·DORNOCH·
HERITAGE·SOCIETY

Former Migdale Hospital goes on the market

THE former Migdale Hospital in Bonar Bridge is now on the market with a guide price of £350,000.

The 159-year-old property will cease to be a hospital on June 30 when patients and staff move into the new facility that has been built to replace it at a cost of more than £8 million.

In line with NHS procedure, the ground floor of the old building will be boarded up as soon as possible after patients and staff transfer to the new facility and perimeter fencing will be placed around the site.

The property, which is 'B'-listed by Historic Scotland, will then be sold in line with NHS procedure for the disposal of any building that is surplus to requirements.

Ewan MacCrimmon of Bell Ingram in Oban has been appointed as the marketing agent. He will liaise with their local office in Bonar Bridge to arrange viewings.

The building, which was originally the Sutherland Combination poorhouse, was designed by architect Andrew Maitland and was built between 1843 and 1845. The poorhouse opened on November 6, 1845.

The main building was a typical H-shaped layout.

The larger block at the front was a two-storey corridor-plan building with a central portion containing the master's quarters. The poorhouse dining hall and chapel were located in the central range at the rear.

The two wings of the front block contained accommodation for men and boys in the north wing and women and girls in the south wing.

And, in the range of single-storey buildings at the rear of the main building were found various work and utility rooms, including a bakehouse on the men's side and a laundry on the women's side. The grounds were cultivated as a kitchen garden.

In 1927, the name was changed to the Swordale Institution and, in 1948, it was handed over to the Northern Regional Hospital Board as part of the new NHS.

It was renamed Migdale Hospital in 1958.

'Migdale Hospital'

Talk by

Rhona MacLeod

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Because Migdale Hospital was originally the poorhouse for the County of Sutherland, most of my talk is taken up with how the poorhouse came into being and how it developed. So there is really very little about Migdale Hospital, it's predominantly about the poorhouse and about the way that poor relief was managed in Sutherland.

From the time of the Reformation, responsibility for the care of the poor in Scotland rested on the established church. Money was donated to the church poor box and administered by the Kirk Session in each parish. In addition to the basic provision that they made, charitable individuals and philanthropists provided some assistance for the needy, often by private giving, but sometimes in the towns, by building hospitals specifically for the care of the poor.

The level of provision varied from parish to parish but was always meagre. For example, in 1818 in Sutherland, a pauper got seven shillings a year. At the same time,

a worker on the construction of the Caledonian Canal at the time got 16 pence per day.

So you can see that the level of provision was very low. By the beginning of the 19th century, the whole system was under severe pressure. Industrialisation brought huge movements of population and rapid growth of cities.

Changes in economic circumstances could throw thousands of people out of work with very little warning, and the system could not provide help on such a scale. The disruption in the church of 1843 was a further blow to the old system, and by the 19th century the old church-based system of poor relief was quite inadequate. In 1845, a new Poor Law Amendment Act was passed.

The established church was deprived of its responsibilities with regard to the poor, but the parish remained the unit of administration. Parochial boards were to be set up, made up of local landowners, members of the Kirk Session and elected representatives of the ratepayers. They were empowered to levy an assessment and set a poor rate.

The parochial board was to collect and administer the funds and determine the amount and nature of the relief to be given to the poor. A role of the poor in each parish was to be maintained. Each parish or group of smaller parishes had to appoint an inspector of poor who was responsible for assessing the needs of each applicant and making a recommendation to the board about how they should be treated.

The new system was to be run by a central board of supervision in Edinburgh. Change came very slowly, but gradually parishes were assessed and poor rates levied. Because the people on the parochial boards represented the people who had to pay the poor rate, they had an interest in keeping the rate as low as possible.

Their approach reflected the Victorian attitude to poverty. They wanted to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Children, the old and infirm, the chronically sick and disabled, were deserving of help from the poor rate, but the general principle was that there should be no relief for those who were able to work.

This would encourage idleness and be morally harmful to the people. Relief to the destitute unemployed was a big problem in the Highlands. Much of the work was seasonal and the winter months could be very difficult for people.

