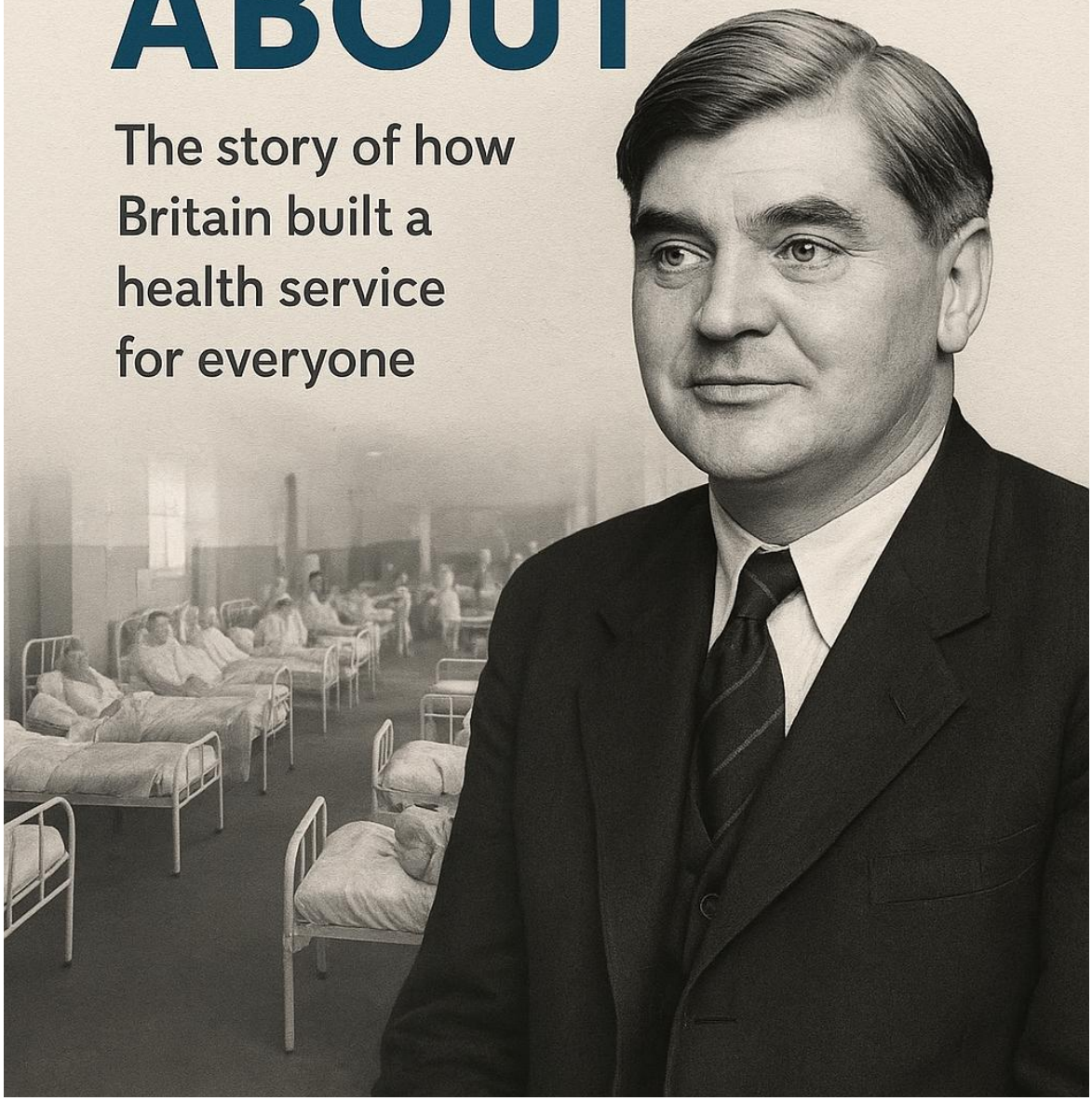
HOW THE NHS CAME ABOUT

The story of how Britain built a health service for everyone



By Sarah Smith

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Introduction – A Nation in Need

Welcome to Britain in 1945 — a nation tested by years of war. Cities lay in ruins, families had been torn apart, yet the conflict had revealed something unexpected: that organisation, shared sacrifice, and collective planning could transform lives.

The Second World War proved how hospitals, doctors, and planners could work together across the nation. That shared experience of danger and cooperation inspired a new appetite for collective solutions.

Out of that wartime spirit — and a hope for a fairer society — grew an idea so simple yet revolutionary: healthcare as a right, not a privilege. From that conviction, our National Health Service was born.

