

# Nostalgia

Looking back at Pembrokeshire  
of yesteryear

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## Leprosy, plague and medieval medicine

In the first of a series of  
articles, Mark Muller looks into  
health care in times gone by

DURING the 1990s, fate decreed (aided no doubt by my having lived the hedonistic lifestyle of a rake in my youth) that I experience a major brain haemorrhage.

The added misfortune was in being sent to Morriston Hospital for prolonged, emergency brain surgery.

I can't really go into the horror of that place (although I do accept that not all will have had the same experiences that I had) but it meant that I developed an interest (jaundiced though it might be) in things medical - although the former image of all doctors being revered and viewed through rose tinted spectacles has been severely adjusted.

Nevertheless, twisted and bitter sentiments aside, the story of the introduction of medical services through the ages is horribly fascinating and I will attempt over the next few weeks to reveal some detail of what happened in Pembrokeshire during the last many centuries.

With the increase of various monastic orders throughout the country in medieval times, came a whole multitude of diverse skills.

Although the Augustinians weren't the most familiar of the monastic orders in Wales (that was the Cistercians), their Priory in Haverfordwest was to provide enormous benefit to the locality.

Their busy agenda ran as follows: "Disturbers are to be rebuked, the low-spirited to be encouraged, the infirm to be supported, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the contentious restrained, the haughty repressed, litigants pacified, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the evil borne with, and all are to be loved."

A long-forgotten and seldom seen addition to the Priory was the medieval leper hospital and chapel named Magdalene's Chap-



Mary Magdalene Leper Hospital at the bottom of Merlin's Hill. The building later became a chapel and in the 19th century was converted into a residence.

el situated in the corner formed at the bottom of Merlin's Hill and Freemans Way. It appears in the Pembrokeshire Archives as the 'Lazar Gardens'.

The state of medieval medical understanding was such that skin complaints unrelated to leprosy might quite often have been diagnosed as such.

As many as 300 leper hospitals were built in this country at roughly the same time and most were on the outskirts of towns or communities.

This was due to a church edict in 1179 requiring lepers to not live among healthy people.

All of these hospitals were called Magdalene after Mary Magdalene; the reason deriving from the name of her supposed brother Lazarus (described in the Bible as 'a beggar full of sores') a shortened form of which, Lazar, came to mean leprosy.

In addition to the leper hospital (which subsequent-

ly became a chapel) the Priory had an apothecary where medicines were prepared from the herbs grown in the still visible gardens in the beautiful ruins.

With the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, the role was taken on by The Society of Apothecaries who tended to supply doctors rather than dispense potions and remedies themselves.

A division already existed between doctors and surgeons to the degree that doctors who had had any training (and many who hadn't) were called physicians or doctors whilst surgeons, who had often been no more than barbers, could title themselves only with 'Mr'.

The problem was however, that doctors were interested only in the wealthy which left the poor at the mercy of the quacks, or mostly nothing at all.

The next mention of anything resembling a place where the very sick could go was in the mid-17th century when, with the outbreak of

the plague in 1651-2, pest houses were opened.

These were largely places where plague victims once identified, having been turned out of the houses where they had lived, could go to die.

Rock House in North Street, Haverfordwest is known to have been a pest house.

In the many documents and letters relating to the plague and housed in the Archives is mention of a woman who was a visitor to the town, who selflessly entered the pest houses and gave what care and sustenance that she could to those dying.

She is referred to only as 'The Stranger Woman'.

The same documents suggest that she had poor treatment from other townsfolk who regarded her as either deranged for doing such kindnesses or else was tainted by some evil force in that she appeared not to succumb to the plague herself.



The still visible Priory Herb garden used to create medicinal potions and ointments.