

BECKETT PARK HOSPITAL.

STATEMENT OF THE LEEDS EDUCATION AUTHORITY.

At the beginning of the European War in 1914 certain of the buildings of the City of Leeds Training College were placed at the disposal of the War Office by the Leeds Education Committee for Hospital purposes. Other College buildings were subsequently handed over, until one hostel only remained in the possession of the education authority. As the demand for hospital accommodation increased, wooden hutments were erected on the college playing fields.

The education authority had to rent other buildings in the city to house the college students, and had to make arrangements for half-time work in certain schools in order that the academic side of the training college work might be carried on.

Immediately after the signing of the armistice the owners of properties which had been rented by the education authority in order to provide accommodation for their training college students began to press for possession of their buildings. The agitation for the re-establishment of the ordinary full-time system by parents of children who were attending schools where the half-time system was necessary owing to the occupation of the school buildings by the training college became intense. For these reasons, apart from the undesirability of having a hospital for men on the same site as a women's training college, it was necessary for the education authority to urge that the training college buildings should be returned at the earliest possible date, in order that the buildings might be used for the work for which they were provided—the training of teachers. The non-return of the buildings in 1919 prevented the admission of 130 ex-service men to the college.

The War Office promised in September 1919 that the whole of the Training College estate should be restored to the education authority by the end of December 1921 at the latest.

Conferences were held in October 1919, in November 1919, and in January 1920, between representatives of the central and local military and educational authorities, as a result of which the Ministry of Pensions (who had meanwhile taken over from the War Office the hospital on the college premises) agreed to vacate one hostel at once, another "at the earliest possible moment," and to hand over to the education authority the upper floors of the educational block by 1st February 1920.

After many delays, and as a result of continuous pressure, the education committee managed to regain possession of their buildings little by little with the exception of one hostel.

In hardly any case, however, was a building returned to the authority on the date on which the government department concerned had promised to return it.

The temporary hospital remained on the estate, housed in wooden hutments which had been erected on the playing fields. From time to time incidents occurred whereby the Committee were driven to the conclusion that the Ministry did not intend to carry out the promise made to vacate the estate by the end of 1921.

Finally, another conference was held between representatives of the Board of Education, Ministry of Pensions, H.M. Office of Works and the Leeds Education Authority, when the local authority, although feeling that the Ministry of Pensions had made no serious attempt to carry out the promise to vacate the Beckett Park site by the end of December 1921, consented for the sake of the disabled men in the hospital to allow the Ministry to retain the use of the Beckett Park temporary hospital site with the remaining hostel until August 1924. The Ministry of Pensions agreed that the extension granted by the Authority was generous, and in fact suggested a proviso, which was agreed to, to enable them to vacate the estate before the above date, if they wished to do so. The representatives of the Ministry stated expressly that this was to be considered a final settlement.

Notwithstanding this definite agreement, the Ministry of Pensions in the Autumn of 1923 again asked that the education authority would consider the possibility of granting an extension of the existing occupation for a period beyond August 1924. This was the second time that an extension of occupation beyond an agreed date had been asked for and there seemed to be no prospect of any finality in agreements with the government departments concerned.

The Leeds Authority therefore felt that they had no option but to insist on the fulfilment of the agreement. They held that the Ministry of Pensions had had ample time since December 1921 to make alternative arrangements, and that apparently they had taken no definite steps to carry out their side of the agreement.

The Ministry requested the Education Authority to receive officials of the Ministry in Leeds. The Authority, not wishing to act arbitrarily, decided to receive any representations which the Ministry might wish to put forward, but they felt that it was important that they should see the Minister of Pensions himself and the officers who were present when the agreement to vacate the estate in August 1924 was arrived at. The Authority therefore suggested that a deputation from the Leeds Education Authority should wait on the Minister of Pensions in London. The Ministry agreed to this suggestion and the deputation was received by the Pensions Minister at the House of Commons, when there were present, in addition to the Minister and the deputation from Leeds, representatives of the Pensions Ministry, the Office of Works, the Board of Education, and other government departments.

The proceedings at the interview with the Minister of Pensions and the events which followed are so important that they are presented in detail.

At the interview the Minister explained the difficulty from the Ministry's point of view and intimated that the evacuation of Beckett Park Hospital was impossible owing to the lack of suitable alternative accommodation. He asked that the Leeds Education Authority should agree to the occupancy of the Beckett Park site by the Ministry of Pensions for a further period of five years.

