

Ballachulish Infectious Diseases Hospital (Craiglinnhe) Ballachulish



Craiglinnhe (above) was built in 1885. It is a former quarry master'sⁱ house which had been converted to MacMillan's Temperance Hotel by 1891.¹ That year, Dr Roger McNeil, MOH for Argyll, recommended providing 'isolation facilities' at Ballachulish. There was a considerable workforce at the Ballachulish slate quarries and, at the time, the nearest available provision was over 30 miles away in a 14 bed fever hospital in the grounds of Lorn Poorhouse in Oban.²

By 1898, several attempts to find a suitable site for a fever hospital had fallen through³ and an influenza epidemic that year made the need for local fever accommodation more apparent.⁴ In April 1901, Lornⁱⁱ District Committee acquired Macmillan's Temperance Hotelⁱⁱⁱ which had the advantage of being an isolated house but near the main road and

ⁱ From the Ballachulish Slate Quarries.

ⁱⁱ Lorn is the north part of Argyll.

ⁱⁱⁱ The proprietor, John Macmillan had sold up in 1900 to move to the south.

accessible.ⁱ It seems to have cost £1200 – the amount borrowed by the council – and the alterations, additions and repairs were completed by contractor Mr Rowan for £470.⁵ The half-acre site had outbuildings which were converted to mortuary, laundry, disinfecting room and shed for a horse ambulance although it appears that it did not have one until 1913. The building is unusually grand for a fever hospital of this periodⁱⁱ and, in 1903, it had only two 2-bed wards and two nurses' rooms fitted out. That year, it was at one point full with 4 enteric (typhoid) fever patients. A caretaker was employed at 5/- per week and there were two trained nurses and a 'local woman' employed, presumably for domestic work. In 1911, it had some refurbishment including the hot water system and a water bed and two cots were purchased.⁶ It had one nurse in 1913.⁷

Ballachulish ID Hospital
Patient statistics for selected years

	1909	1911	1928	1929	1937
Scarlet Fever	12	4	4	15	2
Diphtheria	2	4	2	6	1
Enteric fever	4	2	0	0	0
Pneumonia	0	0	3	6	2
Measles	0	0	2	5	0
Others	0	0	3	3	3
Annual total	18	10	14	35	8
In-patients at 31 Dec	0	0	1	7	1

Source Medical Officer of Health Reports

From 1904, the building of the Kinlochleven aluminium smelter and hydroelectric scheme brought many more people into the area and this further increased the need for local hospital accommodation. By 1927, the hospital had 20 beds, space for cots and a detached two bed wooden shelter for convalescents or to isolate smallpox cases (although the disease had virtually gone by then). A horse ambulance was still available

ⁱ A source in the National Records of Scotland states that the house was sold by the Quarrier Company Ltd (which ran the Ballachulish slate quarry) to Argyll County in 1901 but the MOH report uses the term acquired. The building is much grander than usual for a fever hospital especially within such an impoverished area. This suggests there was something unusual (but as yet uncovered) about its acquisition.

ⁱⁱ When it was sold in 1955 it had 3 public rooms and 8 bedrooms (4 in the attic).

but the county's motor ambulance was used for longer journeys thus extending the catchment area of the hospital. Dr Lachlan Grant was the medical officer to the hospital and a trained nurse was also caretaker.⁸ In 1928, patients stayed an average of 30 days in hospital which was typical of fever hospitals elsewhere.

In the 1940s, it still had about 20 beds with a resident matron and other staff employed as required.⁹ A local resident remembers being there at that time with scarlet fever but, by the end of World War 2, there were few infectious diseases cases and general medical cases were admitted from mid-1950. The capacity was now reduced to 12 beds but patient numbers averaged 10 or less and admissions included thrombosis, asthma, chest infections, and gastric cases.¹⁰ Patients were mainly elderly chronic sick and it provided 'very little in the way of active treatment for the local inhabitants'.¹¹ Some refurbishment occurred around this time and electric light was installed in March 1952.

During this change in function, the matron was Miss Sarah MacDougallⁱ who had been there since 1948 and matron since 1950. The local GP, Dr Mackenzie, was medical officer and there were 4 domestic staff (cook, part time handyman, ward orderly and maid), two NHS nurses and two agency nurses.¹²

From at least 1950, the local health board wanted to close the hospital and transfer patients to a new facility at Glencoe Hospital which would be created by converting its redundant electric plant house and garages. Although they identified the need to keep the facility quite separate in staffing from the maternity in the main building, the Western Regional Health Board rejected the idea, causing some apparent friction between the two boards.

A main reason given for closing the hospital was its high running costs but there were other issues. In 1950, Dr Mackenzie, local GP and hospital medical officer, noted that the lack of water in summer was normal and that cans of water had to be carried from Ballachulish village.

ⁱ Matron at Raigmore Hospital, Inverness from March 1941 - July 1945.

In August 1953, water shortages were exacerbated by a period of low rainfall and the building's other inadequacies as a geriatric hospital were now apparent. Administrative costs were high due to the hospital's isolation. There were too few toilets and bathrooms and it was a fire risk, not only to bed ridden patients on the first floor, but to the staff who were quartered on the second floor up a narrow stairway. The problems for staff had been previously highlighted during some sharp exchanges between the health board and the Royal College of Nursing which also noted the lack of sitting room, lack of transport for nurses to and from the hospital, no coal fire upstairs and no wireless.

It was thought that the cost of a new water supply, although apparently not excessive, could not be justified and the hospital was closed in August 1953. There seems to have been little, if any, local consultation on this and a Ballachulish Hospital Protest Committee was set up which campaigned unsuccessfully to have the hospital reopened. Dr Mackenzie seems to have reflected local opinion when he wrote that there were now no geriatric facilities locally and that the hospital only required a water supply to put it right.

At this point, the health board seemed to have no strategy for accommodating local geriatric patients other than in Dalintart Hospital Oban, the former poorhouse, to which most of the remaining Ballachulish Hospital patients were transferred.ⁱ The mortuary was no longer used once the hospital closed and the outbuilding became a separate property, Craiglinnhe Cottage. In August 1955 the Ballachulish Hospital was sold for £2500 and converted to residential property.¹³ It is now the Craiglinnhe Guest House.¹⁴

ⁱ In 1955, maternity facilities opened in Oban allowing Glencoe Hospital to convert partly to a geriatric facility.

References

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- ³ Oban Times 30 May 1896
- ⁴ County of Inverness Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1898
- ⁵ Oban Times 12 Oct 1901, 20 Sep 1902, 14 Feb 1903
- ⁶ County of Argyll Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1913: 1903: 1911 Argyll Archives
- ⁷ McNeil, Dr R County of Argyll Medical Officer of Health in Dewar Report p387
- ⁸ County of Argyll Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1927 Argyll Archives
- ⁹ Gregor M and Crichton R From Croft to Factory Edinburgh 1946 p67
- ¹⁰ Ballachulish Isolation Hospital Admission Book 1949 - 1953 Argyll and Bute Archives
- ¹¹ Ballachulish Hospital Miscellaneous papers National Records of Scotland
- ¹² NHS5/6/56 Argyll Archives
- ¹³ Ballachulish Hospital Miscellaneous papers Argyll Archives
- ¹⁴ Mr D Hughes proprietor of Craiglinnhe. Personal communication 14 September 2009 – and previous owners (name unknown) verbally on 10/9/11