



DOROTHY OAKLEY, VAD NURSE Part Two

Dorothy Oakley featured in our Exhibition of the First World War and there is a Fact Sheet available covering that period. Unfortunately at the time records were very scarce but as these four years of commemoration have progressed there has been a steady release of information and we can now present a more rounded picture.

Family Background: Dorothy was born in 1872 in Kensington. She was the third child in a family of seven – three girls and four boys. Eventually the family moved from Paddington to Chislehurst, Kent.

There are records showing two of her brothers went to Harrow and probably the others did too, plus her father. The eldest son seems to have followed the same career as his father and became a land agent, the second went into the diplomatic service and was also an engineer. The other two became an architect and a horticulturist respectively.

The 1880s was a very distressing decade for the family. Gilbert, the youngest child, was born in 1881 and their mother died shortly afterwards. The youngest daughter died in 1883 at the age of nine and then their father died. There is a rather sad 1901 Census showing the two youngest boys, John, 22, and Gilbert, 20, living together and describing themselves as joint Head of Family. John had also caused concern during the Boer War. At the age of 20 he had joined the army, been sent to South Africa, became a POW, was then released and shortly afterwards discharged and sent home.

At the start of the First World War, with the exception of the eldest, all the brothers joined various regiments as officers.

From the choices she was going to make it would have been interesting to find Dorothy had some medical background but there does not seem to be any information regarding her education or any form of training. Her name does not appear on the 1901 census but there is nothing to suggest this is significant. In 1911 she is shown as living with Gilbert at Glebe Cottage, Vicarage Road, Lingfield. There are still irritating gaps in the details we have – what brought her to Lingfield for example?

Wartime Service Dorothy Oakley a remarkable woman. She was living in Lingfield “By her own means”. She had been voted on to the Lingfield Emergency Committee (there is a Fact Sheet giving details of this) and was chairman of the Hospital & Convalescence Sub-Committee (she was obviously interested in medical matters). She could have spent the War comfortably, her contribution being her Committee work. Instead in January 1915 she announced her retirement from the Committee, saying she had become a Voluntary Aid Detachment Nurse and was going to Serbia.

This was beginning of a long period of service. She was 43. She was still serving in September 1919 and probably continued until the VADs were disbanded. We can only guess at the things she saw and had to deal with and the discomfort she experienced. Right from the start she accepted the danger from U-boats during the journey to Serbia. There she faced the typhoid epidemic, the threat of invasion from the Bulgaria and Germany, plus the difficulties of working in the prevailing conditions in the country.

There is no definite information regarding the group she joined and we only know that although it would have been operating under the British Red Cross she seems to have been freelance. However, we now have her passport and from this we can see she certainly travelled at the same time, along the same route to the same destination as the Sir James Berry party.

Passports at the time were large sheets of parchment. Dorothy had been travelling in Europe in 1913 on a 5 year passport but to go to Serbia she had to take out another one as a civilian volunteer which was valid for two years. Her passport photo comes from the 1913 one so she was 41 when it was taken.

The normal sea voyage to Marseilles was round the Bay of Biscay and we can see she followed what had become the normal route for the Serbian Relief Missions. From Marseilles “whatever shipping is available” was taken to Malta, then Greece, then train to Serbia, in Dorothy’s case finishing at Nisck. (One interesting point is that the passport shows her accommodation expenses)

She only seems to have stayed 5 months. However, the situation was deteriorating badly. The epidemic was increasing in intensity but an even greater threat was the invasion. It was decided to send home the civilian volunteers leaving only the professionals in charge. (The Fact Sheet mentioned previously details what happened to them).

Dorothy’s return journey is strange. It follows the usual route back to Marseille but then she travels overland to Paris and comes home by the Channel Ports. Was the U-boat menace now so great that to travel through France was safer? On the other hand had she been or was she ill? She does not return to Lingfield but to Campden Hill, London and there is a gap of about a year before there is any mention of her again. Attempts have been made to tie the London address to a member of the family but without success. Perhaps it is that of another VAD member.

On the 17th May, 1916 she officially joins the British Red Cross as a VAD. We have her card which shows she was first sent to Harwich Military Hospital as a storekeeper, then

in September she was transferred to the 4th London General Hospital at Denmark Hill (Kings) as a nurse.

In March 1917 she was sent to France where she stayed until March 1919. On her return she was sent to a RAF Hospital in Croydon where she stayed until the VAD was disbanded – and this has been another frustrating puzzle. Croydon Airport Museum, the local authority, the web site of London Hospitals and the very helpful archivist at the RAF Museum at Hendon cannot find where this hospital would have been. There are suggestions but no certainty. What is known is that a lot of records were destroyed so perhaps that is problem.

In June 1919 Dorothy Oakley was awarded 2 Scarlet efficiency stripes.

