

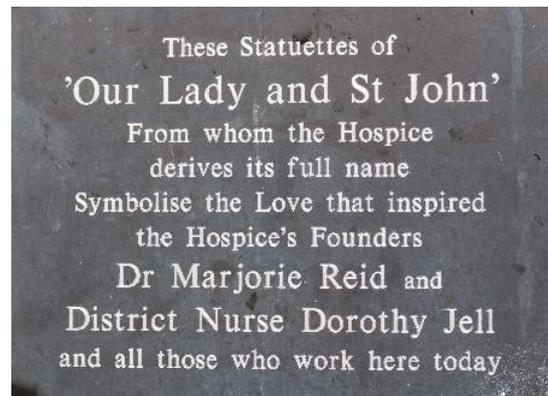
# Dr Marjorie Reid (1924-1990)

## 'A hospice for Milton Keynes'



Marjorie Reid was a GP in Winslow. She launched the idea of a hospice for Milton Keynes in 1974, at a time when the hospice movement in Britain was still in its infancy. Her work would go on to revolutionise care for the dying in the new city. Her co-founder, Dorothy Jell, shared Marjorie's ideals and worked with her, but sadly died in 1978 before the hospice was built. Marjorie did see the hospice open and served as its first medical director. She also died fairly young, however – ironically of ovarian cancer, in 1990.

Marjorie's Christian faith played a very important part in her life, including her work for the hospice. The full name of the hospice (Our Lady and St John) comes from the two people who remained with Christ as he died – Mary, his mother and John, his friend. There are statuettes in the hospice grounds showing them by the cross. But Marjorie was also insistent that the hospice would be for people of all faiths and none. When a local order of nuns offered to provide a building and run the hospice she turned this down to ensure it would not be seen just as a Christian institution.



When she proposed the idea of a hospice in 1974, Marjorie was asked how long it would take to establish this. She predicted six years and was out by just one year – Manor Farm at Willen was purchased in 1978 and the hospice opened its doors to its first patient in 1981. Over this period Marjorie worked tirelessly to convince others - including local medical professionals, the Council and potential funders - of the need for a hospice. Steve Barnes, until recently chaplain of the hospice, has pointed to the need for education at the time, including of the medical profession. Dying could be seen as a failure by doctors striving to keep people alive. It was important to convince them that dying wasn't a failure - we all do it. Enabling people to die as well as possible, and in as pain-free a way as possible, had to be seen as a legitimate part of medicine.

In an article written for the Society of the Sacred Mission at Willen, Marjorie discussed the idea, and ideals, of the hospice movement:

*"To care for the dying we have to try to understand something of their feelings, their needs, their hopes, their fears. [...]"*

*"We learn to care by listening to the dying, by remembering that they are whole people, not in any way diminished or made into second-class citizens by the approach of death. Their personal dignity must be respected and their sense of dignity maintained. It is important that they be helped to live until they die."*



*Willen Hospice from Willen Lake*

She argued that it was also important to support families:

*"If communication between patients and relatives can be maintained and each helped to accept what is ahead, the last few weeks can be a time of great closeness, with a stripping away of superficialities and trivialities and the enjoyment of the real and lasting things of life. This need not be a solemn situation – hospices are places of love and laughter. Children and animals should not be excluded if they are part of the family, and the patient remains part of the family until his death."*

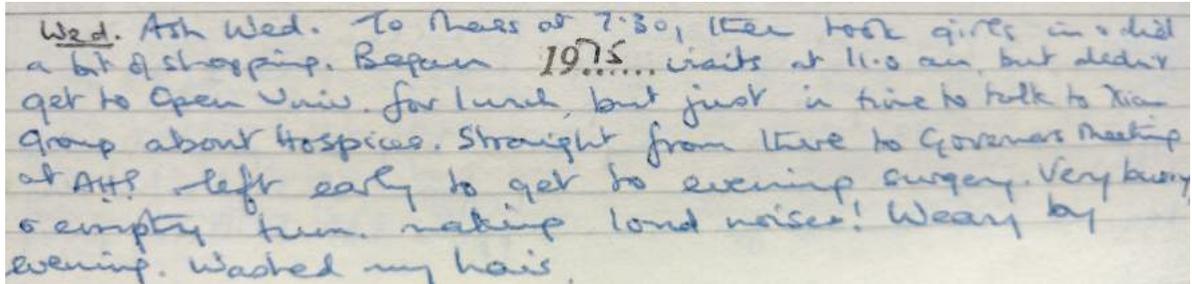
In fact, the first patient to be admitted to the hospice brought his dog with him. After he died the dog stayed on for a further six or seven years, going round the patients as an informal PAT dog.

Marjorie led an extraordinarily busy life as a practising GP, who also held child health clinics and looked after children in children's homes in the area. She was a governor at Aylesbury High School and a member of the local parish council. She gave talks to schools, health centres and parish groups, particularly on care for the dying and the bereaved. She attended church at least twice a week. She was a keen gardener. And she had family responsibilities, with five children, four still at home when she launched the idea of the hospice. Her husband, John Reid, was deputy chief

medical officer for England at the time. He also became a member of the World Health Organisation Executive Board, and was frequently away from home.

