

Nursing at The London Hospital in 1920s & 1930s

Miss Luckes 40 years' reign ended with her death in 1919. She and Lord Knutsford had made 'The London' one of the foremost training schools in the country. This was followed by nearly 20 years of caretaker government, resistant to progress. But it was a period of stability. enormous number of men killed in the First World War left a generation of spinsters for whom there was no hope of marriage. There was prolonged, economic depression and 'The London' had an inflexible rule that no member of the Nursing Staff who left could ever be re-appointed. These factors made for stability and promotion was slow. Sister Charrington, for example, was in one ward from 1906-38 when she died. Each ward had one maid, and they too were a stable force. Sister Charrington and Mrs Crew, for example, grew old together. The maids were almost mother-figures to nervous probationers who were terrified of sisters. They stood between them and the stern arm of the law.

Stability made for security. There was no shortage of trained staff. There were 200 private staff nurses to fall back on. Every ward sister was a queen in her own right. The ward sitting room was her home. She had her meals in it and spent much of her off duty time there.

New departments opened with the minimum of expense. The Childrens' Department Sister was sent abroad to gain experience and then the Department was opened in a series of caves in the basement of out-patients. Imagine a paediatric department with no sanitation whatsoever, just a screen, a jug and a pail!!!

In 1935 when she came back from Kings College it was left to Miss Alexander - The London's first qualified tutor - to make the first real progress there had been in the whole of that period; until then Wednesday night was lecture night. No one was off duty and leaving only a skeleton staff in the ward - everyone went to the lecture.

During the first year of training probationers had three other hours a week for study; one a tutorial from Sister, 9 am-10 a.m. for night nurses, 2 p.m.-3 p.m. for day nurses. Both lots were equally somnolent and home sister was on duty to make sure they didn't sleep.

That ended with the hospital final examination which was irrevocable. The Final State Examination was completely irrelevant - taken at the nurses own risk!! Miss Alexander reorganised the whole of that system before she left in 1938 to become Matron of Addenbrookes.

The 1920's and 1930's were proud years for The London. Patient care was superb. The private staff nurses in their green capes and bonnets were known throughout the length of the land and they nursed everyone from Royalty downwards.

The day before the Second World War broke out a fleet of double-decker buses was drawn up in Stepney Way and as we boarded those buses each carrying one suitcase, we little knew our stable, secure, and in many ways sheltered lives. were over. An era had ended.

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