But the Poor Law Report of 1844 said that relief to the able-bodied paupers puts a premium on indolence. There is plenty of work in the Highlands, but the people are idle. One way of improving matters, they suggest, would be to get the people to learn English.

The central board was unsympathetic to the situation in the Highlands and wanted a uniform system that would be applied across the whole country. The 1845 Act had introduced the idea of the Poor House. The Act permitted any parish with a population of 5,000 or more to erect a Poor House and smaller parishes might combine for the purpose of building a Poor House if the Board of Supervision gave consent.

The Highland parishes were slow to begin to build Poor Houses. The tradition had been for each community to look after its own poor. Many small communities had a house or lodging house that was available rent-free for local people who had no family to care for them and an attendant would be appointed to provide what care was necessary.

A central Poor House would mean that the pauper would be exiled from his own community and this was seen as harsh at a time when travel and communication were difficult and slow. However, some property owners favoured the idea of the Poor House, believing that it would be cheaper to look after the poor in a centralised institution than it would be to give them relief in their own homes. Secondly, the Poor House would serve as a test, enabling the parochial boards to distinguish between the genuinely needy and the idle scroungers.

To be an effective test, conditions in the Poor House had to be tough and as discouraging as possible. The genuinely needy would accept relief in the Poor House, the rest would not and would shift for themselves. There is some evidence that people did try to exploit the new system.

One report found in the Highland Counties what they called a proneness to pauperism. It said, without shame, a great number of applicants feigned all sorts of diseases and infirmities, though the parties were evidently perfectly healthy, as the allowances to lunatics and idiots were the highest amount, many feigned madness. Parents asserted that their children were lunatics, when clearly they were not.

The first Highland Poor House was established in Tain for the Easter Ross parishes in 1850. After its first year of operation, Henry Dunning MacLeod, who was chairman of its board of management, wrote a lengthy letter to the Inverness Courier extolling the benefits of the new Poor House. His main argument is that it has already brought about a substantial reduction on expenditure on poor relief and that it will continue increasingly to do so.

The building cost £2,823.13, just less than half the cost of the Sutherland Poor House. He describes it on a more humble scale than any he has seen, but it can accommodate 179 people. He does acknowledge that there is a general disinclination to use it.

Only two out of the nine parishes made use of it. He wants to assure his readers that no money is being wasted on excessive provision for paupers. No meat of any kind is given to paupers in the Tain Poor House, and whereas in the south paupers get wheat and bread, in Tain they will get oat cakes only.

The other benefits of the Poor House that he discerned are firstly that it has ended favouritism, where friends and relatives of parochial board members got much higher allowances than other people. Secondly, it saved the board having to deal with what he calls clamorous applicants, who demanded poor relief in less than feminine language. The offer of a ticket to the Poor House made these applicants disappear.

And thirdly, numbers on the Poor Rule had fallen, because relatives who had no compunction about putting a family member on the Poor Rule would not let them go into the Poor House. He argues that the board should make it an inflexible rule to give

no relief except in the Poor House. I include these details to give some idea of the thinking of those involved in setting up Poor Houses and their expectations of the system.

As early as October 1853, the Dornoch Parish Board discussed the matter of having a Sutherland Poor House and expressed views in favour of it. Poor Houses continued to be built in the Highlands over the next twenty years. The Board of Supervision exerted severe pressure on parochial boards to build Poor Houses and regretted that they did not have statutory powers to compel them to build them.

In 1861, at a meeting of the Sutherland Parochial Boards in Golspie, presided over by the Duke of Sutherland, it was decided on the motion of Mr Dempster of Skibo that a Poor House should be built for the Sutherland Parishes. The vote was 7 to 5 in favour of the plan, and Mr Briscoe, the General Inspector for the Board of Supervision, gave it as his opinion that Bonar Bridge would be the most convenient site for the building. The resolution was referred back to the Parish Boards for their approval.

The Dornoch Board took the view that if eight other parishes approved the resolution, they would also approve it. The Duke of Sutherland, who was the proprietor of the thirteen parishes, was so enthusiastic about the project that he was prepared to pay the expense of management of up to four non-consenting parishes for a period of ten years so that the consenting ones would not be subjected to extra costs. In the end, it didn't prove necessary.

