



'BRING HIM TO BARRINGTON'S'

by Kevin Hannan

The recent calamitous closure of Barrington's Hospital brings to mind a number of near misses in its tortuous life when its very existence hung in the balance, even when the indispensable nature of its services was appreciated by almost everyone in Limerick. The records show that there was always a reluctance on the part of the powers-that-be, and indeed the community at large, to contribute sufficient funds for the operation of the hospital. Despite its enormous value as the first general hospital in the city, there was all too often an extraordinary apathy towards the maintenance of such a priceless gift.

In the 1860s, a shortsighted Limerick Corporation withdrew its annual grant of £400. The reasons for this drastic withdrawal of funds were barely whispered at the time. According to the *Limerick Chronicle*, in December, 1872, the newspaper did not 'wish to enter into the causes which led to this step on the part of the Council. Perhaps if it were taken now, the importance of the hospital and the duty of the Council would be regarded in a far different light'.

The loss of the Corporation grant was a body-blow to the governors of Barrington's, who had to struggle hard to keep the hospital open, particularly at times when there was no alternative to the vital services provided there, except for the very limited facilities available at the Workhouse Hospital ('the Poorhouse'), an incredible situation indeed! Even the mere thought of being carted off to the Workhouse kept many praying for the survival of Barrington's. A *Limerick Chronicle* correspondent, in 1872, asked:

"Would any gentleman send a sick domestic to workhouse hospitals, with their cold, bare, limewashed walls and unsympathetic associations - associations destructive of self-respect among the humbler classes? ... In Barrington's Hospital, on the contrary, the patient experiences all the comforts - perhaps much more than the comforts - of home: and there are facilities for the admission of relatives and the enjoyment of their society which the sick appreciate in a way that those who enjoy good health cannot understand."

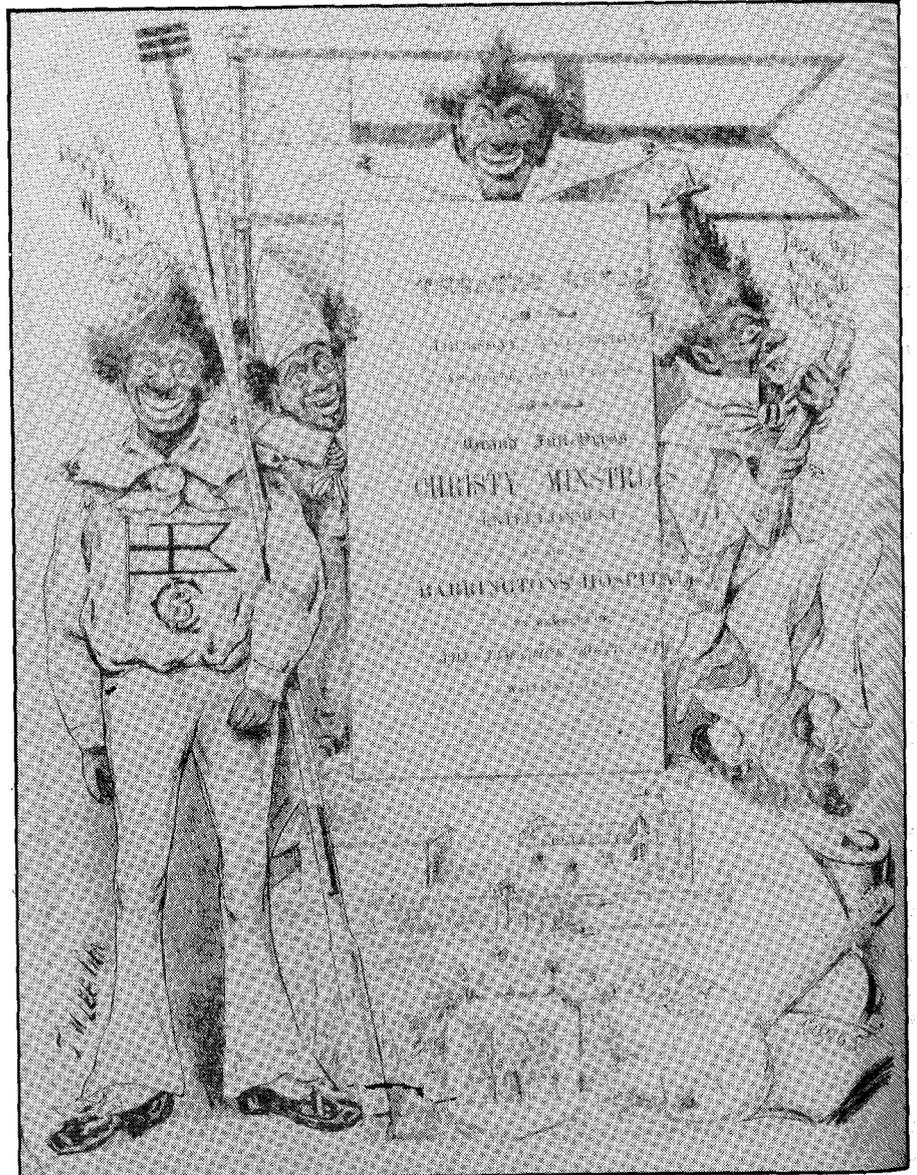
A curious bequest was made to the hospital in February, 1863, by the Marquis of Landsdowne. This gift of