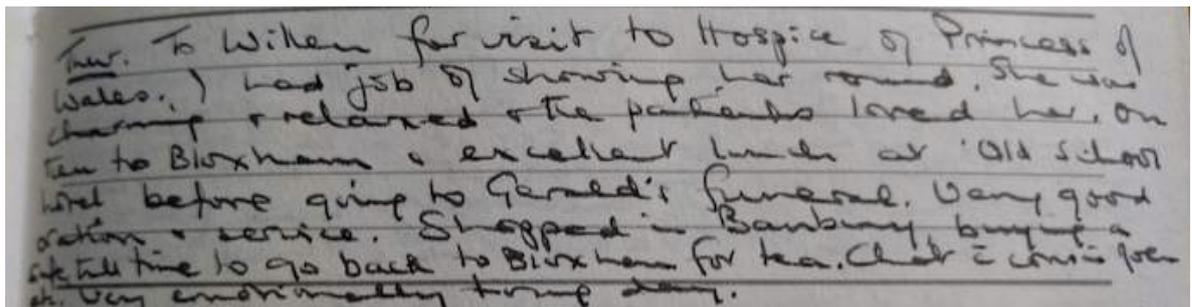
Extracts from Marjorie's diaries show how her hospice work jostled with other professional, community and family responsibilities in very crowded days.

Talking about the Hospice at the Open University, February 12 1975:



*Wed. Ash Wed. To mass at 7.30, then took girls in & did a bit of shopping. Began visits at 11.0am, but didn't get to Open Univ. for lunch, but just in time to talk to Xian group about Hospice. Straight from there to Governors meeting at AHS [Aylesbury High School] & left early to get to evening surgery. Very busy & empty tum making loud noises! Weary by evening. Washed my hair.*

Visit of the Princess of Wales to the Hospice, January 23 1986:



*Thur. To Willen for visit to Hospice of Princess of Wales. I had job of showing her round. She was charming & relaxed & the patients loved her. On then to Bloxham & excellent lunch at Old School hotel before going to Gerald's funeral. Very good oration and service. Shopped in Banbury, buying a safe, till time to go back to Bloxham for tea. Chat with cousin John etc. Very emotionally tiring day.*

Marjorie was involved at all levels in the establishment of Willen Hospice. She led in negotiations with the Council, and in early fund-raising. Her approach was always hands-on – for instance in 1977 the Greenshield Stamp Company agreed to accept stamps at a beneficial rate, initially for the purchase of wheelchairs. Marjorie asked if people could collect stamps and send these to her, giving her home address.

The early days of the hospice were quite rocky – the original approval for the project led to the resignation of two members of the health authority who believed the building was unsuitable and that enough money would never be raised to convert it or run it. And there are press reports of the hospice being in financial difficulties. Lady Duncombe, formerly secretary to the Council of Management of Willen Hospice, comments in an interview carried out in 2017 as part of research for this biography:

*"We [began] with nothing, absolutely nothing ... It was a question of collecting everything we could to stock the place. The stuff came in from everybody who heard about it."*

This included bedding. It was at this point that duvets were coming into fashion, *“and so we managed to get quite a lot of sheets and bedding.”*

Marjorie built up a committed team inspired by her ideals. And there was a pioneering spirit in these early days: Jane Henshaw, a member of the board of trustees, published newsletters and helped the nurses. Lady Duncombe worked on fund-raising but also made tea for patients and often did the laundry. Bett Morgan lived close to the hospice – she began collecting second hand clothes to sell, the forerunner of the Willen Hospice shops. Leslie Jell, Dorothy Jell’s widower, was Chairman of the Council of Management but also helped out with whatever needed to be done. Jean Maughan, who became the first hospice nurse, commented in an obituary for Marjorie: *“She had a great talent for persuading people to do things they had never really thought about, and to give more than they expected of their time and money”*.

Over the years, Willen Hospice came to be loved and celebrated across Milton Keynes. Speaking in 1994 at a thanksgiving service for the life and work of Marjorie Reid, and commemorating the opening of an extension to the hospice that bore her name, Leslie Jell commented:

*“The vision of one woman has had an impact on innumerable families ... There can be very few people in Milton Keynes who have not heard of the hospice”*. Within the national hospice movement, Willen Hospice *“is recognised as being in the forefront of hospice care”*.

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to Steve Barnes; Lady Rachel Duncombe; Leslie Jell; and two of Marjorie’s daughters, Lucy Reid and Morag Reid, for providing photos, diary extracts, articles and other invaluable resources, and for sharing their memories of Marjorie Reid and the early days of the Hospice.

Photographs of Marjorie come from Lucy Reid and Morag Reid, reproduced with permission. Photographs of Willen Hospice and the Statuettes by Liz Whitelegg.

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