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Write: Chris Lloyd, The Northern Echo, Suite 10, 2nd Floor, Coniscliffe House, 5-7 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington. DL3 7EE
Email: chris.lloyd@nne.co.uk **Call:** 01325-505062 **Tweet:** @echo.chrislloyd



The earliest picture in The Northern Echo's archive of the development of Middleton Hall, showing Jeremy Walford outlining the plans in 1999



An Edwardian picture of the centre of Middleton St George, known as The Square, as it looked when Middleton Hall was being developed as a 'private asylum' 125 years ago



George Stephenson who visited the Rev William Addison Fountaine (or perhaps he was the Rev William Fountaine Addison that day) at Middleton Hall on May 30, 1822

HE WAS the Middleton St George GP whose father had established a truly pioneering doctors' surgery in Felix House in the village, complete with Alpine chalets and Saanen goats in his open air sanatorium. However, by the 1980s when Dr Steavenson retired, time was moving on around Middleton Hall. Since the war, the formation of the NHS and medical advances meant that mental health issues, particularly those associated with ageing, were increasingly treated in hospitals while 'care in the community' became popular as the 20th Century wore on with people being kept for as long as possible in their own homes. The role, therefore, for separate private institutions,

like Middleton Hall, was reduced so it tried to adapt by becoming a nursing home. It struggled, however, to escape its past. "I STARTED here when I was 14 as a dishwasher," says Julie Binks, who is now residential care manager, having worked there for 44 years. "I lived in Middleton St George and it was a place you pedalled past very fast because it had that reputation. People in the village didn't talk about it and you certainly didn't go up the drive." Debbie Sanderson, Julie's deputy, who has worked there for 42 years, says: "It looked very creepy from the outside, and it contained people from another age." There was a Greek prisoner of war who didn't speak any English, a lady who had never recovered



Four of Middleton Hall's long-serving members of staff who between them have worked there for nearly 125 years: Caroline Soullier, Debbie McGinnes, Debbie Sanderson and Julie Binks
Picture: SARAH CALDECOTT

after being jilted at the altar, and another who'd come to live there after having an illegitimate child – they were people time had forgotten. By 1996 its 100 residents had dwindled to 40 and its fabric was in need of investment, but its business model was falling apart. In the 1920s Stockton accountant, Augustus Adolphus Walford, had invested in Middleton Hall. His son, David, took over the accountancy and the shares, and when he retired from the firm became a non-executive director of the hall. His son, Jeremy, had left the region to work in the motor industry then started a customer service business consultancy in London. He says: "When the company got into financial difficulties in January 1996, my father picked up the phone to me

and I came up for two days to help with a business plan – I'm still here. "I was shocked by what I found. It was an under-occupied traditional nursing home, very outdated, run by a matron and in need of a lot of refurbishment. "Within hours it became clear to me that they didn't need a business plan – they needed a rescue package. On my second day here I attended the directors' meeting and they all resigned, including my father." Jeremy was left holding the shares. "It was a very tricky business," he says, "but it had some very good staff and all these grounds." He had never been in a care home in his life, and quickly realised that he would not want to live out his days in a traditional place like Middleton Hall, which

still had one foot in its past as a Victorian institution. "Some of the practices were archaic," says Julie Binks, "like on an afternoon, everyone went to bed to move them out of the chairs." Jeremy visited other care homes that were regarded as good, but he couldn't see himself or his parents being happy in them, either. "I wanted somewhere people aspire to live in rather than have to live in," he says. "It was all about giving people choice to lead the lives they wanted to live. It is about attitude – people move here for positive reasons because they see the benefits of living here, not because they have to." Over the last 30 years millions have gone into developing Middleton Hall and creating different types of apartments and properties, from completely