£3,000 was subject to the condition that "... the hospital be open at all times to the natives of Co. Kerry'. Apparently, the interest on this money helped to maintain the institution during the hard times following the loss of the Corporation grant.

The sword was about to fall on the hospital at the beginning of 1879 when the Congregated Trades of the city were successful in influencing the Corporation to make an annual grant of £100 to Barrington's. Although this was only a quarter of the original grant, it was

sufficient to supplement other fund-raising projects with which the hospital governors had become masters during the years of struggle. However, small and all that the grant was, its legality was disputed in the courts.

After some lengthy legal arguments, Judge Fitzgerald requested the Finance Committee of the Corporation to inquire as to whether Barrington's Hospital was an institution where fever patients were admitted. At this meeting a number of people deposed that they were treated for fever at the hospital; these included Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, who declared that both his brother and himself had been fever patients there. No



Limerick Boat Club poster, advertising 1885 concerts in aid of Barrington's Hospital.



1890 memorial to Sir Croker Barrington in hospital ward.

doubt the Council members looked with a jaundiced eye on the Bard's testimony, and more than likely experienced a measure of disappointment at his recovery from whatever ailment he had suffered from.

Two governors of the hospital, Robert Hunt and James Alexander, gave evidence to the effect that Barrington's was well suited for the treatment of fever patients, and that no such patients had ever been refused admission. These depositions would seem to have been part of a plan to convince the committee members that Barrington's was a fever hospital, but doctors Parker and Bourke deposed that Barrington's had never been used as a fever hospital, and that it was devoted entirely to the treatment of surgical cases. Dr. Bourke, however, leaned towards the fever protagonists when he suggested that 'The upper part of the hospital was suited for the reception of fever patients owing to its isolation from the rest of the building and its thorough ventilation'.

Despite the Bard of Thomond's doubtful testimony, it was found that the Corporation's action in making a grant towards the hospital was quite legal. When the news of the Council's victory broke the citizens went wild with delight. The United Trade Guilds, with their colourful regalia, marched through the main city streets, headed by the Boherbuoy Brass and Reed Band. This monster demonstration, the biggest seen in the city since the charring of Spring Rice fifty-nine years before, converged on Bank Place, which was unable to contain the great crowd. The jubilant mass swelled into Charlotte's Quay, Michael Street and Rutland Street. The

crowd was addressed from the windows of the Mechanics' Institute by the officers of the Congregated Trades, including Con Fitzgerald and John Godsell. In the course of his address Mr. Fitzgerald said: 'The working classes had obtained that day in the Council chamber a great victory, and that those gentlemen of the Corporation who voted on the occasion deserved their gratitude.'

There was, he said, only one dissentient voice among the one and twenty who recorded their votes. Here there was a crescendo of shouting from the crowd to 'Name him, name him', but the speaker went on:

'A sentimental grievance was raised, but the guardians of the people's interest declared that they did not believe it and, as a proof, they voted for a grant for the hospital. What was more valuable than life? And those who would relieve the sufferings of others who met with accidents, which occur from time to time, were surely engaged in a high and noble mission. Their opponents would, if they could, dry up the stream of charity which had flowed for the past fifty years amongst the working classes from the source of Barrington's Hospital, where eight eminent physicians and surgeons give their services for the relief of suffering humanity without any pecuniary reward.'

