

NURSING IN THE GLOUCESTER UNION WORKHOUSE HOSPITAL

by F.H. Storr

While modern nursing was struggling to evolve at the Gloucester Infirmary there was another hospital serving the poor of the town with a rather different philosophy of care. Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 the sick poor had to be admitted to the newly established Union Workhouse which replaced the old small workhouses of the individual parishes in which no particular provision had been made for the sick.

Under the Act the Gloucester Union Board of Guardians, who were responsible to the Poor Law Commissioners or Poor Law Board, met weekly every Tuesday at 10 a.m. from May 7th 1835. In the minute books kept of these meetings there are the records of many decisions made concerning the hospital and the persons appointed to care for the sick poor of Gloucester. Until a purpose-built workhouse was ready for occupation the building used was the old Gloucester Workhouse and the first Matron was the Matron of the old one, but her duties were primarily that of housekeeper responsible for all the inmates rather than only for the care of the sick. On July 7th it was ordered that "a contract be made with a midwife to attend all cases of midwifery that shall occur within the Workhouse". This was particularly important because all pregnant women were specifically excluded from being given care at Gloucester Infirmary.

A committee was set up to look into the whole state of the workhouse in the light of the new Act, and when it reported in August 1835 it recommended that the room formerly set aside for the sick should continue to be used as such "and be well ventilated". Two medical officers were to be appointed to attend the poor, including cases of midwifery in an emergency, for £500 per annum.

A further committee appointed to "examine the orders and regulations of the Poor Law Commissioners to find out how far they can be adopted with reference to the present workhouse" reported in December 1835. It was clear that there would not be enough room for all the sick and for the lunatics and idiots in the old workhouse. They did recommend however that "an able bodied young woman be appointed to act as a Nurse and as assistant to Matron". On January 12th 1836 the Matron reported that "there is in the workhouse a young woman by the name of Comfort who can act as an assistant". The Board ordered that "she be employed and if she conducts herself well she shall receive some pecuniary allowance by way of reward".

In May 1836 the Board advertised for a sub-matron to teach and take over the entire care and management of the children of the workhouse, and this post eventually evolved into that of the schoolmistress, but together with the nurse they were responsible to the Master and Matron.

In October 1837 the Board borrowed £5000 in order to start building the new workhouse, 1000 yards south from Northgate Street in what came to be called Workhouse Lane or Great Western Road since the workhouse was built next to the rapidly developing Great Western Station. In March 1838 it was decided that the Matron should be paid £30 per annum, and the nurse (Ann Wrenn at this time) should be paid £6. 10s. 0d. per annum.

In August 1838 the following rules were made for the workhouse hospital:  
The medical officers to attend the Workhouse daily.  
No pauper admitted to the sick wards to be discharged without a certificate from the medical officer.  
A report on the general state of health of the inmates was to be made weekly but any contagious disease had to be reported to the Guardians at once and

steps taken to separate the diseased inmates from the rest. The report book of the medical officer had to be on the Board room table at the beginning of each meeting. A visiting committee was appointed with the particular responsibility of assessing the danger of any infection.

On September 11th 1838 the Master "this day reported to the Board the insufficiency of the present nurse at the workhouse to perform the duties allotted to her. It was directed that an advertisement be inserted in the next papers for an efficient person to undertake the situation of Nurse at the Workhouse".

On September 15th 1838 the following notice appeared in the Gloucester Journal:

#### GLOUCESTER UNION

Wanted - A steady middle-aged woman to undertake the care of the sick in the Workhouse, together with lying-in women. For reference apply to the Master of the Workhouse.

N.B. None need apply who are not thoroughly competent to perform the duties.

Meanwhile a room for the nurse was to be included in the new workhouse and on September 18th it was reported that "Mr. Bump and Mr. Taylor having adjourned, in compliance with a request from the Court, to the (Gloucester) Infirmary to ascertain the rate of wages generally given by that Institution to the nurses and which they find upon enquiry of Mr. Hill the Secretary to be as follows:- Ten guineas per annum for the first 3 years with an additional half guinea in every complete Quarter and also an additional sovereign per annum to enable her to provide all the basins and chamber pots necessary each year. And fourteen guineas per annum after the first 3 years with the additional sovereign as above mentioned. They therefore recommend that the same terms be adopted with respect to the Nurse appointed for this establishment". This was unusual since many workhouses continued to use paupers with no established salary for another 30 - 40 years.

On 25th September Mary Yeates was chosen from four applicants to start on September 29th, while the quarter's salary due on that day was to be paid to the present nurse and she was to be told that her services were no longer required. Mrs. Yeates resigned however on July 23rd 1839 and a more specific advertisement was put in the Gloucester Journal on August 5rd:

WANTED - A middle-aged active Woman as a Nurse to the Gloucester Union.

Salary £12 per annum with the usual establishment diet.

Testimonials as to character and competence (without which no application will be entertained) to be sent to me at the Workhouse on or before Monday the 12th day of August next and personal applications to be made to the Board the following day.

