

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in April 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women staff and female patients associated with the Fleming Memorial Children's Hospital, Jesmond, Northumberland.

Nellie Wright: A Life of Dedication and Hard Work

Nellie Wright was born in Scotland in 1873, a period marked by significant social and economic changes. The industrial revolution was in full swing, and many families were moving from rural areas to cities in search of better opportunities. Growing up in such an era, Nellie was no stranger to hard work and the challenges of working-class life.

By 1891, at the age of 18, Nellie found herself working as a kitchen maid at Fleming Children's Hospital in Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne. The hospital, established in 1888 through the philanthropy of John Fleming, provided much-needed medical care to children in a time when healthcare facilities were scarce and diseases rampant.

Nellie's role as a kitchen maid was demanding. Her day typically began before dawn and ended late in the evening. Her primary responsibilities included:

- assisting in preparing meals for the patients and staff, which involved tasks like peeling potatoes, washing vegetables, and helping with cooking.
- keeping the kitchen clean was a vital part of her job. This included scrubbing floors, washing dishes, and cleaning cooking utensils.
- ensuring that the pantry was stocked and ingredients were ready for meal preparation. She often fetched water and maintained the kitchen fire.

The working conditions were challenging. The kitchen was a hot, noisy, and cramped space, and the physical demands of the job were immense. Nellie stood for long hours, carried heavy pots, and was constantly exposed to the risk of burns and other injuries from the hot stoves and boiling water.

Despite the hardships, Nellie would have formed close bonds with her fellow workers. The camaraderie among the kitchen staff provided emotional support and helped them cope with the long hours and demanding tasks. However, the social status of a kitchen maid was low, and opportunities for advancement were limited. Nellie, like many others in her position, earned a meagre wage that barely covered her personal expenses.

Nellie likely harboured dreams of a better future. Some kitchen maids aspired to rise to higher positions within domestic service, such as becoming a cook or housekeeper. Others dreamed of leaving service altogether, perhaps hoping to marry and start their own families. However, the rigid class structure and limited opportunities for women in the late 19th century often made such aspirations difficult to achieve.

The establishment of Fleming Children's Hospital was part of a broader movement during the industrial revolution to address the healthcare needs of the poor and sick children. Philanthropists like John Fleming recognized the urgent need for medical care in rapidly growing urban centres. The hospital provided essential services in a time when infectious diseases were rampant, and medical facilities were limited.

Nellie Wright's story is a testament to the resilience and dedication of working-class women in the Victorian era. Her hard work and perseverance contributed to the daily functioning of Fleming Children's Hospital, ensuring that the patients and staff were well-fed and cared for. While her name may not be well-known, her role was crucial in the operation of the hospital and the care of its young patients.



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