

Miss Louise Catton

A nurse who served at the 4th Northern General Hospital, Lincoln

From the Garton Archive: Item of Interest No 29

The highly informative Western Front Association website reports that little has been written about British military nurses during the Great War, and few primary sources have survived, making it difficult to piece together even the basic details of the organisation and administration of the nursing services during that period of history. As one 'Blogspot' writer put it, 'The fine detail of military nurses' service during the Great War is largely lost' and is '... a yawning gap waiting to be filled.'

The WFA website also informs us that there was neither a register of nurses before 1919, nor national regulations covering standards for nurse training. In the mid-nineteenth century one year of training was thought to be adequate, but during the last two decades of that century it was deemed necessary to produce 'professional' nurses who had received a longer period of training. However this was not compulsory, and the result was a two-tier system with those who had completed three years of training being regarded as 'proper' nurses, whilst others who were considered to be less qualified tended to be allocated to 'fever' nursing, the care of children and the mentally ill.

During the early years of the Great War, the WFA informs us that by 1915 it became evident that there were insufficient numbers of fully trained nurses to staff the ever-increasing number of hospitals and casualty clearing stations at home and abroad. As a result, a decision was made to employ partly trained nurses in the military hospitals such as the 4th Northern General Hospital (4th NGH) in Lincoln. These nurses worked under the trained nurses of the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service, and the Territorial Force Nursing Service, at reduced rates of pay. Assistant nurses were not numerous, but were invaluable in nursing patients with infectious diseases and mental illness.

To this growing force were added the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs), whose work has been described elsewhere in Occasional Papers 14 and 35. In a nutshell, these women, often from middle or upper middle class backgrounds, were given a basic training in First Aid and nursing from the St John's Ambulance Association, and performed sterling service in the wards in support of the more highly qualified and experienced nursing staff.

One of the more highly qualified nurses at the 4th NGH was Nurse Louise Catton. Born in the Lincolnshire village of Brant Broughton, she was a trained Staff Nurse, and served for much of the war at the Hospital. I have recently had the pleasure of meeting her great niece, Mrs Gill Wass of Seafood, east Suffolk, who has kindly

donated several photographs taken at the 4th NGH during her service there, including the one of Nurse Catton below.



Nurse Catton later married and became Mrs Louise Wright. The Editor of *The Magazine*, which featured life at the 4th Northern General Hospital in Lincoln, reported her marriage as part of the 'epidemic of war weddings' in the following words:

Just after going to press with our last issue, we heard that one of our most popular NCOs was 'proceeding to get married' to one of our Staff Nurses, Miss L Catton, of Brant Broughton.

The couple was presented with a handsome set of service cutlery by Major Tinley who, in a witty speech, warned the recipient Sergeant Wright not to cut himself! Mr and Mrs Wright made their home on Church Drive, off Boultham Park Road in Lincoln.

It was not uncommon for romantic liaisons to blossom in the military hospitals. John Lewis-Stempel, in his highly acclaimed book on the life of British officers in the Great War (Lewis-Stempel, 2010), cites the example of a soldier who ended up in a hospital suffering from amnesia and delayed battle fatigue. He fell instantly in love with a VAD, whom he married two years later. The author also quotes Robert Graves, who wrote that the 'nurse-wounded-soldier pattern' was one with a thousand precedents. Graves attributed this to gratitude on the part of the man, and a reversion to infancy and a desire to be taken care of by a woman. On the woman's part, Graves postulated that it was her sympathy for pain, an effort to make up for what the soldier had gone through, and a kind of almost incestuous maternal feeling for this 'man-baby' which fuelled relationships 'in an atmosphere of war urgency'.

This explanation is perhaps over-simplistic, and would probably not find much favour in today's social and political climate, but it is interesting to reflect upon Graves' views in the context of history, given that he was an officer during the Great War. He was certainly greatly affected by his war experiences, and is quoted by Lewis-Stempel as admitting that for years after the war '...shells used to come bursting on my bed at midnight' and '...strangers in daytime would take on the faces of friends who had been killed'.

The following priceless photographs from Miss Catton's personal collection are illustrative of life at the Hospital, and of the use of the Wragby Road site of Lincoln School and its playing fields. Sadly many of them have faded, but others are still in reasonable condition.

The first two photographs show life inside the temporary huts which covered much of the Lincoln School playing field, and which served as wards during the Great War.





