End of line for ‘Blue Funnel’ hospital

CLOSURE of the former naval hospital at Eastney brings the curtain down on a building steeped in naval history.

St Nicholas’s stout portals admitted generations of patients and their selfless carers. The first to be treated there — wounded sailors returning from the Battle of Copenhagen — were visited by Nelson.

Shipmate Harry Lamer, chairman of the Great Yarmouth branch, said Nelson — a Norfolk man and deeply concerned about the welfare of sailors — played a key role in establishing the hospital which is now up for sale.

Work began on the building in 1800, on 270 acres of reclaimed sand dunes known as the Denes. It was completed in 1811 at a cost of £120,000.

At one stage it was used to confine French prisoners of war, whose craft work is on show at the local maritime museum.

When in 1844 the military lunatic asylum at Rochester was found to be unsuitable, the hospital was converted to house them, end by the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, the hospital catered for all mentally ill servicemen.

After the Army pulled out at the end of the 1960s the hospital catered for the mentally ill of the RN and RM and later became known — although incorrectly — by Servicemen as “The Blue Funnel Hospital.”

During the Second World War patients were evacuated, the building renamed HMS Watchful and used as a naval base.

In 1968 it was transferred to the National Health Service, and renamed again as St Nicholas’s.

Despite its changing roles St Nicholas’s Hospital has never lost its distinctive naval character. Although the site now occupies only 11 acres, the chapel and clock tower remain virtually unchanged and the wards still boast the names of famous admirals such as Nelson and Rodney.

Nor is it surprising to know that the hospital has generated its own collection of ghost stories, one of its most distinguished residents being a naval captain who is said to be seen roundings at night in full ceremonial dress!

Ghosts or not, the Great Yarmouth branch is said that the town’s historic link with the Navy is now in the hands of auctioneers. Before they took over, members of the branch attended a de-consecration of the hospital chapel and honoured the memory of RN patients treated there and the shipmen for whom they cared.

Haverhill’s happy new year

DISGUISED as Santa Claus, Haverhill branch secretary, Shipmate Gerry Plumridge, helps to raise funds for the Children’s Ward of the West Suffolk Hospital.

The branch manned the Santa grotto in Haverhill shopping precinct in the run-up to Christmas, proceeds going to the children’s ward which specialises in treating leukaemia.

Haverhill is a new branch which has recruited 37 members since its formation on October 5. Its commissioning came about through the efforts of five members of Sawston branch who tried of making the 40-mile round trip to attend meetings at Sawston.

HPs back ex-Service care plea by Legion

YEARS-LONG campaigning by The Royal British Legion has come a step closer to success with the support of an all-party group of MPs for better Government co-ordination of care for ex-Service people.

Twelve cross-party MPs were the original signatories to a Commons Early Day Motion which called for a Sub-Department of Ex-Service Affairs within an existing Ministry.

At present ex-Service people have to deal with any one of 17 Government departments, each in a different building, 60 miles away, to get their affairs sorted.

At a round-up at Westminster last October, MPs from across the House debated the Motion and decided to support it.

Doctor, parliamentary expert, Dr MacArthur, said: ‘It is time, and the time is right, for the Government to envisage a Department of Ex-Service Affairs, which I believe should exist.

‘This is the chance for the Government to step up and provide a service for our ex-Service people and to get the details right right up to what we believe is the best way that they should be given an Ex-Services Department which stands up to the level that their service and the sacrifices that they have made require.’

Under fire

A recent report from the House of Commons Commission on Ex-Service Affairs has been slammed by the Legion.

The report, which was the result of a year-long inquiry, is critical of the way the Government is providing care for ex-Service people and states that they have been left out of the recent shake-up of the Health Service.

The report states: ‘The Government has failed to give adequate priority to ex-Service people in its plans to reform the Health Service. This is a failure on the part of the Government and a tragedy for ex-Service people.

‘We have to see a change of direction, a change in the way the Government is providing care for ex-Service people, and a change in the way it is providing care for ex-Service people.’

Smartest bearer

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