She nursed for all the three services. The Harwich Military Hospital, or the Garrison Military Hospital, had been requisitioned by the Navy and was previously the Great Eastern Railway Hotel, owned by the Great Eastern Railway which began a service to Rotterdam in 1863 and a similar service the Antwerp the following year. As a hospital it provided beds for 6 officers and 121 other ranks.

Apart from the hotel, in late 1914 the Admiralty also took over much of the Great Eastern's fleet with ships becoming hospital ships and the steamers becoming minelayers or sweepers. The Navy also used the hotel as administrative offices in the Second World War. It has now been converted into flats.

The 4th London General Hospital provided beds for 300 officers and 1,625 other ranks, with tents and huts. It returned to being a civilian hospital in 1919.

Dorothy Oakley went to France with a contingent of VADs on the 27th March, 1917 but apart from a mention in the BRC War Diary that the new nurses had arrived there are no further details and we have no idea where she was sent or in what type of hospital she served. There were nine hospitals sponsored by individuals such as the Duchess of Westminster Hospital at Le Tourquet (for officers) or at Etaples (Liverpool Merchants). There were also some hatted hospitals (Wimereux) but the most prolific type were tented.

For the complete picture of a tented hospital a book is recommended – *A Volunteer Nurse on the Western Front (Olive Dent)*. Olive Dent served as a VAD nurse. The book became a classic but was then forgotten. It was discovered by BBC researchers looking for the background to *The Crimson Field* which was shown on TV in 2014. It is now back in print and presents the most vivid account of what nursing in tents was like for both the wounded men and the staff caring for them plus various problems which arose as a result of being in tents, incidents which are presented with humour but must have caused great difficulty at the time. There was an invasion of an enormous swarm of ants which found their way among the food, the medical supplies, the beds etc. and meant finding bowls in which as much as possible could be protected by being stood in water. Another time everything froze – the water, milk, the medical instruments and cold nurses had to search for all the clothes and blankets they could find to keep the wounded men warm. The incessant rain made having to go constantly from tent to tent to tend to the men, giving repeated medication etc., a trial, as did putting on and taking off galoshes, the rain soaking the long skirts which also became heavy with the mud

collecting on the hems. One enterprising nurse made herself a skirt from a ground sheet. Gales meant tents could blow down and orderlies had to be called to help stabilise them.

The official British Red Cross War Diary does provide some idea of the nurse's life particularly of those who became ill with dysentery, pneumonia, TB etc. Other documents seen at the National Archives also revealed something surprising and not considered – the number of nurses serving near the front who suffered from neurasthenia (shell shock). Nursing could be hazardous and there were deaths not only from disease but also the usual dangers of being in a war zone.

Attached are some official details which highlight further aspects of the service of a VAD. You will see that in the first document mention is made that rules and regulations are necessary – nurses are told to comply unquestioningly and accept them even if they cannot understand why. There were problems within the VAD service, particularly with the older women where civilian commonsense met the implacable military mind. One wonders how Dorothy dealt with this.

The Regulations governing her employment in fact show the VAD Service broke their own rules. She was 45 when she was sent to France. The maximum age for foreign service was 42.

Dorothy did eventually return to Lingfield. The 1939 Register shows her living in Ravenshill, Racecourse Road. She must have named the house herself because it refers back to when the family were together. She is living with a Mary Tyson, a widow who also has private means, Olive Bowack, an incapacitated widow and Gertrude Jenkins, a nurse companion. No family connection can be found with these people but, again, they maybe friends from her nursing days.

The Register also shows she was still a member of the Red Cross, but does not mention in what capacity. She was 67 at the time.

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 St Peter and St Paul, Lingfield.

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Sources:

Vivienne Bennett
British Red Cross
Imperial War Museum
National Archives
RAF Museum, Hendon
Croydon Airport Museum
British Red Cross War Diary
Findmypast
The Genealogist
The London Gazette

British Newspaper Archives

Web Sites: London Hospitals

Scarletfinders

Joint War Committee Reports of BRC and St Johns Ambulance Brigade.

Olive Dent: *A Volunteer Nurse on the Western Front*

**Letter from Katharine Furse, B.R.C.S., the Commandant-in-Chief,
Women's V.A.D.s, to each WW1 VAD Nurse, followed by a list of
required Clothing and Equipment .**

**DOCUMENT GIVEN TO EVERY VAD CALLED UP TO ACTIVE SERVICE THROUGH
DEVONSHIRE HOUSE.**

This paper is to be considered by each V.A.D. member as confidential and to be kept in her Pocket Book.

You are being sent to work for the Red Cross. You have to perform a task which will need your courage, your energy, your patience, your humility, your determination to overcome all difficulties.

