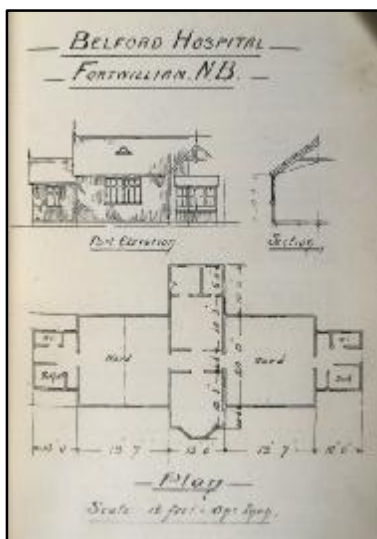


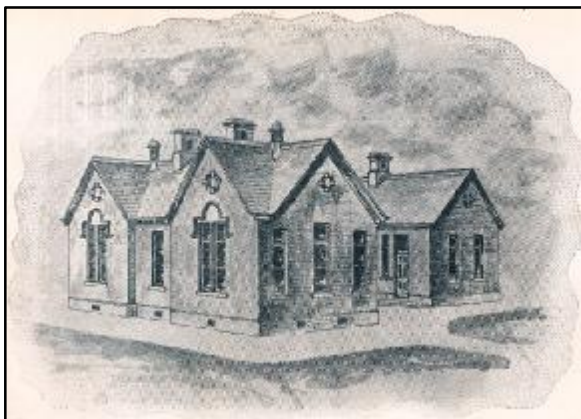
Lochaber Fever Hospital, Fort William

In common with many rural areas, Lochaber was generally free from infectious diseases in the 19th century. When the Belford Hospital opened in 1865 it contained two fever wards but these appear to have been little used. In 1889, a Local Government Act of Parliament made local authorities (Fort William Burgh and Lochaber District) responsible for providing fever hospital accommodation and, from at least 1891, the Belford Hospital trustees had an agreement with the two local authorities for the use of their fever ward.¹



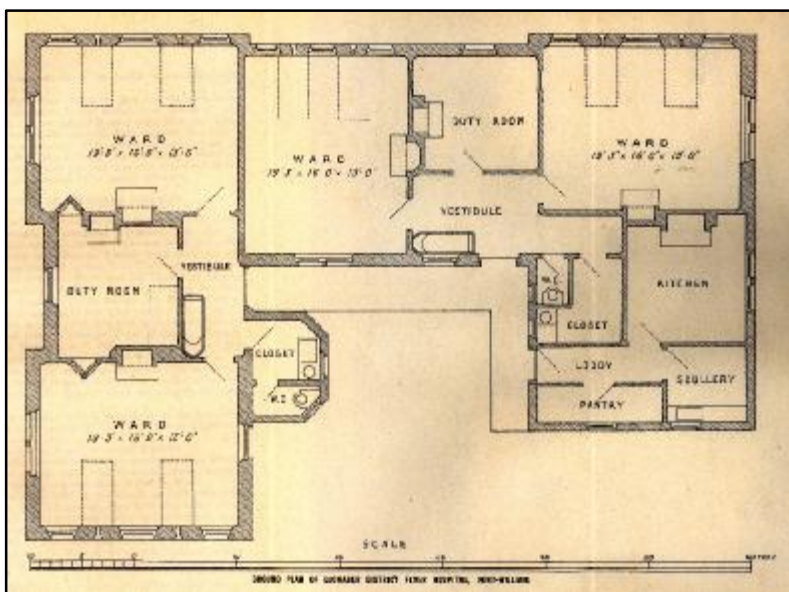
In 1893, the Belford trustees and the two local authorities built a fever hospital in the grounds of the hospital (left). It was purchased from Humphreys of Knightsbridge, London, and was corrugated iron clad and the interior lined with polished wood and felt. It had two four-bed wards separated by a nurse's room and kitchen. At the end of each ward was a bathroom, WC and sink. Lighting was by gas and the wards, kitchen and nurse's room were heated by central stoves. Each ward could be isolated to allow for two different diseases to be

treated. There were moveable ventilation vents and a disinfecting chamber and laundry. The hospital was opened in May 1894 and was in use four times that year for fever outbreaks. However, in subsequent years, it seems to have been little used.² An 'ambulance carriage' for up to two fever patients was purchased in 1896 for £56.³ In October 1900, the building was destroyed by fire apparently due to a faulty flue. Four patients were safely moved out and the damage was assessed at £1,000 including compensation of £3 to a patient whose clothes had been destroyed.⁴



The trustees then built, on the same site,ⁱ an eight bed infectious diseases hospital of composite bricks, slated roof and sash windows (left) which was completed in summer 1901 and connected to mains electricity in August 1902. The architect

was James Falconer, Blairgowrie, who had a local office and the contractors appear to have been local.ⁱⁱ It was for 'patients resident in Lochaber District and Fort William Burgh'. It had four two-bed wards and a separate kitchen, WCs and portable baths (see plan below).⁵



ⁱ No other convenient site could be found. By 1908, the Medical Officer of Health considered it to be too close to the general hospital.

