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Dairymaids and shop girls, mothers and nuns:

First World War VADs in Southam,
a rural Warwickshire town.

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This is Bettie Langdon, dressed in her best, daughter of a Southam publican. A Southam VAD, she was one of the over 100,000 or more VADs nationwide who worked voluntarily, in over 3,000 VAD hospitals in World War One.

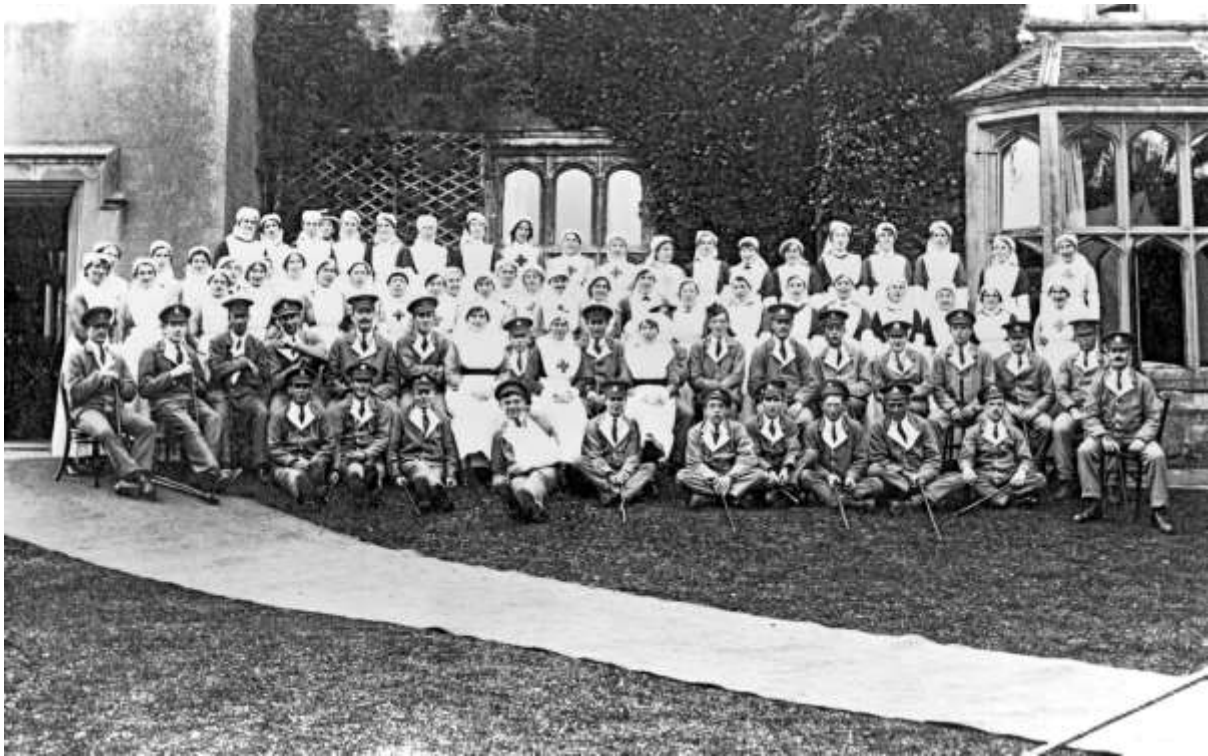
Recently many articles and chapters have been devoted to the work of those hospitals, and site specific displays such as the Lottery-funded community installation at Henley-in-Arden in Warwickshire and the vivid recreation of a ward at Dunham Massey, National Trust House in Cheshire, have brought the hospitals visually and emotionally to our attention.

It is fortunate that in some instances such as Dunham Massey, and both Wellesbourne and Copton House in Warwickshire, that the Commandant or her second-in-command (women of what my Victorian grandmother would have called 'the quality') have left journals or diaries. These recount details of their leadership roles, but no journal exists from the Southam Hospital although an outstanding collection of photographs in the Southam Heritage Collection reveal traces of a history of a hospital that was certainly forgotten, almost lost.



