

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.

Ethel Fraser's Story

John Fleming, a local solicitor, donated £25, 000 in 1886 to establish The Fleming Memorial Children's Hospital, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne in memory of his wife Mary Ann who had died in March 1882. Designed by John Quilter and George Wheelhouse, the foundation stone was laid by Lady Armstrong on 18th April 1887 and the hospital was officially opened by her husband, Lord Armstrong of Cragside, on Wednesday 26th September 1888. The hospital was a substantial building set in grounds of over three and half acres. The two general girls' and boys' wards were named after Mary and John Fleming respectively and portraits of Mary and John Fleming hung at the entrance of the hospital. No reason has been found as to why John Fleming made this specific donation, but it was reported that in his will he left over £100,000 to various local charities. He was described as a well-known philanthropist but there is very little mention of him in newspapers other than that which relates to his business as a solicitor. He and his wife Mary Ann appear to have had only one child, also named Mary Ann, born about 1832 in Newcastle upon Tyne. Their daughter married in 1851 but was

widowed 18 years later at the age of 37 leaving her to bring up seven children on her own. Perhaps one or more of the grand children had health issues which may have motivated John to consider the need to build a new children's hospital.

According to the 1901 census Ethel Fraser was one of 33 female staff at The Fleming Memorial Hospital. She was described as aged 26, a hospital nurse, born in Leeds, Yorkshire. As the census was taken on the night of 31 March it can be assumed that Ethel was staying at the hospital nurses' quarters. The census recorded a Matron, a hospital Sister, a Head nurse, 18 hospital nurses and 12 ancillary staff.

Ethel was indeed born in Leeds on 2 Nov 1874. She was the sixth child of thirteen children born to James Benjamin Meredith Barlow Fraser and Emma Louisa Calvert. Her parents married on the 3rd of May 1865 at St Michaels Church, Headingley, Yorkshire. Her father James, born in 1836 in Pendleton, Lancashire, was a well-known architect. A Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects he planned the Festival Gallery at Leeds Town Hall as well as two churches. He also designed the Aire and Calder bridge at Wakefield, the new river bridge at Ilkley and the North Bridge at Halifax. In association with two others, he planned several stations including Westgate Station at Wakefield. He was also an architect for many residences in his local area.

Two of Ethel's siblings died in infancy. Her brother James Albert died at the age of three in a drowning accident, two years before she was born. Her sister Phyllis died in 1888 when just a month old and Ethel was fourteen years old.

From available records Ethel's nursing career began at the Fleming Memorial Hospital in 1900. There are no available records to indicate what training she received but in the 1901 census she was described as a hospital nurse. Early in the 1900s some hospitals provided lectures and clinical instruction and in exchange students provided the hospital with two or three years of skilled free nursing care. She left in August 1903 after being there for three years.

She then spent three years from October 1903 to 1906 at Kings College Hospital, London and was a staff nurse for the last year she was there. At the time that Ethel was at Kings College Hospital the Sister Matron was Katherine Henrietta Monk who was appointed as Sister Matron, commencing on 5 Aug 1885. She quickly introduced new nursing staff to the hospital, reorganised the Nursing Department and founded the Training School for Nurses. Monk was a founding member of the Committee of the Royal Pension Fund for Nurses, inaugurated in 1887, and was also one of two Civil Matron's appointed on Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Advisory Board for the improvement and reorganization of Military Hospitals. She was also appointed to the Council of the Red Cross Society. She suffered a severe illness in 1905, she resigned as Sister Matron and left King's in May 1906.

From there Ethel was private nursing in Harrogate for a further 3 years from 1907 to 1910 but there are no details of her employment.

The 1911 census records her as a visitor at Verulam House, occupation Hospital Nurse. Verulam House was the residence of the Bishop of St Albans who at that time was Edgar Jacob, brother-in-law of Ethel's eldest sister Lousia who was now a widow. Louisa was also recorded as being at Verulam House in the 1911 census.

Ethel then became a member of the private nursing staff at The Yorkshire Cooperation for Nurses, Clarendon Road, Leeds, and it was reported that eminent Leeds surgeons did a great deal of their professional work there. There is no record of when Ethel began work there but she was in post at the time of her application to join the Queen Alexander Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) Reserve which she did on 25 March 1915. The address she gave on her application form was Verulam House, Verulam Road, St Albans.

In March 1902 the QAIMNS replaced the Army Nursing Service, which had its roots in the Crimea War period of 1850s. The QAIMNS expanded steadily and at the outbreak of WW1 there were 297 trained nurses but by the end of the war about 10,500 nurses had enrolled in the Reserves.

Entry to the QAIMNS and the Reserve was strictly controlled. Applicants had to be over the age of twenty-five, single, educated, of impeccable social standing and have completed three years of nurse training in a hospital approved by the War Office. During the war the QAIMNS and QAIMNS reserve nurses were subject to military authority and under direct command of the War Office, led by Matron-in-Chief Ethel Becher.