Con Fitzgerald was loudly cheered before John Godsell came to the window to speak. He said he was here to:

'... thank the Corporation of Limerick on behalf of the working men; to thank Mr. Robert Hunt, Mr. John Quin and other gentlemen, not only for their private efforts, but for attending

that day before the Council. The trades had raised their voices against the closing of Barrington's Hospital and their voices had been heard that day, and a response given by the Corporation, to whom they felt very grateful. The trades were opposed to going to the Workhouse Hospital if any accident or sudden illness should come upon them and they were saved from what they considered would be a degradation.'

The jubilant crowds dispersed to their own areas around the city, and great bonfires blazed well into the night.

In the days following this victory, many people recovering from the shock of the near closure wondered how Limerick would have managed without Barrington's. Judging from John Godsell's remarks, the dreaded stigma of the workhouse was still as large as life, and for the ordinary people there was no acceptable alternative to the hospital: it was their refuge and sheet anchor in times of sickness and physical injury.

There is a strange and poignant analogy between this momentous episode in the chequered life of Barrington's and its final plunge beneath the tempestuous waves that had threatened it for so long. In 1879, a *Limerick Chronicle* reporter wrote:

'The people cannot be accused of ingratitude; when the fate of the hospital lay in the balance they thought of but one thing - of the incalculable benefits which for over half a century it had conferred on suffering humanity - of the incalculable injury which must result if this sphere of usefulness were limited or removed.'

In early 1988, our citizens showed the same concern when confronted with a similar crisis, but the Government brutally dismissed their pleadings and ignored the decision of the Irish parliament simply to gain its political ends. However, the triumph may yet prove to be a pyrrhic victory for the Government.

The Curry Lane Tragedy

It is sadly ironic that one of the first major tests of the hospital's services came with the Curry Lane tragedy in 1849, when 40 women paupers were killed and many more badly injured in the stampede that followed a false alarm of fire in the crowded Auxiliary Workhouse. Shutters and doors were freely given by the shopkeepers of Broad Street and by householders from the adjoining lanes to bring the dead and injured to Barrington's, two hundred yards away, where 'every respect was accorded the dead and every assistance given to the injured'.

House Collapse in John Street

Another major disaster in which the hospital figured was the house collapse in John Street in 1869, when five people



Garryowen Fair, June, 1895.

were killed and members of five families injured. The house was at the corner of Hatter's Lane on a site now occupied by the old Christian Brothers' school. All the injured were treated in Barrington's Hospital by Dr. Cavanagh and the resident Surgeon, Dr. Carey. The dead bodies of Thomas Harrold (14), Ellen Harrold (4), Mary Leary (55) and her son and daughter, Michael (27) and Ellen, were brought to the hospital mortuary.

At that time, the Corporation was blamed for the tragedy by closing its eyes to the decrepit state of the building in which five families resided. For some considerable time before the tragedy, complaints were made to the Corporation about the dangerous condition of many old cotted houses. A contemporary correspondent wrote:

'Some years before the Limerick Town Council had withdrawn a grant of £600 a year to Barrington's Hospital on the grounds of economy. The Council was now reminded that the hospital was now at hand to receive the victims of Corporation neglect.'

The Faction Fighters

While the badly injured faction fighters of the last century were brought to the County Infirmary, the overflow of patients were treated at Barrington's. These gladiators regarded their mutual skull-cracking as a form of entertainment and availed of every opportunity at fair or gathering to indulge in one of their favourite pastimes. These deadly encounters were more or less accepted as part of the rural scene. About 1928 a very old resident of Crosby Row, Ellen Davis, recalled her grandmother's description of the scene in Courthouse Lane, in the Abbey, when about a dozen badly injured faction fighters were lying on sacks awaiting treatment in the

County Infirmary. Dr. Sylvester O'Halloran summed up the situation as follows:

'I have had no less than four fractured skulls to trepan on a May morning. There is no part of the habitable globe, that for a century past afforded such an ample field for observation of injuries to the head as Ireland in general: this Province of Munster in particular, for our people invincibly brave, notwithstanding the cruel oppressions they have suffered for a century past, and highly irritable, soon catch fire: a slight offence is frequently followed by serious consequences; sticks and stones and every other species of offence next to hand, are dealt out with great liberality.'

