

**Presentation for the Bicentenary of John Passmore Edwards on
behalf of Acton History Group by Dr Ray Batchelor**

Acton Care Centre (formerly, Passmore Edwards Cottage Hospital)

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Welcome!

Thank you all for coming this afternoon to celebrate the Bicentenary of the birth of the extraordinary man, John Passmore Edwards, who, in the late 19th century paid for the construction of Acton's Cottage Hospital - the building we can see across the way, and which from its opening by Lady Emma Louise Rothschild in 1898 until its closure as a hospital in the late 1990s played such a critical role in the lives of thousands of people who lived in Acton. In part, the building - and financing - of the Cottage Hospital was Acton's historical answer to the question being asked of the NHS right now: who pays? And where should the money come from?

A little context about John Passmore Edwards

He was born in 1823 into relative poverty in rural Cornwall. He had some education and, having learnt to read, became a passionate reader. However, he recalled later in life that in his world at that time, there were practically no books to read - a fact which helps set his later enthusiasm for Public Libraries - including our own John Passmore Edwards Free Public Library opened in 1900, now the very successful ActOne Cinema - into perspective. In fact, words became his career. As a young man, he became a journalist and publisher but - critically - was made bankrupt. Passmore Edwards' personal sense of moral obligation meant that, though legally not obliged to, he spent several years writing and publishing so he could pay off every single debt and every single debtor. This was a not only a moral man, but one who understood first-hand the value of money and the wisdom of economy. Eventually, Passmore Edwards was very successful!

Many of his publishing ventures were periodicals aimed at ordinary men who sought to better themselves. As he judged that his success – and wealth – was built on the efforts of ordinary working people, he set about trying to support them. He tried politics and was elected as MP for Salisbury in 1880. After over a decade in parliament, he judged politics was not an effective way of changing things. He set about more direct action, by giving away several hundred thousand pounds to enable the building of Working Men’s Institutes, of hospitals - including this one - and above all, of libraries. He became known as “The Cornish Carnegie” after Andrew Carnegie, the famous American industrialist, millionaire, and philanthropist who also paid for many libraries in London which are named after him. However, unlike Carnegie, who set up a trust to administer his money-giving, Passmore Edwards was very “hands on” to ensure the money was spent wisely to achieve maximum effect. Here in Acton, the Cottage Hospital in Gunnersbury Lane, which was opened in 1898, was paid for by him.

What was Acton like then?

Until the mid-19th century, Acton was a quiet, rural village with at most, a high street with few cottages and shops, a coaching inn and a cluster of small country estates now mostly remembered in our street names. But from the opening of the first railway station in 1853 – now called Acton Central – Acton began changing and expanding - fast! More stations were built in the following years until Acton had, according to local historian Jonathan Oates, “more stations and halts than any parish outside central London”. The population rose from 3,152 in 1861, to some 37,703 inhabitants in 1901 – a more than tenfold increase! In South Acton, many poor women worked at the laundries which had sprung up there – so many laundries, in fact, that it was known as "Soapsud Island". It was rough, dangerous work. Looking back in 1945, the *Acton Gazette* claimed it was said that all that was needed to do laundry was a woman, a washtub and a bottle of gin.

Many men worked in the industrial complex of engineering factories which developed in Acton Vale, the second largest industrial conglomeration after Birmingham.

How did the increase in civic activity change Acton?

Acton had its own Local Board from 1865 onwards with powers to raise money through the rates and responsibilities to manage sewers, street cleaning and other aspects of local life. Acton Board became Acton Urban District Council in 1894. The John Passmore Edwards Free Library which opened in 1900 was the beginnings of Acton's "civic quarter". The District Council busied itself with building a fire station, planned a swimming pool and toyed with an Isolation Hospital, but it did not have the powers to build a General Hospital. Theoretically, provision for that was already paid for by the Poor Rate. "Destitute poor" patients were treated at the Brentford Union Workhouse Infirmary. Eventually, Passmore Edwards - who had supported the building of hospitals elsewhere - was approached by the President of Acton's Philanthropic Society. He agreed to fund the building of the hospital, provide a site could be found and the Council took responsibility for running costs. Lord and Mr Leopold Rothschild, father and son millionaire bankers living at Gunnersbury Manor, donated the land. Lady Emma Louise Rothschild laid the foundation stone in 1897 - the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee - and Mrs Creighton, wife of the Bishop of London, opened it in May 1898.

Why a hospital?

