

'But for New Cross,
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poorer'

It was opened when Macmillan was prime minister and national service was still in force and closed 23 years later as a result of Government and BDA opposition. But the spirit and values of the UK's first school for dental therapists live on. Joanna Lyall attended a reunion of the New Cross 'girls'.

It was a day of hugs, smiles and reminiscences by the score. Guests remembered the Mrs Malaprop warden who spoke of the importance of 'de-rodent' in girls' personal hygiene, who later went on to be head of the Queen's household at Buckingham Palace, and children being bussed in from local primary schools for treatment 'with no worries about parental consent'.

Seeing their younger selves in slides projected on the walls some remarked that it was 'a piece of social history, really' and so it was. Early students were housed in a former home for unmarried mothers where they were advised to bring 'an eiderdown or travelling rug' and some slept five to a room. For £3 15 shillings a week they got breakfast, supper and full board at weekends and were asked to provide their own ashtrays for the bedrooms. The first director of the school was a former bomb disposal expert from World War II and students were collected by coach for their lectures every day.

Opened in 1960 by health minister Enoch Powell in a former isolation hospital in South London, New Cross was the first school for dental therapists, or auxiliaries as they were then known, in the Northern Hemisphere. It was born at a time when children's dental health was poor and there was a shortage of dentists in the school services.

Entry was restricted to young single women who had five GCEs (General Certificate of

Education) and the course attracted a grant of £240 for the first year and £250 for the second, from the Ministry of Health.

'In this new school,' said Wilfred Fish, GDC president, in programme notes for the official opening, '60 women students each year will enter a two year course of training to enable them to carry out simple fillings, extraction of deciduous teeth, scaling and polishing, and to give children instruction in oral hygiene.'

'The intention,' Churchill's dentist explained, 'is that those who successfully complete the training should take up employment in the hospital in local authority dental

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services where they will work under the supervision of qualified dentists.'

Those offered places at New Cross had to confirm in writing to the GDC that they understood they might be required to work anywhere in the UK.

In July 1962 *The Times* noted the 'passing out of the first 50 young women, all single,' whose earnings would start at £525 a year,



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with 11 annual increases to £790.

‘While it is expected that many of the trainees will marry and they may marry during the training period, they will be able to continue after marriage,’ it added.

The report also hinted at changes in the provision of dentistry. ‘Their number is small compared with the pressing need for dental workers, but these first 50 girls may possibly decide the Ministry of Health and local authority on future policy regarding dental trainees,’ it said.

‘The remit of permitted duties was very strict and so were the permitted places of employment on qualifying. Auxiliaries were placed in post by the GDC and generally stayed where there were put,’ said Debbie Hemington, who organised the reunion of 250 graduates at a hotel in Kensington, London, to mark the 25th anniversary of the closure of New Cross in 1983. The guests were grouped by graduation year, and every year was represented.

‘New Cross meant so much to all of us,’ she said. ‘We always knew we were in a minority in the profession, never expected to earn much money as we would only work in the NHS, and as such are a special breed.’

‘As a teacher myself,’ she added, ‘I recognise the high standards we were taught and which have never dropped.’

Now a lecturer at the Eastman and also working part time in a general dental practice, Debbie (née Todd) was the last student to graduate from New Cross. She recalled a time when employment was restricted to hospital and community services.

In the late 1970s a Government review concluded there were enough GDPs to treat most of the population. Community dental services were cut and many dental therapists were made redundant, she said.

Ted Seal, the last director of New Cross, who led an unsuccessful campaign to save the school in the face of opposition from the BDA and the Government, said that the

Government’s objective was not so much ‘close New Cross but abolish dental therapists.’

While the Government achieved its savings and closed the school, the BDA eventually abandoned its policy of abolishing dental therapists and new training facilities opened, with different funding, he said. Therapists had survived and could be employed in all services.

A total of 1,154 dental therapists are registered with the GDC.

‘Next time you meet a dental therapist trained after 1983 look them in the eye and say “but for New Cross and us, you wouldn’t be and dentistry would be the poorer”,’ Ted urged. And many of the audience agreed.

‘We were and are a fiercely motivated group and without the pioneers of the “New Cross Girls” the role of dental therapist would not be what it is now,’ said Myra Cameron, now a part-time tutor at the Eastman. Myra graduated in 1981 and has been working for the NHS in Waltham Forest ever since.