The late Dr. Bill Dundon, the popular R.M.S. at the hospital during the 1920s, once said that the motor car (then in its infancy) was taking over the supply of casualties after the eventual reconciliation of the battle-weary faction fighters. How right he was proved to be!

Gunpowder Explosion

In January, 1837, Barrington's experienced its first great emergency when the hospital coped successfully with those injured in the O'Connell Street explosion which left ten people dead and scores injured. This dreadful accident occurred when a keg of gunpowder exploded in Richardson's ship chandlery at No. 1 O'Connell Street. It was said at the time that the death toll would have been greater were it not for the skill and care of the medical staff at Barrington's; and, of course, the staff had to receive and take care of the bodies and parts of bodies of the mutilated victims.

The Big Wind

The busiest night ever for the normally

hard-pressed staff of the hospital was Sunday night, 7 January, 1839. This was the night of the 'Big Wind', when hundreds of casualties were treated at Barrington's. Some came under their own steam; others, the more seriously injured, were brought on doors and shutters, or on the backs of stalwart assistants. Many suffered serious injury from flying slates or falling masonry.

Drowning Tragedies

Of the drowning tragedies with which the hospital is associated perhaps the most poignant was the Easter tragedy of 1906, when the bodies of five young victims, all in their twenties, were received in the morgue there. The party, which included two brothers, Edward and Thomas Browne, was thrown into the water when their ganlow capsized in a sudden gust of wind near Coonagh Creek, a few miles from the city. The other three victims were Frank Connery, Thomondgate, Thomas Creamer, Ellen Street, and Joe Lynch, Denmark Street. All the members of the party were fine swimmers, but were overwhelmed by the very strong current. Michael Punch, of Punch's Row, survived by clinging to the upturned boat which drifted near enough to the shore to make it possible for him to reach it by swimming.

In February, 1930, Barrington's received the bodies of the victims of the Plassey drowning disaster, John O'Connell, Thomas Anslow and Thomas Madden, three young salmon anglers who had been preparing all winter for the opening of the angling season. On their way home their boat struck one of the piers of Plassey Bridge and was broken to pieces.

The Shannon Scheme

The Shannon Scheme kept the hospital busy for five years from 1925. Injuries to



workers were all too many, as cost-cutting was often given precedence over personal safety. During that time hundreds of casualties were treated, and the bodies of the victims of the many fatal accidents received at the hospital.

Fishing Accidents

Many a happy fishing excursion ended in Barrington's surgery, with a nurse or doctor extracting a fish-hook from hand or face or leg. Panic usually followed a fish-hook accident, especially among boys. On the hook penetrating the flesh, the first thought was 'Barrington's'; companions of the injured party were sure to helpfully shout in a well-conditioned chorus: 'Bring him to Barrington's!'

Many amusing stories are told of such accidents. I once saw a tearful boy, with a fish-hook stuck in his jaw, running along the canal bank on his way to the hospital, his youthful companions running behind holding the bamboo fishing rod, with the line still attached to the hook. A nurse once told me of the time she helped a Barrington's house-doctor to extract a treble hook from a boy's nose, one of the hooks being buried in the septum. She went outside to the waiting room to inform his anxious companion to go home, as the patient would have to remain in the hospital for some time. The disappointed boy assured the nurse that he was only waiting for his hook!

A SINE QUA NON

The number and variety of casualties treated at Barrington's over the years is hardly computable by any equation. Even in the slow-moving nineteenth century injuries were many and varied. Human savagery made up for the effects of the fast-moving machinery of the twentieth century. The following is a list of some of the casualties of June 1880, written in the style of news reporting at that time:

'Mary Starkie was admitted by Dr. Holmes labouring under fracture of the hip joint from a fall she sustained on Saturday in Mungret Street, by a boy who knocked her down.'

On Sunday morning, between two and three o'clock, John Connors was admitted under the following circumstances. He suddenly got out of bed while in a state of spiritualised somnambulism and ran into a wall of his room, on which a large picture was hanging in a glassed frame, and drove his hand through the glass, the result being that he suffered frightful lacerations of the wrist, pieces of glass remaining in the torn flesh. Dr. Holmes, who dressed the wound, was a considerable time removing the pieces of glass he found embedded in the flesh. Several arteries of the wrist were severed, and the man's life is not out of danger.'

Catherine Hanrahan, residing in



Jackie Storan, John's Square, pictured on the steps of the hospital, c. 1910.

