

HASLAR HOSPITAL

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Haslar Heritage

Certainly there is little about an Naval hospital, in times of peace, to attract a sensation-loving public; but let a great naval war break out, and a wondrous change will be noticeable in the popular estimate of this particular branch of the service; especially if there is an action at sea.

The hospitals become at once the cynosure of every eye, their inmost recesses are lit up by searchlights of public criticism, and woe betide the officials who are caught napping, or who, through supineness in time of peace, have allowed these beneficent provisions for the sick and wounded to drift into a condition of inefficiency and neglect.

When we consider the important part the hospitals have played in the economy of the fleet, it is curious that so little should be known of their past history; surely this ought to be full of instruction? Certainly their records should throw light on many questions relating to the welfare of the navy seaman of bygone times; while the building themselves, it may be affirmed that the walls but endowed with the power of speech and of memory, they would unfold a tale of deep and gruesome interest!

Of existing Naval hospitals there can be no doubt that the one whose somewhat gloomy aspect attracts the eye on the Gosport side of Portsmouth harbour has the greatest claim on our attention, not only by reason of its superior size and national importance, but from its antiquity, and many interesting historical associations connected with it. To trace back the history of Haslar Hospital to its foundations is to hark back to what may be called the 'dark ages' of the Navy, to a time when, to put it mildly, the welfare of the unfortunate creatures who were sent off to fight their countries battles by sea did not receive the attention it with at the present day. And no direction was the roughness of the times more forcibly illustrated than in the defective arrangements for the care of the sick and wounded.

It is, of course impossible, within the limits of an article to touch more than the fringe of a very great subject; though it will be easy to show how curious are the results that await the student of this department of Naval history; and more-over, that there is another aspect of hospital management besides the medical one.

The earliest mention of Haslar occurs in a publication of 1745, wherein we learn *'that a piece of ground has been purchased at Portsmouth, on which a hospital is ordered to be built large enough to hold 1,500 sick and wounded seaman'*. And later on we are told that *'this noble building was raised at the earnest recommendation of the Earl of Sandwich'*; - it was not completed till 1762.

That Haslar Hospital should have been founded in the year which saw Prince Charlie's romantic, though ill-starred invasion of England was, of course, only a coincidence; and yet, though devoid of political significance, a certain pathetic interest attaches to chance association of the Pretender's name with an institution so closely bound up with the history of the Fleet, for it serves to remind us of a feature in his character which, as a biographer says *'redeems it from much of the obloquy with which it has been loaded'* namely, his warm admiration of the British Navy.

'Though a foreigner by education, he was an Englishman at heart, and understood the basis whereon the glory of England subsisted her naval power'. And long afterwards, when a victory of pleasure which provoked a sneering remark from Prince of Conti, Charles Edward replied, *'I am the friend of England against all her enemies; as I always regard the glory of England as my own and her glory her fleet!'*

Surely it may be affirmed that had Prince Charlie's warm regard for the navy been shared, in some degree, by those who were responsible for its efficiency in times past, the feeling would have shown itself in a more solicitude for the welfare of the sick and wounded seaman? Those melancholy episodes which tarnished the Navy's fair fame would probably never have occurred!

Now, if there is one more curious fact than another that study of this particular department of history obtrudes on our notice, it is the light in which Naval hospital seems to have regarded in old days by the authorities – as if it was a prison in fact! As many precautions were taken to guard the inmates as if they had been a lot of criminals, intent of nothing so much as breaking out! And this anomalous state of things might well cause surprise, did not a very cursory acquaintance with Naval history remind one that the fleet at this time was chiefly manned by compulsion, in the form of the *'press-gang'* with its cruel methods, which swept up a large number of men whose only ambition was to regain their liberty at the earliest opportunity.

Now a spell at hospital was, in those days, not only an agreeable relief from the monotony of a sea life, and therefore much sought after, but it afforded the long-for chance of recovering that freedom from which the men had been so heartlessly torn; and after Jack would have been something more human if, after being shipped off under the conditions described, he had not availed himself of the chance thus afforded.

A well known Naval writer tells us that Haslar Hospital was a common *'take-off for deserters'* that in fact the men ran from it in such numbers as almost to counterbalance the impressments (1755). It was a common thing, at that time, for a lieutenant to receive and order to take a midshipman and party of men who could be trusted, for the purpose of guarding the hospital. Later on when officers and seaman of the fleet were better employed than keeping watch and ward over the sick, this duty was entrusted to the military, who had to furnish *'nine sentinels by day and fifteen by night.'* Still the leakage continued, much to the distress of the Physicians and Council, who thereupon advised the erection of the massive lofty iron railings that now grace the open, or

western side of the great quadrangle; also that the windows of the lower stories should be barred, and that the men should be locked in the wards at night (1795).

Still as we know, *'stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage!'* and as long as Jack was minded to get out, the devil himself could hardly keep him in. Necessity it has been well said is the mother of invention, and Jack's resources are infinite. Many and curious was his means of exit. We find the Council complaining that *'eleven men made their escape in one night'*. Another time three found means of exit *'down the closet, thence through the drain into Haslar lake a low tide'* It is interesting to know that *'the drains were well contrived, and were washed by the tide every twenty-four hours!'* Next night a sentry was put at the mouth of this novel bolt-hole, with the result that two poor fellows were nabbed as they emerged.

Then it was discovered that the patients were in the habit of saving up their allowances of wine and porter to bribe the nurses and sentries to let them escape. It was the custom to give a reward of one pound for the re-capture of deserters; the sum being deducted from their pay; but it coming to the knowledge of the men that the reward was withdrawn, we learn that they became *'extremely riotous, inasmuch as forty or fifty men have gone over the hospital walls in the middle of the day!'* It is not surprising to hear that *'some of them returned often drunk and in worse state of health than when they went out'*. The only wonder is they returned at all!

