

Emily French and Nellie Barlow - Nurses and Midwives

Community Nursing in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

There were many local district nursing associations set up in the latter half of the 19th century. The Lichfield Diocesan Nursing Association was in operation 1865 - 1870 and when it folded a Staffordshire Institute for Nurses was set up in Stoke on Trent, its first secretary being the Rev. E.J. Edwards of Trentham. Trentham Nursing Association was probably one of the smaller associations which were run by a committee made up of local people, usually businessmen, and including the vicar.

Funds would have been raised through jumble sales, bazaars and donations. We know from Trentham Estate records that payments were made from the Sutherland estate towards the employment of a "Trentham Village Nurse" and she lived in her estate cottage rent free. Local doctors would have referred patients to her and the nurse would have taken instructions from the doctor. There are two doctors listed in Trentham on the 1911 census, Ernest Saxton on Albert Road and John Grover on Earls Street.

The estate notes also reveal that, around 1895 a house was "specifically built for the village nurse" with facilities enabling her to attend to patients at home. The first nurse named is Eleanor Whitehead who was in post 1899 - 1903 and listed on the 1901 census as having been born on St Helena Island. Following her came Nurse Baldwin in 1903 and then Frances Roland. In 1909, when the decision was made to move the Trentham Nurse to 3, Longton Road, it was Nurse Hulme in post.

Then in 1914 Edith French arrived in Trentham and she stayed almost forty years.



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Edith French

Edith Emily French was born in 1873 in Middlesbrough, the daughter of Henry, an iron merchant and his wife Jane. On the 1901 census Edith is a pupil at The City Lying-In Hospital, London and we know from The Midwives' Roll that she qualified in 1901 and was enrolled as a practising midwife in 1905. She subsequently held posts in Lyme Regis and Cornwall before taking up her position in Trentham just before the start of the war. Leaving her home and family to train in London would have been unusual at that time but her obituary in The Sentinel states "she was firmly set on a nursing career". It goes on to say "carrying out her duties cheerfully and extremely competently, she soon became a well-loved figure in the district. No task, great or small found her wanting and at all hours she would leave her cottage home at Ash Green on her nursing mission."

When the Sutherland estate was sold at auction in 1919, Edith French acquired her cottage at 3, Longton Road for £350 and lived there right up to 1951 when poor health forced her to enter Stamer House in Penkhull. Highly regarded by many, she was a good friend to the Wenger family at The Priory and she nursed, among others, Florence Graham, wife of the Reverend Malcolm Graham, who later bequeathed her money in his will. Nurse French finally accepted retirement at the age of 70 and she died on May 7th, 1954 aged 80 years. Her obituary concludes "her area was a large one but even in later years when most people would have been only too glad to relinquish their duties, Miss French carried steadfastly on."



Nurse French's house, 3 Longton Road, Ash Green [private collection]

Nellie Barlow

Nellie Barlow was a local girl, born in 1898 to mother Alice née Hesketh and father John who lived at The Duke of Sutherland's kennels on Whitmore Road. John was a stableman, groom and huntsman, Tom Furnival was married to Nellie's aunt. She lived with her grandparents for much of her childhood and went to train at Birkenhead Maternity Hospital, where she passed the examination of the Central Midwives Board, obtaining her certificate to practice as a midwife in April 1930.

Nellie set up her practice at 60 High Street (now Mayne Street) in Hanford and attended her first local birth on August 23rd 1930. We know from her detailed midwifery register that she was often called upon to deliver babies in Trentham, no doubt allowing Nurse French a day off. Presumably, it was a reciprocal arrangement with Nurse French covering Hanford as well when needed.

Unlike Nurse French, Nellie Barlow had family in the area as she was related via the Furnivals to the families of Chadwick, Penson and Willis. Edith French would have been still living in Trentham in 1948 so she probably attended the marriage of Nellie Barlow to her widower neighbour, Bertie Unwin. Nurse Barlow lived out the rest of her life in Hanford and passed away aged 85 years in 1982.

Neither Edith French or Nellie Barlow had children of their own, but we know that more than a thousand were brought into the world between 1914 - 1961 by their skilful hands.



Bicycles were the favoured mode of transport for nurses and midwives in the early decades of the 1900s. Nurse French certainly rode a bike, as it was reported in 1931 that she had a collision with a motor car and took several months to recover.



Nellie Barlow - [family collection]