

Chapter 8.

... In Health.



Mirabel and friends at the El Arteal hospital.
Aguardalupe Las Herrerias Facebook Page.

The nearest hospital was the Hospital de San Antón in Cuevas. It had belonged to the French order of friars, the Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony, until the order was suppressed in 1800 following the French Revolution. Cuevas City Council took the building over in 1802 and converted it into a Charity hospital, employing four doctors. They were assisted by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, who also staffed the nursing home and orphanage attached to the building. Although still technically called the Hospital de San Antón it is always referred to as the Hospital de la Caridad (Charity). The orphanage no longer exists, but there is still a nursing home (asilo) there.



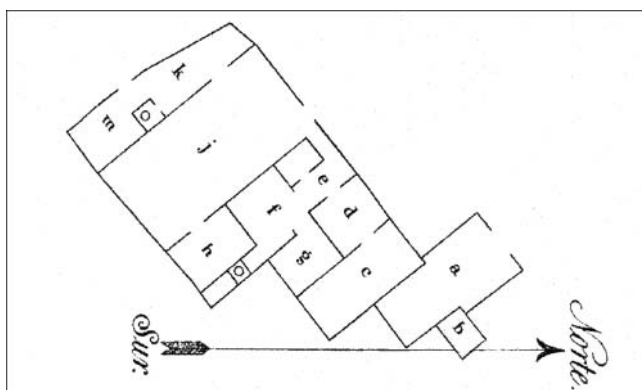
Two views of the Hospital de San Antón known as the Hospital de la Caridad.

Left, Federico de Blain.

Below, IAPH.



Those injured in the mines had to be taken to the Hospital San Antón for treatment. The appalling state of the road added to the length of time that it took to cover the distance and many men did not survive the journey. The parish priest José Sánchez Puerta, one of the several clergymen who had shares in the Esperanza mine, together with the mining engineer Antonio de Falces Yesares drew up plans for the building and funding of a hospital in the Jaroso. The small Hospital of Our Lady of Carmen was built on land in the Diosa concession and opened in 1861 under the directorship of Vincent Juan y Esteban and staffed by nuns. Many lives were saved due to the more prompt treatment received in this establishment. It was funded by the mine owners and operators, who were contracted to make annual contributions based on their profits, and by the miners themselves, who had a small amount of pay docked by their employer each varada.



Plan of the original Hospital of Our Lady of Carmen.

From Sierra Almagrera y Herrerías. Enrique Fernández Bolea.

Key:

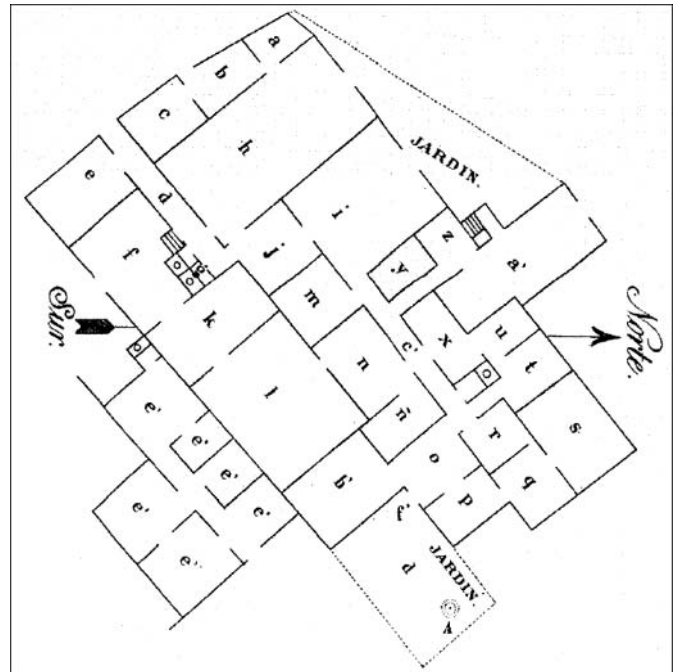
- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| a. Chapel | b. Sacristy |
| c. Nuns Dormitory | d. Community Hall |
| e. Entrance | f. Kitchen |
| g. Refectory | h. Patients Dormitory |
| j. Sick Room | k. Patio |
| m. Pharmacy | |

By 1875 there were concerns among some mine owners that the small hospital was inadequate and outdated, and that they were not getting good returns on their contributions. In 1879 it closed for a while and was then reopened, this time under the supervision of the Cuevas Charity Board, while plans were drawn up for improvements to the establishment. In 1883, responsibility for the hospital was passed back to the mine owners and in 1885, working to plans drawn up by Guillermo Muller, the hospital was re-modeled. As can be seen, the new building befitted its purpose, with medical, surgical and recovery wards and more importantly an isolation ward for infectious and contagious cases.