Courthouse Lane, Englishtown, was admitted to the same hospital on Saturday night last, labouring under concussion of the brain, with several scalp wounds, which she received from several blows inflicted upon her by a man named Henry Harty, aided by his wife, and her dangerous condition has led to the arrest of the latter pair and the taking of her depositions by a magistrate in their presence, as her life is in imminent danger.

Martin Minogue admitted with a dangerous head wound caused by



Sr. Joan Bluett and three of her young charges in the 1950s.

the vigorous application of an ash-plant during a row in Palmerstown.

Mary McElligott, of old Francis Street, admitted labouring under many fractures sustained in a fall, and the window underneath her own broke her fall but yet her life is despaired of.'

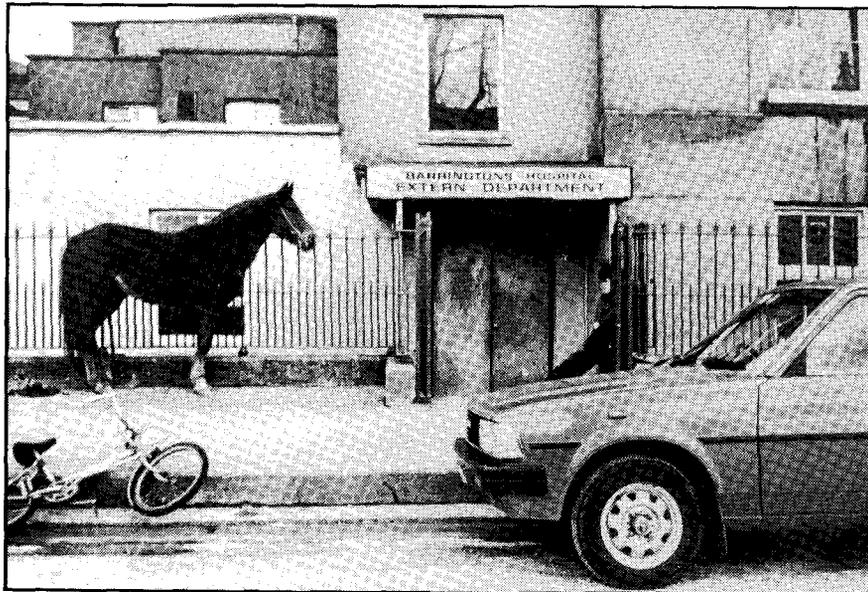
The following are some of the extern cases treated in the same period:

'Thomas Quinlan, wound on the cheek, received in a fight; Pat O'Grady, a wound over the left eye, received in a pugilistic encounter in a public house in the Irishtown; Thomas Murray, a scalp wound; a woman with a severe scalp wound, received in the Irishtown from her paramour.'

A watchman's diary of the same period sets out the following sad incident of his all-night vigil:

'Heard the unmerciful screams of a woman coming from an upper room of a house in Nicholas Street, at the corner of Pump Lane. As it was pitch dark, the sounds, now getting fainter, led me to the house. As I made for the stairs I was knocked down by someone fleeing from the house. I climbed to the room where, with the light of my candle I found a woman with her throat slashed lying on a bed. With the help of some neighbours, I brought her on a shutter to Barrington's, where she was found to be quite dead.'

Yes, Barrington's was there for everyone, dead and alive, at any time of the day or



All roads lead to Barrington's ... by motor, horse, bike and shank's mare.

night. Decomposed bodies of drowning victims and the mangled victims of industrial accidents and human depravity all found Christian respect there. The whole city depended on its services. It was more than a by-word in Limerick: it is now an enduring piece of Limerick history and folklore. It was a place of hope and trust, not alone for the patients, but for those outside, except, of course, during the nine months from July, 1832, when the hospital was taken over to cater for the fever patients during the dreadful cholera epidemic. The 'gentry', who resided on the other side of the Abbey River at Charlotte's Quay, objected to the coffins being brought from the mortuary 'in full view from their sitting rooms'. Strangely enough, the hospital authorities acceded to their request (demand?), and opened a mortuary at Mary Street, amid the teeming tenements of the working classes, whose feelings, no doubt, were no less sensitive to the sight of coffins than their better off class-conscious neighbours across the river.

