

A short history of Erith
Sanatorium

1893-1945

By Trevor Tamssett

Bexley Historical Society ©

October 2015

BEXLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



A view of Erith Sanatorium looking broadly south west from The Dell c1937 (BLS&AC)

Sanatorium *n.* A hospital for convalescents and the chronically ill, originally especially for tuberculosis patients. A health resort or health station. A ward or building for the isolation and treatment of sick pupils at a boarding school.

The Chambers Dictionary 11th Edition

BEXLEY HISTORY

1 October 2015

A short history of Erith Sanatorium

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century the top ten diseases that killed humans were all infectious ones whereas today there are none in that list. This was a world of pre-antibiotic treatment and any pre-knowledge of exactly how infections were spread. Life would have been dominated by the latest outbreak of one infection or the other.

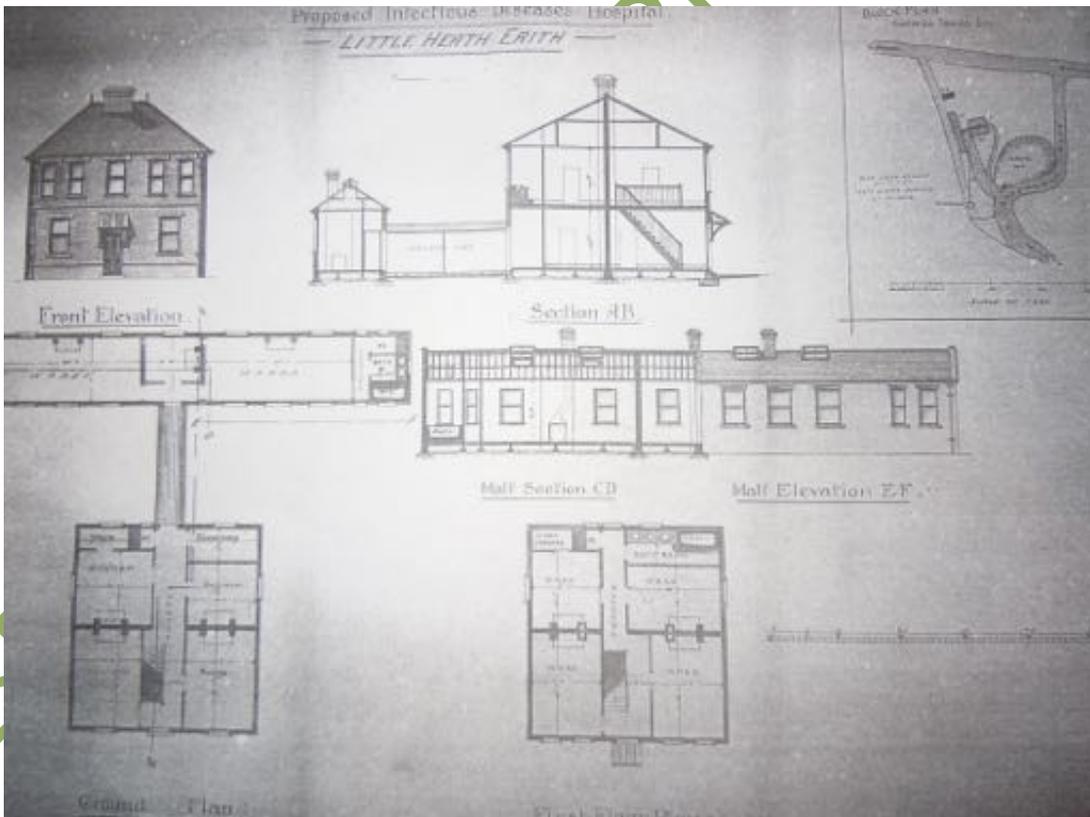
It was therefore planned to build an isolation hospital in the late 19th century to try to deal with these infectious diseases in the Erith area as they were without a suitable hospital at that time to treat them. A number of factors (they were probably countrywide as well) contributed to this decision chiefly that with an increasing population, pockets of poverty, poor sanitation and over crowding were producing an environment for any outbreak of an infectious disease to spread quickly in a close community. The population of Erith grew from around 14,200 in 1893 to about 25,300 by 1902 indicated that the decision in retrospect was necessary.

Tenders were sought and estimates were produced for the building of originally an eight bed Sanatorium in December 1881. In the following year Erith Urban District Council (UDC) purchased a site of just over an acre for £300 in Bedonwell Road called Little Heath in Belvedere as it was then, which is where Belmont Primary School is today.