*Plan of the remodeled hospital.
From Sierra Almagrera y Herrerías. Enrique Fernández Bolea*

Key:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. Bathroom | b. Reception Patio |
| c. Contagious Ward | d. Passage |
| e. Mortuary | f. Courtyard |
| g. Toilets | h. Medical Ward |
| i. Surgical Ward | j. Rest Room |
| k. Store Room | l. Patio |
| m. Refectory | n. Kitchen |
| ñ. Dispensary | o. Entrance |
| p. Nuns Common Room | q. Nursing Sisters Room |
| r. Maids Room | s. Nuns Dormitory |
| t. Pharmacy | u. Laboratory |
| x. Herbarium | y. Laundry |
| z. Sacristy | a ¹ . Chapel |
| b ¹ . Boardroom | c ¹ . Corridor |
| d ¹ . Courtyard Garden | e ¹ . Chaplains Rooms |
| f. Garden Entrance. | A. Aljibe. |



The alterations had been desperately needed, the single ward (j on the old plan) had nowhere near the capacity that was required. In 1883, Pié y Allué railed against the conditions there in an article published in *El Minero de Almagrera*, under the title *El Hospital de Sierra Almagrera*. He described the ward as a place where the slightly and the seriously injured were cheek to jowl with the dying, and where even the spaces between the beds were filled, forming a continuous row of patients. Despite many mines still being unable to operate because of flooding, the hospital was often so full that the sick could not be admitted, and patients were discharged before they were healed in order to admit others in a more serious condition.



Two views of the hospital (highlighted). On the left, the hospital seen from the North and right, seen from the East just before its closure.

Left photo, Rodrigo. Right photo, E. L. Morin.

The man charged with running the re-vamped hospital, Dr. Vincent Juan Blanes soon realized what had been going on for years and publicly denounced it. Between 1884 and 1885 alone, there had been a short-

fall in the contributions from the mine companies of 4,000 reales. This disregard for a contractual agreement is truly shocking, all the more so when one considers that the same companies were still docking the workers' contribution. However, Blanes' naming and shaming had little effect and by 1895 due to lack of money the building, which unfortunately had not been well constructed in the first place, had become very dilapidated. Its condition was so serious that the staff needed to be evacuated while the most urgent work was carried out.

Despite donations from some of the more worthy mine owners, the Hospital Board struggled to find the funds needed complete the necessary repairs to the buildings. One owner, Andrés Márquez Navarro, offered a loan, which was to be repaid by charging the mine operators for using the hospital. While this move kept the hospital doors open for a while longer, it operated at a very reduced level. Because of the lack of funding the Sisters of Charity, who ran the place in everything but name, had to return to the San Antón Hospital in Cuevas, leaving just one doctor to cover the Our Lady of Carmen site. The unscrupulous mine owners continued to send men to both hospitals, and continued neglecting to pay the bill. Finally, in 1899, a more water-tight contract was drawn up to cover the running costs of the establishment, but it came too late to restore it to its former glory. Fortunately for the men themselves, another hospital was about to open.



The ruins seen from the plaza.

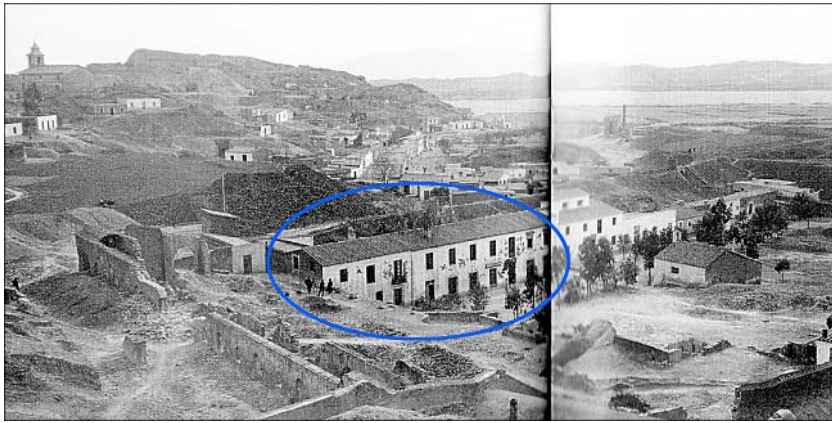
Author's photo.