Though the hospital building was completed in 1831, several months elapsed before it was ready to receive patients. In the meantime, the Night Watchmen were paid sixpence a week to keep an eye on the premises. Today there are no watchmen and very few police on the beat, and, despite the vigilance of a caring citizenry, the sad spectre of an empty and silent Barrington's elicited no vestige of sympathy from the vandals who destroyed the windows of the mortuary only a short time after the institution had lost the battle for survival. It was just like kicking someone on the ground.

By the closure of Barrington's, Limerick lost one of its most important institutions. Though few like visiting hospitals or being brought to one as a patient, Barrington's had a strange,

unaccountable friendliness that is hard to describe. Perhaps it was its ever-readiness to help everyone at all times of the day or night; or its high rate of success in the treatment of every type of injury that could befall a human being; or perhaps the feeling of homeliness in its wards, for most of its patients were near their places of abode. Some time in the 1930, the well known lecturer, Rev. Owen Dudley, at the end of a function in the Grand Central cinema, remarked to the late A.J. O'Halloran: 'What did Limerick people do before Barrington's?' If he were here to-day, he might well ask: 'How can the people of Limerick do without Barrington's?'

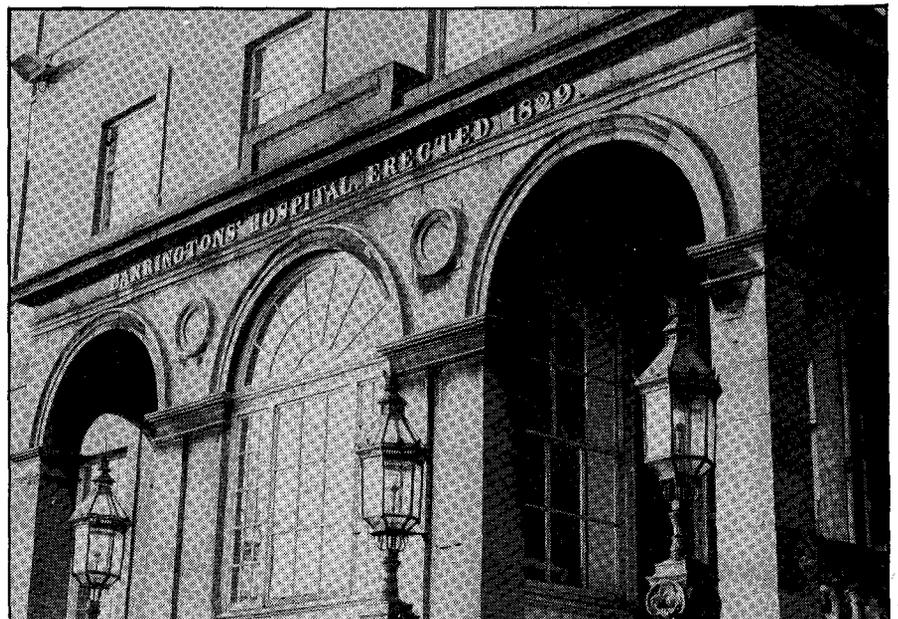
Before Barrington's was built, there was no hospital available for the reception of accident cases, which were always plentiful. The County Infirmary was invariably hard put to deal with rural

patients. It is very difficult to imagine how the people survived without medical services. Before Barrington's was founded, how many died needlessly from untreated injuries and illnesses? The Barrington family must have been only too well aware of this awful situation when they launched their great humanitarian charity.

St. John's Hospital was essentially a fever hospital, and even if there had been a hope of treatment there, people would hardly have risked the possibility of contagion; indeed, most people tried to keep as far away from it as they could. Part of this institution, known as the Lock Hospital, was open for the care of women suffering from venereal disease, an incurable complaint at that time and a sad circumstance that washed out every vestige of human vanity. For the sufferers it was a case of any port in a storm. St. John's was a place that was feared by those who had no immediate need of its services and doubly feared by those who had.

Barrington's was different: it was a colourful and essential part of the very life of Limerick people for nearly 160 years. Like St. John's, it was founded by a Limerick family for Limerick people. It gradually grew on the citizens, and was accepted for what it was - an institution that exuded hope and care. From the very beginning, injuries that might have previously proved fatal yielded to the prompt and effective treatment that was to give the hospital its respectability and prestige.

Apart from its traditional function as a first-class casualty station, it was a highly reputable general hospital where major operations were successfully carried out down the years. Hopeless lamentations for its passing will die only with the generation that remembers it for what it was - an old and true friend in need!



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