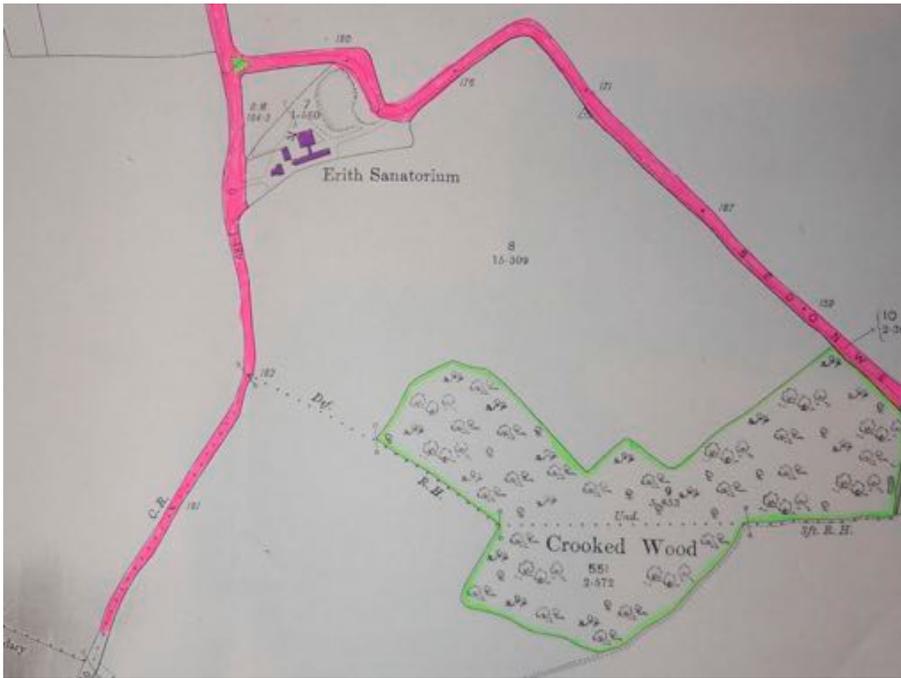
Bedonwell Road at that time ran from Northumberland Heath turning south towards Long Lane. Part of this road to the junction with what is now called Little Heath Road was renamed Belmont Road in 1936.

It was not until July 1893 that Erith Sanatorium was ready for occupation and built by George Henry Gunning of Crayford Road, Erith at a total cost of around £2,250 for patients with infectious diseases in the Erith UDC area.

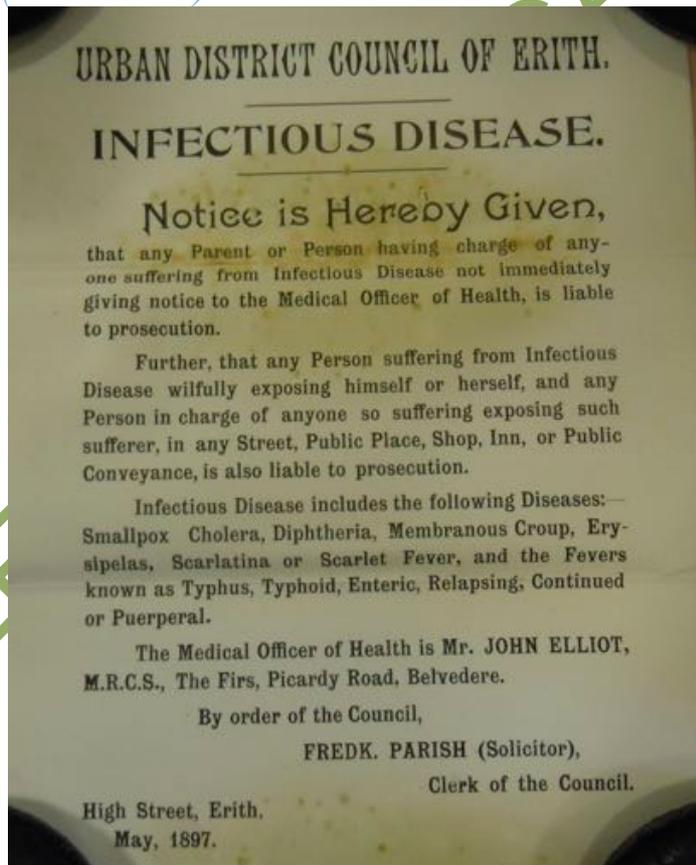
Outbreaks of infectious diseases in the Bexleyheath area around this date also meant another isolation hospital to cater for them was hurriedly and “temporarily” built in 1892 in Long Lane roughly opposite to the current Travellers Public House. Today that area forms part of Russell Park and it was built to serve both the Bexley and Bexleyheath areas. However this was used until about 1928 when it was deemed inadequate and was closed. Although The original Erith Sanatorium was planned to be a two-storey building for eight patients this continued to change after it was built due to the demand from the increased number of infectious diseases being notified in the area that needed hospitalization. In fact part of that increase also may have been that individuals could be fined up to £5 for not notifying the authorities of any infectious diseases that they or their families contracted!



