

“The Joint Hospitals Scheme”

In 2020 NHS Grampian and Grampian Hospitals Art Trust (GHAT) are celebrating the centenary of the formal announcement of the creation of the “Joint Hospitals Scheme”. The scheme innovatively sought to combine public health services and medical education in one location and ultimately resulted in the co-location of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, Royal Aberdeen Children’s Hospital and Aberdeen Maternity Hospital as well as Aberdeen University Medical School on the Foresterhill campus.

The “Joint Hospitals Scheme” was a visionary plan conceived of primarily by Matthew Hay, a Professor of Medical Jurisprudence and Chief Medical Officer of Health for Aberdeen from 1888 to 1923. Hay was concerned about the poor, inadequate and out-dated health care provision in Aberdeen where there existed a growing demand and need for quality health services. He strongly believed by combining the primary hospitals in one location that Aberdeen could build a health care system fit for purpose and able to cope with the changing demands of the new century.



Matthew Hay

At the turn of the twentieth century the three primary hospitals in Aberdeen were based in separate and cramped facilities in the city centre. The Aberdeen Royal Infirmary was based at Woolmanhill where there was no room to expand and grow

services whilst the Aberdeen Maternity, previously a part of the Aberdeen Dispensary, Vaccine and Lying In Institution on Barnett's Close, had recently moved into a new but still small location at 35 Castle Street in 1900. The Royal Sick Children's Hospital was located nearby also in a small facility on Castle Terrace.

There had always been concern that the Royal Sick Children's Hospital was too small and the facilities inadequate so from an early stage, prior to the outbreak of World War 1, fundraising efforts took place to raise money to build a hospital on a new site. By 1920 it was clear that Aberdeen Royal Infirmary also needed to expand and relocate and there was some discussion about whether a new Aberdeen Maternity Hospital was also needed.

In February of 1920, the "Joint Hospitals Scheme" was officially proposed at a special meeting of the Aberdeen Medico- Chirurgical Society although the plan was formally implemented in 1923. Originally the plan was to include Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital in the scheme as well as a new Medical School, in a joint collaboration with Aberdeen University, and nursing homes on a joint site. In the early stages of the scheme's development there was a debate over whether to also build a new Aberdeen Maternity Hospital because at the time most women gave birth at home and it was thought that any serious cases requiring medical attention could be treated within Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. However, over time it was decided to include a maternity hospital in the plan.

Also included in the revolutionary plan were shared services for the hospital including shared kitchens and sterilising facilities as well as what became Aberdeen Joint Hospitals and Steam Laundry Company which operated until the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948. In addition to teaching work undertaken at the Medical School by Aberdeen University the University also developed plans to be responsible for pathological, bacteriological, and bio-chemical work for the hospitals.

By 1925 the Royal Sick Children's Hospital's successful fundraising efforts allowed them to purchase 17 acres of land at Foresterhill which was then an open area of countryside away from the city centre. At the same time Aberdeen Town Council reserved the rest of the land available for future development after sufficient funds could be raised for buildings and facilities on what would become the Foresterhill campus.

In 1929 the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital became the first hospital to open on the Foresterhill campus. A foundation stone for Aberdeen Royal Infirmary was laid by the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, in 1928 and, following a successful fundraising campaign, the new Infirmary was opened in September 1936 by the Duke and Duchess of York, soon to become King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. The Aberdeen Maternity Hospital opened in 1937 closely followed by the early stages of the Medical School in 1938.



A 1980s aerial view of the Foresterhill site showing the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital



A postcard showing the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and Medical School



A photograph of the new Aberdeen Maternity Hospital taken circa 1938

Since the initial development of Foresterhill the hospitals and the Medical School have gone through many changes with new facilities and clinics added. Aberdeen Royal Infirmary has gone through a number of refurbishments and upgrades to keep pace with changing patient and health care demands and new technologies and the Medical School, likewise, has gone through significant expansion and been upgraded to adapt to the needs of twenty first century technology, educational needs and research. Two of the three hospitals have outlived their facilities and, thanks to public support, a new Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital was opened in January 2004 and a new Maternity Hospital called the Baird Family Hospital is currently expected to open in 2023.

Keep an eye out for more from NHS Grampian Archives and GHAT as part of the Amplify project.