Remember that the honour of the V.A.D. organisation depends on your individual conduct. It will be your duty not only to set an example of discipline and perfect steadiness of character, but also to maintain the most courteous relations with those whom you are helping in this great struggle.

Be invariably courteous, unselfish and kind. Remember that whatever duty you undertake, you must carry it out faithfully, loyally, and to the best of your ability.

Rules and regulations are necessary in whatever formation you join. Comply with them without grumble or criticism and try to believe that there is reason at the back of them, though at the time you may not understand the necessity.

Sacrifices may be asked of you. Give generously and wholeheartedly, grudging nothing, but remembering that you are giving because your Country needs your help. If you see others in better circumstances than yourself, be patient and think of the men who are fighting amid discomfort and who are often in great pain.

Those of you who are paid can give to the Red Cross Society which is your Mother and which needs more and more money to carry on its great work. their Mother Society and thus to the Sick and Wounded.

Let our mottos be 'Willing to do anything' and 'The People give gladly'. If we live up to these, the V.A.D. members will come out of this world war triumphant.

Do your duty loyally

Fear God

Honour the King

Katharine Furse

Commandant-in-Chief,

B.R.C.S.

Women's V.A.D.

(BRCS ACC 513)

THE FOLLOWING PRAYER WAS PRINTED ON THE BACK OF THE LETTER:

And only the Master shall praise us,

and only the Master shall blame.

*And no one shall work for money, and
no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of working, and
each in his separate star,
Shall draw the thing as he sees
it for the God of things as they are.*

[THIS WAS FOLLOWED BY A PRAYER WRITTEN BY RACHEL CROWDY, COMMANDANT OF VADS IN FRANCE]

Lord, who once born your own Cross shoulder high to save mankind, help us to bear our Red Cross banner high with clean hands unafraid.

To those who tend the wounded and sick give health and courage, that they of their store, may give to those who lie awake in pain with strength and courage gone.

Teach us no task can be too great, no work too small, for those who die or suffer pain for us and their Country. Give unto those who rule a gentle justice and a wisely guiding hand, remembering "Blessed are the Merciful." And when Peace comes, grant neither deed nor word of ours has thrown a shadow on the Cross, nor stained the flag of England

List of required Clothing and Equipment

(# Total; A: Worn; B: in Trunk; C: in Handbag; D: in bread bag)

Nr.	ITEM	#	A	B	C	D	NOTES
1	Coat with unbuttonable collar or turn-down cloth	1	1	-	-	-	
2	Hat, bonnet, or headcloth	1	1	-	-	-	
3	Cap	6	1	4	1	-	
4	Vest, Cloth or knitted scarf	1	1	-	-	-	in inclement seasons, otherwise, in the trunk
5	Wash clothes	2	1	1	-	-	
6	Wool dress	1	-	1	-	-	
7	Collar or neckcloth	6	1	4	1	-	
8	Aprons, white	3	-	3	-	-	or night shirts
9	Aprons, colored	4	-	3	1	-	
10	Night jackets	3	-	2	1	-	according to need
11	Shirts	5	1	3	1	-	
12	Wool undershirts	2	1	1	-	-	to Nr. 14 & 16, or 3 bloomers
13	Corset or Reform-corset	2	1	1	-	-	

14	Petticoat	2	1	1	-	-	
15	Dust-skirt	2	1	1	-	-	
16	Trousers	4	1	3	-	-	
17	Stockings	6	1	4	1	-	
18	Leather laced boots, high	1	1	-	-	-	
19	Leather shoes, half-height, with double heels; pair	1	-	1	-	-	
20	Shoes, warm, pair	1	-	-	1	-	
21	Galoshes, pair	1	-	-	1	-	
22	Handkerchiefs, pair	9	1	6	2	-	
23	Gloves, pair	2	1	1	-	-	
24	Umbrella	1	1	-	-	-	
25	Toilette kit, incl. toothbrush, nail brush, comb	1	-	-	1	-	
26	Hand-towel	1	-	-	1	-	
27	Mirror, small	1	-	-	1	-	
28	Clothes brush	1	-	-	1	-	
29	Shoe cleaning kit	1	-	-	1	-	
30	Sewing kit	1	-	-	1	-	
31	Mending bag	1	-	1	-	-	
32	Knife, fork, spoon; in a case	1	-	-	1	-	
33	Drinking cup	1	-	-	-	1	
34	Canteen	1	-	-	-	1	
35	Pocket knife	1	-	-	-	1	
36	Pouch with writing implements	1	-	-	1	-	
37	Change purse	1	1	-	-	-	
38	Travel inkwell	1	-	-	1	-	
39	Lantern	1	-	-	1	-	
40	Lighter	1	-	-	1	-	
41	Stearine candle for lantern	1 pack	-	1	-	-	
42	(Collapsible) Rubber basin	1	-	-	1	-	
43	Military song book (hymnal?)	1	-	1	-	-	
44	New Testament with Psalms	1	-	-	1	-	
45	Neutrality insignia	3	1	2	-	-	
46	Identity card	1	-	-	1	-	
47	Expenditure book	1	-	1	-	-	
48	Bandages according to #75.	1	-	-	1	-	
49	Bandage packets	2	-	-	2	-	

TO BE KEPT FOR REFERENCE

Regulations Governing the Employment of Nursing V.A.D. Members in Military Hospitals.

