

Robert Gordon's Notebook 1918 – 1950s

(Robert Gordon was a Hall Porter. Contents of notebook transcribed as written, spelling mistakes included!)

Preface: The notes contained in this book are all written from memory and so may contain inaccuracies, but none willingly given. RG

The Past Thirty Years and Seven

When I first started work for the Board in January 1918, the old building was much the same as originally builded. The wards were then, from what is known as Ward one to six, but were known by their native names, vis. Hinemoa, Rotorua, Arawata, Waiwera, and Fraser (Wd 6) and ward 5, the Allen. Eye ward was completed but not opened. Ward 6 was the only upstairs ward, and believe it or not, the lift at the Ward five end of the corridor was hauled up by a windlass. One had to put the patient in a chair, a basket work three wheeled affair, place him or her in the lift and climb a ladder to the top of the lift well and two of us would have to turn the handles until the patient and chair plus escort came up to the level of Ward six, and the faster the other man turned you had to keep up with him literally for your stomach's sake, or a belt in that region from the handle was the penalty for trying to go slow.

What is now the Photography Department was the diphtheria ward off Ward 6. Seddon was the TB Ward and what is now the Ewart TB was the Fever Ward. The present Infectious Diseases Hospital was not built or at least not in operation. At the back of Seddon Ward were several wooden shelters for TB cases. All the Eye Ward cases including TA cases were done (that is operation cases) in either the Children's Theatre or in the Main Theatre.

During the 1914-1918 War, the Children's Theatre was largely used for Military cases requiring operation. The patients being wheeled down from the Victoria Ward which was then a Military Hospital to the Children's Ward by an orderly of the Medical Corps. In those days it caused quite a sensation when the daily patients book reached a total of three hundred patients. I think it was during the 1918 influenza epidemic if I remember rightly. It was during those days that was the only time I ever saw the front door locked day and night with a porter at the inside to open and shut it after the caller. The poor porters at the front door then worked in two shifts of twelve hours each from 8am to 8pm with two men on each with one extra man on the telephone exchange during the day. The most of us worked the following hours, 8am to 5pm, with a half day one week, and the weekend Saturday afternoon the following week. In addition to this, once a week one came back for two hours on the telephone exchange to learn that business and also once or sometimes twice in a week starting at 8am or 7 am if you carried a breakfast, work all day at your own job, then go on the front door duty till 10pm, sleep in (in order to be on duty if wanted) to carry out any one who died or watch a lunatic or chase an escapee if necessary. Then it did not matter how many times you were called out during the night or if you got no sleep at all, you still had to do your work the next day until 5pm which often seemed to be an awful long time coming round. All for £2.10.0 a week and meals and no overtime. Speaking about meals, in those "good old days" the food to all the wards (including Victoria and Childrens) was carried (by a porter) in a large tin with a lid upon which were placed the pie dishes with sweet custards on top. The whole of which was supported by a broad strap of leather round the porter's neck, hooking into two handles on the tin. And in addition to that there was a jug of soup (the kitchen was then where Ward 3A is now) to carry in the right hand, and believe me those concrete steps leading from the yard to the Children's wards and the zig-zag to Victoria Wards took a lot of negotiating especially in wet weather or very hot weather. I never heard of anyone whistling the "British Grenadiers" going up there, although I often suggested the probability of it. All patients were carried from the ambulance or whatever conveyance they came in, sometimes even the Hansom Cab, on a stretcher to the surgery at the left of the front door (where Ward 21 runs out now), and then to the Ward. By means of the stretcher and two straps over the shoulders of the bearers, Ward six included sometimes. Quite a good weight to carry too, very often. I remember once wondering

what made a man so hard to lift into a chair at the front door, until we discovered he was hanging on the Handsome Cab and we were trying to lift both.

Deceased persons were carried out on stretchers and straps in the same manner, but not the same stretchers.

The milk supply had to be carried in two buckets on a yoke across the shoulders to various wards from Ward one entrance where it was taken on a barrow. In wet weather a poor kind of a joke.

The dairy was where the sewing rooms in the yard are now. Speaking of the telephone exchange, we once had one which had shutters which dropped when a call was made and one day the telephone man had to leave the office for a few minutes. So he put in a porter who did not know anything about it in charge, but he did not know of the man's ignorance of the matter, so when he came back he asked him Any shutters dropped down? Oh yes said he, well what did you do? Asked the telephone man, "pushed them up again" (?) and his ignorance. At one time there was a bust of the late John Blundell standing on a wooden pedestal which stood between Ward one and two in the main corridor. Once or twice it was bowled over and broken once through accident and once through someone seeing something he did not like, out of the corner of his eye. And hauling off and letting drive at it in the half darkness of the said old corridor.

