

Chapter 39 – ‘Mater Dei’ Nursing Home

Malon Miryam¹

For some years a successful maternity home with mother craft clinic was carried on by Miss A Hubble, a secular nurse in St Peter’s Road,² East London. Later the Home was moved to 12 St Matthew’s Road³ and named “Mater Dei” Nursing Home.

Finding the work too strenuous single-handed, Sister Hubble was anxious to sell out and, chiefly through the instrumentality of Rev PJ Walsh, then parish priest of East London, the little hospital was bought by Mother General Augustine Geisel in December 1940, and three Sisters⁴ took possession on the last day of the year. The trio worked hard until late into the night to make it possible for the first Mass to be celebrated there next morning by Rev Dr H Boyle, on a temporary altar in the sisters’ dining room – a poor place for so sublime an Act.

The first patient, Mrs Price, arrived on 3rd January 1941 and the long record of happy mothers and their babes increased steadily until, in June 1942, the authorities realised that another wing of private wards was necessary and that, without delay. Plans were drawn up by Mr EDW Bowen and Mr CC Pike erected the new wing in the following year. It was taken for granted that this extension would give the nuns and patients comfortable accommodation for years.

In the meantime the medical men of the town watched with interest and satisfaction the conscientious work being done by the nuns at this Home. Knowing the ever-increasing need for good hospitalization in the rapidly-growing city, the doctors, in a body, interviewed Mother General Augustine at the Sacred Heart convent, Albany Street, one day early in 1945, taking her by storm in showing the pressing necessity for a large private hospital in East London. Could she undertake so vast an enterprise? Should she? But to know that there was suffering which she might be able to relieve was sufficient incentive to the large-hearted woman. So, with God’s help, she decided to face the Colossus.

Chief among the different questions to be answered were where to build and how to finance the venture. A good property in St Mark’s Road had providentially come into the Congregation’s possession some little time before, of which the lease to private people had just lapsed. “Woodleigh” was one of the city’s most treasured and historic residential properties. It had been the home of the late Sir Charles Crewe where members of the English Royal Family, Governors-General of South Africa and many other distinguished personalities were the honoured guests of Sir Charles and Lady Crewe during their lifetime. On this property many old oaks, Coral trees⁵ and other indigenous shrubs adorned the spacious grounds, affording pleasant shade in the peaceful park like atmosphere.

Therefore “Woodleigh” was just the right spot for a private hospital. To alter the existing building would entail considerable expense and then the result would not produce the needed modern hospital; so the gracious old residence had to be demolished. And now it was not a case of “all hands to the pumps” but “all heads to plans”. With so many experienced in nursing jotting down what was considered essential (the Doctors lending a “head” too,) a fairly good sketch was, before long, offered to the architects Messrs Farrow, Stocks and Farrow, who soon put it into shape.

Permission to build was obtained in September 1945 and the building, commenced in January 1946, was ready for the laying of the foundation stone by Right Rev Bishop James Colbert on 25th March. The much loved Mother Augustine was not with them that day, having died on 24th January 1946, soon after inaugurating the good work which remains a fitting memorial to her generous soul.

¹ Hebrew, meaning “Mary’s Inn”.

² The site where the Chinese School stood later.

³ The former home of Mr and Mrs T Harris.

⁴ Sisters Adeline Mack, Petra Heckmann and Theophane Eckl.

⁵ *Erythrina Caffra*.

The erection of such a building within a given time could not be guaranteed by the contractors Messrs C Pike and Son, as the period was one of uncertainties and shortages. However, the various tradesmen certainly wasted no time. So expeditiously did the building grow that by the end of 1947 one big wing, housing the Sisters' quarters and the Maternity Wards, was ready for occupation and a fleet of cars and ambulances conveyed the staff⁶ and patients, babies and all, to the new quarters on 18th December. Even before the official opening of the hospital the Matron admitted one of the Mater Dei's first benefactors, 'Granny' Snell, to the medical department, where she was given the Sacrament of the sick and died peacefully in the care of the nuns she had befriended so often.