Some of the Parochial Boards remained concerned about the cost of such a building and the scale of it, but by the end of 1862, they had all come round to the idea. Four acres of land was bought at Sordale, with arrangements for water supply and access road from Mr Dempster of Skibo. All decisions about the poorhouse had to be approved by the Board of Supervision, but the cost of erecting and maintaining the building would be borne by the thirteen parishes in combination.

The total cost was £6,000. Parishes contributed on the basis of their valuation roll for 1863-64. The Dornoch Parish Board had its share of the cost available in the back, but the other parishes borrowed their share from the Scottish Equitable Life Assurance Company.

The loan amounted to £5,387.02, Dornoch paid £612.17, bringing the total to £6,000. The annual instalment for the parish of Creagh was £22.08. The building was to be styled the Sutherland Combination Poorhouse. The building was designed by Andrew Maitland, architect of Tyne, and is very similar in style to poorhouses elsewhere, particularly those at Shannonry, Inverness and Nairn.

It also bears some resemblance to a Board of Supervision suggested design for a town poorhouse of 1847. Every aspect of the project was controlled by the Board of Supervision. Its size was determined by them, although local parish representatives thought that a smaller building would have been sufficient.

The Board also simplified the design for reasons of economy. The building, which will be familiar to most of you I imagine, is long, white-harled, two-storey, gabled and impressive, and was fronted by a single-storey block housing the Porter's Lodge and

probationary wards. Access was by two large double gates on each side of the Porter's Lodge. To the rear of the main building there were to be exercise yards and the outside privies. The whole site was to be surrounded by a nine-foot-high wall. A stone-flag corridor ran the whole length of the ground floor, with a stone staircase at either end.

Day rooms and dormitories opened off it. Men were housed at one end and women at the other. Separation of different classes of inmates was an important requirement of the Board of Supervision. The dining room, with its high curved ceiling, was to the centre rear of the building, with the kitchens beyond. At the back of the building there was a sizeable kitchen garden, where potatoes and vegetables would be grown for the use of the inmates. And the poorhouse was designed to accommodate 110 people.

The atmosphere inside the poorhouse was austere, with bare floors, white-washed walls and sparse furnishings. The dormitories had beds but no other furniture and no form of heating. The dining room had long tables and fixed benches, and the public rooms were heated by coal fires and the building lit by paraffin lamps. It was a chilling and intimidating environment for someone who would be used to the proportions of a croft house. The running of the poorhouse was the responsibility of the House Committee, which was made up of two representatives from each parish, 26 people in all, and they met in the poorhouse four times a year. The members were to take it in turns to inspect the house weekly, to see that everything was in order.

For the day-to-day management of the poorhouse, a governor and matron were to be appointed, usually a husband and wife team. A porter was also employed, but it was assumed that domestic work in the poorhouse would be done by the inmates. In fact, the early inmates of the poorhouse were so frail that domestic staff had to be employed.

Each parish was responsible for the cost of maintenance and clothing for each pauper that it sent to the poorhouse. The establishment charges, that is, the salaries, repairs, rates etc., were payable by each parish every quarter. They were apportioned among the various parishes according to the valuation role of the parish for the current year.

The costs of children born in the poorhouse were to be borne by the parish that had sent the mother to the poorhouse, not by the parish in which the poorhouse stood. And quarterly accounts had to be submitted by the governor to the house committee. The poorhouse opened on the 6th of November 1865.

The most striking thing about the early years is how few people actually entered it. At the census of 1871, when the poorhouse had been up and running for six years, it had six inmates being looked after by a governor and matron, Mr. and Mrs. James Sutherland, a porter and a kitchen maid. There were two very old men, two elderly women, one unmarried woman and her child.

By 1881 there were 24 inmates, almost all Gaelic-speaking, and 12 of these came from the parish of Creagh. There were six children attending school, one three-year-old infant, six women and eleven men. In 1891 the numbers were down to 18, ten men ranging in age from 34 to 83, six women, one year-old infant and one nine-year-old scholar.

