HOSPITALS IN LUTON AND DUNSTABLE - AN OVERVIEW*

Introduction to Mediaeval Hospitals

Hospitals in the Middle Ages were generally small, endowed religious houses, dedicated to the care of the old, the sick and pilgrims. The Church saw it as one of the main duties of Christians to care for those in need. In the deeply religious feeling of that time priority was given to preparation for the life to come, whether it was heaven, hell or purgatory. The physical being was given care but little hope of cure. There were three types of mediaeval hospital, each with a different function and examples of each were established locally.

Farley Hospital, Luton

This has been accorded the title hospital although it was founded for travellers through the benevolence of Henry II. He was crowned King in 1154 at the age of 22, having already inherited the duchy of Normandy from his mother in 1150, and on the death of his father a year later he also inherited a large area of central France. From his wife, Eleanor, he gained sovereignty over much of southern France. The new King was torn between his allegiance to France and England and spent much of his time crossing and recrossing the Channel. Following his accession he left Dover on 10 January 1156 accompanied by his brother William, Thomas à Becket, his Chancellor and at that time friend, and a large band of courtiers. They landed at Wissant, midway between Boulogne and Calais, planning to ride the twenty-seven miles to St Omer en route for Rouen. After only four miles they came to the little hamlet of St Inglevert where the party, tired and cold after the winter crossing, was given a warm welcome at the monastery. It had been founded in 1131 by one Olyard who, together with a band of like-minded devout men, cleared the wooded area and made it safe for travellers and pilgrims. The brothers were not ordained but determined to help those in need. Certainly Henry must have been very pleased with his stay at St Inglevert because on reaching St Omer he ordered a charter to be prepared in which he made a gift of land and woods at Farley, Luton to the French hospital worth £2 a year.

Some time in 1156 the French brethren came to Luton in their distinctive cassocks bearing the symbol of a red key sewn in cloth on the front. Realising that the foreigners would appear strange to local eyes, Henry sent a letter to the people of Luton by Thomas à Becket charging them "not to insult or injure the brethren but to welcome them with good will and assistance". Later evidence showed that the King also desired that the brethren should pray for the souls of himself, his ancestors and heirs. The lands extended from Stockwood Park across what is now known as Farley Hill Estate and the buildings, including a chapel believed to have been dedicated to St John the Baptist, were probably made largely from timber freely available from their woods. At first the new Hospital was administered from France and the first recorded

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*The material in this paper has been taken from Margaret R. Currie, Hospitals in Luton and Dunstable - An Illustrated History. Copies may be obtained (price £3.50 plus 50p p+p) from Luton Museum and Art Gallery, Wardown Park, Luton. Cheques should be made payable to Luton Borough Council.