Everyone knows, or ought to know, that one of the grievances brought forward by the Spithead mutineers was the bad treatment, perhaps rather the want of treatment, of the sick on board the ships of the fleet, as well as the embezzlement of the necessaries supplied for their use, and certainly the barbarity of the times is nowhere reflected more strikingly than the hospital annals, which go a very long way towards confirming the opinion that all was not as it ought to have been. The Council are constantly complaining of the condition of patients sent from the fleet; some are sent *'with single jacket, and others with no clothes in their hammocks'* but the officer's servants seem to have been in a worse plight – to the master's shame! They are *'sometimes sent on shore nearly naked – one man had only a pair of trousers and a shirt, quite worn out'*.

There are constant complaints of the *'lousy bedding'* and of being *'overrun with vermin'*, which is not surprising when we find the Council asking if they may have *'a copper for warming water and a fixed fireplace'*. So many that all patients *'may be washed with soap and water on arrival at the hospital'*.

The defective state of the provisions supplied by contract was another fruitful source of complaint; and as the defects had to be made good by the purchases in the town by the hospital employees, the council report that this *'delays the patient's dinners, sometimes till four pm, which is not desirable for sick men'*. Certainly there were fines for breaches of contract, but then the rascally contractors *'pay fines without question'* and laugh up their sleeves!

And so when the mutiny broke out at Spithead there were no keener sympathisers with the movement than the poor fellows in '*durance vile*' at Haslar, who, though unable to take an active part in it, hoisted a flag composed of handkerchiefs tacked together, morning and evening, and answered the cheers from the fleet; just by way of showing what they thought of it all. And when the boat load of delegates were fired into alongside the London the wounded were at once landed at Haslar Hospital, where three of them died, and are buried in Kingston churchyard.

If the Jack Tars of that day ever glanced up at the fine pediment that adorns the front of the hospital, the carving on which represents, amongst other subjects, '*Navigation leaning on a rudder, pouring balm into the wounds of a sailor*' we can picture the sardonic grin that would steal over their honest faces, as this was explained to them.

With the close of the long war in 1815, followed by the enormous reductions in the fighting forces and all establishments connected with them, the history of Haslar Hospital resolved itself into a mere dry, uneventful record of useful work, combined with slow, though steady progress in the direction of efficiency. As England has been engaged in no important war since that date there has been little to bring the hospital into notice; yet, in a quiet, unostentatious way, it has always played an important part in the economy of the fleet. For the sick and the maimed – like the poor – we have always with us!

Amongst the changes that have taken place in comparatively recent times, the most important are; first, the elimination of the military or '*executive*' element from the administration of the hospital and secondly, the establishment of a nursing staff of Sisters. The presence of an executive officer, in the person of a captain-superintendent, was a relic of the older days, when it was considered absolutely essential to the proper maintenance of discipline amongst the large body of seaman under treatment, that there should be a staff of officers in residence. Besides so little confidence was placed in doctors, that it was accustom in the old days for a lieutenant to accompany the medical officer in his round of visits, so as to ensure that the patients received proper attention.

Of the several officers who held the post of captain-superintendent of Haslar, the most distinguished was Sir Edward Parry, of Arctic renown. The administration of the hospital by this distinguished officer was what might be described as epoch making; and some interesting particulars of this period of Sir Edward's career have been gathered together by his son, in the '*Memoirs of Rear Admiral Parry*', a book which every naval officer might study with advantage. It was during this officer's residence at Haslar that the first steps were taken for founding Sailor's Homes at Portsmouth and other ports, a movement in which Captain Parry took a prominent part, and which has been attended with remarkable success wherever it has taken root.

The comparatively recent institution of a nursing staff of Sisters was a wise and very necessary step in advance, the full benefit of which will be more manifest, perhaps in time of war than in time of peace. Men have never been conspicuous successes as nurses and most assuredly the old staff of men-nurses at Haslar could hardly be instanced as exceptions. Nursing is essentially the role of a woman; and in this capacity the annals of our several campaigns how devoted are the services of the sex has rendered our sailors and soldiers from the Crimean of terrible notoriety down to present time afford abundant testimony.

It may be of interest to mention the fact that the names of the Sisters composing of the nursing staff at the naval hospital appear regularly in the official '*Navy List*'. The uniform worn by the Sisters – if the word uniform is applicable to ladies' dress is plain and tasteful, and affords an agreeable contrast to the frigid monotony of line and colour that characterises Government establishments. The presence of nursing Sisters has moreover revolutionised the aspect of the wards; the inhospitable and repellent appearance which bore in the old days, have undergone a surprising transformation.

The only living links with the past that now greet the eye at Haslar are the old Greenwich pensioners, who were removed here some years ago as a necessary consequence of changes in the administration of Greenwich Hospital. They all have their little grievances – what Englishman hasn't? – But on the whole, it would be difficult to conceive of a pleasanter place in which to while away the evening of life; for their table is provided liberally, and each man has a sufficiency of his favourite grog.

It may safely be said that at the present day Portsmouth has few pleasanter or more instructive sights to offer to the visitor than a tour of inspection of the wards and grounds of Haslar. The perfect order and scrupulous cleanliness inside, the bright parterres of flowers, the well kept lawns and shady paths, and the many provisions for the comfort and health of patients, all tend to impress one with the change for the better that has taken place since the days of our last great Naval war.

If one of the Jacks of 1796 was to rise from the grave and wander into the wards at the present time, he would likely enough think us a sadly degenerate lot to require so much care and so many comforts, unknown to a former generation.