In 1918, I think the full strength of the porters was 16 altogether. The Children's Porter of which there was only one included amongst other duties the chopping wood and filling coal scuttles for some 12 fire places as well as cleaning them out. I know because I had to do it. Also carry a breakfast at seven am, working till 4pm and sometimes later. The porters of those days were a fairly tough crowd. When I was in charge of the Men's Quarters a fight was quite a common occurrence and gambling was by means of cards played till very late and sometimes all night. I do not know what a modern dietitian would have said about a plate of stew being thrown against the dining room wall as sometimes did happen. At that time the Mens Dining Room was supplied with enamel plates and mugs and some oil cloth on the tables. It was the late Mrs Snow who was instrumental in getting china plates cups and saucers and table cloths for the men then. On one occasion two men came into the dining room, one pushing a wheel barrow on which the other man was standing. All round the room whilst the men were at tea, cutting their chairs from under them and cheerfully offering to fight anyone who objected. On another occasion, I was going upstairs and I heard the remark "Look out here he comes" so I made way, politely, for another man who stopped two full buckets of water. It was fortunately a warm summer day. Upon getting upstairs there were two big six foot men literally throwing buckets of water over each other. All horse play of course. Whereupon I told them, "look here you fellows, throw as much water as you like at each other, and as long as you clear up the mess I won't say a word about it." Well they did too. Not a spot left anywhere. Tough fellows but good men in the main. Used to play up and no more about it. Another duty that fell to the porters was that of assisting the storeman to unload cartloads of flour and sugar. In fact, the storeman of that day used to say the the porters had the finest sense of smell of any men he ever knew. He averred that they could smell a load of flour coming round the Basin Reserve because as sure as that flour arrived not a porter could be found.

Poor old Gincraft, the Head Porter, used to have to chase all round the place recruiting men for the job as he could find them. I remember on one occasion seeing six men get out of one of the ambulances after I and two other men had carried in a whole cart load of flour. I was not amused.

About twenty years ago I accompanied an old man to Ward five, and, on the way up he was talking to me about the old building. He stated that he had been either the Contractor, or, the Clerk of Works for that part of the Hospital. So I asked him what made them run all the wards out to the southwards side, that is the cold side of the place. "Oh, said he, the reason for that was that the plans were made in England where the south is the side that gets all the sun, and those folks of that day did not think of turning the plans round." So I suppose he was in a position to know. It sounded logical enough to me.

Underneath the older wards bricks can still be seen which were made by convict labour from clay obtained from the site of Government House (formerly a Lunatic Asylum called Mount View) and probably baked at Mount Cook or Terrace Gaols. They still have the broad arrow upon them as a kind of trademark.

The old boiler house was in the yard where the Plaster Room and Eye Ward extensions are. There was one Robert Scott, a fireman there, since dead, who was a real 'character'. One day he was stooping down doing something to the pumps used to fill the boilers. I quite innocently asked as one always does under the circumstances, "Are your pumps not working Bob?" Whereupon he rose in his wrath with a face the colour of a red blanket, roared like the bulls of Bashan in his broad Doric tongue "What is the matter wi ye. Had ye been drinking." I did stop, not to deny the soft impeachment but stood not upon the order of my going.

The House Surgeons of those days were some lads too. At one time they had a party and decided that they would dispose of the piano by throwing it out of the window. They got it up on end at the window but suddenly changed their minds or else the Avurdupoise of that instance was too great. And so left it until the morning and then it was too late.

The old laundry was situated where Engineers Offices etc now are. The stable for the old horse "Darkey" was at the back of there. This horse had a playful way of making a grab at you with his teeth if you did not watch him or else he would run back with the cart. Evidently with the amiable intention of crushing you against the wall. His driver used to say it was only playfulness. But I for one wouldn't take his word for that. When they disposed of him Mr Mkiridy offered both him (horse) and cart to me as a free gift. But I respectfully declined it, having no use for a cannibalist around of that kind.

The old mortuary was built slightly to the left of the present building and it was qualified for an old age pension before I started here and it was old in every sense of the word. An odiferous place.