The next set of pictures shows groups, both formal and informal, outside the temporary wards, or in other locations on the site. The first two appear to show improvised protection from the sun and the rain!







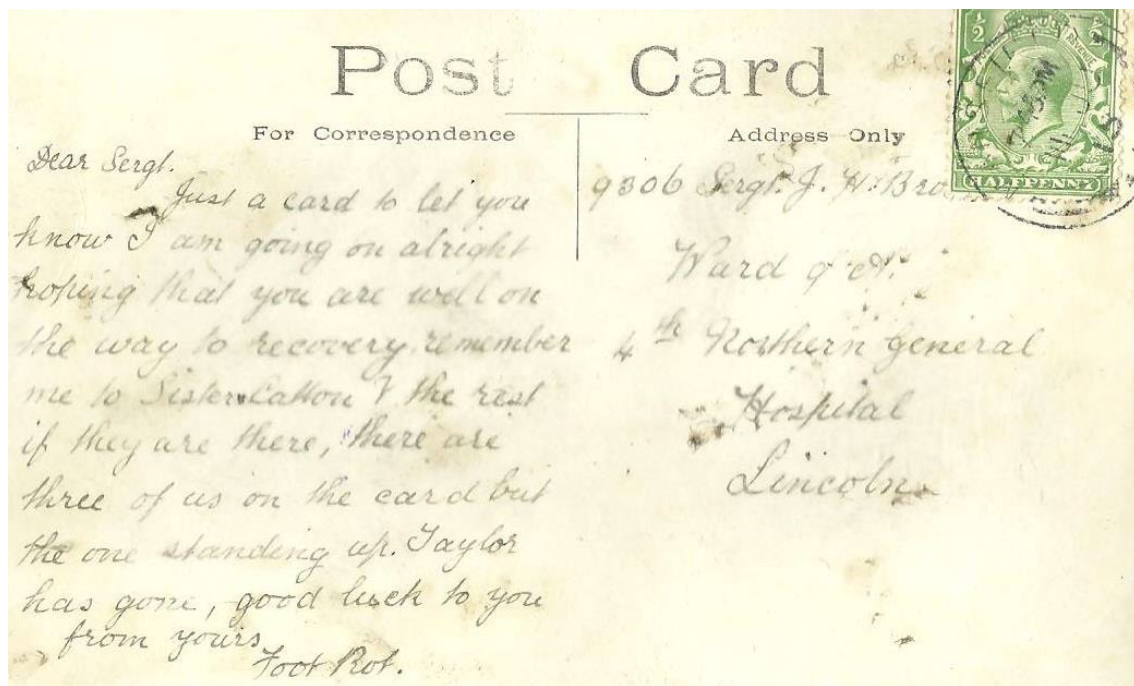


The picture below shows a patient relaxing on the veranda in front of the original Lincoln School cricket pavilion, which acted as a temporary chapel during the Great War.



The next three of these iconic 'photographic Haiku' moments show a group of officers, a postcard sent to the Hospital from 'Footrot', and a rare picture of four World War One airmen from RAF Scampton, who perhaps visited the Hospital in search of female company.





The next photograph is not part of the collection presented by her great niece Mrs Gill Wass, but is from the original extensive Garton Archive collection. It appears that a musical soirée was in progress outside Hut 16.



The final photograph shows a group of nurses outside the main entrance to Lincoln School on Wragby Road. Nurse Catton is on the extreme right of the middle row.



This remarkable collection of photographs adds a further dimension to the two earlier articles from the Garton Archive on the Great War in Lincoln, Occasional Papers 14

and 35, which may be downloaded from the LCHS website under LCHS History/School Archive.

Baroness Shirley Williams, whose mother Vera Brittain wrote the compelling story of her own moving and candid experience during the Great War, *The Testament of Youth*, described nursing in World War One in an article in the Guardian on 2 April 2001 as exhausting and often dangerous work, which has been barely recognised in the extensive literature on the war.

This brief article is written as a tribute to that intrepid band of angels of mercy who provided first aid, comfort and solace to the wounded and dying at the 4th NGH in Lincoln on the site of the present Lincoln Christ's Hospital School. Nurse Louise Catton from Brant Broughton in Lincolnshire was one shining example of many.

Reference

Lewis-Stempel, J (2010) Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War Westfield & Nicholson The Orion Publishing Group, London

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