Until about 1880, if you fell ill, you would probably be looked after by the women of your household or your servants at home. Mrs Beeton's famous cookery book published in 1861 included a big section on the care of invalids. Nursing at home was unpaid and a low-status activity. Paid nurses were few in number. In the 1840s, Charles Dickens famously caricatured one such in his novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, where Mrs Gamp is depicted as "dissolute, sloppy and generally

drunk". A doctor might be called in, if needed, and - critically - if his services could be afforded. The convention of doctors working for free among the poor was long established and is exemplified by Dr Lydgate in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, set in the early 19th century.

Two things shifted care of the sick from the home to the hospital: firstly, technical innovations such as anaesthetics and antiseptic surgery offered huge advantages and required a hospital context; and secondly, because of the way in which war forces change, and how the Crimean war of the 1860s changed nursing. Alongside the justly celebrated work of Mary Seacole in the Crimea, Florence Nightingale gained a reputation for rigorously organising nursing in the same war, and went on to establish formal training for nurses at St Thomas's Hospital. With other such developments, nursing was becoming a profession for intelligent women.

The Hospital in its earliest years:

In 1898 when the "Passmore Edwards Acton Jubilee Cottage Hospital and Invalid Kitchen" opened, Florence Nightingale was still alive. It had only 12 beds - a ward for women, a ward for men and more general wards, and was funded wholly by donations from charitable organisations and subscriptions by people in the area. Seven Acton GPs gave their services for free, organised by Dr Thornton of "The Maples", a rather grand house you can still see in Acton High Street.

The 1901 census records four nurses living at the hospital, managed by the Matron, Miss Agnes Jackson, and supported by two young women domestic servants, Mary Small and Maud Doll, both in their teens. Eventually, two "Queen's Nurses", later District Nurses, living at the hospital treated people in their own homes. Early treatments included those for "gout, hysteria, and gall stones, surgery for adenoids, [and] burns and scalds from the laundries".

In 1901 the precarious finances were laid bare as the hospital had, briefly, to close its doors for want of sufficient donations.

Comparing the census returns of 1901 and 1911 is instructive. As might be expected, four nurses have grown to nine, domestic servants including a cook to three, with a pharmacist running a dispensary. The nine patients recorded in 1901 have grown to 25 by 1911. Other things can be learnt: places of birth are given and of everyone living there on that day, we have a mix of people coming from elsewhere in London and a great many coming from the country, representative of the massive migration to the city which helps explain London's - and Acton's - booming population figures. Miss Agnes Jackson, the matron presiding over the hospital in 1901, was born in "Bengal", while the vital fact of her being a "British Subject" is recorded alongside that fact. Plainly, her family had gone to India to be imperial administrators or for business purposes.

Perhaps most striking is the range of occupations given for the patients themselves. In 1901 we have a charwoman, a domestic nursemaid, the inevitable laundress and a "street singer" - a euphemism, perhaps, for a beggar. In 1911 we have a general labourer, a "van boy" (aged 14), an 'engineering labourer', tinsmith, domestic servant and – a status which would not have been possible in 1901, an "Old Age Pensioner". Old age pensions of 5 shillings a week for single people over 70 were only introduced nationally in 1909 as part of Lloyd George's radical social reforms aimed at imitating Germany, Britain's most successful rival. These reforms are often seen as the earliest foundations of our modern welfare state.

How did the Cottage Hospital change?

In the First World War, the Hospital took in wounded soldiers and offered free training for women V.A.D. nurses - women volunteers working at the front. After the War, a combination of civic and charitable initiatives led to the purchase of further land and the building of a large extension - a wing with the words "ACTON WAR MEMORIAL" on its Gunnersbury Lane facade opened by Neville Chamberlain in 1923. Though supplemented by income from the privately funded care offered

by the hospital to those who could afford it, countless fundraising activities - not least, by Acton Male Voice Choir - were constantly needed to maintain the finances of the hospital over the years.

In the Second World War - a sign of things to come - the Ministry of Health took control and, in 1948, the Hospital became part of the new National Health Service. In 1953, visitors from a charitable funding body remarked on the "light airy wards, the independent atmosphere of the nurses' home where each room has a washbasin and interior sprung mattress and where there was a guest room for boyfriends". In 1979, the hospital was given over to the care of the elderly - a fitting prelude to its complete transformation by 2003 into a care facility with purpose-built buildings. Today the very successful Acton Care Centre is the largest facility run by Gold Care homes.

Ultimately, Acton Cottage Hospital proved a great success. In its long life as a general hospital from 1898 to 1979, and in its reincarnations since then, Acton and Actonians have had good reasons, long after Passmore Edwards' death in 1911, to be grateful for his imaginative use of money.

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