Healthcare in Pembrokeshire: From 'County' to Withybush

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AS the UK celebrates the 70th anniversary of the National Health Service, the Western Telegraph continues to prepare for its first ever awards recognising those who work in to provide quality care locally.

As the Western Telegraph's Health and Care awards 2018 approach, it is worth remembering how the NHS in the county came to be the service it is today...

Before the NHS was established on July 5, 1948, people across the UK received healthcare from different sources. This included hospitals funded through charities, a national insurance scheme which allowed some workers access to GP care, and privately funded doctors, among other methods.

But this system did not always provide an equal service to people living in different areas of the UK or earning different incomes.

Fortunately in Pembrokeshire, the County War Memorial Hospital in Haverfordwest served much of the populace.

Built in 1923 to commemorate those who died in the Great War, the hospital was funded by a system of voluntary subscriptions, with the local populace and the British Red Cross Society raising £30,000 in total to construct it, or approximately £1,268,342 in today's money.

According to local historian and Western Telegraph contributor Mark Muller, the 'County' was aided by two satellite medical centres at Sealyham and St Brides.

In December, the Western Telegraph spoke a couple celebrating their 70th wedding anniversary at the end of last year who first met while working at Kensington Hospital, St Brides in the 1940s.

Charles and Jean Weatherall worked as a groundskeeper and nurse at the hospital, which today has become the luxurious St Brides Castle.

Kensington Hospital was funded by a charitable trust and provided care for ill children, including those who were suffering from tuberculosis, and was a self-contained community beloved by the residents.

"It was such a wonderful outlook there," said Jean. "You could see the sea, and every time you looked out of the window there was a

Healthcare in Pembrokeshire as it used to be: the old County War Memorial Hospital. PICTURE: Pembrokeshire Archives.

different view."

Health and care services across the UK struggled to cope with the onslaught of the Second World War, and Pembrokeshire's hospitals had to cope with an influx of evacuees from London, as well as injured soldiers returning from abroad.

Withybush Hospital's origins began during the war, in the form of temporary Nissan huts built as a makeshift medical centre and managed under covert conditions.

When the NHS came into being in 1948, it aimed to provide free health care for all, but for some, the new system brought unexpected feelings.

According to Mark Muller: "This change brought about an initial feeling of deflation amongst those who had with immense pride tasked themselves with consistently raising large amounts."

The current hospital at Withybush was built in 1979, funded by contributions from the tax payer under the NHS, and the old county hospital was finally closed in 1987.

Today, Pembrokeshire continues to be served by Withybush Hospital, though there is currently concern for the future of services at the facility.

The people who today work at Withybush, in GP surgeries across the county, and carrying out home visits often do so without recognition, as their forebears in the NHS have done for 70 years.