Alderman Owen, the Chairman of the Education Committee, informed the Minister of the existence at Ripon of a hospital which was well planned and fitted with every modern convenience, was the property of the Government and was unoccupied. The Chairman added that the buildings were in excellent condition, that the hospital was situated in open and beautiful country and was readily accessible. The buildings were constructed with concrete walls, slated roofs and asphalt floors; they were light, well ventilated, fitted with electric light, and there was an ample water supply from the Ripon Corporation mains. The Ripon hospital, in fact, was so complete that very little expenditure would be involved in the transfer of the hospital from Beckett Park to Ripon. Mr. Owen told the Minister that the transfer of the hospital from Beckett Park to Ripon would be welcomed by the Mayor, Corporation, and people of Ripon, who were prepared to go to considerable trouble in promoting the comfort and happiness of the disabled ex-service men.

The fact of the existence of this hospital was quite new information to the Minister, who, after consultation with his officials, decided to send headquarters staff to visit and report on the suitability of the hospital buildings at Ripon.

The Chairman pointed out to the Minister that the Ripon buildings were advertised for sale by tender by 31st March, 1924, and the deputation left the Minister understanding that action would be taken without delay and that, in view of the negotiations between the Leeds Education Authority and the Pensions Ministry, steps would be taken to prevent any demolition or dismantling of the buildings, pending a settlement.

The Minister requested that, pending a settlement, the matter of the interview should be considered as confidential and not for publication.

On the 19th March, 1924, Sir Lisle Webb, the Director-General of the Medical Services to the Ministry, and Dr. Bellew, of the Ministry of Pensions, visited Ripon, inspected the hospital and interviewed the Mayor and Town Clerk.

Owing to a rumour that the demolition of the buildings at Ripon was being expedited, Alderman Owen, on the 21st March, 1924, sent the following telegram to the Ministry of Pensions:—

“ WARPENSION, PARL, LONDON.

21st March, 1924.

Reference to interview between representatives of Leeds Education Committee and yourself on Thursday, 13th March, surprised no communication since received and anxious as to what is being done in view of sale by tender of Ripon Hospital on 31st March. Trust your Ministry have taken steps with War Office, Disposals Board, Office of Works or department concerned to ensure that nothing has or will be done to reduce or destroy the alternative accommodation and facilities at Ripon before negotiations terminate.

LESLIE OWEN, Chairman, Leeds Education Committee.”

to which the following reply was made:—

“ 21st March, 1924.

“ LESLIE OWEN, Education Committee, Leeds.

Your telegram of to-day. Regret after visit of my Officers to Leeds and Ripon am advised Ripon Hospital cannot for medical reasons be used as substitute for Beckett Park. Letter follows explaining position and proposing further conference.

MINISTER OF PENSIONS.”

On the 22nd March, 1924, it was rumoured in Leeds that contractors were engaging workmen for the demolition of Ripon Hospital, and Alderman Owen sent the following further telegram to the Minister of Pensions to which no reply was received:—

“ 22nd March, 1924.

“ Rt. Hon. F. O. ROBERTS,

Minister of Pensions,

Warpension, Parl, London.

Wire received. You do not give the assurance asked for that steps have been taken to ensure that no part of Ripon Hospital has or will be dismantled before negotiations are terminated. Accordingly I assume that Ripon Hospital will remain intact. Conference will be useless if in the meantime the alternative accommodation proposed is destroyed. The advice given the Minister that for medical reasons only Ripon is unsuitable is surprising in view of the statement that the real reason Ministry could not leave Beckett Park was the absence of suitable alternative accommodation in Yorkshire.

LESLIE OWEN, Chairman, Leeds Education Committee.”

The Leeds Deputation which waited upon the Minister of Pensions on the 13th March went to Ripon on the 23rd March, 1924, and made a careful inspection of the hospital there. The members of the deputation were fully convinced that the hospital was an ideal one in every respect. The buildings were in good condition, there was no sign of any demolition, and the Officer in charge, in reply to a question, stated that he could not say when the place would be pulled down as he had no instructions in the matter.

Despite the understanding with the Minister, on the 13th March information was received from Ripon that the demolition of the hospital building had commenced, and on the 24th March, 1924, the following telegram was sent by the Chairman to the Minister of Pensions:—

“ 24th March, 1924.

“ The Right Honourable F. O. ROBERTS,

Minister of Pensions,

House of Commons, London.

Beckett Park Hospital, Leeds.

Further to my telegram of Saturday. 100 men are now demolishing Ripon Hospital. 200 men ordered for to-morrow. The Contractors are Marsden and Wilkinson, Ripon.

LESLIE OWEN, Chairman, Leeds Education Committee.

The Minister of Pensions replied as follows:—

“ 25th March, 1924.

O.H.M.S. Westminster.

CHAIRMAN, EDUCATION COMMITTEE, LEEDS.

Letter regarding Beckett's Park and Ripon despatched to-day.

MINISTER OF PENSIONS.”