Of these, seven came from the parish of Creagh. In 1901 there were 24 inmates, of whom 12 belonged to the parish of Creagh, three children, nine men and twelve women. From these figures it is clear that the parish of Creagh made most use of the poorhouse, obviously because of its nearness, but the remote parishes made very little use of it.

The inmates tended to be the frail elderly, the mentally infirm, who are described as imbecile, unmarried women with infant children and sometimes orphans. Certainly in all poorhouses there were twice as many women as men. These figures represent a small fraction of the number of people on the parish poor rolls throughout Sutherland.

In addition to the long-term inmates, tramps could get overnight accommodation in the poorhouse. They were put up in the porter's lodge, with locked doors separating them from the porter's quarters. Female tramps were housed at one end, male tramps at the other. And from 1927 they had to get a ticket from the inspector of poor to get admission to the poorhouse. And that system continued right up into the 1950s. Tramps have all but disappeared since that time.

So what was it like to live in the poorhouse in the 19th and early years of the 20th century? The Board of Supervision laid down regulations covering every aspect of life inside the poorhouse and carried out annual inspections to make sure that these regulations were being obeyed. An annual report was submitted to the Board and it then made whatever recommendations it thought fit to the House Committee. The Board said that the purpose of the rules was that the poorhouse would be conducted so as to afford an adequate test of alleged destitution or disability in the cases where the claim was doubtful, as well as a means of restraining vice, while at the same time affording a secure and suitable refuge for the infirm and friendless poor.

The poorhouse could only be a test if it was conducted under rules and regulations as to discipline and restraint so strict as to render it more irksome than labour. A needy person applied to the parish board to be put on the poor roll. The inspector of poor investigated his case and made his recommendation to the board. Some people were given allowances, some people were given a ticket to the poorhouse. Discipline and cleanliness were the watchwords of the poorhouse. So what was life like for people who went there? On arrival at the house, a pauper was searched to make sure that he didn't have any prohibited goods about his person. That usually meant alcohol. This searching was one of the porter's tasks. A pauper leaving the house was similarly searched in case he might be removing any article belonging to the poorhouse.

Then, on admission, the paupers would be given a bath and poorhouse clothes. They would then be taken to the appropriate part of the house. There were five classes of inmates and they were to be kept separate from each other.

There were males over 15 years, males 2 to 15, females over 15 years, females from 2 to 15 and children under 2 years. The numbers were so small in the Sutherland poorhouse that not all these categories would exist and complete separation was very difficult. In fact, in a later Board of Supervision report, the House Committee have to be reminded of the absolute necessity of keeping children separate from other groups in the house.

The dividing up of families and the separating of husbands and wives were aspects of the poorhouse life, much criticised by commentators. There was a very strict daily routine. All inmates, except the disabled, those of unsound mind and children, were to rise, be set to work, leave off work, go to bed with such intervals for meals as are notified by the ringing of a bell.

The work in the Sutherland poorhouse would be domestic work or working in the gardens, but the majority of inmates would be quite unfit for any kind of work. Children were to be instructed for 3 to 4 hours every day in reading, writing, arithmetic and the principles of the Christian religion. After 1872 Education Act, the children would go to the local school. They were also to be given such instruction as shall fit them for service or other employment and train them in habits of industry, usefulness and virtue. Usually at about the age of 12 it would be arranged for a girl pauper to leave the house and be placed in domestic service. At the same age, boys would be sent to become apprentices or to work as labourers on local farms.

There was a steady stream of demand for pauper apprentices from outside tradesmen for pauper children apprentices were very cheap and in no condition to complain about their situation. Such leisure time as people had must have been very difficult to fill as no inmate was allowed to possess or to read in the poorhouse any book or printed paper of an improper tendency or to play at cards or any game of chance. Dice, cards and the like are to be removed.

No inmate was allowed to smoke in the poorhouse or in any of the buildings belonging there too. I noticed that tobacco figures in the list of supplies bought quarterly for the poorhouse so the smoking must have been done outside. Also, taking away the tobacco ration was a very popular punishment for anyone who was providing difficult behaviour in the house.

