

November 2021 'Mediaeval Monasteries, Medicine and Care' – Sandra Gann.

Our speaker, Sandra Gann, told us she had worked as a Lady Almoner* at St Bartholomew's Hospital – her role was to relieve 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. (* Now known as a medical social worker)

Sandra described the spread of mediaeval hospitals following the Norman Conquest, outlining that the majority of care took place in monastic hospitals. She gave an example of St Bartholomew's Hospital, in the City of London, the oldest hospital from 1123 and the only hospital still offering health care on its foundation site. St Thomas' Hospital was founded 4 years before but has moved site. The smaller Maison Dieu group (House of God), set up by local dignitaries or institutions, was the forerunner of the alms house. A sign depicting such a site can be found at one end of 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 Edwards alongside south side of Love Lane, by the River Tweed, founded by The Trinitarians (Red Friars), for sick and poor. St Mary Magdalene by Berwick's the Golf course first recorded in 1296 but founded before then no visible remains but in 1910 sandstone sarcophagus and other ecclesiastical architectural fragments found thought to be dated from 12th century. There is a Spittal house in Paxton which is thought to be linked to the Coldingham Abbey.

Another establishment is recorded to have existed in Wooler: St Mary Magdalene Hospital Wooler 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, on our 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, laundry once existed. A scandal occurred in 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 both the illnesses and treatment from the Middle Ages.

The practice of mediaeval medicine at this time was described as being rooted in the Greek tradition based on the four humours was introduced by Hippocrates and 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 with each, 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 and the need to maintain balance for good health. Descriptions of care varied from blood-letting (releasing bad blood) to the all-important use of plant – monasteries had Physick Gardens. Herbs and plants had a very important contribution to mediaeval medicine. The monk-healers used herbs from their physic gardens attached to the monasteries and people from the community 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 being 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 were very clear 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.

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