

# CONSUMPTION, THE POST OFFICE AND THE SANATORIUM AT BENENDEN

*Dr Gary Cook looks at the historical scourge of TB*

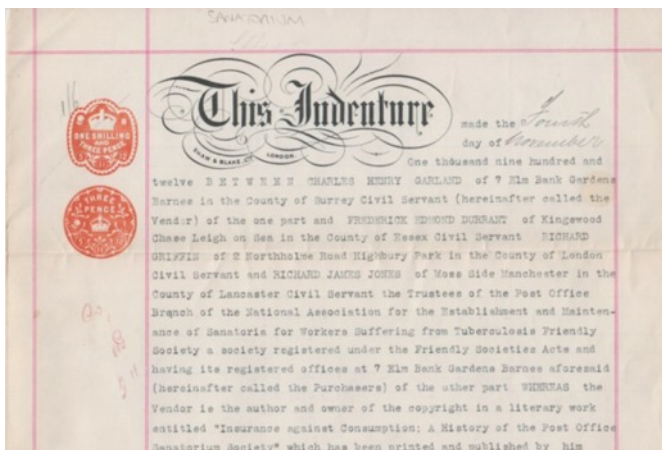
This article describes the Post Office's contribution to the fight against Consumption (or Tuberculosis as it became known) amongst its workforce. In the early 1900s sanatoria were the fashion for treating patients with consumption. However, they were often situated in mountainous areas such as Davos in Switzerland, offering the 'fresh air cure', but out of the financial reach for the majority of patients. At that time, nationally, less than 10% of consumptives received such treatment (1). This was especially true of postal workers where up to 45% of deaths among sorting clerks and telegraphists were due to consumption. This concern motivated Charles H Garland, himself a telegraphist clerk and secretary of the Post Office Branch of the Friendly Society – the National Association for the Establishment & Maintenance of Sanatoria for Workers Suffering from Tuberculosis (*left*), to address this challenge.



In March 1903 the Postal Telegraph Clerks Association set out to make available accommodation in sanatoria to meet the needs of its members. These endeavours were approved by the then Postmaster General of the day (Lord Stanley 1903-1905) who enabled a 2/- a year subscription to be taken from the salaries of the postal and telegraph workers. The scheme was expanded to involve all postal and telegraph workers. By 1906 some 32,000 workers had signed up. Other donations were made and the first set of Rules were agreed (*left*).

The private or mutual insurance schemes represented by the above Friendly Society predate the introduction of the National Insurance Act 1911 under the auspices of Lloyd George. This Act introduced a universal scheme of health insurance and a limited, centralised unemployment insurance scheme. Charles Garland was appointed in

July 1912 to the National Health Insurance Commission which was established to administer this new National Insurance Act. Following his move to this Commission, Charles Garland



sold the copyright of his book "Insurance against consumption, and the administration of sanatorium benefit: including an historical account of the Post Office Sanatorium Society" to NAEMSWST (*left: Part of the Indenture or legal agreement for sale of copyright*).

Charles Garland worked closely with Dr Thomas Lister, Physician to the Mount Vernon Hospital for Consumption, who was a Council member of the National Association.



Table 1 Examples of Grade Activity

NGU: Not get up from bed

OTL1: Out of bed to lavatory

U4H: Up for 4 hours

UAD: Up all day



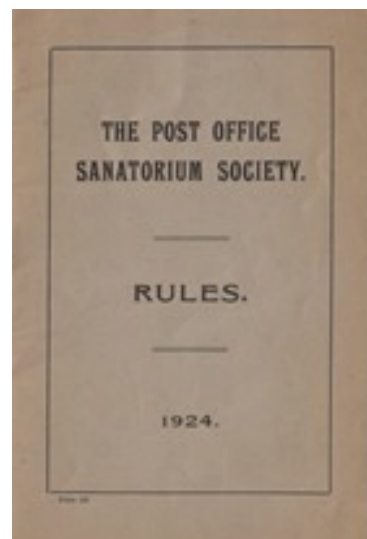
*Workers in the field*

1918 postcard of a group of male patients who had moved beyond UAD and the next stage of graded walks to heavier work as depicted. Male and Female patients had to walk segregated routes until their paths crossed in a wooded area known as “mingling woods”!

In 1916 the society changed its name to a shorter, less cumbersome title, The Post Office Sanatorium Society (POSS), and in 1923 the society extended membership to the whole of the Civil Service. Figure 8 illustrates an example of a promotional commercial cover with POSS logo mailed from the society’s headquarters in Canning Town.



Cover franked with George V 1d tied by a double circle handstamp for Victoria Docks and North Woolwich E16 dated 12 March 1924. It is of a size that may well have contained the revised POSS Rules for 1924 (adjacent).



