

Introduction

The ancient burgh of Nairn lies on the south coast of the Moray Firth where the coastal plain of the Laigh of Moray narrows and the constraining influence of the hills to the south made this one of Scotland's smallest counties and burghs. However, for a town of only around 3,000 inhabitants, Nairn showed considerable confidence and ability in establishing, in 1847, Highland's second hospital. This was even more remarkable given that Nairn was only 16 miles from Highland's

**First opening dates of hospitals
in Scotland**

1729	Edinburgh Infirmary
1733	Glasgow Town
1742	Aberdeen Infirmary
1776	Dumfries & Galloway Infirmary
1782	Montrose Royal Infirmary
1798	Dundee
1804	Northern Infirmary
1805	Paisley
1807	Greenock
1819	Grays Hospital Elgin
1835	Balfour Hospital Kirkwall
1838	Perth
1845	Ayr and Kelso
1847	Nairn Town and County

first hospital, the Northern Infirmary, which opened in 1804.¹ As the table (left) shows, Nairn is prominent in the list of places in Scotland which had hospitals by the mid-19th century.

Part of Nairn's confidence no doubt came from its rising prominence as a Victorian seaside resort, promoted by the famous Dr Grigor and enhanced, in 1855, by the railway connection to Inverness which brought people of substance to holiday, and sometimes to settle, in the

town. As with Inverness, Nairn had ex patriots, especially military men in Bengal, who were willing to send home donations to its hospital. Nairn's Town and County Hospital was followed by other Highland hospitals. Some, as in Nairn, were set up by voluntary associations but most were established by wealthy individuals or families. All were established by the start of the First World War.

¹ Earlier 'hospitals' such as Dunbar's in Inverness were essentially almshouses.

The 1845 Poor Law established Parochial (later Parish) Boards² which, as well as providing for the poor, steadily accrued powers to deal with disease outbreaks and other public nuisances as they were quaintly called (and still are). In 1861, the four Nairn Parochial Boards combined with neighbouring parishes to open Nairn Combination Poorhouse. Combinations, or unions, were common in the Highlands where, apart from Inverness, parishes were too small to support their own poorhouse. As elsewhere, Nairn Poorhouse, later renamed Balblair Home, accrued its share of the chronic sick. In 1948, some former poorhouses became hospitals for the chronic sick within the NHS and the last one in Highland at Migdale, Bonar Bridge, finally closed its original building as recently as 2011. Others, like Balblair, remained within the Local Authority as residential homes although Balblair Home retained some Health Board chronic sick cases well into the 1960s.

The 1889 Local Government Act transferred public health responsibilities from parishes to the larger Districts, County Councils and Burghs. Therefore, when the new Nairn Town and County hospital opened in 1906, Nairn Burgh and County found a use for the old building to accommodate infectious diseases cases. Nairn, like other small local authorities, struggled to finance fever hospitals. The 1889 Act also made Medical Officers of Health compulsory, a post of prime importance for local authorities in coordinating their own infectious diseases facilities with other local health services. These included voluntary hospitals, voluntary district nursing associations and charities such as the Red Cross. Nairn's small size made this relatively easy but it led to its loss of independence after its forced union with Moray when the 1929 Local Government Act created larger local authorities.

Nairn's loss of independence as a local authority seemed to generate a local impression, which still persisted in the 1970s, that it became rather peripheral, evidenced by the apparent neglect of the poorhouse and the closure of the fever hospital in 1937 in favour of centralisation in Elgin. Nairn successfully avoided the attempt to incorporate its hospitals into the North East health board along with Moray and this allowed it to

² These were the forerunners of modern local authorities.

continue access to the specialist facilities in nearby Inverness. However, from the 1980s onwards, there is much evidence of attempts to centralise health services in Inverness and of Nairn's resistance to this. The Highland Health Board's attempt to close Nairn maternity beds in the 1980s required a long and hard fight and the resilience of the local and medical Nairn community has resulted in the recent substantial rebuild of the hospital.

The Northern Counties Convalescent Home at Tradespark, established in 1882, operated almost continuously as a voluntary association until the 21st century. Although the provision of convalescent beds was initially seen as a priority for the new NHS in the early 1950s, the Home was not considered large enough to be useful. However, the Health Board kept it well supplied with referred patients for whom it paid, and this kept it economically viable. However, two attempts by the Home to be incorporated into the NHS were turned down by the Secretary of State for Scotland and it closed in 2004, ultimately a victim of its small size and related disproportionate running costs.



The new Nairn Town and County Hospital under construction in 1906