

HEALTH, WELFARE & LEISURE

The Railway Village was designed and built to meet not only the housing needs of the GWR workforce, but also provide social, educational and welfare opportunities to the workers and their families.

The first of 300 houses were occupied in 1843 and in the same year The Swindon Mechanics Institution was established. The Mechanics Institution provided social and educational activities but it was another four years before the health and welfare of employees and their families were more fully addressed with the formation in 1847 of the GWR Medical Fund Society.

Daniel Gooch, the superintendent of works, supported the formation of a medical fund; he could see that providing healthcare would improve the overall health of the workforce which would also improve productivity and encourage workers to stay with the firm. Workplace accidents were also a problem and workers and their families often could not afford to pay to see a doctor or buy medicines. The fund was supported by GWR but it was the workforce that paid into it with deductions made from their wages.

As the GWR works grew and the workforce increased so did the provision of health services. Nationally there were improvements in public health and sanitation and these were reflected in Swindon with the opening of a swimming pool in 1868 and washing baths in 1869.

The cottage hospital was opened in 1871 to deal with workplace accidents. Medical facilities were extended when the Milton Road Baths, now the Health Hydro, was built in 1891. As well as two pools there were medical consulting rooms and a dispensary for medicines. Washing baths and Turkish baths were added a few years later.

The extent of the health services provided by the GWR Medical Fund, plus the leisure and educational services associated with the Mechanics' Institution made Swindon a pioneer in the provision of "cradle to grave" welfare services, a century before the National Health Service was founded in 1948.

PHOTOS HEALTH, WELFARE & LEISURE



The GWR Hospital in Faringdon Road, pictured in 1927. It opened in 1871 to deal with workplace accidents. When it first opened there were 5 beds, an operating theatre and morgue. The building is now the Central Community Centre.



The Milton Road Swimming Baths were built in 1891 and were part of the extensive services provided by the Medical Fund. The building housed two pools, doctors' consulting rooms and a dispensary for medicines. Turkish baths were added at a later date.



As well as providing health & leisure services, the Swimming Baths also hosted concerts, this one by a Temperance Society band. There were several temperance bands in Swindon.



The ward at the GWR Hospital in 1927.



Pharmacists prepare medicines in the dispensary which was housed in the Milton Road Swimming Baths building.



GWR Trip — What began as an annual one day outing introduced in 1849 grew into "trip week" when GWR families enjoyed a week's unpaid holiday.



Swimming Baths, Swindon.









