

When nurses were paid £22 a year

by 'BEORCHAM'

Recently I was asked if the Local History Society would like to have the minute book of the Berkhamsted Nursing Home for the years 1879-82. Certainly! Besides shedding new light on local life in Victorian times—and incidentally recording the decisions of what was probably the first local committee consisting entirely of women—the book reminded me that nursing is a subject much neglected by local historians.

From early times until the Reformation, the care of the sick was largely the responsibility of monastic orders. Locally we had at least two hospitals, one for lepers, the other for poor and infirm people, both under the supervision of brethren of the Hospital of St. Thomas of Acon, London.

A document of 1269 mentions the nurse's chamber at Berkhamsted Castle. In 1643, fifteen children of 'Barkhamsted Peeters' were 'put out to nurse'; altogether 80 parishioners were victims of a 'pestilential fever.' In the following century, local women tended ailing children from the Foundling Hospital and found their pay reduced at the very time when 'bread and all other provisions bear such an exorbitant price.' That was in 1764. Three years later, Mrs. Jeffreys, wife of the rector of Berkhamsted, wrote to the Foundling Hospital saying that a girl with the itch 'takes on sadly at leaving her nurse,' and that if the children were backward in reading it was not to be expected that 'common nurses' were capable of teaching them well.

Note the word 'common'. Untrained the nurses may have been, but one likes to think that the kindness which earned the love of a little London waif was not exceptional. However, nurses picked up knowledge and skill as best they could until Florence Nightingale urged the need for proper training.

PAROCHIAL EFFORT

The Church of England took the initiative in providing a properly organised nursing service for Berkhamsted. A printed leaflet (undated) attached to the minute book, mentioned at the start of this article, is headed "Berkhamsted Parochial Nurse and Nursing Home Association", the governing body comprising the rector and churchwardens, medical men, six elected subscribers of at least one guinea, two lady superintendents, and a committee of nine elected ladies, all being subscribers of at least 10s. 6d.

Nursing of the sick poor was to be undertaken without regard to religious persuasion, and Nonconformist churches responded by devoting offertories to the associ-

ation. The Rev. A. F. Birch, rector of Northchurch, was unable to help as his church was heavily in debt at the time of its enlargement.

NURSING HOME

Another printed leaflet, headed "The Berkhamsted Nursing Association, established 1876", gives the terms for nursing in one's own home, from £1 1s. weekly for ordinary cases to £2 2s. for smallpox and mental cases. Nurses were to be treated with consideration, allowed time off to go to church, given six hours of rest in the day if they had been up all night, have meals cooked for them, and not be required to do washing or other housework.

It seems that the first nursing home was at Gossoms End. In March, 1880, a three years' lease of a house opposite St. Peter's Church was taken. At the time of the move a concert given by a famous Victorian entertainer, Corney Grain, raised £34 15s., only £1 5s. short of a whole year's rent of the new house. Accommodation was available for nurses, three convalescents, and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ellens, who were to have free lodging, garden, coals and lighting and £7 per annum; Mrs. Ellens was to be a general servant. Once in three weeks a washerwoman was to be hired for two days, receiving 3s. a day but no food or beer.

STAFF CHANGES

Three shillings a day was more than any of the nurses received. Nurse Winter came here in 1879 for 7s. a week, with free board and lodging and free uniform, which she was expected to make herself. Nurse Newhall, slightly better off with £22 per annum, was advised to find some other work when it was found that she was not strong enough for constant night nursing. She had been attending a man with typhoid fever.

Sister Harvey was offered £60 a year, finding her own food. When nurses were at home the sister was allowed 8s. a week for their board, wine and washing not included.

Nurse Bevis came at £23 a year and at the end of April the committee thought it better to tell her that her services would not be required after May 30, as there was little sickness as a rule in the sum-

mer, and it would be advantageous to have another invalid ('a paying lady') for the summer months, using Nurse Bevis's room!

HOT DINNERS

Nurse Satchell resigned when she was reported for not answering respectfully on returning to the home after 10.30 p.m. Another nurse resigned because her bed had been occupied in her absence.

Sister Louisa was accused of not feeding the nurses properly, and 'as she has not in any way behaved pleasantly or properly', was asked to leave. But Sister Louisa

must have had a kindly streak; she said that some of the poor were missing the hot dinners which had been discontinued on account of the expense, and it was decided that Mrs. Saltmarsh, the mission woman, should have 5s. a month to 'get a chop and cook it' in cases of great need.

Patients, it was said, were apt to like the nurse to go merely for the nourishment and food they gave, and did not understand that the real duties of the nurse were to attend to matters of cleanliness and ventilation.



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