



## DOROTHY OAKLEY

Dorothy Oakley is the only woman we have found in our villages whom we know to have done war work, in her case, nursing. There are possibly others but unfortunately women's records in many cases were not kept or were later subjected to a 'sweeping clear out' such as that in the 1930s.

We have her personal details. She was born in Kensington in 1871. Her father was a Land Agent. In 1911 she was living 'by private means' in Glebe Cottage, Vicarage Road, Lingfield. She was unmarried.

In 1914 she became a member of the Lingfield Emergency Committee and the Chairman of the Hospital & Convalescence Sub-Committee. In January 1915 she announced her resignation as she was about to leave to nurse in Serbia as a VAD. When the Emergency Committee was wound down in 1919 there was an acknowledgment of Dorothy's war service in the Balkans.

In 1958 she lived at The Laurels, Dormansland and died in The Larches Nursing Home, East Grinstead. She is buried in the Lower Churchyard of the parish church of St Peter and St Paul.

Nursing was regarded as the 'traditional' role for women. 10,400 served in the Queen Alexandra Military Nursing Service, 920 of them on hospital ships and over 6000 in theatres of war. Many died on active service, killed by enemy action in air raids or when hospital ships sank, or of the diseases they were nursing – cholera, malaria, typhus, dysentery.

Looking through the medical records of nurses one surprising discovery was the number treated for neurasthenia (shell shock), usually associated with soldiers in the trenches. With this evidence it seems strange that it should have taken so long to come to the conclusion that 'shell shock' was not malingering but the effect on the brain of constant bombardment. It possibly affected local people too. Lieutenant Ivan Margary of Chartham Park, Felcourt noted in his diary after a particularly bad day in the trenches "Even those of us who were not suffering from shell shock could not stop our hands from shaking."

10,000 VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachments) served abroad. 80,000 were on 'home service', working in private and official hospitals staffed by the Red Cross and the Order of St John; 15,000 were involved in cleaning and cooking. 8000 members of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (the FANY's) drove ambulances, first in Belgium and then in France.

**VADs:** There were problems with the VADs. Many professional nurses resented them and reading Vera Brittain's comments in "A Testament of Youth" you can understand some of the difficulties. They were given the worst of things to do – emptying bed pans and so on.

Some felt they were being deliberately kept away from patients. The problems were complex, however. The women who volunteered ranged from the very young with a romantic concept of nursing to older women, cultured, educated, with a forceful personality who would not submit unquestioningly to the rules, some of which were petty. Some came from privileged backgrounds. Some resigned, feeling they were bullied, unable to accept the cantankerous attitude to be found in some hospitals. On the other hand the behaviour of some of the VADs was not acceptable.

In the main it depended on the Matron. If she was able to understand the spirit which made the woman volunteer, was willing to see they became fully conversant with what was expected of them and to see they were accepted and taught patiently so that they were able to merge with the professional staff and, importantly, that staff did not see them as threatening their hardy gained professionalism, then the two groups worked well together. All of them were going to see things and have to undertake things which looked at in retrospect seem beyond human endurance.

**Serbia:** Medical units in Serbia were virtually non-existent and where they were conditions were appallingly insanitary. There was pressure not only from Serbian sick and wounded but also from the Austrian prisoners of war. It was the latter who were the source of the typhus epidemic which was going to become a disaster.

The hospitals also lacked equipment and medical supplies and this resulted in what became known in Britain as the Serbian Relief Fund. It also resulted in various units going to Serbia where they established their own hospitals, dealt with primitive conditions, treated the wounded and sick and faced the typhus epidemic to which some of them succumbed.

In 1915 the cause of typhus was unknown although it was thought it was caused by lice. There was no known cure and the mortality rate could be about 20%. It started with fever, sickness, headache and aching limbs and advanced rapidly to diarrhoea, delirium and then, at its most serious, to bronchial-pneumonia.

Apparently Kitchener had intended to send an Expeditionary Force from Salonika into Serbia but it was thought the intensity of the typhus epidemic was too great a risk. So – did the typhus change the war? If the Force had gone to Serbia would Bulgaria not have allied itself to Germany? Germany would not, perhaps, have been able to help the Turks and Gallipoli would not have been necessary. If Gallipoli *had* succeeded it could have had the same effect, and possibly the Bolshevik Revolution would not have taken place.

**The Units that went to Serbia:** Serbia regained its independence from Turkey in 1878. In 1914 she was bordered to the north by Austro-Hungary and then around her, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Roumania, some of these boundaries being as recent as 1913 as result of the Balkan Wars. So in 1914 Serbia was already suffering from lack of medical staff and facilities and from privation due to recent wars.

The First British Red Cross Mission went to Serbia in 1915. There two other missions were set up and supplied by the Royal Navy.

Some women doctors went independently, such as Dr Dorothea Clara Maude. Then there were the Units – a team of doctors, nurses, VADs, with supplies to establish hospitals.

The one most likely to be that which Dorothy Oakley joined is the unit run by Sir James Berry and his wife, Dr Frances May Dickinson, MD. It left in January 1915 as Dorothy made her announcement and also at the time equipment and supplies were ready for shipment having been bought with money collected by Redhill farmers in support of the Relief Fund.

The first unit to arrive under the Serbian Relief Fund was that of Lady Leila Paget whose husband was a diplomat in Serbia. She set up her hospital of 600 beds near Skopje. The details are in a translation of the Serbian and read rather delightfully "Lady Leila Paget, passing through a series of temptations (fever, typhus, dysentery) where she herself was a victim did not want to leave Serbia in the autumn of 1915". Neither did her staff and patients. The Bulgarians apparently were tolerant but it was the arrival of the Germans that made it necessary, although even the arrival of her husband to add his persuasion could not make her leave her patients.

Mrs Mabel St Clair Stobart was a non-militant Suffragette, the founder of the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps and the Women's National Service League. She commanded the Serbian Relief Fund's Front Line Field Hospital and she and her medical staff accompanied the Serbian Army's retreat over the Albanian mountains, following the Bulgarian invasion.

Finally there was the Scottish Women's Hospital led by Dr Elsie Maud Inglis, who had first approached the War Office regarding setting up a hospital in France only to be rejected. She returned to Edinburgh and sought help from the non-militant suffragettes and formed her own unit, first in France and then in the Balkans. Sadly she became very ill herself and when she finally returned to Britain she was dying of cancer.

All these people were volunteers. They worked in appalling conditions and danger, among many diseases. Some of them became victims. Some died. They face the truly dreadful journey over the mountains with the retreating Serbian army, going with them to still offer medical help, or they chose to stay in the hospitals, risking imprisonment which some did experience until being released after diplomatic pressure.

We know nothing of Dorothy Oakley's experiences and wish we could find more. Her grave in the St Peter and St Paul churchyard is marked by a bird bath, in a very unstable condition. Possibly there is no one left to care for it. The village men are

honoured – is there not a way that an obvious brave woman could be too, perhaps by repairing the birdbath?

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Sources:

Imperial War Museum

National Archives

British Red Cross

Surrey History Centre

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Scarletfinders

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