

# CARING FOR THE SICK IN BRAINTREE

Most towns and villages in the Braintree District would have been reasonably small with fewer inhabitants than today. Therefore there would have only been a local doctor needed to treat the sick.

The first hospital was founded in London in 1123 and by 1700's there were only 5 hospitals in the whole country. So access to that type of care was very limited for the majority of the nation. Up until the 1600's people would have gone to either a healer, a wise woman/man or a herbalist who would have helped them through natural remedies and knowledge. This was not based on scientific learning like we have today and over 500 years ago King Henry VIII agreed that there should be stricter rules if you wanted to become a doctor.

For Braintree, the earliest evidence of a Doctor was that of Learned Apothecary Mr Samuel Dale who set up a practice in 1686. He was also paid £5 per year (£800 in today's money) to help and heal the poorest people of Braintree as a "poor-law Doctor". His friend Benjamin Allen also became the town doctor and Benjamin's house is where the Constitutional Club is today on Market Square. He once treated John Ray, the father of natural history, for jaundice with a concoction of horse dung and beer!

# THE AMBULANCE SERVICE COMES TO BRAINTREE

There is reference to the St. John's Ambulance Society being in Braintree from as early as 1880 advertising lectures to the ladies of the town.

Two years later 15 male members of the Society successfully passed the examination of proficiently rendering first aid to the injured, receiving a medal and by 1888 women successfully passed this course too. Police constables got their training reimbursed by gentlemen of the town.

There is reference to an Ambulance from the Braintree Hospital Board in 1912 to support with the outbreak of scarlet fever in Witham. Then there is also mention of Mrs. Courtauld presenting the Courtauld Cottage Hospital with a motor ambulance in 1921. The cottage hospital had been gifted to the town of Braintree by her husband William Julien.

The St. John Ambulance Brigade Braintree Division had a headquarters hut in Grenville Road in the 1920's and was the first in Essex to get a road side Ambulance Hut in 1937. The hut was built beside the main road just before Bradwell, furnished and equipped to deal with any road emergency.



The St. John Ambulance Brigade Braintree Division roadside hut at Bradwell, 1939.



Winifrid Chapman, Attendant at the St. John Ambulance Brigade Braintree Division roadside hut and her grandson Eric, a youth member of the division.

# THE BRAINTREE & BOCKING NURSING DIVISION

Fifty years after the St John's Ambulance Society forms a Braintree Division, 1937 sees the discussions of having a Nursing Division. In November that same year, the first week long course of First Aid is given here, in The Infants School on Manor Street (now the Museum's Old School Hall) and from December 1937 the Braintree & Bocking Nursing Division was founded.

Their headquarters was at Gauden Hall, Bocking. During the war years meetings were held in the homes of members but eventually moved to The Wiseman Hall, Sandpit Lane and by the end of the Division they met at the Old Vestry Hall, St Michael's Lane.

This voluntary Division started with 15 members including a Lady Ambulance Officer, Lady Superintendent, Nursing Officer and a Secretary. Their numbers grew in the successive years, however the war years were tough. Additional training was constantly needed on gasses, war-weapons and evacuation schemes as the war progressed. The nurses also ended up manning First Aid Posts, working with the mobile units and even drove the ambulances. Two members opened their homes for "reception of accident cases".

In spite of the struggles they continued to deliver dedicated work supporting the injured and in need, logging in 1944:

294 hours at hospital

17 members passing re-examination

174 hours motor ambulance duty

624 hours central hospital supply

2,684 hours first aid post

Full time surgeries at Lake & Elliot, Crittalls and Courtaulds

After the war much changes and with the founding of the National Health Service the need for a Nursing Division diminishes.

# NURSES OF BRAINTREE

Nurse Mooney was employed at Crittall Windows manufacturers as the company nurse. She joined in 1922. She trained in The Royal Hospital, Bath. Like Nurse Ruck, she joined the Territorial Force Nursing Association during WWI, working at a hospital in Birmingham. When she first came to Braintree she described feeling like 'a fish out of water' but soon swayed the men to her side and got them into the habit of visiting her for even the most simple of accidents. Mooney often wrote for the Crittall Magazine, and described enjoying her time there and of the 'amusing incidents' she would experience in a day.



Annie Fenwick was a much loved nurse and midwife in Braintree. She was so wellloved that when a new nurse was hired by the Nursing Association in 1930, a petition signed by 300+ mother's was created to maintain her services. Sadly, and perhaps as a consequence of this petition, despite the many years and dedication Annie had given the association - her and her equally loved partner Nurse Walsh were dismissed with no given reason. Fenwick, undeterred by the setback, maintained that Braintree was her home and continued her services in the area. In 1944 she had been practicing 28 years and coincidentally she helped deliver her 28th set of twins on the same year. In 1950 she saved an 80 year old lady from a burning house who was minutes from death.

For Gertrude Walsh, nursing and midwifery was not just a profession but a soul purpose.

In 1912 she made 2081 visits to the community (mostly maternity cases) and was on duty 2,680 hours.

She had worked for the Nursing Association 20 years when she was mysteriously dismissed, however unlike Nurse Fenwick (who she had purchased a home with in Coggeshall Road), she did not recover from the shock. Walsh fell ill on the 4th anniversary of her dismissal and died shortly afterwards. Over 300 mother's were present at her funeral, and strong emotion was felt. When interviewed, Fenwick was sure Gertrude had died of a broken heart.