Discipline was very important and a list of punishments was prescribed for different offences. The number and nature of punishments had to be recorded in the quarterly returns to the Board of Supervision. Lighter offences counted as being disorderly for example making a noise when silence had been ordered to be kept. Anyone who by word or deed reviled or insulted any person. Anyone who pretended sickness. The punishment for that type of offence could be one or two extra hours of work for up to two days or to be deprived of part of the diet for up to three days.

The next category was refractory. This type of behaviour carried a more severe punishment. Anyone who in one week repeated one or more disorderly offences was deemed to be refractory. Anyone who reviled or insulted any officer of the poorhouse or any member of the parochial board. Anyone who brought alcohol into the poorhouse or got drunk. Anyone who climbed over a wall or fence or attempted to quit the poorhouse in any irregular way. All these were deemed to be refractory and could be punished by solitary confinement for up to 24 hours with increased work and alterations to diet. They also had to wear a distinctive dress to show that they were under punishment. There was also corporal punishment in the poorhouse and this was administered to adults as well as to children.

I think it was part of the porter's job to administer the corporal punishment. There was a cell in the Bonar poorhouse and the 1907 report of offences cites the case of a woman from the parish of Dornoch who was accused of assaulting the children of another Dornoch woman. On being cautioned, she used very filthy and defiant language. On being asked to perform her usual work she absolutely refused to do so and again made use of very foul language to the governor and matron. She was warned as to the consequences of her conduct and on still refusing the governor placed her in confinement in the cell where she was kept for three hours and released on promising to be amenable to the rules of the house. Once inside the poorhouse you could not go in and out freely.

In 1862 there was a new regulation from the Board of Supervision that paupers were not to be allowed to go out to church on Sundays. Instead they would get religious instruction inside the poorhouse. A pauper could discharge himself or sometimes, more rarely, a family member would remove someone from the poorhouse.

The type of food and quantities per person were laid down by the Board of Supervision and different categories of inmates got different amounts of food. The basic diet was porridge, broth, bread and potatoes and until the early 1900s in the Sutherland poorhouse all meals could be eaten with a spoon. They didn't have any other form of cutlery until some time later. You might say that at this time this diet was not that different from what ordinary folk had in their own homes. What made the poorhouse different was the quantity of food provided. For example, at this time the allowance of oatmeal for a female prisoner in Perth prison was double that for an adult in the poorhouse.

A leading article in the Scotsman newspaper in 1863 said of the poorhouse diet The diet is calculated to sustain life and no more and so close is the calculation made that doubts will obtrude whether it does not really fall short in the amount of nutriment necessary for health and does not subject many inmates to slow death from gradual inunation. The diet did not vary from day to day. I have a copy of the Easter Ross dietary for a week which I could show you at the end of this talk if you are interested.

The criticism of the diet did have some effect and some experimental improvements were made and these tended to be continued. Certainly by the 1900s the diet of the Sutherland poorhouse included meat and fish. The strict discipline, poor diet and wearisome routine made the poorhouse a place that no one would wish to enter if they had any possible alternative.

The Scotsman newspaper article I referred to earlier asserted that in Scotland poorhouses had failed both as tests of poverty and as means of more effectually administering to the wants of the aged and infirm. In fact, of the total poor in the County of Sutherland very few actually saw the inside of the poorhouse and about two-thirds of its capacity remained vacant during all the years of its existence and that is true of all the other Highland poorhouses as well. In 1880 in the parish of Creagh there were 79 people on the poor roll and of these seven were in the poorhouse.

In 1889 there were 59 people on the Dornoch poor roll of whom one was in the poorhouse. Creagh and Dornoch made more use of the poorhouse than the more remote parishes. In the parish of Tongue of 32 people on the poor roll, one was in the

poorhouse. So contrary to the original expectations it was cheaper to keep people in their own homes and give them a small allowance than it was to pay for their maintenance in the poorhouse. Allowances were small. In the 1880s people got between one shilling and two and six and a pauper with four dependent children got three shillings a week. It cost eight shillings a week to keep a pauper in the Sutherland poorhouse. It was one of the more expensive ones. So the poorhouse became something of a white elephant.

