

## **The War Years and the introduction of the National Health Service**

Probationers were liable to close supervision but knew that sister was always available and they were not put into situations beyond their capabilities. Discipline was rigid both on and off duty. Even sisters were marked in for breakfast and there was a late list put up quarterly in Matron's Office. Long hair was essential it was parted in the middle and put up in a bun. Short hair came into fashion at the end of the war but the rule of long hair at 'The London' was not relaxed until 1927. Check sleeves and puffs were worn to meals and off duty. On duty one took off the check sleeves and replaced them with white ones. To speak to a doctor bare armed was a crime! And so it was to sweep without gloves on!

Sisters were compensated for this rigid discipline by a Victorian style of gracious living. They were called in the morning not with anything so vulgar as tea but with a jug of hot water to wash in. Meals were formal; each Sister had an individual place and menu cards were on the tables. Miss Alexander was rebuked as a junior sister when, off duty, and in mufti, on a Sunday morning, she went to breakfast without a hat!

Today's Nursing Officer would hardly appreciate having to wash all the money Miss Culpeck handled, as her predecessor did!

It was a more leisured age. Matron was 'at home' on Tuesday nights and probationers were sent to her in clean aprons. We were so busy with routine that medical progress almost passed us by. Boiling their cabbage in three lots of water we hardly noticed the first diabetics to be treated with insulin. Raw liver was delivered to the ward each morning. We minced it, and sieved it, and mixed it with orange juice and we scarcely noticed that the patients with pernicious anaemia lived.

Funds were as tight then as they are today. Patients provided their own butter, tea and sugar. Lord Knutsford appealed regularly for sufficient money to pay nursing staff salaries. Gurney and Croft Wards were closed from the end of the war to the late twenties and re-opened as dormitory accommodation for the 2nd ward maids who were to take the sweeping and washing up from the probationers.

### **The early war years, 41 years ago.**

War clouds gathered in the years leading up to 1939 and we were constantly reminded of its threat and we wondered what the future held in store. During the summer months both the work of caring for the patients and that in the classroom was interrupted. I was Sister Wellington, a men's surgical ward. During those months we were very conscious of great activity in hospital and a spirit of urgency in making plans for its evacuation, leaving only skeleton staff behind. This was a mammoth task carried out by the House Governor, Captain Brierley, the Matron, Miss Mabel Reynolds, and all heads of departments. Although the nursing was interrupted, it was never discontinued.

In the background was the Ministry of Health. It set up the Emergency Medical Service and the area around London was divided into 10 sectors radiating from Charing Cross. 'The London' was allocated Sectors 1 and 2, geographically East London and Essex, North East London and parts of Middlesex and Hertfordshire. An assistant matron was made matron of Sector I and Miss Reynolds of Sector II and matron's office was reorganised into the sectors. Staff remaining at 'The London' were under the care of Miss Burgess who is with us here today.

Various hospitals were made available for air raid casualties and patients to be evacuated from danger areas, and there was a London hospital in charge of each unit. The Midwifery department went to the Hertfordshire area. The Preliminary Training School was transferred from Tredegar House to 'Hylands' near Chelmsford. The nursing staff were allocated to these areas and given advice as to what luggage we should take. We were also given gas masks, ration cards and identification cards.

About 200 patients were to remain at 'The London' with skeleton ward and teaching staff and work in out-patients continued. Evacuation started on September 1st and 2nd 1939. War was declared on September 3rd.

Red London buses and Green-Line coaches were lined up outside the Luckes Home to take patients and nurses to their temporary homes. I can so well remember that drive through the East End of London. I went with about 80 others to Goodmayes, a mental hospital. Wearing our indoor uniform and clutching our belongings we had little idea of what lay ahead of us in the next few years. We had lived a very sheltered life at 'The London' and now we were thrust into the big wide world. A new era had certainly begun.

We were homesick at first but we got used to it and frequent changes of staff between 'The London' and the Sectors took place. The teaching programme was reorganised and classes held on all sites. The ward sisters did all they could to help. Soon a generation grew up who knew more about training at sector hospitals than at 'The London' as they came out of preliminary training school.