The first Mass was said in the L-shaped chapel on 22nd December 1947 and a portion of the house was blessed the same day. Meanwhile work went on, as plasterers, plumbers, etc. used all their energy to get the whole building ready for the official opening on 26th April.

The great day began with Solemn High Mass celebrated according to the ancient Dominican rite. The celebrant was Very Rev Father Hilary Carpenter OP, Prior Provincial of England, who was assisted by Rev Father David Donohue OP and the Very Rev Father Geoffrey Lynch OP, Vicar Provincial of South Africa. Father JB Reeves OP was Master of Ceremonies. This fraternal gesture of the Priests of the Order, in coming many miles to assist at the ceremony, was appreciated by Mother General Demetria Hemmer and her Congregation. Among the Visitors were also Right Rev Bishop D O'Leary OMI, the Mayor of East London, Cllr D Lazarus and Mrs Lazarus, Mr G Randell MPC and Mrs Randell, Mrs J Scheepers, the wife of the Chief Magistrate and many more of the city's prominent members.

In his speech the mayor gave a brief resume of the work done by the nuns since their arrival at King William's Town in 1877 to 1948. He referred particularly to their work at East London during the "Great 'Flu'" of 1918, when the white Dominican habit was a familiar sight in the Location, the North End and other parts of the town where their assistance to the poor and the sick would never be forgotten. He offered the warmest good wishes for the magnificent work they are still doing for the citizens of East London. Monsignor Boyle handed him the key with which the Mayor opened the main entrance to the hospital and then declared it officially opened.

The building has the shape of a square with an open quadrangle in the centre. On the right of the main door is the Maternity wing and on the left are the Medical and Surgical Departments. The two spacious operating theatres are on the second storey. A special feature of the home is the woodwork done in the kitchen and laundry by sister M Polycarp Strobel, while St Vincent School for the Deaf at Melrose had sent small occasional tables – the work of Sister Dosithea and her pupils. Another attractive element was the patients' lounge where convalescing patients can sit and read or chat, listen to the wireless or play games. The children's wards, too, showed careful and loving planning. Cupboards and walls had charming nursery rhymes or animal scenes painted on them and on brackets round the walls were attractive toys. Curtains trimmed with strips of nursery rhymes helped to make the wards more like home than a hospital.

On 28th February 1948 Monsignor Boyle had consecrated the altar of Carrara marble in the hospital chapel. The four white marble statues were likewise imported from Italy. The choir stalls are a gift from Mr and Mrs Eric Kohler, two of the hospital's greatest benefactors.

In 1953 the "Lourdes" Grotto was completed when the beautiful statue arrived from Mr Dings'⁷ factory in Holland. A private garden was later laid out around it for the Sisters' use and, in 1969, a swimming pool was built there too. A sterilizing room and a rest room for the doctors were added to the Maternity Block in 1956, and the old sterilizing room was free to be adapted as a long-overdue milk kitchen for the large nursery. Two cottages at the south end of the property housed the lay nurses until a fine new Nurses' Home was erected for them in 1961.

Dr P Wagner was the first Honorary Medical Superintendent of the "Mater Dei". He held this position until his demise when he was succeeded by Dr J Watt F.R.C.S. Dr W Waddell F.R.C.S., F.R.C.O.G. gave

⁶ *Mother Magda Weber was the first prioress and Sister Corona Schott the first Matron of this hospital.*

⁷ *A friend and benefactor of our Sisters in Albertushof.*

lectures to the pupil midwives free of charge, from the inception of the midwifery training school in 1947 until his retirement in 1956. This generous friend also attended many Sisters who came to him, even from other convents, and he was afterwards awarded the Bene Merenti Papal Medal in recognition of his countless benefactions.

The "Mater Dei" Private Hospital owes its very existence to the East London Doctors who have so nobly aided the nuns' endeavours. The Congregation would like to put on record its lasting gratitude to those medical practioners who have helped the Sisters give succour, for God's sake, to all who come to His Mother's Hospice.