

Miner Complications at the Birth of the NHS



Described by its architect JB Dunn, as one of the finest homes in Scotland, the sale of Gullane's Whetton Lodge caused a bit of a stushie just before the creation of the NHS in 1948, writes **Chris Holme**.

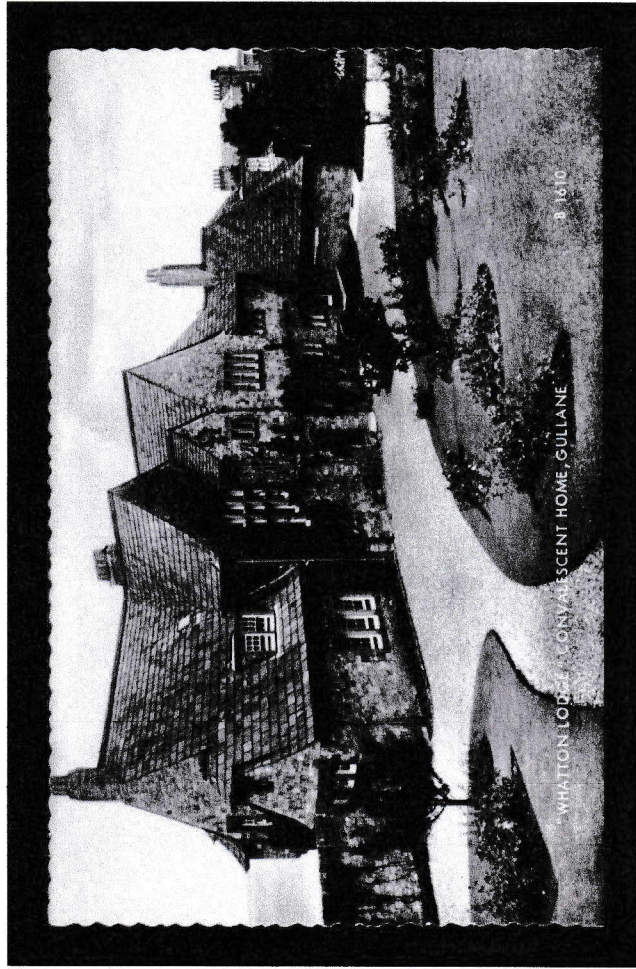
Plans to nationalise Scotland's health services in 1948 faced a last-minute threat from an unlikely source – workers in the newly-nationalised coal industry. The Miners' Welfare Fund wanted a convalescent home in the Lothians. However, this ran against government health policy which was to bring everything into the new NHS. The mineworkers had chosen one of the finest houses in Scotland – Whetton Lodge in Gullane. This was also contrary to health policy to site such homes near hospitals.

Papers in the National Archives reveal a final snag. Grand houses like this on Hill Road had few conditions for use solely as family homes – and this was to be a convalescent home for up to twenty miners.

Whetton Lodge had been the home of Sir Harold Jalland Stiles. He had been surgeon to the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh, succeeding Joseph Bell, Conan Doyle's model for Sherlock Holmes.



Sir Harold Jalland Stiles

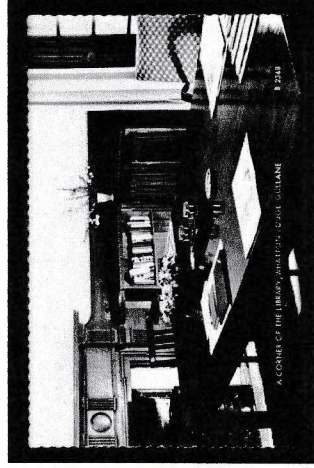


His nearest neighbour was his former assistant Sir John Fraser who died the year after Stiles. Fraser became principal of Edinburgh University in 1944.

Other neighbours were asked their views on dropping the feu condition and were uniformly shocked. According to one Hill Road resident: "The precedent, to allow institutions of this kind to spring up in a locality famed throughout the world as a holiday resort primarily for golf, would to my mind be disastrous."

Pressure grew on Arthur Woodburn to act – but he had no powers to intervene as Secretary of State. However, a letter on behalf of Lady Fraser and her son Sir James said they had no objection, "as they feel certain that had Sir John been alive, he would have been the last person to stand in the way of such a project."

The risk of death was four times greater working underground in the Lothians than being an Edinburgh civilian killed by enemy bombing. At least one hundred Lothian miners were killed in accidents over the decade to 1948. Miners of all people were deserving of the fresh air and breathtaking views from Gullane Hill – ironically over the seams under the Forth, where many of them had worked.



Top: The dining room, Whatton Lodge from James Valentine Photographic Collection. Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums
Below: A corner of the library, Whatton Lodge from James Valentine Photographic Collection. Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums

Woodburn met a miners' deputation on March 24, 1948, and wrote to Lt Colonel John Patrick Nisbet Hamilton Grant, DSO, managing director of Biel and Dirleton Estates, in early April 1948. The two later met in London, and the waiver was agreed. Grant, who had been sympathetic to the miners' side from the outset, wrote to Woodburn: "I trust all who occupy it will get renewed health from the invigorating air and from a spot which has been described in the *Times* as one of the most beautiful in the United Kingdom."

Gullane hosted the British Open that year. Even the King came to watch Henry Cotton win his third championship – as if with surgically precise timing – three days before the NHS came into being.

Whatton Lodge was purchased for £11,000 and formally opened in July 1949. It could accommodate twenty people, two sharing each of the ten bedrooms. Four public rooms, including a library, were set aside for the miners' use. In both choice and expenditure, the committee charged with identifying suitable premises was said to have acted shrewdly. The house was of first-class hotel standard, and it was reported that the central heating would be controlled by a device that automatically adjusts itself to the outside temperature. There were rich, plush carpets and soft, comfortable, easy chairs inside, and two well-fitted sun parlours. Thousands of miners and their families have since benefited from their stay there.



Above: Whatton Lodge from James Valentine Photographic Collection. Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums
Right: Group of miners drink in the dining room (TBC and need credit)
Below: (TBC and need credit)