- 1.--Selected nursing members must be thoroughly recommended as in every way suitable to be employed in the Wards of Military Hospitals, and must be willing to be so employed under the following conditions.
- 2.-They will be required to work under fully trained Nurses, and will be under the direct control of the Officer in charge and the Matron of the Hospital in which employed. Their duties will be similar to those carried out by probationers in Civil Hospitals. These include sweeping, dusting polishing of brasses, cleaning of ward tables and patients' lockers, cleaning of ward sinks and ward utensils, washing of patients' crockery and sorting of linen. These, and any nursing duties which they are considered qualified to perform, will be allotted to them by the Matron of the Hospital. (A.C.I. 1244 of 1916)
- 3.-They must be between 21 and 48 years of age for Home Service, and 23 and 42 for Foreign Service.
- 4.-They will be required to live in quarters provided by the Nursing Staff of the Military Hospitals, under the control and supervision of the Matron.
- 5.-They will be required to adhere strictly to the Time Tables in force in the Military Hospitals, and to the Regulations and Standing Orders for the Services, so far as such orders concern them. (Q.A.I.M.N.S. and T.F.N.S.)
- 6.- They will wear the washing uniform of their detachments at all times when on duty.
7. - The Uniform Allowance of paid V.A.D. nursing members employed in Military Hospitals will in future be issuable at the rate of £2 10s. 0d. half-yearly, instead of £2 as at present. The allowance will be issuable in advance at the beginning of each six months' engagement (i.e. no allowance will be issuable in respect of the month's probationary service. The first issue of the increased rate will be made, in the case of ladies at present serving, from the first day of their next six months' of service. Any member breaking her engagement within six months of its commencement will be required to refund £1 5s. of the allowance. (A.C.I. 519 of 1917)
- 8.-They will be appointed for one month on probation; at the expiration of this time, if recommended by the Matron for further service, they will be required to sign an agreement to serve for six months or the duration of the War, at home or abroad, as required. Their salary shall be at the rate of £20 per annum; and all probationers who, on completion of their current agreement, enter immediately on a subsequent term of six months' employment, are to be paid at the rate of £22 10s per annum from the first day of the further term of employment.

Probationers who sign an agreement to serve for so long as required will be eligible for further increment of £2 10s each half year until they reach the maximum rate of £30 per annum, the first increment taking effect six months after the date on which they become entitled to £22 10s. per annum. Only continuous service will reckon toward this increment of pay, i.e., probationers who return to civil life within the completion of one period of service and the beginning of another will not be allowed to count any service given before their temporary return to civil life. (A.C.I. 2306 of 1914)
- 9.-The engagement of Voluntary Aid Detachment members will be terminated at any time if found unfit in any respect for service.

10.-Leave will be granted as follows:--

During the first six months ===== 7 days

During the second six months ===== 14 days

This will be taken as and when the exigencies of the service permit. (A.C.I. 970 of 1916)

11.-Travelling.-A first class railway warrant is sent to nursing members proceeding to a Military Hospital. Members receive their fare home on termination of contract, but are not entitled to their travelling expenses home if they leave before the completion of their contract, except in cases where the engagement is terminated by the Hospital Authorities. Members are entitled to return fare home at the end of their months' probation only if, in the opinion of the Hospital Authorities, the member is not fitted, either by health, temperament, or any other reason, for Hospital duties. If a member's departure is due to misconduct, or if she leaves at her own wish, she is not entitled to a ticket. Members proceeding on leave may, at the discretion of the Matron, be granted a Travelling Concession voucher, which entitles them to the double journey at single fare.

NOTE.-Unless there is any exceptionally good reason for their not doing so, members are expected to renew their contract in the Hospital to which they have been appointed, if asked to do so by the Matron.

Much time, money and energy are wasted moving to the restless manner in which members move from one Hospital to another every six or seven months. It is exceedingly difficult to Matrons if their V.A.D. probationers are continually changing. Members renewing their contracts have just as good a chance of being sent abroad by the Matron-in-Chief as they would if they were on the books of Devonshire House.

Hospital Ships and Ambulance Trains are not staffed by Devonshire House.

DEVONSHIRE HOUSE KATHARINE FURSE

J.W. 1917.