

# Goodbye - Phipps Ward

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I am visiting to take one last nostalgic look at a place where I worked as a Medical Technician since November 1981, until some eight years ago. It takes me back.

I'm standing in the main corridor, that divides into two, the east and west wings of the 'Phipps' unit. From here, I can see right down either wing. The layouts of each are commonly known as the familiar 'Nightingale' or 'pavilion' style of ward with five patient spaces running down each side of each ward.

What makes this unit unique is that it is the only place in Europe to exclusively use a form of artificial ventilation known as 'iron lungs'.

Most people under the age of 60 are unlikely ever to have seen an iron lung, yet seventy 70 years ago these medical mechanical monsters would have been a common sight in most hospitals throughout the country. Indeed, until a few years ago, medical students would have learnt about such devices as a recommended treatment for respiratory paralysis, used to maintain life for those whose breathing capabilities had been impaired or destroyed by polio.

Five iron lungs line each side of the two wards making 20 in total, some open and appearing like the jaws of an alligator. Others are closed, fully containing the limbs and torso of the patient within, their head protruding through an airtight leather lined 'collar' seal.

On each inhalation phase, a powerful pump sucks and forces the incumbent to inhale through their nose and mouth, then relaxes, allowing the patient to exhale passively. The pump, at the foot end of the iron lung, furiously forces 13 litres of air into and out of the machine cycling at around 16 – 19 'breaths' per minute.

But none of these machines 'breathe' in harmony with one another, so the combined sounds emulate like a stormy seaside shoreline on a very rough night. Especially eerie in the darkness of the night.

The wards smell of medical antiseptic, just like many hospital wards. Not only smelling powerful but tasting appalling.

The ward has many high and wide windows, just as Florence Nightingale recommended in her plans and proposals. Daylight shafts illuminate and brighten the clinical cream and chrome contraptions. Each one alongside its adjacent window.

I take it all in, for tomorrow, I and my colleagues and I will be moving all this equipment to a shiny new purpose-built respiratory unit, the 'Lane-Fox Respiratory Unit', which will have been opened at St. Thomas' Hospital, some 3 miles away on the banks of the Thames. Close your eyes and put yourself in my place.