

Royal Earlswood Redhill

Ernie Wells was a good friend and we had some interesting times together. We had both attended the same school. I worked on the railways and he worked as a carpenter at the Royal Earlswood hospital. One evening when out visiting a few pubs together, he was telling me about the social life at the hospital. "Mick," he said, "why don't you apply for a job at the hospital? It's easy, and a good place to work." Living near the hospital as a child I knew it was a special place for people with all sorts of problems. At the first opportunity I applied and secured a job in the kitchens, helping with the washing up. It was such a change from the railways. We had plenty of help from high grade patients (that was the term used in those days). We kept a watch on things such as the potato peeler and moved crockery around on trolleys as required.

It was not long before I met up with a pretty Irish lass who soon persuaded me to apply for a position as a Student Nurse. I had my doubts about this as my education was poor. I had never tried very hard at school and never had much interest in anything except railways. As children we were never allowed to take part in the many activities we would have liked to.

The hospital was a large Victorian building and a very grand looking place. The accommodation for the staff, I considered very good, as were the meals. At night it was rather a spooky building, sometimes the odd scream could be heard, nevertheless I always slept well. A few of the names I remember: a Dr Gurney Smith who would often play the organ in the large dining room, a Dr McLeod who married a young nurse, Ann Bishop and Eileen Mc Dermot (sisters), a Mr. Ron Moon, (Charge Nurse), a couple of odd characters named Vernon the German, and another Bob the Knob, (one can only guess why). There was also a very jovial baker who baked all the bread on site with a young helper who was a patient. This same lad would manually pump the organ bellows when required, for Dr. G-Smith who played in the main hall and it sounded great, I had a go once; it was hard work. Day shifts were 0630 -1330 and 1300 -2000 with 30 minute change over times. Night shifts were taken by permanent night personnel; however I passed my interview with the Chief Male Nurse and a Mr. Connelly whom I had already met. He lived in the same street as my parents. It was not long before I started work as a student nurse. Right from the first day I had problems with things like taking notes at lectures. My spelling and handwriting were very poor. But I did well on the wards and got on fine with the other staff and patients. I learnt things such as how to give injections and apply dressings. We attended lectures concerning psychology, different types of patients and how to treat them. My first ward was a male ward with some bedridden patients and a large number in wheelchairs, several suffered from fits.

Toilets and feeding took up a lot of time. About twenty patients had to be fed and this mainly consisted of bread and milk and for some a powdered food by the name of Complan, which appeared to be a sort of porridge. I will never forget the toilet room: everything was open with two rows of eight toilet seats side by side. We had a sitting of 16 patients at a time whether or not they wished to use the facility. Most had to be cleaned afterwards, best not to describe the smell, and all this just after breakfast. The patients in those days were graded as Feeble Minded, Subnormal, and Severely Subnormal, politically incorrect these days.

The exercise yard for those that could walk was what may be described as a very large cage with no roof. On a nice summer day it was quite pleasant sitting outside just keeping watch if only for half an hour. Sometimes I was sent to a ward known as the Refractory; this place was for able bodied men who may be described as severely disturbed. Several of the charge nurses were former guardsmen and they were handy to have around. The patients could all feed themselves and did not require much supervision for such things as the toilet or dressing. Some were at times very aggressive and a lot of people not connected with the hospital would have been frightened of their behavior, more than once we saw flying saucers as well as plates and fists. Treatment was promptly given with an injection or orally with a drug called Paraldehyde. Most never received any visitors; they had been placed there and forgotten about as a family embarrassment. On the female wards we had pointed out to us two ladies with royal connections. I have placed notes about them on other pages.

Classroom work did not suit me and it soon became apparent that it would not be wise to continue as a student nurse. However I was able to continue as a nursing assistant and so I never qualified, but I did gain a lot of practical knowledge about many aspects of nursing which proved useful later in life.

The nurse who I was engaged to decided we should finish, and although I was upset at the time it was for the best. During that time I was getting into what may be termed as a spot of bother. It was time to move on. I had a map of The British Isles laid out on a table. I closed my eyes and placed a pin into the map it had landed next to a town named Bedford. I picked up the Nursing Times and found vacancies for Nursing Assistants at Bromham Hospital, Bedford. I applied and got an interview. A complete change was coming in a different part of the country with another work experience and a most unexpected turn of events.