years before but has moved site. The smaller 'Maison Dieu' (House of God) group, set up by local dignitaries or institutions, was the forerunner of the alms house. A sign depicting such a site can be found on Berwick's old stone bridge; it was founded by Philip de Rydal c1250 for travellers, pilgrims and seafarers. A sign along the Kelso to Coldstream road indicates a farm, so named, where an old stone wall exists indicative of an ancient ruin of such a place. Leprosaria were common, where those suffering from leprosy and other skin conditions sought haven.

In Berwick, maps show evidence of many historical sites through names such as Spittal (giving rise to 'hospital'). Examples include a Lazar house of St Bartholomew's at Tweedmouth, St Edward's along the south side of Love Lane by the River Tweed, founded by The Trinitarians (Red Friars), for the sick and poor. St Mary Magdalene, by Berwick golf course, was first recorded in 1296, but founded before then; there are no visible remains, but in 1910 a sandstone sarcophagus and other ecclesiastical architectural fragments found there date from the 12th century. There is a Spittal house in Paxton which is thought to be linked to the Coldingham Abbey.

Another such establishment is recorded to have existed in Wooler: St Mary Magdalene Hospital on the corner of Ramsey's Lane and Oliver Road recorded last in 1480 but thought to date from 1288.

At Soutra Isle in the Borders, en route to Edinburgh, one passes a sign to the remaining Church of the Holy Trinity, a memorial to an Augustinian monastery of 1164 where a hospital 700 sq m. with brewery, gardens and laundry once existed. A scandal occurred in the 1460s, when the Master, Stephen Fleming, was accused of misconduct and the monastery closed down with assets transferred to the New Trinity Hospital on the site of Waverley Station, Edinburgh – look for the sign near platform 11 (under the stairs). Dr Brian Moffat, an archaeologist and botanist, has excavated the site and found evidence of plants and medicinal products, establishing evidence for both the illnesses and treatments from the Middle Age era.

The practice of mediaeval medicine at this time was rooted in the Greek tradition based on the four humours introduced by Hippocrates, developed by Galen and linked to the four elements: blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile. These 4 substances were organised around the 4 elements, the four qualities of cold, hot, moist and dry, and around the 4 seasons. When they were in harmony, the person was healthy – an imbalance leads to pain and disease. Thus the aim of the healer would be to

rebalance the humours. This could be the environment, as well as remedies noted for their heat or coolness, needed to maintain balance for good health. Care varied from blood-letting (releasing 'bad blood') to the all-important use of plants – monasteries had Physick Gardens; herbs and plants were very important to mediaeval medicine. The monk-healers used herbs from their physic gardens and people would often come to them for ingredients for remedies. Most people could not afford the few doctors who were trained; at this time the more common practitioners were apothecaries, alchemists and the widely used 'cunning folk', usually women with an accrued knowledge of folk-lore using plants and superstitious rituals. All practitioners, whether professional or amateur, needed a good knowledge of astrology, as the position of the planets played an important part in both diagnosis and remedy. Belief that movements of the stars and planets influenced the inner workings of the human body was widely held.

In the 13th century people believed that the soul was more important than the body, but the care and attention given to patients of these hospitals would have been a welcome relief from the worries of fire, famine or fever in the community at that time.

Finally, it was suggested that the mediaeval monastery hospitals had similar aims to our own in the 21st century by helping patients find ways of managing disability and disadvantage to aid health. Profound thanks were given to Sandra for her stimulating talk.