

## THE SPITTLEHOUSE OF KEY STREET

By FELIX HULL, B.A., PH.D.

In Miss Melling's study of *The Poor* in Kent<sup>1</sup> there are two brief references to a hospital at Key Street for which the justices appear to have accepted some responsibility:<sup>2</sup> The poor law measure of 1597,<sup>3</sup> which was one of the many enactments finally codified in the great Poor Law Act of 1601,<sup>4</sup> included amongst its provisions a clause permitting, if not in fact ordering, the justices to allocate money from the County Stock for the support of hospitals and almshouses. It would appear that, as with so much early legislation, the intent was stronger than the ability to carry out that intent and that probably the desire to limit the financial demands on the county authority was decisive in determining the extent to which this clause was observed. Certainly there is no known evidence of any other such foundation being supported by the justices for East Kent although there may well have been similar institutions equally in need of support.

The story as we have it can be told very simply for all the evidence which has so far come to light lies in six entries in the Quarter Sessions records for the county between 1599 and 1607, and it is the very lack of evidence which invites comment and creates the desire to know more of this early 'county hospital', if indeed 'hospital' is a correct usage.

Unfortunately the original petition for assistance and the justices' order of 1598 are both missing, but on 24th July, 1599, the following petition was placed before their worships:<sup>5</sup>

Most humbly sheweth unto your worships your poore distressed orator Richard Sherwyn keeper or governour of the hospitall or spittle house at Key Streete . . . that wher ther ar in the said hospitall foure diseased persons not able in any sorte to helpe themselves besides your poore orator and his wife beinge both very old and unable through many infirmityes to do any thinge for their owne sustenation, in which case yf they be not in som good measure releaved by charitable devotion they ar very like to perishe. And wher by the last acte of parlyament yt ys provided that they should be relieved of the stocke

<sup>1</sup> *Kentish Sources*, 'The Poor' (1964), 38 and 40.

<sup>2</sup> Miss Melling also refers to similar support for hospitals at Dartford and Rochester at the same period.

<sup>3</sup> 39 Eliz. I, c. 3.

<sup>4</sup> 43 Eliz. I, c. 2.

<sup>5</sup> KAO, QM/SB324.

## THE SPITTLEHOUSE OF KEY STREET

of the County by the discreceion of your worships in your Quarter Sessions and accordingly your poore orator hath had payment by your worships allowance of vjli. xiijs. iiijd. for one year and no more, which will not any thinge nere extend to the sufficient sustentation of the said poore and diseased people, they having but iiij acres of land nor any other meanes of mayntenance wher as the other ij hospitalles of this County have som good proportion of landes to Releve them and yet ther ar not in eyther of them so many poore people as in this poore house, whereby your poore orator hath ben constrayned to supply his owne and the said poore peoples their wantes by the sale of his owne land beyng xls. by yere and of his kyne and other goodes which he had to the valew of x li. towards it. May it therfore please your good worships in tender consideracion of the premisses to assigne to your orator a yerely pencion proportionable to the chardge of keping so many persons which to do the treble of the said somm formerly allowed wyll very hardly suffise, And all the said poore wretched and diseased persons shall not cease dayly to pray . . .'

It is pleasing to record that this petition resulted in an immediate increased payment to the sum of ten pounds yearly, which if not up to the hopes, surely unrealistic, of Richard Sherwyn, must at least have assisted in the struggle to maintain the house.<sup>6</sup> Not that this was the end of Sherwyn's problems. The following winter saw more trouble for the hospital and with a nice distinction of words 'the poore, wretched and diseased people' of the petition were now 'visited with sickness'.<sup>7</sup> Once again the justices allowed their finer feelings to rule and for that year the Epiphany Sessions held in January, 1599-1600, at Canterbury ordered that the 'yerely pension of tenne pownds . . . shalbe augmented and increased fyve marks so that for this yere he shall have to the use aforesaid the somm of twenty marks . . .'

So far help had been casual and it is all too easy to relate the next step to twentieth-century standards and usages, yet it would seem reasonable to assume that the continued and increasing financial responsibility of the justices required some closer measure of control. There is no great surprise therefore in a justice, either John or Edward Boys but the text is defective, being requested to visit the hospital.<sup>8</sup> What is somewhat more surprising is to discover the extent to which the County authority of the day was prepared to accept both financial responsibility and a real measure of control in such a case. At the Midsummer Sessions, 1600, Mr. Boys reported in terms which by inference must have been favourable to Richard Sherwyn and his house and it was ordered that 'Richard Sherwyn, master of the sayd

<sup>6</sup> KAO, QM/SM16.

<sup>7</sup> KAO, Q/SR 1.m.3d. No. 16, see also *The Poor*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Q/SR2 m. 8d. No. 4, see also *The Poor*, 40.

## THE SPITTLEHOUSE OF KEY STREET

hospitall, shall continewe the keepinge of the number of [ — ] people there, *videlicet* of foure besides himself and his wief and shall register their names in the records [*of this*] court and for their mayntenaunce shall have hencefoorth (twenty marks) by yere . . . and yf any of the sayd poore decease then he ys to receave another by order of the justices from tyme to tyme.'