I have noted in Red Cross information leaflets, and other discourses about VADs that no names or personal information is given about the shadowy figures of the nurses. Who were they?

This paper focuses on a cohort of women and girls who served as VADs in Southam's Red Cross Hospital from 1917-1919.



Here they are gathered for a wedding in September 1917; it is an invaluable picture for it shows that at this time, just five months after the hospital opened in April 1917, more than 50 VADs were already serving. Many were possibly part-time and at this stage some had not got red crosses on their aprons to denote qualification.

Using aural evidence gathered in 2012/13 from descendants and relatives of Southam VADs (daughters, a son, and several great nieces mostly in their late 80s and 90s), together with the photographs and brief reports in the *Leamington Courier*, the social background of some of these rural women has been pieced together.

They come from across the social spectrum. Of course they include women from the two landed estates, and wives and daughters from the affluent middle classes. There was a significant influx, when the hospital opened in 1917, of women and girls from what today would be called low-income families. The challenges and opportunities that their voluntary role afforded, and the sacrifices that their families made, have become apparent as their stories emerged.

Popular media, fiction, present-day costume dramas and even serious social histories frequently feature VADs either as helpless young socialites, who, never having made even a cup of tea, went to France to serve from the early stages of the war, or, the upper-class older figures, who took on the onerous tasks of leadership.

The evidence from the Southam hospital presents a more nuanced picture. I would like to suggest that there is a danger that the life histories across the broad social range of those who served as VADs, is in danger of being overlooked and in consequence, lost,

In rural Warwickshire, the women, and perhaps most especially the young girls faced new challenges including hospital discipline and the physicality involved in caring for injured bodies and fractured minds.



Back row the young VADs: Mary Grant, Lillian Plummer, Lily Burnell, Annie Louise Grant, Olive Fell, Beatie Langton, Nancy Alsop, Dolly Bond
Seated the more experienced VADs: Mrs Helen Stephens, Mrs Selina Oldham, Mrs Moyna Gosden

They wore clean uniform, obtained qualifications, and were given a rare opportunity to meet new people and to work outside the home or family.

These were not girls who were, or had been, in 'service' - they had not worked outside the home. The sacrifices were shared by their families for they came from households that depended on the labour of family members – girls such as Lily Burnell – cooking for her six brothers who worked in the quarry, carrying water from the pump, heaving coals, tending the six acres which was home to pigs, chickens and produce.



She cuts an unconfident figure outside the family cottage with her down-at-heel mother and work-worn looking father Omer, a postman and volunteer fireman.



Yet on the previous group photo shown earlier Lily (third from the left) in her neat uniform pictured with VAD colleagues both young and older, displayed had a new confidence. After the war Lily she married Jack Bicknall.



He had been gassed in whilst serving in France and, according to their daughter (Mrs Mary Bicknall pictured here in 2013), he always suffered from a rasping cough.



The young couple married in the 1920s and moved into the next door cottage to Lily's parents and an internal door way was knocked through. Mary Bicknall could recall the pressures of cottage life. There was no running water but a pump across the yard, and her mother continued to labour for the family. We see Lily below in her apron with her parents.



Nancy Alsop came in to the VAD hospital three miles from Napton, one of the nearby villages; for Nancy it was an escape from a humble and limiting farming background. (pictured left with her parents and siblings)



When Nancy left school, her daughter Gwen told me, she got a job in the creamery several miles away at Leamington Hastings, but she was sent with her eleven-year old brother to hand in her notice before she ever started. She was needed to work at the little farm. It would be unpaid labour. A talented and statuesque girl, it was likely a blessed release to go into town to be part of some bigger and much more demanding establishment. She is pictured below (seated centre) relaxing with her VAD colleagues. The coloured photograph shows Nancy's daughter Gwen (in her late eighties) with daughter and grand-daughter visiting the Southam VAD exhibition (2013).



