

Full title of book: The Firs Maternity Hospital, Nottingham, England: A Short History

Author(s) of book: David J Hallam Jones

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This short booklet exploring the history of The Firs Maternity Hospital in Nottingham is a local history written partly to capture the story of the Firs and partly to raise money for a local Methodist church in the area. The author, Hallam-Jones, makes clear from the outset that he regards the book as a work in progress which will act as a spur to memory and to the collections of stories and personal testimonies.

The bulk of the book focuses on the period from 1908, when the maternity home first opened, to its closure in 1982. The home was initially opened by a local charitable trust with the intention to provide maternity care to unmarried mothers. As the book makes clear, however, the maternity home managed to generate income by taking in fee-paying patients. It also trained pupil midwives. The book has clearly tapped into local archival sources, but unfortunately is very light on detail about both who was trained and who received care in the Home. It is not clear how many unmarried women or fee-paying women used the home, or what kind of care they would have received.

The maternity home moved to new premises in an old house in the north of the city in 1928, demonstrating on a local scale the impetus towards institutional birth even before the Second World War. It remained in these premises until closure in 1982, but in a development which mirrored what historians already now about the inter-war period, the home was taken over in the late 1930s by the City Hospital, the ex-Poor Law and now confident and expansion-minded local authority-led hospital. The Firs remained under the wing of the City Hospital and many local midwives undertook their Part One Training at the City and their Part Two at The Firs. Again, as a reflection of national experiences, the birth rate at the Firs peaked at 1,500 per year in the late 1940s before diminishing with the move towards more specialist and medicalised in-patient care.

The book was not designed for professional historians, which makes it frustrating because it leaves out so much detail. The development and decline of The Firs was clearly a microcosm of national developments in maternity care. The book also reminds us that the stories of the cottage hospitals, GP units and local maternity homes have not yet been researched in adequate detail, although they have the capacity to add greatly to our understanding of maternity care in the twentieth century. This book may be of interest to local historians, but primarily as a spur to asking more questions and digging deeper.

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