As patients recovered and became well enough to leave, after months or years of residency, a tradition had developed whereby the event of leaving was celebrated by the “Bensan Band”.



Photo postcard of the band circa 1937, plus reverse of postcard with the comment ‘..a snap of the band. They play when a patient goes home...’

In 1939 there was a further name change to the Civil Service (formerly Post Office) Sanatorium Society (CSSS) reflecting the growing presence of civil service departments. During the war the sanatorium suffered from German bombs, with significant damage to

some buildings, and loss of life particularly from a ‘doodle-bug’ in 1944. After the war many efforts to increase membership, modernise and rebuild led to the setting up of the 1947 Victory Fund Appeal with its aim to raise funds for building a 75 bedded unit, an operating theatre, a modern x-ray department, a nurses home and new medical department.



*1947 Victory Appeal*

*Promotional appeal label used on the reverse of a letter mailed in 1947 to Denmark.*

The National Insurance Act 1946, followed by the creation of the National Health Service in 1948, had major implications for the Benenden Sanatorium and Society. However Aneurin Bevan decided against absorbing the sanatorium into the NHS.

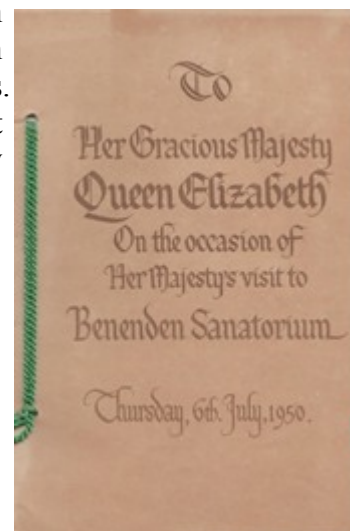


*King George VI air letter sheet AP3 (ref 3), 6d Stamp LA1, layout type A, format AF2 with ‘Air Letter’ in upright type and blue / deep blue inscriptions mailed on 04 May 1948. It was sent by a sanatorium patient to a correspondent in Toledo Ohio USA exchanging chess moves, with commentary about playing chess as one of the pastimes of residents at the sanatorium.*

The Sanatorium continued its independence, and the Queen Mother made her first visit to Benenden on 06 July 1950, at which she took the time to speak to every patient and toured the grounds. The event was celebrated by the publication of a booklet reproducing a book entitled ‘Benenden 50 years ago’ written by Miss M M Ratcliffe of the Post Office Savings Department.



*Walking the Sanatorium grounds*



Each patient received a personal invitation card in respect of her Royal Highness's visit. This specific invite was to a Miss R F Deegan and the postcard message is addressed to a person with the same surname, and describes progress with 'Rita' presumably the same person. The postcard is from the sanatorium and is postmarked Benenden Cranbrook Kent dated 1st August 1950.



*Royal Visit invitation*



*Personal message*

The use of mail to promote the CSSS continued into the 1960s whereby civil servants would sign outgoing mail and place CSSS labels on the reverse of the envelope.



Records suggest that a shop existed on site for some years. The oldest was built of corrugated iron and collapsed when the doodle-bug mentioned earlier landed nearby in 1944. A 'New Post Office' was opened in 1947 and was situated at the stage end of the 'Concert Hall'. A new Post Office and Shop was built in 1956.



*Postcard circa 1960 of the shop interior*



*Registered envelope with a Benenden Sanatorium with three Queen Elizabeth definitives totalling 1 shilling and 2½d cancelled 25 October 1956 by single ring counter handstamp Benenden Sanatorium Cranbrook Kent.*

As time passed, along with the introduction of effective drugs for the treatment of tuberculosis and further decline in the disease, the need for sanatoria and lengthy stays fell rapidly. Such institutions closed or metamorphosed into different hospital organisations over the ensuing decades. Benenden Sanatorium was no different. Its connection with the Post Office and dependence of its patients on the postal system for communication fell away. The Civil Service Sanatorium Society has become the Benenden Healthcare Society which remains an independent subscription based service and part of the private healthcare system.

### **References**

(1) [www.benenden.co.uk/about-benenden/history-of-benenden/](http://www.benenden.co.uk/about-benenden/history-of-benenden/)

(2) Garland, c. H. & Lister, T. D. (1911) *Sanatoria for the People The State Campaign against Consumption*.

(3) Huggins, A. K. (1970) *British postal stationery*

In addition this paper has relied heavily on two sources for the factual information included in this paper:

Smelik, S. (2005) *Caring for Generations: The Benenden Story 1905-2005*

Web: <https://benendenheritageproject.wordpress.com/2016/05/>