It did not happen overnight. The NHS was the product of years of debate, compromise, and stubborn determination. Its founding promise was both simple and radical: healthcare would meet need, be free at the point of delivery, and be available to everyone.

In the summer of 1948, that promise became reality — and with it, millions of people experienced, for the first time, free dental care, eye tests, hospital treatment, and general practice.

The NHS was more than a new system of care — it was a declaration of compassion, equality, and shared responsibility.

Before the NHS – Healthcare for the Few

Paying for Treatment

The most essential thing to remember is that prior to the NHS, *most healthcare had to be paid for directly*. Visiting a doctor could cost several shillings – a serious burden for working families. For many the choice was stark: call the doctor or feed the children. This resulted in most people delaying or avoiding seeking medical help altogether.

Hospitals existed but often required a deposit or proof of ability to pay for treatment before admission. In a nutshell, poverty could literally determine who lived and who died.

The Poor Law and Workhouse Infirmaries

The Poor Law (introduced in the 19th century) provided limited relief for those too poor to afford care, but medical help was usually tied to *workhouses*, where the sick were treated in harsh, humiliating conditions. These institutions were a last resort – few sought them willingly. There was much stigma attached to the workhouse and falling ill may have led to treatment, but with shame attached.

Voluntary and Charitable Hospitals

Some towns and cities had *voluntary hospitals* which offered care funded by donations and subscriptions, normally contributed to by the wealthier classes. They provided specialist care, but were very selective in who received treatment. Patients were expected to be respectful and deserving.

Friendly Societies and the 'Panel' System

Many working-class families joined *friendly societies*, paying small weekly fees in exchange for help with doctor's bills or sick pay. After 1911, the *National Insurance Act* provided limited medical coverage for some – but this only applied to men working in certain jobs, not their families. This system, while better than no system, left huge gaps. Women, children, and the unemployed were often excluded.

Public Health Improvements

In the background, there were efforts being made to improve water sanitation, water supply and disease prevention (especially after cholera outbreaks in the 1800s). Local councils ran some health services, such as maternity clinics and TB care, but funding was uneven. The system was very fragmented – a mix of private, charity, and local authority provision with no national coordination.

Social Inequality and Health Outcomes

Before the NHS existed, infant mortality rates were very high, particularly in poorer areas. Malnutrition and preventable diseases were widespread, and access to dental, eye, and maternity care depended almost entirely on income.

War and Reform – The Seeds of Change

The Second World War

WW2 disrupted normal life, but it also forced the government to organise healthcare on a national scale. Cities were bombed and hospitals were overwhelmed – new co-ordination was essential. The emergency measures which were subsequently put in place gave planners a taste of what a nationwide health system could achieve. The chaos of the war demanded more than patchwork solutions – it demanded a plan for the whole nation.

The Emergency Medical Service (EMS)

Established in 1939 to prepare for war casualties, it coordinated hospitals, created new beds, and ensured that people could access care efficiently. It showed that doctors, nurses, and administrators could work together under a centralised plan and furthermore proved that a national system *could* function smoothly.

Shared Sacrifice and Collective Spirit

Wartime highlighted social inequalities – poor nutrition, overcrowding, and disease were starkly visible. People saw firsthand the benefits of collective action: rationing, evacuation, and co-ordinated health responses.

The public became more open to the idea of government responsibility for citizens' welfare… after all… if a bomb could bring people closer together, why couldn't illness?

The Beveridge Report (1942)

Presented by economist William Beveridge, who aimed to tackle what he called "the five giant evils:" Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness.

His report proposed that the country introduce a welfare state which included healthcare as a universal right, and provided a framework for post-war reform, showing that national systems were both possible and desirable. These ideas were later adopted by the labour party during their campaign in 1945 – more on that shortly.

Early Public Health Experiments

Local councils and wartime services ran healthcare initiatives (TB clinics, maternity care, and vaccination programs). Wartime success stories convinced policymakers that national coordination could improve outcomes with emergency maternity units and pre-fabricated hospitals giving access to care previously unavailable to many.

Political Momentum

Before the war, the Conservative government had introduced some social reform, but large gaps still remained in healthcare, housing, and social security and by 1945, Britain was ready for change.

Under the leadership of Clement Attlee, Labour set out an ambitious vision: full employment, adequate housing, financial support for the unemployed, and, most notably, healthcare for everyone, free at the point of use. The campaign was shaped in part by William Beveridge's 1942 report, which had inspired ideas for a comprehensive welfare state.

