

THR saying "from mighty oaks little acorns grow" is apt for Colchester's Catalyst Charity which can trace its roots back to 1949 in a house in Lexden Road appropriately called "The Oaks".

What set out 68 years ago as a small nursing home developed, in due course, into a major purpose-built private hospital.

When it was sold, the proceeds established a charity which - from the interest from the investments - over the past 25 years has donated around £9 million to support medical good causes in north Essex.

The National Health Service was formed in 1948, but there were those in the medical profession who felt that there was still scope for private medical services as well as the NHS.

So a group of prominent Colchester doctors and surgeons, led by Sir Ronald Reid, Thomas Oglvie, James Green and Kenneth Mackenzie, formed a private non-profit making company to be run from a house owned by Mr Reid just a minute's walk on the other side of the road from Essex County Hospital.

The company was called "The Nursing Home (19 Lexden Road) Limited". It had 11 beds.

Today the house, opposite the Colchester Royal Grammar School and on the corner of Oaks Drive (which did not exist in 1949), is now where the Colchester English Study Centre is based.

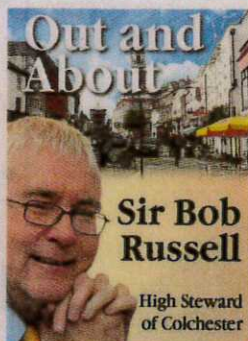
Sadly, there is no trace of the original name of "The Oaks" at this address, but it lives on in the name of The Oaks Hospital at Mile End which is the successor to The Nursing Home.

Directly involved over the past 42 years in the evolution from nursing home to private hospital to a charity is Mr Peter Fitt.

Now the charity's company secretary, he recently researched the records and has written the history of what is a remarkable Colchester success story and an account of changes to the local medical scene.

The initial venture proved to be loss-making, and, although the nursing home was providing a valued

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Sir Bob Russell

High Steward of Colchester

service, it was suffering from financial deficits each year so a decade later some of the town's leading business and professional men were invited to offer their expertise.

A new company and proper management committee were formed.

In August, 1959, 19 Lexden Road was purchased for £4,500.

Patient fees were 20 guineas (£21) a week.

The new company was registered as a charity on July 17, 1963. It still exists today, but no longer known as "The Nursing Home" but instead "Colchester Catalyst Charity" of which more in due course.

Under new management the company enjoyed financial stability, and with growing demand there was detailed discussion in 1965 to build an extension at 19 Lexden Road.

This did not happen, however, and a much more ambitious decision was made - to sell the property and build a new 27-bed nursing home in nearby Oaks Drive. This opened in 1969.

By 1973, the new home had been extended by the addition of a further 23 bedrooms and an X-ray suite.

The total cost of the original new building and extension



■ Early days - the house where the story of the Oaks began

was just over £1 million, all of it financed by the sale of 19 Lexden Road, public appeals and loans from private medical company BUPA.

In 1986 the company's name was changed from Colchester Nursing Home Ltd to Colchester Oaks Hospital Ltd, a recognition that the term

"nursing home" did not convey to the public the service that was now being provided.

In 1989, came the momentous decision to sell the Oaks Hospital to a national private hospital group. Colchester Catalyst Charity was created to put the proceeds to good use.

● To be continued next week.



■ Modern site - the Oaks Hospital at Mile End



■ Charity man - Peter Fitt

Charity is Catalyst for ongoing healthcare of the sick and suffering

LAST week I wrote about the establishment in 1989 of Colchester Catalyst Charity with the proceeds of the sale of the private Oaks Hospital in Oaks Drive being used over the past 26 years by the charity to fund a range of medical-related good causes in North East Essex.

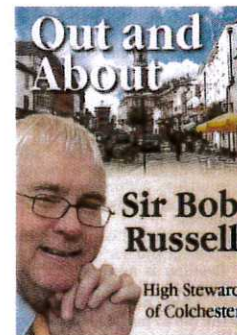
Today's article continues the theme of 'mighty oaks from small acorns grow', describing why the hospital was sold and what has happened since then.

Company secretary Mr Peter Fitt recalls: "The Oaks Hospital board somewhat reluctantly acknowledged that a committee of businessmen, however talented, giving their spare time was not sufficient to provide proper management, nor bring about much-needed expansion, of a not-insubstantial acute hospital in the late 20th century. "It was therefore agreed to seek either some form of partnership or a complete takeover by one of the much larger providers in the field."

In due course this led to the hospital, as a business, being sold to Bedford-based Community Hospitals Ltd in August 1989.

The freehold, however, was transferred to the newly-established Colchester Catalyst Charity with the new company taking over immediate control

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of the hospital until they built a new private hospital.

This opened, retaining the name Oaks Hospital, off Mile End Road in January 1994.

With the subsequent sale of the former hospital to become a care home for the elderly, the charity's trustees had more than £4million in the bank. The choice was either to pass this to other local charities and wind up the company, or invest the assets and become a grant-making charity through donating the revenue generated each year.

The latter course of action was taken, with remarkable success thanks to shrewd financial stewardship. Not only have donations since 1990 totalled nearly £9million, but the asset base has grown to nearly £10million.

In their application to the Charity Commission to change the principal aim, from that of a private hospital to a grant-making charity, the trustees said the sole object was "the relief at or in the neighbourhood of Colchester in the County of Essex of the sick and suffering."

The Catalyst Charity widened



■ Facility - the former Oaks Hospital

its activities through the establishment of the Equipment Pool Scheme, loaning items to patients waiting for NHS equipment, later adopted by Essex County Council to become the Essex Equipment Service.

The Short-Term Wheel Chair Charity can trace its roots to this scheme.

Two other Catalyst projects are the Respite Care Scheme, providing short-term breaks specifically for users and carers; and Special Individual Needs, to assist those with medical conditions seeking help.

With the fluctuations of investments and returns, some years have been better than others but overall it has been a record of success year-on-year both in terms of the value of grants made and maintaining a healthy asset base.

On Monday evening this week the Colchester Catalyst Charity held its annual meeting. In the financial year to last

September the value of grants awarded to various medically-related charities in North Essex totalled £375,394, with the charity's assets valued at £9,685,162.

Grants ranged from £1,500 for equipment for mental health charity Mencap to purchase equipment, to the largest of £41,498 for Tendring Citizens' Advice Bureau for a project to recycle mobility equipment, and others including £13,500 for Stepping Stones children's special needs nursery and £22,000 for the men's Chaps charity for a portable ultrasound scanner.

The past few months have been equally successful, with the year ahead forecast to continue what is stated on the inside cover of the annual report: "Colchester Catalyst Charity aims to help relieve the sick and suffering by making a positive and ongoing contribution of healthcare in north-east Essex."