Original plans by Local Erith Board for the Sanatorium in 1881 (BLS&AC)



OS Map 1896 showing area all round the Sanatorium was countryside (BLS&AC)



Official notice from 1897 that could carry up to a £5 fine (c£400 today) for non-notification of infectious diseases to the Erith Health Board (BLS&AC)

Extra hospital accommodation was obtained and used for almost two years in Walnut Tree House in Erith at the beginning of the 20th century to assist with the number of cases at the time.



Walnut Tree House in 1901 in Erith (then owned by Erith UDC having been bought by them from the Parish family) used for almost two years as temporary extra accommodation for the Sanatorium (BLS&AC)

But this house was vacated by 1902 as improvements and advances were being made or planning to be made to cope back at the Sanatorium. In fact by the end of 1901 27 beds were already available for occupation.

In 1901/2 an outbreak of smallpox caused 320 incidents of the disease in the Erith area alone. Although this outbreak was classified as Variola Minor and as such it was a lesser smallpox

virus with a much lower mortality rate it would have still generated a great deal of fear in the area. These smallpox cases (as would have been the case of the hospital in Long Lane) were however all sent to the Metropolitan Asylums Boards either to the hospital ships moored in the Thames close to Erith or to the hospital at Long Reach built and opened in 1902 that was specifically built for this epidemic adjacent to the ships.

Erith Sanatorium mainly dealt with scarlet fever and diphtheria cases primarily. About 85% of these two notified infectious diseases around this time were sent to the Sanatorium, a few went to other hospitals but the rest were dealt with at home by fumigation/disinfection. Generally both these diseases could mean anything from three to ten weeks stay in hospital depending on the seriousness of the illness before those who recovered were discharged. But the Sanatorium took in patients suffering from any infectious disease in smaller numbers if it were serious enough. For instance in times of measles and whooping cough epidemics a number would have been hospitalized.

In 1908 a further two acres of land was purchased from Colonel Barne for £300 of part of his Long Lane Farm estate (leased at that time to a Mr. G. and W. Sheldon) to increase the capacity of the Sanatorium even further. Part of this land was to be used to build a new laundry and steam disinfecting unit and this extension was finally opened in January 1911. More building work continued to be carried out in improving the site during the First World War.

Between the two world wars the Sanatorium was run by a Medical Superintendent with a Head Nurse looking after nursemaids, ward maids and the like but before the Second World War there was also a Matron back in charge of the nursing staff. The administration and maintenance required with such a hospital gave rise to the employment of a Porter and

Portress by 1915 and even a gardener was found necessary to tend the allotment on the site which obviously was a productive food source for some hospitals in the district. It also occasionally gave rise to an opportunity to sell produce to local farmers. Something called lucerne is recorded (a forage food for cattle) as being sold for a period. So undoubtedly this was a good thing for Erith Council to have a little extra income!

HEALTHY



Internal photo of an eight bed ward of the Sanatorium c1910 (BLS&AC)

A horse drawn ambulance was stationed at the Sanatorium and was manned by local firemen and it was not until 1920 a motor driven one was purchased. Times were hard for those in the hospital especially when the children were separated from their

parents. A Council minute in 1921 stated parents visiting their children mid week were only allowed to view them through the windows!! This may have been to minimize any cross infections but extremely hard on the individuals. But parents apparently were allowed proper visiting privileges at the weekends. Schools were closed for up to three to four weeks at a time to try to lessen any infectious disease outbreaks spreading further.



Ruth Mary Cowley, Nurse at the Sanatorium c1920 in her "Going out grey uniform". This photograph was donated to Bexley Archives by her daughter (Mrs Iris Brooker). Iris and her husband Bill were long term and Honorary members of Bexley Historical Society

If times were hard for the patients, the staff had tough times as well as they stood a high risk of contracting any of the diseases being treated in the Sanatorium at the time (which records show they did) whatever precautions they took. Also lack of entertainment to relieve the pressure of work gave rise to a piano, gramophone with records (!) being purchased and even a tennis court being built! The Dell fronting on to Belmont Road today (it is still there as a nature area for the school) was a quiet area for both staff and recovering patients.

Up to the Second World War changes were still being made and buildings added. Together with medical advances in drugs and treatment made the hospital more able to cope with any likely future incidences of infectious diseases. It was even noted that a Rodent Week in Erith was held regularly certainly from



OS Map of 1933 shows how Sanatorium had expanded with extra buildings and land in comparison to the one depicted on page 5 but still relatively rural and not built-up (BLS&AC)

1923 onwards perhaps also to assist with health improvement of the area!