Labour's manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, promised a society in which no one would be left without basic care or security, a message that resonated deeply with a population shaped by wartime hardship, and when Labour won a landslide victory in July 1945, the party gained a strong mandate to turn these ideas into reality. For healthcare, this meant one clear mission: to create a National Health Service that would meet people's needs, regardless of income, location, or social status. While the NHS would become the most visible achievement, it was part of a broader commitment to fairness and social justice — a promise that Britain could build a society that cared for all its citizens from cradle to grave.

Nye Bevan and the Birth of the NHS

Aneurin 'Nye' Bevan was a Labour politician, Welsh MP, and above all, a passionate advocate for social justice. He was appointed Minister of Health in 1945 and he held a deep belief that healthcare should be a right, not a privilege.

"No society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means." – Nye Bevan

His goal was to create a universal health service which would be free at the point of use. He wanted hospitals, doctors, nurses, dentists, and pharmacists to work together under one national system, its principle being that care would be based on clinical need, not ability to pay.

His idea was revolutionary, but he faced strong opposition from doctors who were concerned about losing income and independence, local authorities who resisted the idea of central control of hospitals, and political opponents, namely the Conservatives who criticised the cost and scope of the operation.

Bevan was not swayed, and famously negotiated with the British Medical Association by offering incentives. He is quoted to have said that he had to *"stuff their mouths with gold"* to get doctors on board.

Bevan had his way and on 5 July 1948, the NHS was officially launched. The service was unveiled at Park Hospital in Manchester (now Trafford General Hospital) and the first patient to be treated under the NHS was thirteen-year-old Sylvia Diggory. The launch was a major event and was attended by Bevan himself. He described it as 'a milestone in history.'

Challenges and Legacy

Early Challenges

Of course, like with many new ventures, the NHS was met with challenges from the start. The service was more popular than expected – demand soared immediately and costs far exceeded early estimates, leading to funding struggles.

Much like today, there were shortages, with not enough doctors, nurses, and hospital beds to cater to new levels of demand. This led to much political tension, with critics accusing Bevan of creating a system which would be too expensive to sustain. Bevan himself, resigned in 1951, when charges for prescriptions, glasses, and dental care were introduced – he felt it was a move that betrayed the founding principles.

Adapting Over Time

The NHS had to evolve, and fast. New treatments, new technologies, and an ageing population meant rising costs. Several reforms took place in the 1970s and again in the 1990s to try and balance efficiency while maintaining the founding ideals. Despite the political and financial pressures, the core principles remain intact to this day – care based on need, not wealth.

Public Support and Identity

The NHS soon became deeply woven into British national identity. It was seen as a moral achievement, a sign of fairness, compassion, and collective responsibility. Even today at times of national crisis (e.g. pandemics, strikes, funding cuts), public affection for the NHS often grows stronger.

Lasting Legacy

Britain's National Health Service has inspired health systems worldwide. It continues to represent a belief in equality and community care. More than 70 years on Bevan's vision still shapes public debate: how to fund and protect a universal service in a changing world.

Conclusion

When the National Health Service was founded back in 1948, it represented more than just a new way to deliver healthcare – it was a promise that compassion and equality could be built into the fabric of a nation. For the first time, ordinary people could see a doctor, visit a hospital, or receive treatment without fear of the cost. It changed not only how people lived, but how they thought about one another.

Today, it is easy to forget how extraordinary that achievement was. The NHS has been part of British life for so long that it can seem as if it has always been there – steady, reliable and endlessly available. Yet behind every appointment and every hospital ward lies a history of courage, compromise, and conviction.

We are deeply fortunate to have a health service founded on the belief that care should be given according to need, not income. Though it faces challenges – funding pressures, staff shortages, and the demands of modern medicine – the spirit that created it endures.

The NHS remains one of our country's greatest expressions of fairness and humanity. To value it, to defend it, and to support those who work within it, is to honour the generation that built it – and to keep alive the hope that health and dignity should belong to everyone.

"Born from the ashes of war, the NHS remains one of Britain's proudest achievements — a promise that no one should face illness alone."

Author's Note:

As someone who once worked within the National Health service, this story holds a special place in my heart. I have seen first-hand, the quiet dedication, compassion, and resilience of those who give their time and energy to care for others. Behind the statistics and policy debates are real people – nurses, doctors, porters, and countless others – who show every day what kindness and commitment look like in practice.

Writing this booklet has reminded me not only of the NHS's remarkable beginnings, but of the spirit that continues to sustain it. The challenges are many, yet the purpose remains unchanged: to care for those in need, without judgement or cost.

The NHS is far from perfect, but it is precious. It stands as proof of what can be achieved when a society chooses compassion over convenience – and I hope we never lose sight of how extraordinary that is.