ⁱⁱ Donald Fraser, slater; Robert Harper, plumber; Donald McColl, mason.

The Belford trustees owned and ran the hospital and the local authorities contributed to costs each paying, in 1916, £25 towards the building and doctor's salary. This was an increase of £5 over previous years and provoked intense discussion with an apparent lack of communication between the two authorities, not unusual at the time in many parts of the country.⁶ There was a considerable degree of flexibility in the arrangement, essential in coping with unexpected outbreaks of infectious disease. By 1909, Lochaber District owned five TB sheltersⁱ which were loaned out and at least one was located in the hospital grounds. That year, it had a patient from the infectious diseases hospital which was full up because of a scarlet fever outbreak.⁷ The outbreak meant employing a probationer nurse specifically for the fever hospital.⁸ In October 1912, there were 20 infectious diseases in-patients during an outbreak of scarlet fever implying that the main hospital wards must also have been used.

Apart from such outbreaks of disease, it seems that the fever hospital was infrequently used. In the early part of the century the local Medical Officer of Health noted that only a small percentage (typically 5-10%) of fever cases were removed to hospital. This was sometimes because the family refused but more often the distance involved made the journey too onerous.

In 1929, the Inverness County Medical Officer of Health reviewed health services and noted that the eight bed hospital was 'entirely unsuited' to its purpose, a view shared by local medical staff. The building was damp despite attempts to resolve it and, internally, it 'did not even remotely conform to modern requirements'. This included sanitation and disinfection issues which were described as 'decidedly primitive' from a hospital viewpoint. By then, a St Andrews ambulance was based at the Belford which was also used for fever cases.

After the 1929 Local Government Act, public health was administered by Inverness County Council which continued the practice of leasing the building on an annual basis as well as contributing towards staff

ⁱ Lochaber was the first in Inverness shire to do this.

salaries and paying a fee for each patient.⁹ However, it was clear that the County favoured centralising treatment in its main fever hospital at Culduthel, Inverness and, when this happened, the Belford Fever Hospital would close.

In the early 1930s, there were widespread epidemics of scarlet fever and diphtheria and the fever hospital was unusually busy. The standard treatment for such diseases was a six week stay, twice that in general hospitals, and this limited overall capacity although in-patient numbers still seem low and they varied considerably (see table). Nevertheless, as with fever hospitals elsewhere, it was often little used, for example, in 1933, it sat empty for 117 days, and most infectious diseases cases continued to be treated at home.¹⁰

Year	Patients
1932	38
1933	22
1934	7
1935	30

From at least early 1932, there were definite plans to close the hospital and this provoked protests within Fort William especially from parents.¹¹ The epidemics may have been enough to delay closure plans but, in 1934, the Belford Hospital managers, presumably in recognition of the defects of its fever hospital, gave the County Council notice and the fever hospital closed in May 1936.¹² It sat empty and, in 1939, an architect's report recommended its demolition.¹³ Again it was saved and it became a wartime emergency centre and first aid post. From the late 1940's, attempts were made to convert it into a maternity unit but extensive dry rot was discovered and it was demolished in 1953.

References

- ¹ County of Inverness Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1891 p15
- ² County of Inverness Medical Officer of Health Annual Reports: National Records of Scotland HH62
- ³ Fort William Public Health Committee Minutes
- ⁴ Scotsman 15 October 1900 - Page 6
- ⁵ County of Inverness Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1900 Highland Archive Service: Macgregor, E. *The Belford Hospital* West Highland Museum Fort William 1948 Highland Archive Service: Belford Committee Minutes: www.scottisharchitect.org.uk
- ⁶ Oban Times 9 December 1916 courtesy of Jean Cameron
- ⁷ Belford Committee Minutes: County of Inverness Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1909 Highland Archive Service
- ⁸ Belford House Committee Minutes Highland Archive Service
- ⁹ Belford Hospital 1st Annual Report 1933
- ¹⁰ County of Inverness Medical Officer of Health Annual Report HAS : Belford Committee Minutes
- ¹¹ Aberdeen Journal 2 March 1932
- ¹² Gregor M and Crichton R *From Croft to Factory* Edinburgh 1946
- ¹³ Belford House Committee Minutes 5 April 1939