Six nuns are an unexpected group who gained their Red Cross Certificates in 1914. Their order had originally come from Germany, via the Low Counties in 1879; historians who have worked on the Convent's history have been surprised to learn of their involvement for, whilst not a closed order, they worked within the Convent teaching, and caring for orphans, and earning their living making and selling high-quality embroidery.

Here they are pictured on an early training activity with the St Johns and the Scouts.



Pictured here two of the nuns on a group picture at the hospital.



Living in a substantial home on the edge of town was Mrs Selina Oldham an older VAD.



Mrs Oldham was wife of a prosperous, influential, industrialist John Oldham. She came from a wealthy household in Kenilworth and after their marriage they honeymooned in Paris. Hers was a comfortable life. John Oldham was influential everywhere in the town: Churchwarden, Chairman of the Board of Guardians, JP, and, with his wife Selina, they served on the Food Committee, yet they were prosecuted for food hoarding! Police raiding their property found ten hams, two sides of bacon and other provisions excessive to their needs. Mrs Oldham was found guilty and ordered to pay fines of 10shillings on three charges and costs of £8. The charges against Mr Oldham were dropped!

Miss Nellie Irwin also came from a comfortable background. Her father was an Irishman and she was brought up in Napton where, until his death in 1906, Rev. Irwin was vicar. Her mother came from a very rich and ancient, landed family in Northumberland. On the photograph, below outside her home at Newstead Lodge in Southam, Mrs Irwin on the right, appears a very grand lady. There were two live-in servants, one of whom is looking out of the window.



Nellie Irwin was the local Red Cross secretary who worked tirelessly from the outbreak of war, collecting 3,000 eggs per week for the National Egg Collection. At the Hospital she took on the onerous task of quartermaster: making sure that everything needed was provided. There are accounts in the Rugby Advertiser in the summer of 1917 of the similar, newly-opened VAD Hospital in Bilton, Rugby asking the public for donations of vegetables, jam, butter, eggs, newspapers, magazines. Folk in Southam and the villages around raised funds

for the hospital and one may speculate that Miss Irwin persuaded them to part with sacks of potatoes and other produce.

Small businesses lined the single street in the town and most had a field or two behind; Sarah Cardall, in her thirties, was one of several of the VADS listed on the census who worked as a dairy maid. There was nothing picturesque or romantic in the role.



It meant milking the cows, humping the cans of milk, making butter and much else. Here is her Dairy Training Certificate, and her VAD Certificates and some of her Red Cross effects: badges, training manual, coat badges etc can be found in the Southam Heritage Collection.



These Southam VADs needed to be tough for there was no water supply in the Hospital, and no pump in the grounds; water had to be carried some distance from a street pump; no doubt the 'walking wounded' were used to carry water too. Imagine transporting

enough water for everything: washing, cleansing wounds and personal hygiene, toilets or chamber pots, cooking and cleaning. Finally a water diviner found water in the Hospital orchard in Summer 1918.

Sarah Cardall was a regular in the Southam Ladies Amateur Dramatic Society formed to raise money for war causes; they gave fund-raising performances around the area and for the soldiers in the hospital. The men also rehearsed plays, this one is called 'My Friend Jerry'.



In some cases the VADs and the professional nurses joined them in fancy dress. The show below is entitled 'In memory of Happy Days' and was staged in December 1918.



Many of the VADs were shop girls. The family of Violet Chambers were the printers on the main street where she and her sister Daisy worked in the shop.



Her story is a colourful one. A local lad, Graham, emigrated to Canada before the war and corresponded with Daisy. In January 1916 he landed in England with the Canadian expeditionary forces and by early August he appeared in Southam. Daisy was not an outgoing type (presumably didn't fancy going to Canada) for just a month later, on September 3rd 1916, Graham married Violet.



