

Hallam Hospital Memories

Barbara Millichip (as told to Moreen Wilkes)

Pitch black night. Noises everywhere. The distant sound of bombing. Everything dark: faces hidden, lights dimmed, almost extinguished, cars creeping by with almost no headlamps. Not many people around but long queues at the bus-stop. The occasional drunk. Men in uniform.

This is nowhere for a 17-year-old country girl to be. Especially when she has no idea where this is anyway. But she has her orders and in February 1943, you obey your orders and go where you're told to go whether you like it or not. Even so, this is an intimidating experience for a young woman who has hardly ever left the security of the family farm – a journey alone into the intimidating pitch Black Country in the middle of the war in the middle of the night.

She has been sent to West Bromwich but she doesn't really know where West Bromwich is. Worse still, nobody seems much interested in helping her find it.

Eventually someone at Snow Hill Station tells her she needs the 74 or the 75 bus. She pays her fare and sits back hoping the journey won't take too long and she'll be dropped off close to her destination.

Instead, the conductor demands she pay her fare again.

“No I have already paid,” she says.

“Not for this bit, you haven't,” he informs her.

She thinks she is being robbed by a man in uniform but she pays up in any case. Only later does she discover that when the bus reaches the border between Birmingham and West Bromwich, passengers were required to stump up yet another fare because the rest of the journey takes place under the auspices of a different council.

Eventually, carrying her small suitcase, she is pitched out into the deep dark of Dartmouth Square. There are no lights anywhere. In the pitch black she has no idea where to turn but she knows where she's aiming for: Hallam

Hospital. And after literally bumping into a local, she discovers she needs yet another bus to Stone Cross, where she is dropped off at the porter's lodge and directed to the Home Sister's office.

At last – other people. Companionship. Light. Here she finds her fellow student nurses. Each with her own travel tale to tell. They have come from all over the country and even from Ireland, quite a trek in the circumstances. They are sent to their accommodation, described as rooms but actually cubicles in an army hut. This is the Preliminary Training School and will be home for the girls for weeks to come.

At least tonight there isn't an air-raid. The first of those comes three nights later, when the sirens start their wailing and all the girls are told to stay put. The Home Sister comes to the door, efficient and severe, shouts: "There's an air raid. Keep calm and don't turn on any lights" and is gone. The girls lie awake listening for the bombs as they pound the factories of the Black Country and wonder.

They were at PTS for three months, where they learned the medical theory expected of young trainee nurses and then they gathered practical experience on the hospital wards, spending three months in each of them. She started in the geriatric ward, itself once the local workhouse, where most of the patients had been living since as long ago as the First World War. This was a real eye-opener.

The patients were institutionalised and quite unlike people she had ever met before. One difficulty was the accent – thick Black Country speech was different from anything she had heard before. It was as if they were speaking in a foreign tongue. She struggled to understand a word they said.

After a while, she moved on to other surgical and medical wards and faced the exams leading to her finals.

But the war was never far away. Many nights, the grim army convoys would arrive. Lorries loaded with the wounded, the dead and dying. The maternity ward was converted into the military wing where some of the most eminent surgeons of the day did all they could to save lives and patch up these terrible casualties. Mr. Barnbrook, Mr. Wimberger, Mr. Bingley, Mr. Baronrose from the General Hospital in Birmingham and Mr. Ledbetter, the orthopaedic surgeon – all were brilliant and dedicated. After the arrival of

another convoy, they would work day and night trying to patch up the wounded soldiers. The demands on them didn't let up even after the war ended, as the casualties of conflict continued to need their expertise.

The staff, too, were constantly on the go. They never went off duty until they had finished what they were doing or until they were relieved. In some cases they were lucky to get any time off duty at all.

The incoming convoys of wounded affected the district hospital as well. She found it was a united family – doctors and nurses working together as one. There was a sense of camaraderie and a shared sense of purpose and, despite the terrible injuries and sadness all around, she found the work fulfilling, worthwhile, even enjoyable.

The mainstays of the hospital, Mr. Wimberger and Mr. Barnbrook, were so respected and admired by the people of West Bromwich that eventually buildings were named after them in Hallam Street.

On one occasion, she remembers, Mr. Wimberger was confronted with a soldier with hideously severe head injuries. The poor boy had been taken to Hallam Hospital as a last resort. Few people had much hope for him but they had to try.

The local photographer, Jack Darby, was called in and ordered to take pictures of the patient's skull. These were then studied intently by Mr. Wimberger, though nobody knew what he was planning to do. He then had a plaster cast made of the soldier's head. This was then taken to a local dentist, Mr. Bosworth, who created a metal plate from the plaster cast. The plate was then put into the soldier's head to replace the damaged skull – and the patient recovered.

Today, the 17-year-old nurse has long since retired but she thinks of herself as a West Bromwich woman through and through. She finished work in 1952, having been a theatre sister since 1947. She married a local man, a soldier she met during the war when he was one of Mr. Wimberger's patients.

She remembers the dedication of the doctors and nurses with undimmed admiration and affection. They could not have given more. She will always be proud to have worked alongside them.