Here is a description of the old grounds about 1918. As one entered the old front gate (still standing) the driveway swept away in a curve to the right and left. Up the centre was a broad foot path and about half way up there was a fish pond with a fountain in it. Guarded by netting (to keep out Homo Sapiens Junior) and at the end of that path were two flights of stairs curving on to a partly ivy-clad balustrade terrace at the foot of which was a row of small box trees which the Head Gardener when asked what they were would reply "Thems Mortal Gorgers" – it was evidently a humorous remark. At the top of the steps, stood the bandstand.

The road that we left curving away from the gate, the right-hand one, went away past the laboratory building and main theatre to the old front door and Ward 5 then swung round sharply to the right reached the yard. The left-hand road went up the nurses home and the Children's Wards etc. In between the road and the pathways in the front were green lawns and in between the roads above the terrace were two large lawns shaded by huge pine trees and bordered by beds of red geraniums and silvia bonfire plants. Brilliant scarlet against the green of the lawn and the grey of the asphalt paving of the paths. They were indeed beautiful. In fact the whole place was lovely to look at. Round past the old front door on the left hand side was a small lawn with a fountain and fish pond and there were seats there and it was sheltered from the north. By a hedge and a background of rhododendrons and azaleas and in the middle at the back of these stood a large magnolia tree with big white blossoms. The seat at the back of the fountain was a favourite haunt of a business like kingfisher who used sit like an image on the rail of the seat and suddenly he would dive straight into the pond and come up to digest a goldfish of which the pond contained many. The pond never became overcrowded by reason of that bird's activity. One Sunday evening many years ago, an elderly gentleman highly respectably dressed came to the enquiry office holding a pickle jar and a small net (so beloved by small boys), and said to me "See here my man, take this net and jar, and go and catch me a dozen of those goldfish". So I soothed him by saying that I couldn't leave the office just then but to come up in the morning and the Head Gardener would give him all the goldfish he wanted. He certainly would have received some information if not fish.

There was also a road which went to the left of the bandstand to the old Dental Department which was in old Hospital Road leading from Adelaide Road. This was formerly the Outpatients Dep't, I believe. This road was a straight one bordered by turf and with flower beds here and there and a by path went to the kitchen garden where the tennis courts now are. Where there is now a green sward between Dr Shirer's house and the front gate on one side (to the north) was a paddock covered with fennel and other noxious weeds, and the south side where the new front block is

was another paddock in which stood a building occupied by the Carrara Ceiling Company. I understand that in earlier times it was occupied by the Wellington Glass Factory. In after years the fennel covered space referred to was a children's playground. Next to the old Dental Department stood a house occupied by the Chief Engineer and at one time by the House Steward of that day, Mr Fox.

Looking back at the layout of the building one cannot help thinking what a vast difference it would have made had it been possible to continue the old plan and run the wards out to the north and south and build them several stories high and thus consolidate all the transport and spare endless and unnecessary shifting of patients and transport of food, stores, etc. For example, the old corridor from the Ward one end to the left of Ward five is three hundred feet or one hundred yards and I believe that the distance from the front door to the Children's Wards is four hundred and forty yards - a quarter of a mile. I do not know for a certainty, but so I have heard. The plans would give details of that.

Amongst other items of interest: Here is the height of the Hospital chimney 143 feet. That I know is official, having taken the trouble to ascertain the fact.

Hospital life has its humour too. Not so long ago, a young man came up to the enquiry office and asked me for some water. Do you feel faint said I. Come with me I'll get you a glass of water from the Casualty Ward, and believe it or not, on the way in he produced a urine specimen bottle and remarked "The doctor told me to put some water in this". So I took him to the doctor and said "This man tells me that he has to put some water in this bottle. Would you mind telling him where he can get it from"

Another time I remember working in the theatre many years ago and a man had his broken jaw set. He started to "come round" and the very first words he uttered were "It is simply preposterous". Needless to say he was a Scotsman. Of all the words in the dictionary he had to choose that one.

One day I was taking a man on a chair to one of the wards. He knew me slightly and said "Gordon, I no come in to die". So I told him not to be dashed silly, but to cheer up as one never knew what was in front of him. I certainly did not. For as we went round the corner, one of the porters was carrying a skeleton not wrapped up in any way. Well, I think that was the one time in my life I was "stuck" for an answer.

Before the days of "Bulletins" all enquiries were made by the telephonist at the front door. There was a Chinese patient in one of the wards and his friends were always ringing up about him. He was improving for several days and then took a turn for the worse and died. Mr Stead rang them up and told them he had passed away. "Pass away" was the answer, "what that mean." Oh said Stead, he has died. So the Chinese friend said "What him die of. Did he die of improving".

