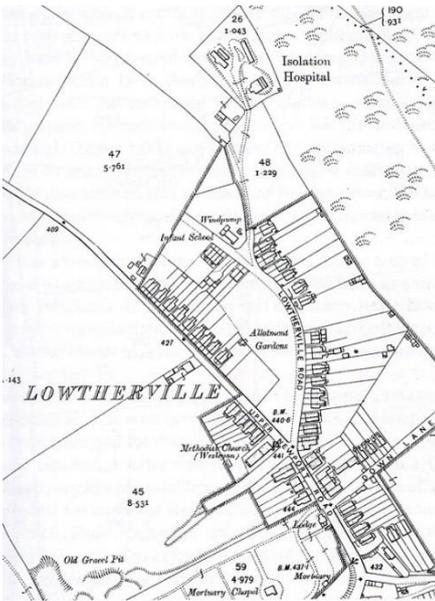




## The Undercliff Isolation Hospital



Scarlet fever used to be one of the most dreaded diseases of childhood. Highly infectious, it led to devastating epidemics in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with young children being most at risk. Two of Charles Darwin's children died of the fever, as did Beth in 'Little Women'; it caused Helen Keller to lose her sight and hearing, and Ventnor's nineteenth century diarist Mark Norman lost three of his four children to it in 1852. He was bitter about their death, believing that the doctor's advice not to move them was given to prevent the spread of the disease among the visitors rather than for the welfare of the children, whose headstone can still be seen in the corner of the Central Car Park, showing just their initials and the year of their death.

Efforts were made to halt the spread of the disease by moving patients to 'Fever Hospitals' also known as 'Isolation Hospitals', and in 1892 the 'Undercliff Isolation Hospital Committee' was formed to find a suitable place to build a hospital to serve Bonchurch, Ventnor, St Lawrence, Niton and Wroxall. Land was found in Lowtherville, not far from what was then St Margaret's Church and School (now housing), local people were worried that the school might have to be closed, but were reassured by Dr John Whitehead that 40ft was the extreme limit for infection risk.

The little hospital opened in Lowtherville in 1904, and consisted of a nurses' home at the entrance, a range of low buildings used as laboratories or stores, and the hospital building itself, which was fifty yards long, twenty feet wide and one storey high, running north and south. It had four wards, a nurses' room, two bathrooms and two earth closets. There were no windows to the south, probably because the building was designed to be cool in the summer, but the windows along the east side were low down, and there were bow windows on the west, perhaps so that parents and other visitors, who were not allowed on the wards, could look in and see the patients. Visiting hours were restricted to one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon, and in 1908 the hospital committee agreed to erect a shelter at the entrance gates for the protection of visitors, providing it cost no more than £3. A horse or donkey drawn ambulance was used to bring patients to the hospital (it was still being used in 1939 - the last one on the island, possibly the last one in the country). The photograph on the left is of children and nurses at the Ventnor Isolation Hospital in 1911; the one on the right shows a horse drawn ambulance arriving at a Yorkshire Fever Hospital in the 1890s which perhaps gives a more vivid idea of how frightening it must have been for a child.



The whole aim was to isolate the patient to prevent the disease spreading. Children were taken from their homes to the hospital alone by ambulance, their toys, clothes and bed linen burned for fear of spreading the infection. Their parents could only see them through glass screens, and it must have been a terrifying experience for a child. In a recent article in the Observer (5 Feb 2017) Terry Waite recalls his own experience in 1943: *"I contracted scarlet fever when I was three and I was put into an isolation hospital. I remember feeling afraid and rather alone, and my parents having to look at me through a glass window. Sometimes I wonder if this early isolation was one of the reasons why my relationship with my parents was so ambivalent."*

The Hospital closed in August 1943, and the buildings were later used for the provision of school meals, as a builders' store, and in the 1970s as a doll factory, recalled by some as a 'Toy Hospital'.

Lesley Telford, *Ventnor & District Local History Society*. Sources: records in our archives including research notes by Ernest Biggins and Fay Brown; E F Laidlaw (<http://iowhospitals.org.uk/book9.php>); OS for map; Yorkshire photo: <http://www.ossett.net>