I remember once doing a round in the Nurses Home at Goodmayes and meeting Miss Damaris Reynolds looking very forlorn and homesick. I tried to assure her that things were not as bad as they looked. Almost every time I come to 'The London', now I ask Miss Reynolds.

"Well, how are things?" and she always puts her hand on my shoulder, and replies - "Not as bad as they look".

In September 1940 the air raids started over London and I was back as Sister Mellish. The first night we took in casualties and it is difficult to describe the dirt and debris and chaos. But we soon got it into proportion - we evolved a system.

The raids seemed to start in the early evening and we could expect patients about half an hour after the first bomb dropped in the locality. We worked with the medical team till about 9 p.m. and then handed over to the night staff. We were then escorted by porters over the bridges to the Luckes Home because of the bombs dropping so near us.

We had some good laughs when we got together in the basement where we slept but very soon a stern voice called -"Lights out nurses, it's 10 o'clock!"

I heard that the Home Sister (I remember her well) had an extra ration of tea for use if the raids were very bad. The raids became very bad indeed but the tea was never made!

The next day, back on duty, the casualties were transferred to the sector hospitals and the wards at The London made ready for the injured from the next air raid. This became the pattern of our way of life for quite a number of weeks. One night in 1940, 41 incendiary bombs were dropped in the area and the frightened Eastenders flocked to the out-patients department. They found a cup of tea and companionship within.

No extra beds were ever put up in the wards. During the early days of raids, the Luckes and Alexandra Homes and the Laundry were hit causing considerable disruption and that night we admitted many casualties, among them some very tough East Enders. Next day King George VI and Queen Elizabeth came to see the damage to the homes and laundry and several of the wards. They were very gracious and kind and I had the honour of conducting his Majesty through Mellish Ward. That day we all had roast chicken for our dinner!

During these years the private staff continued to work in difficult circumstances in peoples homes and when they came in between cases they helped in the wards.

I remember the annexe being opened at Brentwood. It was a bitterly cold winter and we slept in dormitories, 4 or 5 sisters in each. We took it in turns to get up and stoke the boiler to keep warm. Miss Broadley was in charge of the preliminary training school there and was a very useful person to know. She was a very economical housekeeper and had some of the tea she saved from the P.T.S. ration to give to the poor starving Ward Sisters! We we're always very grateful.

The Sister in Queen Mary Ward at Brentwood, always a very compassionate woman, took in a very badly injured woman and her tiny baby which she quietly kept in her office for some months. Although this was not the done thing everyone turned a blind eye including the House Governor and Reggie was able to stay with his mother until they were both well enough to be transferred elsewhere. We all loved him dearly.

Throughout those years time off duty and holidays were arranged, standards of nursing were maintained and uniform always correctly worn although it was during this time that cap tails ceased to be worn due to difficulty in laundering in the sector hospitals.

Some wards were re-opened as the air raids seemed to cease but we knew they would come again. We knew however that a new era was about to begin when Miss Alexander took up her appointment as Matron in October 1941.

P.Stanley

## 1941 onwards

And so we come to the last day of October 1941. There had been no bombing since May. I had only been in my flat for an hour when the sirens went off. Very quickly Miss Burgess arrived and offered to get me a tin hat - I never had one I'm glad to say.

It was a difficult time to take over. The nurse training school was spread between 11 different hospitals. It was a problem for me and the two tutors to repeat classes at all those units. The Sisters were superb. I had the greatest admiration for them. I remember one who worked at a unit which was particularly bad for mice. When she complained she was issued with a cat! The food there was filthy too and we withdrew our nurses from there before long.

When I rejoined the staff in 1941, there were 70 sisters there who had known me since the first day of my training in 1928. It was difficult for them to accept the changes I proposed but I got tremendous support. It was always the trivial that posed the problems.

