

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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ORBOST'S FIRST DOCTOR— Dr James Kerr

- 39 years of service to this district

When Dr James Kerr died on 28 June 1928, aged 65, it was truly the end of an era. '***The old doctor is dead***' echoed through the district. His funeral was one of the largest held in Orbost to that time, having served this district for 39 years. He was indeed 'The Good Physician', always broadminded and charitable in his care, and no hour was too early or too late to make a visit.

Dr Kerr was born in 1862, the eldest son of Dr. William Smith KERR and Mary Elizabeth MURRAY of Dumfries, Scotland. He was educated in Dumfries and graduated M.B. from Edinburgh University in 1884. James joined his father in medical practice in Dumfries. He then served as the ship's doctor on board the *City of Cambridge* to Calcutta (13.3.1885 – 14.6.1885), the *Britannia* and *Pantagonia* to Valparaiso (4.1.1885 – 18.10.1886) and on 7 trips on the *Iberia* to Australia between 19.11.1886 and 18.5.1889.

After coming to Australia he practiced in New South Wales, in Sydney and at Tumut, before coming to Orbost in 1888 on a Government small-pox vaccination program. His liking of Orbost was the reason he returned the following year (August 1889) to become the town's first doctor.

He shared the Manse with Rev. Alex Morton until his marriage in 1893 to Hilda TEMPLE, daughter of George Temple JP & Mary Temple.

After his marriage he and his wife lived at *Lincluden*, Raymond Street, Orbost.

During his 39 years service to the people of Orbost and outlying districts, nearly all



ABOVE: Dr Kerr's brass plaque from the gateway to his surgery in Raymond Street, Orbost is now in the Orbost Museum.

his travelling was done on horseback until 1923. His favourite horse was his last which was presented to him by the citizens of the area. He named the horse 'Scotland' after his homeland.

His annual holiday was usually with a group of leading Melbourne medicos at Mallacoota.

He served on the first Golf Club committee and was keenly interested in the Mechanics' Institute Library, the Rifle Club, the erection of the Higher Elementary School, and the welfare of all people.

Dr. Kerr was particularly well-known for his obstetric work and care of mothers and children. He also advised Orbost Council on sanitary and health matters, including the establishment of a temporary isolation room at the Mechanics Hall during the 1919 Flu epidemic.

These days, our health services are centred around the Orbost Hospital (Orbost Regional Health), but in Dr Kerr's days, there was no hospital at all and he worked from his practice in Raymond Street.

James Kerr's wife, Hilda (nee Temple, b.1874—d.1956) was the daughter of George Temple and his wife Mary, local storekeepers and general merchants in Orbost. This was a literary family, fond of poetry and music. Hilda became well-known as an artist, published poet and writer of musical works, including the libretto for '*Nell—A Story of the Sea*' performed in Melbourne.



ABOVE: Dr Kerr on his horse 'Scotland'. This photo takes pride of place on the wall of a waiting room at Orbost Regional



ABOVE: Inside the St James Anglican Church in Browning Street, Orbost are three impressive stained-glass windows dedicated to James Kerr M.D., Pioneer Doctor and Beloved Physician of Orbost.

RIGHT: On 28 November 2022, this story-board in recognition of Dr Kerr was unveiled in Orbost by another long-serving doctor, Dr David Hollands (retd).

This sign was sponsored by the Orbost & District Historical Society and is situated in the grounds of what was the

**JAMES KERR INFANT
WELFARE CENTRE, cnr.
Browning and Ruskin Streets,
Orbost.**



ABOVE: (At back) Noreen Thomson, Heather Terrell, Dr David Hollands.

(At front) Rita Cavanagh, Lois Crisp, Audrey Van Den Berg, Glenice White, Lynn Craig.

'JAMES KERR INFANT WELFARE CENTRE'

The blonde-brick building in the background of this photo was opened in 1954 with local member, Sir Albert Lind MLA officiating. This building stands next to the Council Business Centre in Ruskin Street and was the culmination of many years of fundraising and lobbying by local people.

(See story over page)

INFANT WELFARE IN ORBOST

The decades after World War II saw a baby-boom and an influx of immigration to the Orbost region, so the demand for better medical services was high.

In the early 1940s, babies were monitored by a Sister from the Public Health Dept. in an anti-room at the back of the Shire Building. Later it shifted to the Cookery Centre at the Mechanics Hall. In '*Orbost Hospital: history, personalities and stories*', the author Dr Margaret Hollands, states that in January 1942, the Victorian Government had made a special grant to the Public Health Department to establish an **Infant Welfare Travelling Nurse** to the Orbost District. Miss Vera Houghton was appointed and it was announced that she would be in attendance at the Cookery Room in the Mechanics Hall in Orbost on Fridays.

Later, Sister was provided with a large 'Dodge' van with a raised roof to travel around the district. She could then visit mothers and babies in their homes and in more remote locations, much as the Library's Book Mobile does now. For instance, many older Orbost citizens will remember that the 'baby van' went to the northern suburb of Orbost (known colloquially a 'Newtown') where there were two timber mills and many workers' families.

In 1949, **Dr. John Lane** and his wife **Dr. Mary Long** arrived to take over a practice in Nicholson Street. They brought their two children with them, and had another three while in Orbost.

Dr Long was particularly interested in the Welfare of our babies and young children. She was a staunch supporter of providing a community health centre and kindergarten. She and Pen Richardson visited all the farms to doorknock. She also lobbied the Shire Council & the local Member of Parliament. Others prominent with this campaign were Mrs Gertrude Dreverman as President of the Infant Welfare Centre committee, Mrs J Nixon (Secretary), and Mary Long (Assistant Secretary), and Mrs T H Rodwell.

Success came in 1954 with the opening of the **JAMES KERR INFANT WELFARE CENTRE**. For over 40 years, services functioned from this building. In the late 1990s, this service was incorporated into Orbost Hospital.



More recently, in October 2013, the James Kerr Infant Welfare Centre has again functioned as part of Orbost Regional Health's Maternal & Child Health Early Years Services and the Orbost Early Learning Centre.