The ruins seen from above.

Author's photo.



The new hospital was in Las Herrerías, set up by Luis Siret in the largest building of the old Atravida foundry and was dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene. Although the building itself was not new, it was soundly built, and, converted into housing, still stands today. The conversion resulted in a spacious, well equipped hospital that served the needs of both the miners from Las Herrerías itself, and also those from the Sierra Almagrera. It was staffed by the doctor, Carlos Salas Parés, assisted by the Sisters of Charity. How Luis Siret managed to secure the ongoing funding of this establishment isn't clear, and I don't know how long it continued to function for after 1928, when the Société Minière d'Almagrera ceased activities in Las Herrerías.



The Saint Mary Magdalene Hospital in 1905

E. L. Morin

The hospital building still stands today.

Author's photo.



Meanwhile, the Basque company, *Argentífera de Almagrera*, had their own hospital at *Cala de las Conchas*, but very little has been documented about it. All that I know is that there was an infirmary, a doctor and at least one nurse. This would have been very much their own health care initiative since *Cala de las Conchas* was very remote from other companies' operations and, unlike *Las Herrerías* probably didn't treat men from mines other than their own.



The Argentífera de Almagrera company had a hospital somewhere on this site at Cala de las Conchas.

Google Earth.

Company doctors and hospitals didn't enjoy a very good reputation in Spain in the early 20th century, with doctors under pressure to play down illnesses and injuries where the company could be held liable. Putting 'colic' as a cause of death for someone who had died of lead poisoning was just one example of how a company doctor would be pressured into being 'economic with the truth'.

The driver behind such practices was the gradual rise in legislation concerning a company's responsibility towards the health and safety of its workers, and the company's efforts to circumvent such legislation.

Whether such practices had died out by the time that MASA opened its small company hospital at El Arteal I don't know. Given that this was a government backed initiative in the period immediately after the Civil War, I suspect that there was no need for such circumvention.

Details of the hospital at El Arteal are to be found in Volume 1, Chapter 6 section 3, and in section 4 is an account of a young girl called Maribel who worked there. I have since found this photograph of her at El Arteal. (She is also on the left of this chapter's cover picture.)



Left, Maribel on her way to work at MASA's hospital.
Auguardalupe Las Herrerías Facebook page.



Right, a small side ward at the hospital at El Arteal.
Author's photo.

Given the poor outcome of a stay in hospital for so many people, their only other recourse was prayer and the hope for a miracle. As well as the chapel attached to the hospital, there was one built on the nearby Carmen concession. (One can't help but wonder if this was funded solely by the Church.) The men had a late start on Sundays, allowing them time to attend Mass. The Argentífera de Almagrera company built a chapel for their workers in the Sierra, and unlike the one at the Carmen concession, the remains of this one, at the Herminia concession, can still be seen. The ruins high up in the mountains have an air of peace and sanctity even today.

The sacristy and part of the arch doorway of the chapel at the Herminia Mine.

Author's photo.



The Argentífera also had a chapel at their headquarters on the coast just outside Villaricos. This was a grander affair. Money was spent a while ago to make the ruins more attractive, unfortunately, painting the walls provided graffiti artists (?) with an irresistible canvas. They also had a chapel at Cala de las Conchas, of which nothing remains.



The chapel at the Argentífera’s headquarters just outside Villaricos.
Author’s photo.

Standing high above the village of Las Herrerías, Luis Siret’s beautiful church with its Northern European spire looks incongruous. Apparently Siret asked Gaudí to design a church for him but they couldn’t agree on the costing so Siret designed it himself. The church, built in 1905, is dedicated to the Sagrada Familia. It is still very much an important place for the local residents, with processions to and from it on important feast days. One of these processions is held on the feast of Saint Barbara, the patron saint of miners. In the 1950’s, during MASA’s time, a statue of her was commissioned for the church, before then, the veneration of Saint Barbara was not a tradition in this area.



The church of the Holy Family.
Author’s photo.



A celebration in the church. [Aguardalupe Las Herrerías Facebook page.](#)



A wedding at the church. [Aguardalupe Las Herrerías Facebook page.](#)