

# Medieval hospitals – and looking after lepers

CHRISTIANITY, SCIENCE AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES MADE THE CARE OF THE SICK AN INTERNATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

## THE LOCATIONS

### Clean air, clean water

The 1,000-plus hospitals in medieval England were generally found outside the gates of, or on the approach roads to medieval towns. Often, as at Oxford (see previous poster), there was more than one. Suburban sites were chosen so that the patients could benefit from clean air and water.

Some hospital were for 'sick persons' generally, others were for the old and/or infirm. There were also hospitals which were refuges for people on the fringes of society: prostitutes, for example., and those with conditions affecting the mind – Bethlehem hospitals which became known as Bedlams. Bartlemas was one of around 600 hospitals for the treatment of leprosy,



Bartlemas lay within Shotover Forest, which not only provided royal and noble hunting but also nuts, berries, herbs, honey, and small mammals for everyone's larder.

## 'THE HOLY SICK'

### 'Come, good my gentle masters'

Leprosy is a condition known in Britain at least from the fourth century (a skeleton in a cemetery at Poundbury, Dorset). Galen the Greek physician (130-203 CE) wrote that leprosy was often found among the Celts. A man aged about 30 buried in an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Beckford, Glos., had feet bones affected by the disease.

The most extensive research using excavated bones shows 0.62% of the individuals had signs of leprosy-related changes. This suggests that about 10,000 people in England suffered from the disease by the twelfth century.

It is hard to decide from medieval records how oppressive were attitudes towards lepers. Certainly fear, ignorance and squeamishness played a part, though the condition was also thought 'holy', a mark from God.

Nineteenth-century ideas about lepers forced to ring 'warning' bells and shout 'Unclean' are certainly wrong. The bells were to attract charitable giving, as the label on the medieval image on the right makes clear: 'Come, good my gentle masters, for God's sake.'



Nevertheless, a decision to enter a leper hospital meant a life of seclusion, though one in which the possibility of a cure was an ever-present hope, encouraged by the healthy surroundings

## THE CARERS: tending soul and body



An image from the hospital of Notre Dame, Tournai. Notwithstanding the emphasis on their spiritual health, patients enjoyed a relatively high standard of physical care and a nourishing, if basic, diet. As in so many other medieval European hospitals, emphasis was placed on cleanliness and treating the sick poor. (Archives of the Hospital of Notre Dame, Tournai, foundation charter of 1238).

**Christ healing a leper.** Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury, endowing a hospital in the Forest of Blean in 1084, laid down that lepers should be 'cared for by a Chaplain and skilful, patient and kindly watchers'.

The care of the sick has always been a Christian duty. Many medieval religious orders had it as their work, including Sisters (as at Tournai, above), and the Hospitaller orders founded in the Holy Land during the Crusades.

Monks and clergy were among those who took part in the flowering of medical sciences, as Christians, Jews and Muslims cooperated in translating, applying and developing the works of Greek, Arab, Persian, and other physicians.



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## THE MYTHS

### Misunderstood, misapplied

Leprosy was a term applied in the Middle Ages to a wide range of skin ailments, including inflammation, psoriasis and smallpox, as well as leprosy proper. This confusion was added to by the many biblical references to 'sinful' lepers.

This probably helps to explain why very strict programmes of isolation for those with leprosy do not appear to have been either continuously or completely enforced in Britain. The Bishop of Exeter, in 1163, confirmed the rights of lepers to visit the market twice a week and collect food and alms. King John (1199-1216), in 1204 gave lepers the right to collect corn from the market at Shrewsbury; and at Chester lepers were granted a portion of all corn, cheese and fish sold on market day.

Moreover, contrary to what most people believe, leprosy is not highly contagious – and this must have been apparent to experienced physicians. There are two reasons: the bacterium itself does not easily cause disease, and, in any case, almost everyone's immune system can ward it off.

Only close contact for a long time with a person whose disease is at an advanced stage is likely to cause infection. It is believed the bacterium travels from person to person by way of the respiratory tract, through discharges from the nose or mouth, such as sneezing or coughing. The incubation period, from the time of infection until the disease sets in, is very long, usually from 1 to 10 years or more.

So why did leprosy disappear? Probably a combination of population loss in the Black Death, improved living conditions, greater immunity, and growing medical knowledge and expertise.



14<sup>th</sup> c. Herbal

## THE TREATMENT

**Baths, particularly in hot water, was a central feature of the treatment of leprosy.** Where resources and professionals were at hand, carefully composed potions – often including snake meat – were given to the patient, and last thing at night the patient was encouraged to sit for half an hour over a steaming stew of barley and oats.

It was realised that improved living conditions were likely to reduce leprosy's incidence – overcrowding and squalor spread infection.

## READING

### An indispensable guide to medieval hospitals

is Carol Rawcliffe's *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2006) Margaret Markham's notes on Oxfordshire hospitals have also been a great help in compiling this presentation, as have the materials assembled by Carol Rawcliffe and her team at the University of East Anglia – especially their work on Norwich's Great Hospital. The best account of Bartlemas is that in the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire, Vol. 2.