BOOK REVIEW

*Caring for Hansen’s Disease. The Hospital & Homes of St. Giles 1914-2005.* Nicholas Best

This small, privately published book tells the story of the Hospital & Homes of St. Giles which was set up in Bicknacre, just outside Chelmsford in 1914 to care for those suffering from leprosy.

The book charts the Hospital’s struggles, its changing (and somewhat mixed) fortunes and its constant battle against prejudice and antipathy. It tells the story of the staff and patients who lived there, initially in very primitive conditions, and gives a brief, but moving history of some of the patients, and how they came to be there. Nicholas Best pulls no punches over the early internal divisions among the staff, and is painfully honest about the problems of coping with a change of regime when the centre was taken over by a housing association in 1984. But all through these personal histories there is a sense of determination and a need to be identified as people and not by their disease.

The only unfortunate part of the book is its final page where it states that ‘The disease would perhaps become curable one day, but in 2005, unfortunately, that day still lay many years ahead’ when we all know that leprosy is totally curable, and has been for many years. But otherwise it is an interesting, light read.

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