Almora Hall, between Middleton St George and Middleton One Row, housed patients and a doctor from Middleton Hall in the 1930s. This is it in the late 1880s with its original owner, Jonathan Westgarth Wooler, outside in his carriage. Picture courtesy of Darlington Centre for Local Studies

independent living to high dependency residential care. "It was only later that I discovered we were building a 'retirement village' and I went over to America to see one," says Jeremy. "Fifty per cent of residents are independent but they come because they know the care is here if they need it," says client advisor Caroline Soullier. "It is very much a lifestyle choice. We started as a care home and have evolved into independent living which has allowed us to have all these extra facilities and services on site." The residents all share the luxury facilities of the hall which include a gym, swimming pool, art studio, library, bowling green, golf putting holes and a café set in 45 acres of parkland full of trees, flowers and wildlife ponds. And all share the activities and a

very obvious community spirit. In 2019, Jeremy turned the business into an employee-owned trust, along the lines of John Lewis. "We now know the company is not going to get suddenly bought out, and for the residents that is an important factor because they are investing their long-term futures in this place," says Caroline Soullier. "People are going to live here for 20, 25 even 30 years so they want security." "It was all about trying to retain our culture, which is all about quality of service and not really about money, which all gets re-invested back in the business," says Jeremy. "This place has evolved hugely in the last 125 years, especially the last 29 years... and it will continue to do so. "The trust has been set up to preserve the special place that Middleton Hall is for the future."



Felix House, in Middleton St George, in the early years of the 20th Century with a conservatory connected to Dr Steavenson's open air sanatorium on the left

Surgery makes a fitting relocation

IN SEPTEMBER, the Felix House doctors' surgery in Middleton St George relocated to a new £2m practice on the Middleton Hall estate. The NHS practice serves 6,000 patients in the area, including people from the retirement village, and it cements a relationship with Middleton Hall going back decades. The Felix House surgery was established in 1864 by Dr David Porteus, a Scotsman who had just moved into the village which was expanding rapidly as, fuelled by the railway, an ironworks was established. As a young man in 1850, Dr Porteus had sailed with Sir John Ross to the Gulf of Boothia in the Canadian Arctic. They were searching for information about explorer Sir John Franklin, who had disappeared in the area in 1845 while searching for the fabled North West Passage. Their rescue voyage was on a ship called The Felix because it was sponsored by gin manufacturer Sir Felix Booth, who had financially supported many Arctic explorations. Therefore when Dr Porteus, the ship's doctor on The Felix, settled in MSG, he named his surgery after his adventure of a lifetime. In 1904, he sold Felix House to Dr Stanley Steavenson, from a well-known Darlington family – Dr Steavenson's father, a solicitor, was mayor in 1883. But Dr Steavenson almost immediately fell ill with tuberculosis. He recovered by using new continental practices of fresh air and exercise and so, in 1908, opened a sanatorium beside Felix House to treat other

sufferers. It was the first sanatorium in the north and only the third in the country. He had 20 wooden Alpine chalets in the grounds, each on a turntable so they could be revolved to follow the sun, and his 53 private patients improved their health by working as energetically as they could in the field. Because cows could become infected by bovine TB, Dr Steavenson imported a herd of Saanen goats from Switzerland to provide TB-free milk for his patients and to add to the Alpine feel of MSG. His Felix Herd won awards and became one of the best in the country. Dr Steavenson loved gadgets – he had one of the first ride-on Atco lawnmowers and one of the first dishwashers, which spewed out water and broke much of the crockery. He also had three pet marmoset monkeys which went on holiday with his family in a special travelling cage in their early caravan. When Dr Steavenson retired around 1950, his son, Robin, took over the practice. Robin was nationally renowned yachtsman, pioneering the National 12 class, and he had worked at Cherry Knowle, Sunderland's asylum. For the best part of 30 years from 1950, Robin was Middleton Hall's principal doctor, applying his father's pioneering principles to the field of mental health. It is therefore quite appropriate that the doctors' village surgery – now called the Middleton & Dinsdale Medical Practice – is in the grounds of the hall to which they had a connection for so long.



ABOVE: Dr Stanley Steavenson with two of his Saanen goats in the grounds of Felix House. RIGHT: One of the wooden chalets in the ground of Felix House with Dr Steavenson on the left

