

# GREY'S HOSPITAL, PIETERMARITZBURG 1855 — 1985

**A Proud record of service to the people of Pietermaritzburg and its environs.**

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**Grey's Hospital in 1910. Extensions to the gables were made in about 1896.**

## INTRODUCTION

Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg which turns 130 years old this year was, until last year, the oldest hospital remaining on its original site in South Africa. Several times during its long history attempts were made to have the hospital moved to a more suitable site. For various reasons, mainly financial, this was not possible and the hospital continued to grow in a somewhat haphazard fashion on the piece of ground selected in 1855 by Dr Peter Sutherland, at the time Surveyor General of Natal. Most of these buildings survive today, including the original hospital.

## THE BEGINNINGS

The site was controversial from the beginning because it was bounded on one side by the Dutch Cemetery.

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However, from all other aspects it was eminently suitable as it lay on the outskirts of the town on the main road to Durban. Its other boundary was the beautiful Umsimduzi River, on the other bank of which was to be laid out the future Alexandra Park.

Grey's Hospital was founded after a visit to Natal in October 1855 by Sir George Grey, Governor General of the Cape Colony which administered Natal at that time. Earl Grey undertook to provide £1 000 for the construction of the hospital on the understanding that the Pietermaritzburg Town Council would take over its administration when completed. He drew up a rough plan for its construction. The hospital was to comprise two identical wings each containing four large wards and two smaller rooms making a total of twelve rooms. Extensions to the wings housed the kitchen and store-rooms.

## OPSOMMING

Grey's-hospitaal in Pietermaritzburg het vanjaar sy 130e bestaansjaar en amptelike opening van die nuwe hospitaal gevier. Tot verlede jaar was Grey's die oudste hospitaal in die RSA op sy oorspronklike perseel. Vanaf 'n bedenklike diens aan die begin van sy bestaan het die hospitaal deur die jare baie hoogtepunte geken.

The first matron of Grey's Hospital, Mrs Isabella O'Hara, was appointed in October 1855 and she presided over a temporary hospital which was established in a house until such time as the hospital building should be ready. The patients were mainly lunatics and destitute people who had until then been accommodated in a room at the gaol. The sick were usually cared for in their homes.

Construction of the hospital commenced in February 1856. The walls were solidly built out of shale two feet wide and by December 1856 one wing was complete with thatch roof and ready to receive lunatic patients. By now the original £1 000 supplied by Sir George Grey was exhausted and Peter Sutherland was paying expenses out of his own pocket so that the work should not be halted. The Colonial Government agreed to make another £1 000 available.

The first patients and the matron Mrs O'Hara, moved into the completed upper wing in February 1857. All households in Pietermaritzburg obtained their water from open sluits running down the main streets and Grey's nearest supply ran down Commercial Road from which it was stored in casks in the back yard. There were no night nurses and patients had perforce to





**Staff of Grey's Hospital in 1896. House Surgeon Dr C J Douglas and Matron Elizabeth Macdonald with probationer nurses.**

procure their own water. Mrs O'Hara was the only attendant at the hospital until 1958 when her husband, William, was appointed as her assistant. They each earned £36 a year. Dr Samuel Gower was the first hospital surgeon. He did not have a very high opinion of the hospital and complained that the surgeon of Grey's Hospital was like *soldiers sent to battle weaponless or shopkeepers whose shelves are short of goods.*

In fact, during its very early years the hospital seems to have had little to recommend it beyond providing a haven for the destitute, and it was viewed with misgivings by both Black and White. One man, Peter Plymmer, who had spent a brief spell there declared in a letter to the newspaper in 1861 that *The word is running over the town that if a man enters that building he must surely die.*

However, from this time onwards conditions gradually improved and more favourable reports were forthcoming. The thatch roof was replaced in 1870 with tiles after two separate fires threatened to destroy the buildings. Fortunately both

were extinguished due to the efforts of the hospital manager, Mr W.H. Jenkins, helped by patients and on-lookers. The new roof greatly improved the appearance of the hospital.

### LAY MATRONS

For the first 50 years of its existence Grey's was run by a series of lay matrons and managers, usually wife and husband. Not until 1872 was a nurse assistant appointed. She was required to be over 40 years old and *capable of much bodily exertion and of temperate habits.* Her hours were from 6am to 9pm or later if required.