The parish boards exercised considerable discretion about who should go to the poorhouse. In the cases of genuine need they could be humane. For example, in January 1883 the Inspector of Poor visited a woman in the parish of Creagh who was found to be suffering from cancer. She refused to accept a ticket to the poorhouse so he recommended that she be provided with an attendant. A neighbour was found to undertake the task and she was paid a shilling a week by the board. In tongue the parish board minutes give the instance of a pauper woman who also looked after her pauper grandmother. They note that she had recently lost a child and in these circumstances they decide it would be harsh to send her to the poorhouse so she is given a small allowance. In cases where the board doubt the genuineness of the claim they offer a ticket to the poorhouse or nothing. Parishes are still paying for the upkeep of the local houses set aside for the poor and they provide boots, clothing, pay rents for paupers, buy coal for them in the winter while the expensive poorhouse lies half empty.

It had been hoped that the introduction of the poorhouse system would reduce the costs of poor relief but in this it failed because the cost of poor relief continued to rise without any check at all. By 1895 the local government board which had replaced the board of supervision was concerned about surplus poorhouses. In a letter to the Sutherland parish councils the general superintendent Mr Barkley writes of the Sutherland poorhouse firstly it is in excellent order but this is not one of the best appointed houses I have seen and as the parishes in the combination could be equally well served in the poorhouses either at Tain or Hawkirk, great advantage would accrue to the district if it were converted into a hospital or asylum for lunatic paupers but this suggestion did not find favour with the parish councils and the poorhouse continued as before.

As we move into the 20th century it becomes clear just how important a part of the local community and its economy the poorhouse has become. The supplies needed by the poorhouse are bought from local shops whether it's food or clothing the maintenance work is done by local tradesmen and increasingly in the 20th century the poorhouse and later the Sordale institution provides employment for local women. One local woman remembers her class being taught in the poorhouse just before the new school opened in Bonar in 1934.

This was one way of making use of empty space. The Sutherland combination expands in 1902 to include the parish of Loch Broom and in 1912 the Kincardine parish also joins. By the 20th century also the poorhouse has become the object of charitable giving from local people. In the early years of the poorhouse, as part of its test function, no New Year treats were allowed and the receiving of gifts of tea and tobacco were also forbidden. But by the 1880s these rules had been relaxed. A generous long-term friend of the poorhouse was Mr Little John of Invercarron House who

regularly distributed gifts of sweets and tea. He also supplied the house with a magazine called Black and White and gave a gift of three dozen shepherd tartan shawls for the female inmates. In 1904 he donated a clock to the poorhouse. It's described as a pretty and costly hall clock in a handsome mahogany case and in the Chippendale style. It is inscribed with the words to help brighten the lives of those in whose home it now stands and it's still there nearly a hundred years on.

From 1903 Mr and Mrs Carnegie of Skibo provided special Christmas and New Year dinners for the inmates of the poorhouse and their daughter continued this on until the minute book for the poorhouse ends in 1948. The house was given gifts of game from local landowners and other benefactors including the WRI and the Girl Guides gave them gifts of cakes and fruit. As standards of living improved in the outside world standards inside the poorhouse also improved and the diet got better.

The annual report of the board inspector is usually a good one. In 1903 he describes it as being an excellent order. Usually the drive for improvement comes from the board of supervision from the central authority and the house committee is very skilful at stalling and delaying doing anything.

In July 1905 the board recommends that they should supply knives and forks for the use of ordinary inmates and the children especially should be taught to use cutlery. This is acted on but when six months later they recommend getting a hot water supply the committee deem it unnecessary. The pattern of improvement tends to be the central authority makes recommendations the house committee delays and sometime later implements them so in 1908 they put in a hot water system.

In the routine everyday life of the poorhouse there is the occasional tragedy. On the 29th of August 1912 an inmate belonging to the parish of Rogart escaped through a window from the poorhouse early in the morning and her body was recovered from the Kyle some days later. The committee expressed their regret but record that they are confident that no reason appeared to the officials of the house for exercising special supervision in her case and there the matter ended.