Ethel was informed of her acceptance on 5 April 1915 and was posted to Wharncliffe War Hospital, Sheffield on 17th May 1915 as a staff nurse. The hospital was situated in the South Yorkshire Asylum, Wadsley which was loaned to the War Office by the Asylum's board. It was fitted out with three operating theatres and had just over 2,000 beds. 37,000 patients were treated there during WW1.

The care of sick and wounded soldiers was carried out by trained and by voluntary nursing staff. The image of the First World War nurse focused on the nurses of the Volunteer Aid Detachments (VADs) who were often referred to as "Flying Angels" and who had a wide range of ages and life skills. There was little mention of professional military nurses, and few primary sources exist.

The initial care of casualties in the war was at a field hospital and if necessary, the casualty would be evacuated to a Casualty Clearing Station. These were basic hospitals and were the closest to the front a female nurse could work. If the patient was unable to return to duty they would be transferred to a base hospital, further back from the front.

There were two types of base hospitals. A Stationary hospital which could accommodate up to 400 casualties and a much larger General hospital which could care for up to 1040 patients. These were located near army principal bases.

Few professional nurses were prepared for the scale of the injuries, wounds, death, and disease they experienced in the wards of the army hospitals. It was hard and sometimes dangerous work. The nurses often suffered from diseases and infections caught from the patients they were caring for and some nurses died as a result. Some hospitals were bombed causing injury or death of both patients and nursing staff.

Ethel was transferred from Wharnccliffe to No 12 General Hospital in Rouen and embarked for France on 13th October 1915 from Folkestone. The ancient French city of Rouen on the Seine, 90k east of Le Havre was safely behind the lines in WW1 and became a major logistics centre with numerous base hospitals.

The following year on 15 April 1916, Ethel returned to England suffering from Rheumatism and Rheumatoid Arthritis. She was also receiving treatment having had numerous tooth extractions. The Army Medical Board granted her two months sick leave from 25th April during which time she was living at her parents' house in Leeds. After her sick leave ended Ethel returned to France.

Later that year Ethel had been receiving treatment at No 5 Stationary Hospital, Abbeyville for influenza and was invalided home from France on 7th December 1916. She was granted extended sick leave which was spent at her parents' home. On 1st February 1917 the Medical Board considered her fully recovered and she was instructed on 5th Feb 1917 to return to France. Issued with a Railway Warrant Ethel travelled down to Folkestone and then on to Boulogne. From 9th February Ethel was a staff nurse at No 10 Stationary Hospital, Saint-Omer where her professional ability was stated as above average and she is described as a good staff nurse, conscientious, reliable, and suitable for promotion to that of Sister. It was mentioned that she was not physically fit enough for heavy work so would not be capable of working in a casualty clearing station.

Ethel was later posted to No 32 Stationary Hospital, Wimereux, from 11th Dec 1918 where her general professional ability was described as up to standard, and her administrative capacity and power of initiative was very good.

Ethel renewed her contract for service with the Army on 6th Oct 1917 for a further six months and again on 4th March 1918 for another six months and for a third time on 14th Sept 1918. She was demobilized on 17 March 1919 having arrived at Folkestone the previous day from France.

Ethel's medal card shows that she was awarded the 1914 – 1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

What motivated Ethel to become a military nurse? Was she influenced by the matron at Kings College Hospital, Henrietta Monk or by Edgar Jacob, the Bishop of St Albans who was reported to be a vocal supporter of British involvement in WW1. Or maybe it was because two of her brothers Herbert, who was awarded the D.S.O. and Harold had enlisted in the Army.

Ethel cannot be found in the 1921 census. She is not living with any family members but perhaps her name was wrongly transcribed as happened with two of her brothers.

The next record of Ethel is from the Leeds Central Voting register which shows her living at 3 Vernon Road, Leeds. This was her parents' family home and where her mother was living at the time of her death in 1932. By 1933 Ethel was living with three of her unmarried sisters, Harriet, Mildred and Winifred at 3 Victoria Avenue, Ilkley. The 1939 Register shows her living at this address and her widowed brother Herbert is also living there with six of her sisters together with a niece. She is described in the register as a Certified Trained Nurse with a side note showing "nursing reserve" though there is no indication of what this means. It seems improbable that at the age of 74 she rejoined the QAIMNS. Perhaps she had become a civilian nursing reservist. She was still living at the same address up until 1954 with four of her sisters.

There is a death registration for an Ethel Fraser in Jan Qtr 1958 Witney, Oxfordshire, aged 83 years. This could possibly be our Ethel as four of her sisters' deaths and one of her brothers are recorded in Oxford.

Ethel never married nor did five of her sisters. Perhaps they chose not to marry, preferring to be independent, but finding security living together. Ethel comes across as a stoical and determined person with a strong sense of family. A remarkable woman in many ways.

References

Census

1901 RG13 Piece no 4781 Folio154 page156

1911 RG14 Piece no 7668 Schedule 146

Ancestry

FindMyPast

H Bentley PhD Thesis, University of East Anglia, 2021

The Roses of No Man's Land, Lyn Macdonald, Penguin (1993)

Famous Regiments, Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, Juliet Piggott, Leo Cooper Ltd, 1975

The National Archives WO 399/2908

The National Archives WO 372/23/14781