

## **News from Danesbury and the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospitals**

Many of you may know that the name of one of the hospitals which The Friends support, Danesbury, is taken from the large white house on the hill in Welwyn above Carlton Rise. Before 1993 the hospital was housed in that building but it was becoming increasingly unsuitable and difficult and expensive to maintain so the NHS decided to sell the building. In an effort to prevent the patients, many of whom were long stay, from being sent to different institutions, the Friends of Danesbury organised an appeal which raised nearly £1 million towards the funding of a new purpose-built hospital in the grounds of the Queen Victoria Hospital in School Lane. Danesbury House itself was sold to a developer and redeveloped as flats.

The history of Danesbury House is interesting. The building was finished in 1778 by the daughter-in-law of the 10<sup>th</sup> Baron St John and inherited by Frances St John, a spinster, in 1786. The St John family were owners of the very grand Grade I listed Thorpe Hall near Peterborough which had been built during the Commonwealth period by Oliver St John on land taken from a monastery sacked during the Civil War. He was an important and influential man who had been Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas under Oliver Cromwell. Danesbury House was then called St John Lodge. In her will dated 6 April 1793 Frances appointed Thomas Forsyth of Upper Wimpole Street, London, to be her executor. When she died she was buried in the village of Longthorpe near Thorpe Hall. In an interesting twist, Mr Forsyth, although living in London, is buried with a grand tomb in the old churchyard at Ayot St Peter. This is a beautiful and peaceful spot carpeted with snowdrops and daffodils in the spring.

The house had many interesting owners through the years. In 1824 a William Blake purchased the House and renamed it Danesbury. Members of the Blake family continued to live in the house until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and during this time the fernery was built. The house was then rented out and finally, after a fire, it was sold to the Dewar family in 1919. They continued to live in it until shortly before the Second World War.

Danesbury House then started its association with the medical world when it was requisitioned and used as a TB hospital and convalescent home. The house continued to be used as a TB hospital until 1955, after which it became a home for long-stay patients under the name of 'The Danesbury Home for the Young Chronic Sick' – the precursor of the modern Danesbury Neurological Centre. Many older Welwyn residents will remember summer fetes being held in the grounds of Danesbury House.

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