Violet subsequently became a VAD and after war ceased sailed to Canada to a country she had never seen, to meet in-laws she had never met, and await the return of a husband she had spent two nights with!

They lived happily ever after, and their story has been told to me by their great niece Mary Williams who went to visit them in the 1950s. Mary is pictured here with a painting of a view from their summer residence on the Great Lakes.



The Grant family had a bakery and shop in the main street. Young Mary was the youngest of the family: she was the skivvy who swept and kept the bakery clean.



Her daughter Monica still has her mother's VAD apron and medal.



A small, quiet, not very confident girl, her daughter Monica says she thinks she enjoyed being a VAD- 'all those men'!

Mothers with children including Mrs Moyna Gosden and Mrs Helen Stephens completed the Red Cross training when war was declared in 1914. Mrs Stephens who worked in her husband's barbers shop, had two young children, and a lodger.



One soldier gave Mrs Stephens a postcard - one of the many group photos - with this message 'With compliments and best wishes from Jack Rand'.



Mrs Gosden, a widow with a teenage daughter, was a house keeper for a commercial traveller. She took in soldiers of the 29th Division billeted prior to going to Gallipoli in Spring 1915. She is seen here wearing her Red Cross badge.



The social structure of Edwardian society was reflected in the roles within the hospital, and naturally the landowners from the two estates nearby were involved in senior positions. Lady Zoe Shuckburgh, just thirty-four years old, mother-of-three children under eight, became Commandant and here we see her in a ward which is in an immaculate state of readiness for the next convoy.



According to Red Cross records she completed 5,500 hours which over two years is a 90 hour week. Whether she drove down from the estate in the hills daily or stayed, we don't know. Here she is with her professional nurse colleague and young VADs, now with their red crosses.



From the other estate, Stoneythorpe, I have uncovered what was the already forgotten story of Daisy Chamberlayne, eldest daughter in her mid thirties. Daisy gained her Red Cross certificates in Southam in Autumn 1914. In 1915, after the hunting season, Daisy went to France in 1915, serving on a Red Cross hospital barge during the bombardment of Bergues; later she worked at the Southam hospital.

Daisy Chamberlayne hunting at Stoneythorpe Hall.
 Three pictures from her mother's album showing a hospital barge for civilians at bombardment of Bergues
 (May/June 1915)



At all levels of society it was a life-changing time, a sacrifice and a heavy commitment. This collection of photographs, taken together with interviews of daughters and great nieces of VADs, have given social insight into the contribution of these women and girls many who are pictured here at Daisy's wedding to Dr John Johnson RAMC in September 1917.



The lives and wellbeing of over a 1,000 wounded soldiers who passed through the hospital, depended on the voluntary work of these women and girls. Several came from landed families or were comfortably affluent, but most came from families that lived in simple, overcrowded cottages, small farmsteads or meagre town houses behind the shop; for the young ones work was following orders from parents, cooking, washing, farm-work, carrying water, heaving coal, generally being the family skivvy whilst brothers went out to work. To the older ones – rich and poor alike - it was a balance, and one in which these women chose to do their part.

Nationally the VADs were all formally thanked after the war and a plaque placed outside each hospital urging the nation not to forget their contribution. In Southam the plaque has long gone and the activity that went on there has been (until recently) forgotten. I hope this paper has gone some way to explore how, in one small community, women both young and old, from across a very wide social, economic and age spectrum, made significant contributions as VADs.

Acknowledgements

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Many of the photographs are in Southam Heritage Collection

Research history:

Following initial interviews in 2011, a poster display was given at
University of Warwick, Parish History Symposium 2012.

Exhibition

Southam Women in World War I
Southam Heritage Collection, April – December 2013.

Talks across region to local history and community groups about Southam VAD Hospital entitled
'Bandages and Fresh Air' since 2014 are ongoing and well received.

Details keep emerging and interest has grown. An exhibition commemorating 100 years since the
hospital opened is planned for Spring 2017.

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