During the war years, that's the First World War the minutes reflect the changes going on outside the walls. Prices rise steeply, tradesmen are forced to raise their prices and many foodstuffs and other materials are in short supply. Advice comes from the board about substitute foods to replace those that are no longer available and at the end of the war they agreed to spend four pounds on a treat for inmates so that they could take part in the peace celebrations. There is ongoing concern by the board that the building is being underused a report of April 1921 says that the poorhouse is an excellent building with a large excess of accommodation and one wishes it was possible to turn it to better account.

At the same time, it is by no means without value to the community. It has at present 27 inmates, mostly aged and infirm who, but for the existence of the poorhouse would require costly nursing at home. One of the ways the board wants to use the vacant accommodation at the poorhouse is by housing what they term mental defectives or harmless lunatics there.

As early as 1915, the governor is required to get the special licence required for keeping mental defectives, but the house committee resists the idea that such people from other parts of the country should be brought to be housed in the southern poorhouse. Gradually, over the next 10 years they begin to accept them and they make up a sizeable proportion of the inmates right up into the 1950s. The poorhouse becomes a place where those who don't quite fit in anywhere else are looked after.

People with serious mental disorders go to the district lunatic asylum in Inverness. People with lesser problems who can't be managed at home go to the poorhouse. In the 1930s, for example, they had a substantial number of people who suffered from epilepsy and that was the only reason why they were placed in the poorhouse.

In July 1920, there is the first suggestion about a change of name. The board suggests that the name Sordale should be put on birth certificates of children born in the poorhouse rather than the poorhouse. The committee agree to this, but it is not until 1926, again on the suggestion of the general superintendent, that they discuss changing the name from Sutherland Combination Poorhouse to Sordale Institution.

This has to be approved by all the parishes of the combination and by January 1927 the formalities about the name change are completed and the new name comes into official use. Nothing else changes. The house is financed and run in the same way and in the community it continues to be called the poorhouse for many years.

By now the building is being made more comfortable. The sick wards get lockers by the beds, linoleum on the floor, rugs by the beds. The day rooms get cupboards and Windsor chairs.

New heating stoves are brought in, wash basins and inside toilets are fitted. In 1925 the telephone is installed and by 1934 enquiries are being made about getting electric lighting. In 1930 the institution is taken over by the county council and a sub-committee is set up to manage and maintain it.

In fact, the same people who sat on the house committee sit on the sub-committee when it passes to the county council so very little change is there. Finding suitable governors and matrons for the poorhouse proved to be quite difficult and over the years the house had lots of ups and downs with staff. In the 1880s the governor was a Peter Ferguson, a Chelsea pensioner aged 70 at the time of the 1881 census.

In May 1887 Evander McKeever, who was the Scourie factor and also chairman of three of the North West Parish Boards, paid a visit to the poorhouse and after his visit wrote this letter to the authorities I think it proper to record the opinion that the governor and matron are both beyond the age which fits them for the proper and necessary duties of their situation. He is 79 years of age and she not much younger. He has been 16 years there and I have no doubt was fitted for the work he has to perform when an active and younger man, but to deal with all the strange persons, male and female, who are sent to Bonar requires more nerve and strength of mind and body than he can be expected now to possess.

We found the inmates doing nothing, which is a great mistake. The house should not be a place for idlers and should have no attraction for man or woman. In all poorhouses everyone should be kept at work of some kind.

I may mention to you that I was told this was impossible under the present governor's management and that no reform could take place as long as he continued at Bonar's poorhouse. By 1891 he has gone and been replaced by Alexander Campbell who remained as governor until his death in 1906. In that year they advertised for a new governor and matron at a salary of £45 per annum and £20 respectively. It was required that one of them should be able to speak Gaelic. From the 51 people who applied they chose Alexander Munro and his wife. He had formerly been with the Leith police.

The emphasis on discipline is perhaps reflected in the choice of a former soldier and a former policeman as governor. The house gets a very good report the following year. It is described as scrupulously clean throughout and the committee have been most fortunate in their choice of governor and matron, that is Mr and Mrs Munro. They remain until 1922 when they are replaced by a Mr and Mrs Sinclair. In 1931 they are asked to resign. No reason is given in the minutes, however they refuse to resign and are given a month's notice.