Full particulars as to the nature and extent of the duties required will be given on request to the Master at the Workhouse.

Clerk to the Board.

Elizabeth Higgins was appointed from two applicants at a salary of £12 per annum.

Mrs. Higgins remained in post for the next nine years during which time it gradually became clear that the hospital accommodation in the new workhouse

was totally inadequate. A major problem was the isolation of infectious diseases, often unidentified fevers but sometimes smallpox and cholera. A room was even needed for "the purpose of receiving paupers labouring under the Itch" (scabies). This must have been a very real problem especially because of the secondary infections that must have resulted from scratching. A report in 1847 says that the most troublesome disease among the children was 'sore heads' and a grim vision of impetigo scabs as a result of head lice arises. On one occasion the children suffered a severe attack of diarrhoea which was blamed on the new potatoes in the soup, so bread and cheese was substituted for a while. On another they were suffering from severe chilblains as "there was no heat to their feet in the school room". During a particularly severe attack of the itch amongst the children it was ordered that "one of the refractory cells be appropriated for the fumigation of the clothes of such inmates that be affected by the disease". However the main conditions that needed care from the nurse were the large numbers of inmates who were old, infirm and decrepit. They frequently took up beds in the hospital that could have been used for more acute conditions, and supplies bought for the hospital during this period were mainly for the infirm, such as a "bed chair and two cradles" and £5 spent on a fly(wheel chair) for "the use of the sick poor under the direction of the medical officer".

In 1845 the design of the 'dead house' was altered "whereby the indecency of the dead being carried through the sick wards might be avoided". On August 3rd 1847 appears the following entry:-

"Whereas it appears that the number in the hospital have been very heavy for some months past whereby the labours of the Nurse have been greatly increased; Ordered that in consideration of such additional services the nurse Elizabeth Higgins do receive a gratuity of £2 and the same to be paid and charged to the common fund of the Union."

However a year later it was resolved that "the present nurse who is old be retained in the Establishment as an assistant at a salary of £6 per annum with rations, and that the Board elect a Nurse this day fortnight." This time the advertisement was to indicate that she should be able to read and write, her age was not to exceed 40 years and her salary was still £12 per annum. On September 12th Ellen Wait, a widow, was appointed "she being the only candidate who had sent in the testimonials pursuant to the advertisement". Elizabeth Higgins died in the workhouse in June 1849.

In spite of the original advertisement that asked for someone able to care for lying-in women, midwifery remained a separate contract as it had been from 1835, and an entry in May 1848 clarifies the role of the medical officers in these cases: "With regard to midwifery cases it has never been the subject of agreement that the medical officers should attend these cases. In general a woman Midwife being employed for ordinary cases but that should any instance of difficulty or danger occur the Medical Officer should then be called upon and be bound to attend".

In 1849 Gloucester suffered a severe cholera epidemic, and at a meeting of the medical officers with other members of the medical profession in May of that year to discuss ways of dealing with it, one of the resolutions was "to provide proper nurses to wait upon the sick in each district". Nurses employed to take care of these cases were to be paid 3/- per day and 3/- per night or 5/- per day and night. This payment together with the other costs of dealing with the epidemic were the responsibility of the Board of Guardians since the majority of cases were occurring in the most destitute areas of the city where there were appalling housing conditions and the River Severn was the only water source. In June 1849 it was ordered that "tickets be printed and delivered to the 4 medical officers appointed to care for the cholera cases enabling them to supply a nurse in any case in which they may consider it necessary that one should be employed". There is no record of the source from which these 'proper nurses' who were prepared to work in such dangerous

conditions were obtained, but nurses were included in the expenditure on items such as bedding, drugs and cleansing materials that made up the heavy cost of the epidemic to the Union.

The burden and the risk to the nurse employed in the hospital must also have been great because her salary was raised to £15 per annum in August 1849 when the epidemic still raged. It was over by October but the nurse resigned then and the post was advertised at "£14 with the rations of the House". No candidate applied but it was re-advertised; there were two applicants and a Helen Eskins was appointed.

On December 11th it was ordered that "an American Clock be furnished to the Nurse not to exceed in price 20/-". There is no mention in the minutes as to why a clock was now necessary in order for her to fulfil her duties.

In June 1850 the nurse applied for an increase in salary but this was deferred to be reviewed after she had been in service for a year. In fact it was not until the new hospital was built and opened in September 1852 that the nurse's salary was raised to £20. As has been indicated this was for work that was different from that of her colleagues at Gloucester Infirmary. Their patients were acute cases admitted with a hope of cure, and the chronic sick, the contagious and the pregnant were refused admission. Under the 1834 Act the workhouse had to accept everyone in need, and the nurse had to care for the paralysed and infirm, skin conditions caused by dirt and malnutrition, and the infectious diseases rife in the nineteenth century slums. Nursing in the workhouse was a cinderella service, and as such affected the development of nursing well into the latter half of the present century.

#### References

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