From the date of this order, therefore, it can be said with a measure of accuracy that the Key Street hospital was a County Institution, however small and obscure. Unfortunately the records are so incomplete that no other direct information of the connection between the justices for East Kent and the hospital survives except for two items regarding inmates of the house. The first of these may perhaps be regarded as fairly typical, the second throws yet more light on the humanitarian and welfare work of Sessions at this date. It is clear that in 1600, as today, finance was the primary problem facing an establishment of this kind. Pensions from Quarter Sessions we may well assume were not lavish and barely met basic needs. If those placed in the hospital were cared for by their parish as the Act directed then much of the financial obligation might be avoided. In passing it should be noted that a pension of 20 marks or £13 6s. 8d. was regarded as a very considerable annual payment at this time and undoubtedly a serious burden on the County rate and stock.

On 18th November, 1605, a bond was entered into between Sherwyn and the town of Maidstone, a document which is valuable for the additional incidental information it contains as well as for the actual nature of the agreement.<sup>9</sup> Sherwyn, himself, *prepositus sive rectore de le Hospitall sive le Spittle-house vocatum Chessnutt Hill in Keye Streete infra parochiam de Borden*, is here styled 'Taylor' and the detailed heading of the hospital itself helps to establish its approximate site. The condition of the bond states that the overseers and churchwardens of Maidstone with the authority of the mayor, John Romney, 'Have delivered unto . . . Richard Sherwyn Gwyde of the saide Hospitall . . . Thomas Binkes a poore blinde and impotent creature . . . well and competently apparelled, and with him allso have gyven unto the said Richard Sherwyn Tenn poundes of lawfull Englishe money for the perpetuall maynteinance and sustentacion of the saide Thomas Binkes . . .' Sherwyn was then to receive Binkes within three months and Binkes was to remain in the hospital 'duringe all the terme and time of his life naturall to be kept founde and provided for . . . sc and in such manner and sort as others of the same Hospitall . . .', sc that Maidstone should be discharged from all responsibility.

Two years later, in July, 1607, the justices made an order which

<sup>9</sup> KAO, QM/SB598.

## THE SPITTLEHOUSE OF KEY STREET

indicates that this small foundation was something more than the typical almshouse even though the use of the word hospital may scarcely stand scrutiny. At the Sessions at Canterbury, therefore, it was ordered 'that Anne Radolphe of Tonge a mayden of the age of xv yerres or therabouts borne at Tonge . . . and grievously visited with the fallinge sickness shalbe be delivered to [ — ] Sherwyn guyder of the hospitall at Key Street to be kept and susteyned . . . so longe as the Churchwardens and Overseers of the poore of the said parishe of Tonge shall pay . . . yerely the som of fifty shillings . . .'.<sup>10</sup>

This momentary glimpse of the care of a poor epileptic girl is the final episode recorded of this spittle-house.

Clearly certain questions arise: where exactly was the hospital; when was it founded and by whom; when and why was it finally disbanded? To none of these can a definitive answer be given and it is the writer's hope that by publishing the few details known, some other evidence may be brought to light.

The will of John Smith of Borden, proved in 1530, and referred to in *Testamenta Cantiana* provides just one more shred of evidence for he included the following clause: 'I bequeith to the hospitall of Chessell-hill xxd. to be prayde for there.'<sup>11</sup> We have, therefore, two well-attested facts. First that the hospital was somewhere in the north-west corner of the parish near enough to Chestnut Street and Key Street to be referred to in both forms; second that it was a pre-dissolution foundation. It is not referred to in *Victoria County History*, though a number of small religious houses in the vicinity find a place in that study; nor is there any purely topographical evidence at present from which one may more closely identify the site. A contributory factor in this obscurity may be the lack of references after 1607. The parish records of Borden, including the fine register from 1555, make no specific reference except that given below and one can only assume that the hospital ceased to function soon after the date of Anne Radolphe's admission. As early as 1599 Richard Sherwyn referred to himself as aged and infirm and on 9th November, 1607, the entry occurs 'buried Richard Sherwyn maister of the Spytte house'.<sup>12</sup> Under the arrangements of 1600 the justices themselves would have been responsible for finding a new keeper, but the burden of a centralized control and the increasing tendency to relieve poverty on an essentially parochial basis may well have resulted in failure to replace Sherwyn. If so, and in default of the survival of appropriate Sessions records, the hospital would have vanished without trace, which is exactly what appears to

<sup>10</sup> KAO, QM/SM32.

<sup>11</sup> KAO, PRC17/19 f.17, see also *Testamenta Cantiana* (East Kent), 25.

<sup>12</sup> KAO, P35/1/1. In the same register the burial on 16th Jan., 1593/4 of 'Hughe Mannedge, master of the spittle house' is also recorded.

## THE SPITTLEHOUSE OF KEY STREET

have happened. It may be symptomatic that when from 1626 we have the earliest surviving accounts for the County stock and payment of pensions to maimed soldiers and others, no entry which can be related to the hospital at Key Street appears.<sup>13</sup> Without the possible but unexpected appearance of other references the further story of this small but interesting foundation and short-lived experiment in County welfare must remain in obscurity.

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382  
© Kent Archaeological Society

<sup>13</sup> KAO, Q/FM 1. It should also be noted that in 1625 in the earliest surviving Order Book for West Kent, orders disposing of both Rochester and Dartford hospitals are recorded. This would appear to be definite proof of a change of policy. (Q/ŠO W1.)