Anne Noble is appointed matron and more of her in a moment. The domestic staff of the institution has increased. They now have a laundry maid, two housemaids, a kitchen maid and an additional nurse also. Able-bodied inmates continue to wash corridor floors, clean out and make up fires and do other cleaning tasks. There is now a staff sitting room and a staff dining room and in 1931 a fairly thorough refurbishment of the whole building is undertaken.

In 1932 they advertise for a porter. His list of duties includes 1. Receiving and discharging admissions at the porter's lodge 2. Assisting with the bathing of male inmates 3. Attending to the garden and vegetable crops and 4. Helping with the discipline of inmates and I think that meant the administering of corporal punishment to inmates. In the 1930s they also grow corn which is sold as a standing crop and they keep pigs. They are sold off regularly and occasionally the matron requests that one is kept and cured for use in the institution and this goes on right through the Second World War and beyond.

In the meantime, Miss Noble is running into difficulties. A nurse and a ward maid have left and Nurse Geer who had been in the institution for three years writes to the committee saying that due to the unreasonable and wholly unwarranted attitude and conduct of the matron towards her for a considerable period she cannot with any self-respect remain in the institution one day longer. Miss Noble when questioned did not give a satisfactory explanation for the departure of so many staff and in addition the committee discover that at the time of her appointment she had given her age as 48 whereas the committee now had proof that she was actually 59. She was asked to resign or be dismissed. She left and Nurse Geer returned and worked in the institution for many years. In July 1936 Mrs Wilson came from Lochmaddy to be appointed matron.

She and her husband had been matron and governor of the Long Island Poorhouse and North Uist and she remained in post till her retirement in 1969. In 1942 it was remitted to the secretary to hand out all obsolete record books etc previously stored in the institution to the local collector of waste paper as part of the war effort and this is why it is so difficult to get a detailed picture of the poorhouse in the early years. All the records have been destroyed apart from one which I have been able to find.

After the war a real effort was made to improve the provision for inmates. Those over 65 begin to get pocket money of one in six a week. Books and magazines are provided. An appeal is opened for funds to provide a wireless with loudspeakers in the day rooms and earphones in the sick wards. Plans are in hand to install central heating. Entertainment is arranged fairly regularly for inmates and staff when Gaelic singers and local musicians come to perform.

All this is a far cry from the bare and austere poorhouse. In 1948 the institution is handed over to the Northern Regional Hospital Board as part of the new National Health Service. At the final meeting of the old committee it is described as one of the leading places of its kind in the Highlands. The sordid institution continued to look after the same sorts of people and in 1958 was renamed the Migdale Hospital. Since then it has been refurbished and modernised several times. Its years as a poorhouse cast a very long shadow and that fact is some indication of just how harsh life was for the early inmates of the building.

But for the last 138 years this building has continuously provided care of one sort or another to the people of Sutherland. The last committee meeting of 1948 refers to the long upward climb of the work at Sordale.


FOUNDED 1899 FRIDAY, JUNE 10, 2011

Crowds flock to tour new hospital

OVER 200 people attended an open day at the new Migdale Hospital at Bonar Bridge on Wednesday.

NHS Highland's locality general manager for Sutherland, Georgia Elaire, said: "We were absolutely delighted with the number of people who turned up to view the new hospital and the interest they showed in how it will be used. We were also very pleased with all the positive comments we received about the facilities they were shown."

The new hospital has been built at Cherry Grove in the centre of the village at a cost of more than £8 million to replace the existing 150-year-old hospital building. Patients and staff will move into the new facility on June 26.

Patients and staff move into the new hospital in three weeks' time.

And of course in more recent years it has continued that climb to become the very excellent geriatric facility that it now is.

Some poorhouses, like Tain, have been demolished. The Inverness one has been turned into upmarket flats. But the Sutherland building has remained a community asset for all of its existence and I hope it will long continue to do so.

Thank you very much.