Up until 1873 the Black patients were accommodated in grass thatched houses at the rear of the hospital for the reason that they are *more in conformity with their experience of daily life and admit of the rude freedom they enjoy in their savage state.* However, it was then decided that a suitable building should be erected and a substantial building for this purpose was ready by the end of 1873. Black patients

had by now overcome their fears and were coming to the hospital in ever increasing numbers.

For the first time in 1873 Grey's was also equipped with two bathrooms and water tanks. A well had improved the water supply which was still provided by the open sluice in Commercial Road. Outdoor privies were sited behind the hospital 115 feet from the nearest ward and Grey's had bucket sanitation up until 1910. There were still no night nurses and not until 1882 was a night nurse appointed, but was very difficult to procure. In 1883 Grey's had two day nurses and one night nurse, when available.

The last of the lay matrons, Elizabeth Macdonald, was appointed in 1877. This remarkable lady who was 34 years old when she was appointed, was to be matron for the next 27 years. She had spent her early years in India and was said to be able to speak Hindustani. She had been widowed four years earlier shortly after coming to Kimberley with her husband Captain R.G. Macdonald and their infant daughter, born a few months later, had also died.



Mrs Macdonald was instrumental in introducing Indian attendants into the hospital. These men in their turbans were to be a feature at the hospital for many years and performed most of the menial work. By 1890 there were two day and two night nurses at Grey's and nine Indian attendants. Soon after this the formal training of nurses was introduced.

In 1899 an examination for Registration was instituted by the Natal Medical Council and the first nurse to pass this examination was Miss Kate Driver in November 1901. She had trained at Grey's in 1894. Nurses wore long dark blue skirts and blouses with *leg of mutton* sleeves. An enveloping white apron, starched collar and cuffs and a frilly cap completed their uniform. For outdoor wear a pert navy bonnet replaced the cap. The extreme discomfort of these uniforms in Pietermaritzburg's notorious summer heat may well be imagined.

### Trained Sisters

The first trained sisters from England joined the staff at Grey's after the Anglo-Boer War. One of these, Miss Jessie Mitchell, was to be Grey's first trained Matron appointed in 1905 when Mrs Macdonald retired.

Mrs Macdonald, sadly, only enjoyed two years of retirement before being murdered by her Indian servant. This unhappy event occurred when Mrs Macdonald attempted to intervene when the man attacked her female servant with a knife. The crazed man turned on Mrs Macdonald and stabbed her several times. She died instantly. Her death shocked the people of Pietermaritzburg and a memorial fund was established and the new Children's Ward at Grey's was given her name, which it bears to this day.

Miss Mitchell, her successor, was Matron of Grey's Hospital for the next seventeen years. She demanded a very high standard of nursing from the girls in training and herself lectured them in basic nursing and ethics, while the ward sisters gave practical tuition. The honorary visiting staff gave lectures in medicine and surgery.

Boating on the Umzinduzi River below the hospital was a pleasant recreation enjoyed by the nurses after boats were purchased in 1912.

Grey's Hospital staff were involved in nursing patients during four wars — the Zulu War of 1879, Anglo-Boer War, First and Second World Wars. Cases were treated in the Hospital and in the field by Grey's nurses — a number of whom lost their lives.

### Developments

New *native* wards were opened in 1914 and in 1919 a modern double-storeyed block was opened for White patients. For the next ten years, however, very few improvements took place in the hospital, partly for financial reasons and partly because of the lack of an administrative head. This was remedied in 1928 with the appointment of Dr R.E. Stevenson as Medical Superintendent. During his eight years at Grey's many changes were wrought and by 1933 the hospital was described as the fourth largest in South Africa and was said to have the best equipped theatres with the possible exception of the Johannesburg Hospital!

It was during this period also the Grey's nurses produced some outstanding examination results, including seven winners of the Kenneth Gloag Medal, awarded to the nurse gaining the highest marks in the final examinations throughout South Africa. This was because Grey's at this time had an outstanding Sister Tutor in the person of Miss Sybil Marwick, herself a Grey's trainee. Unfortunately Miss Marwick was lost to Grey's in 1936 when she was appointed Matron of the Provincial Hospital in Port Elizabeth from which she rose to even greater heights in the nursing world. Today Miss Marwick is enjoying a well deserved retirement in Pietermaritzburg and, aged 85, has a mind as keen as ever.