The Sanatorium continued to be used during most of the Second World War. Apart from the obvious medical staff (matron and full nursing staff), a porter and portress (aka caretaker and wife) as already mentioned were employed to cover a number of maintenance and other miscellaneous issues as required.

Following the caretaker's call up into the army it was deemed necessary to employ staff to cover their duties while they were



Aerial shot on 27 February 1937 looking north showing housing developments of the 1930's beginning to impact around the Sanatorium note the housing built compared to the map on page 10. (britainfromabove)

away and the Council had a number of different married couples at the Sanatorium during its war years.

The diphtheria ward was requisitioned by an Air Raid Precautions team early in the war for their sole use as an ARP post.

They did vacate it eventually when they transferred to Parsonage Manor Farmhouse nearby after pressure was applied because the ward was required following an apparent further outbreak of diphtheria.

The Sanatorium was also used during 1940 as a mortuary for victims of enemy action.

But ironically and tragically about 4.30 in the afternoon of Tuesday 13 February 1945 a German V2 long range rocket fell in the grounds a few yards from the main buildings. The blast walls saved both patients and staff from serious injuries but widespread damage was caused to every building in the hospital. It brought down overhead power lines and caused much other blast damage in the surrounding area. Unfortunately the rocket did however kill 5 people and injured 62. Those five people came from Erith and Belvedere but the 1945 report from the Erith's Medical Officer of Health, Reginald A. Leader, indicated they were not Sanatorium patients or staff.

V-2 rocket leaving the firing table



This episode made the hospital unusable and it was then emptied and the remaining patients were transferred to Bow Arrow and the West Kent Joint Boards Hospitals. The staff were held at Ormonde House Half Way Rest

Centre in Picardy Road in Belvedere temporarily. Some of the

nursing staff were transferred to the existing Hainault hospital in Lesney Park Road, Erith (opened in 1920 and closed in 1974 as a maternity hospital) or found other posts elsewhere.

The Council took back the original pre-war porter, his wife and young son when he was demobbed from the Army after the war. He was employed generally to look after the grounds and also acted as a handyman at Erith Town Hall until around 1948. The porter, Mr.H.E.Winters aka Nick, was also employed as a school caretaker according to Council minutes from 1949.

They were only three occupants on the site during this period living in the lodge built in 1909 that was relatively untouched by the explosive blast and is still there on the school site today. The site continued to be managed as a pig farm, chickens were kept and vegetables grown. Eggs went to Hainault hospital and the pigs were bred and sold at Dartford market on a regular basis. Pork was therefore occasionally on the menu at Hainault during this time as a much welcomed dish following the war years of austerity and food rationing.

It was not usual for Councils to own pigs or poultry but they were encouraged by the Ministry of Food to do so during the war so food waste could be recycled. Food waste was collected from all around the borough and taken to a facility in Tottenham to be cooked and sterilized to turn into pig food. The resultant product was a semi-solid unattractive mass apparently when chopped up by spades in the feeding troughs was attractive to the pigs! It was generally known as Tottenham Pudding.

In 1945 after the V2 destruction the Local Education Authority examined a portion of the premises for use as a school, records are not available for this period to check exactly when any temporary school started. What is documented is that the Council accepted £6,400 as the “after war damage” valuation of the site and it was then sold to Kent Education Committee during 1948 for that sum.

A historical report in 1983 by the then retiring Headmaster of



*The lodge
built in 1909
for the
porter and
portress still
on the site of
Belmont
Primary
School 2015
(T.Tamsett)*



*Hainault Hospital
in September 2015
still used by NHS
but due for
possible
redevelopment
(K.Chamberlain)*

Belmont School, a Mr. R.McFarlane indicated, albeit using somewhat temporary and some habitable buildings remaining from the Sanatorium, that a school was in use serving 160 plus

children from the surrounding area in 1949.
But the birth and development of the school that now sits on this site is another story.....

References and sources:

Bexley Library Service and Archives Centre (*BLS&AC*)

Bolts from the Blue by *Lewis Blake* 1990

Mandy Dunn Belmont School

Terry Winters PhD Vital Therapies Inc., California

Peter Hickson Bexley Civic Society

Jean Treveil Local Resident

Francine Payne Author and historian

Ken Chamberlain Erith & Belvedere Local History Society, Bexley Civic Society and Local historian

Mrs Iris Brooker Bexley Historical Society and Local historian

Wellcome Library - Reports of the Medical Officer for Health for Erith

Britainfromabove.org.uk

Infectious Diseases that were mentioned in the early 1900s onwards included *Chicken Pox, Cholera, Croup, Diphtheria, Enteric Fever, Erysipelas, Puerpal Fever, Scarlet Fever, Scarlatina, Smallpox, Tuberculosis (aka Phthisis) and Typhoid*