One day when we had a daily bulletin made up it was a part of my duties to take them round the wards. There was a man who had died on the Friday night. But on Sunday morning the Sister had him down as "Progressing favourably". Whereupon I kept a straight face and asked have you heard from the man's sister? No said she, what do you mean? Well, I remarked, he died on Saturday and he is progressing favourably today. I thought perhaps you had. That was one of the very few times I saw that sister laugh.

On another occasion an old lady came to the enquiry office and asked where she could find Dr Ewart. Well, as no one had heard of him, I was dragged into the argument. I gently informed her that Dr Ewart had died about ten years before, so then she asked me that as she had trained here as a nurse many years ago she would be glad to know if there were any of the staff left who were here when she had trained. So I asked her when she finished her training and on what year. "Oh said she, I finished my nursing course in the last year of the Boer War", almost exactly fifty years before. Well, I ask you, what an optimist. She must have been. It seems that she was travelling round with her third husband at the age of eighty-one years. Evidently, a case of survival of the fittest. Poor woman, she must have felt like a lost soul wandering round the corridors after all those years.

I saw a lady going into the mortuary the other day, so I asked her for what department she was seeking. "This is the hard of hearing clinic isn't it? I didn't enlighten her as to how right she was, but I thought they were all tone deaf.

I met a lady friend and stood talking to her outside one of the offices. One of the lady clerks was talking to another woman and was holding her baby for her. She said to my friend, "How would you like one like mine", who said, "I might had if I had had the chance." She was never married. Oh said the mother, you've got no idea how easy it is to get one like this. Well, I went for my life. For the life of me I did not know what the next disclosure might be.

Several Sundays ago I was at the slide answering enquiries when a lady came up and asked "Which was the easiest way to get into the maternity ward. Well, I thought a lot, but replied "Turn right and up the stairs".

Another time whilst getting interviews arranged between relatives of patients and the house surgeons, the following incident occurred. It seems that a lady was sent to see the wrong doctor and she returned to me very pale and said "The man in outpatients said that Dr Smith has never had any connection with Mr Jones at all at any time." Well I did not suppose he had, but smoother the lady's ruffled feathers safely.

15/3/53 Today I had occasion to ask an Irishman, who was very Irish, a question as to whether he would sign an authority for a post mortem exam. I said to him would he sign for an autopsy. "Oh said he, and what is that." So I explained that it was a postmortem. Oh no, was the answer, I've never discussed it with the deceased at all, so there was no more to be said about it. The House Surgeon concerned told me that he said to her when she asked for a postmortem, "You should have asked the deceased before he died about that". Just imagine, it would be a real cheer germ, would it not.

A few days ago a lady came and enquired about collecting her late father's effects, and she remarked to me that "he died like" – but she did not say what.

One time I was in a ward very ill and a Welshman "Hight" Jones used to come along and entertain me with a recital of his operations and transfusions. Well I got fed up with it, so I said to him, Taffy how many operations have you had (in a weary sort of way) Two, said he, and how many transfusions? He said two, then I had an inspiration, I asked him sweetly, what was the last one from. A pair of (?). That did it, no more recitals. Another time I was passing down the road at John Street and ran into a Clergyman I knew by sight. I said good day to him and he stopped me and said "My good man, where I have seen you before" "Oh, said I, at the Hospital" "Oh, yes, yes, was the reply, are you feeling better now." I said yes, for I had been ill. "And how long have you been in the Hospital" he asked. Twenty five years was the reply. "My poor, poor man he said, whatever was the matter." Nothing, but I work there I said. And you should have seen his face. It was too funny for words. Poor man, I could not help "stringing" him.

Some years ago, some of the porters were discussing nationality. One said to the other, well, what would you say I was? My mother was Welsh, my father was Irish, my grandfather was an Englishman and I was born in NZ. Well, a cockney in a broad accent replied. "Lummy, if you had been a pup, they would have drowned yer"

A few days ago a native of Pakistan came to the enquiry office and told me he wanted to see John. I said John who? He said I want to see John. He's a Roman Catholic. Rather vague, but I was able to supply the required information.

Away back in 1919, a patient in Ward three did not approve of the state of the nail brushes supplied for the use of the inmates, so he selected the oldest and baldest of the said brushes and stuck a stamp on it without any wrapping whatsoever, and addressed it to Sister Aitken Ward 3 Wellington Hospital. A really telling advertisement, telling the world don't you think?