On the 26th March the letter promised in the telegram of the 21st March was received—five days after the telegram. In the letter the Ministry stated that Sir Lisle Webb, the Director-General of Medical Services, had paid a personal visit to Leeds and to Ripon, and had advised the Minister of Pensions that it was impossible to provide at Ripon the necessary medical attention for the ex-service men whose cases required surgical treatment, and that it would be impossible for the Leeds surgeons to give suitable time to their cases if they had at each visit to travel from Leeds to Ripon. In addition, the Ministry stated that there would be no prospect of securing a lease of the site on which the Ripon hospital was built as the owner had decided that the present buildings must be demolished.

Between the receipt of the wire of the 21st March from the Ministry and the letter received on the 26th March, the buildings were being rapidly demolished.

The position created is remarkable:—

- (a) On Wednesday, 19th March, the Director-General of Medical Services visited Ripon Hospital.
- (b) On Thursday, 20th March, the Officer in Charge at Ripon received instructions to proceed immediately with the demolition of the hospital.
- (c) On Friday, 21st March, the Minister of Pensions, in reply to the Leeds Chairman's wire, intimated by telegram that he was advised that the Ripon Hospital was unsuitable, and that letter was following.
- (d) On Saturday, 22nd March, workmen were being engaged for the demolition of the hospital.
- (e) On Sunday, 23rd March, the Leeds Deputation visited Ripon and was informed by the Officer in Charge that he knew nothing of any proposal to demolish the hospital.
- (f) On Monday, 24th March, 100 men were demolishing the hospital.
- (g) On Wednesday, 26th March, the letter promised by the Ministry of Pensions on the 21st was received (five days after it had been promised).
- (h) The demolition of the hospital had taken place notwithstanding the urgent *unanswered* telegrams of the Chairman of the Leeds Education Authority that the buildings should remain intact until completion of negotiations.
- (i) As recently as Saturday, 22nd March, advertisements appeared in the Press for tenders in connection with the demolition of the buildings, the latest date for submitting tenders being the 31st March.
- (j) On a request for plans and particulars being made on Tuesday, 25th March, information was received that plans and particulars of the various camps could be obtained with the sole exception of the hospital

block (Lot No. 19 in the advertisement) which had been withdrawn, but no information could be obtained as to when or why the withdrawal had taken place.

(k) Instructions were given to the builders to demolish the hospital on piece-work rates without waiting for tenders.

In the letter received on the 26th March, it will be noted that the Ministry of Pensions change their line of opposition from that of the difficulty of alternative accommodation to that of inadequate medical service, whereas in fact there are in addition to local practitioners 7 medical men connected with the Ripon Cottage Hospital, all of whom are said to be competent to deal with any class of case with the exception of severe abdominal cases, while at Harrogate, which is within 11 miles of Ripon, there are upwards of 100 medical men, including expert operating surgeons of high standing and other well-known specialists for particular diseases. In connection with this point, it should be remembered that the hospital at Beckett Park is now admittedly a General Hospital and not one specially for orthopædic cases, and that as a matter of fact few visits of specialists are now paid to the hospital.

With regard to the reference in the letter of the Ministry to the impossibility of securing a lease of the site on which Ripon Hospital is built, it would appear that no serious effort had been made to secure a tenancy of the site before the demolition of the buildings commenced.

On the 26th March, 1924, Alderman Owen at a private meeting of the Education Committee reported the interview in London with the Minister of Pensions and the subsequent events as outlined above. The members expressed great dissatisfaction with the way in which they, as an important Local Education Authority, had been treated by the Ministry of Pensions, feeling strongly that the action in demolishing the hospital at Ripon while negotiations were in progress, and contrary to the understanding at the conference in London on 13th March, amounted to a serious breach of faith.

The members were astounded to learn that splendid hospital buildings erected by the Government and of a value of upwards of £100,000 were being scrapped, thereby making the suggestion of the Leeds Deputation to the Pensions Minister impossible of fulfilment.

The Leeds Education Authority have continually urged that the disabled soldiers housed in wooden buildings in Beckett Park, which were erected as a temporary expedient during the war when hospital accommodation was urgently needed, should have permanent, more suitable and less dangerous accommodation, and they felt that in suggesting that the hospital should be transferred to Ripon, they were acting in the best interests of the ex-service men, who would then be housed in substantial buildings where the risk of fire, which constitutes such an ever present menace at Beckett Park, would be reduced to a minimum.

The deputation, consisting of the Chairman, Alderman Owen, the Vice-Chairman, Councillor Wormald, and Councillor Arnott, leader of the Labour Party, were authorised to interview again the Minister of Pensions. They were unanimously given plenary powers to deal with the matter.

28th March, 1924.