Buildings continued to mushroom on the already congested site as more wards were built to handle ever-increasing numbers of patients. Accommodation for nursing and medical staff was a peren-

nial problem and by 1950 it was obvious that this state of affairs could no longer continue and some sort of plan must be devised to cope with projected expansion.

The vexed question of whether to move the hospital to a new site was once again mooted but decided as impractical and a so-called *master-plan* was conceived. The first phase of this plan was put into action in 1955 with the building of a multi-storeyed block in the grounds in front of the hospital. This block supplied a much needed maternity section on the first floor. Administration and physiotherapy were on the ground floor and private wards on the third floor. The first floor was later converted into operating theatres and a blood bank.

Grey's lost its Black patients in 1954 following the opening of Edendale Hospital. This relieved the chronic congestion of the Black wards but was a severe loss of *experience* for the staff. Coloured patients continued to be treated at the hospital and Indian maternity was retained until the opening of Northdale Hospital in 1974. Since then student midwives and resident medical staff work between the two hospitals.

In the sixties more ground was obtained for Grey's following the purchase by the Natal Provincial Administration of two schools on the opposite side of Prince Alfred Street with the intention of building a new multi-storeyed hospital there. The acute shortage of staff accommodation was alleviated by the construction of two large blocks, one for student nurses and the other for medical and senior nursing staff. A new College of Nursing was opened in one of the old schools.

### A NEW HOSPITAL

By the end of the sixties, however, the Administration was looking at alternative sites for the hospital. Opinion was sharply divided about this. Many felt that because of historical links and the convenience of its situation the hospital should remain on its existing site while others stressed the disadvantages of a multi-storeyed hospital with resultant traffic congestion, noise and a severe shortage of parking space.



The latter triumphed and in 1971 the decision was made to build a new hospital on an elevated site to the north of the town on land forming part of Town Hill Hospital, granted to the Natal Provincial Administration by the Government.

Work on the new hospital site commenced in 1976 and by mid 1983 the main construction works of the large, modern complex were complete but the actual move was delayed several times and did not take place until July 1984.

By this time the old hospital was looking decidedly down at heel as the minimum of maintenance had been carried out while everyone waited for the move.

There were many heavy hearts at the thought of leaving the buildings which for more than 125 years had played so important a part in the life of Pietermaritzburg and its surrounding districts. As a symbolic gesture of respect and farewell a Great Walk was organised for Sunday 22 July 1984. A large concourse of people, staff and public, gathered at the old hospital that morning. Dr Fred Clarke MEC officially closed the old Hospital and to the strains of *Auld Lang Syne* the crowd led by the Chief Matron, Miss Heather Findlay, moved off through the streets of the city and up the hill to what from this moment was Grey's Hospital. Here the sadness of the farewell was forgotten in the joyful welcome provided by the Natal Carbineers and

by the refreshments served next to the magnificent swimming pool forming part of the comprehensive recreation area in the new Hospital.

One year later Grey's was officially opened on 5 June 1985. Already her long, low buildings are blending into the surrounding landscape above the town and her traditions of love and service are intact.

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AGO Depositions
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(Vervolg vanaf p 8)

Die moeders moet oor dieselfde aspekte as hulle dogters onderlig word en kommunikasie moet aangemoedig word. Sodoende kry die moeder die geleentheid om haar regmatige plek as inligtingsbron vir haar dogter vol te staan.

## SLOT

Menstruasie en selfondersoek van die mamma is so 'n integrale deel van vrouwees dat kennis hieroor vir elke vrou van belang is. Omdat puberteit geslagtelike rypwording inlyf, is dit die ideale tyd om die meisie van die relevante inligting te voorsien. Baie van haar vrese en onsekerheid sal verdwyn as sy weet wat om van puberteit te verwag.

Volgens die ondersoek was die kennis van die adolessente dogters omtrent menstruasie en die ondersoek van die mamma onvoldoende. Die adolessente is egter gretig om meer te weet en hulle het die reg daartoe. Die verpleegkundige het ook in hierdie verband 'n belangrike taak omdat sy oor die kennis en vaardigheid beskik om beide die adolessente en hulle ouers van inligting te voorsien.

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