I proposed that the carols that had previously been sung from 4 a.m.-6 a.m. on Christmas morning, would be changed to 8-10 p.m. on Christmas Eve. There was a real crisis. Opposition came from a Sister that I knew did not sing carols. The conversation went like this

"Sister do you sing carols" and she replied "No".

"Sister do you get up and listen to carols with your patients?"

She replied "No, but I like to think of them when I'm in bed!"

I had been at Addenbrooks and learnt a great deal. I returned wanting to put forward changes. I wanted to get rid of the Sisters' ward sitting rooms and have an office between two wards with a telephone so that the ward staff could speak to patients' relatives direct.

Clothes rationing was on so we modified the uniform. Today's uniform was redesigned by Bradleys, but having done this I had to return 25,000 coupons to the Board of Trade. It nearly broke my heart.

We appointed an Assistant Matron with Sister Tutors' Certificate to be responsible for student nurses, another for the private staff and another for the domestic staff. We introduced a central linen room to economise on linen.

A major innovation at that time was the taking over by the Matron of the Theatre staff. The men that had previously run the Theatres either got older or were called up and I was very anxious to take control of them. So I appointed Miss Ida Latham, who was the first non-Londoner to be appointed to the Staff. She was a great success.

We then appointed two Childrens trained Ward Sisters who had qualified at Great Ormond Street to run the childrens' wards both here and at Brentwood. This paved the way for the acceptance of 'straight inners' who had a previous training and went straight into the wards without going to the Preliminary Training School.

We introduced the drug books. Two nurses: one student and one trained, had to check and administer the drug and enter it into the drug book which both of them signed.

The 4th year was no longer compulsory and the student nurses who had done well were offered a staff appointment. By now we had accepted The General Nursing Council Certificate as being an essential part of the training. In my day (1931) when I asked Matron if I could enter for this G.N.C. examination she asked if The London Hospital Certificate wasn't good enough. The presentation of certificates was also introduced at this time.

The Kardex system was introduced to document the students' progress and this replaced huge leather bound books which had been written up by hand.

The hospitals had complete responsibility for their sectors and were only paid for the work done. The London Hospital was paid more than any other teaching hospital as all beds were kept so full with only 4% empty each night.

We made plans for when we were bombed. We would not move anybody in the blackout but wait until morning. We were hit by a doodlebug on 4th August 1944 at 1.20 a.m. It went right through the East Wing damaging the water tower and kitchen and killing two patients. How it wasn't more I don't know. Two student nurses crossing the garden were badly injured. They were taken to Crossman Ward overnight then transferred to Chase Farm where patients with brain injuries were treated. They made a magnificent recovery and went on to finish their training.

The most staggering thing about that night was that in spite of all these troubles, the thing that stood out in everyone's minds was that the kitchen staff produced eggs and bacon for breakfast for everyone. Food loomed large in those war days.

The swimming bath at Aldgate was bombed and many soldiers were injured. The Bethnal Green Underground train disaster was a terrible tragedy. A woman with a baby fell as everyone was rushing down the stairs blocking the way and 300 people died. They were brought in here and it was a terrible, terrible night.

As the war ended and students returned, the class day system was instituted. They worked five days had one class day and one day off. The class day started at 9 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m.

At the end of the war came much discussion about the Health Service. The medical staff were well represented and the Royal College of Nursing did much for the nurses. However, Consultants were given positions on The Board of Governors in their own hospitals and I think this was a very big mistake. There was a massive increase in administration and pay beds were done away with. Many of the sector hospitals were upgraded.

In 1940 much work was being done on the problem of Tuberculosis. We could not persuade the Minister of Health and teaching hospitals to designate beds. We had two at Brentwood but that was all. In the week before discussions were to take place, a mining disaster occurred in which 98 men were killed in Yorkshire. The country was shaken. Ninty-eight was the figure quoted for the number of deaths due to tuberculosis in England each week. The figures were discussed and the Teaching Hospitals either opened 5% of their beds or seconded their nurses to the other units.

With that story I'll hand you on to 1951.

Clare Lady Mann

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