

50 years of the Parish Nurse in Pilton

Throughout the Victorian years the population of Pilton grew by leaps and bounds as people crowded into Barnstaple from the surrounding parishes in search of work, bringing their families with them. Unfortunately there were not enough houses, and families shared tiny cottages without sanitation or running water. Sickness was rife due to poor diet and bad housing, and when epidemics such as cholera came to Pilton the parish had more paupers than any other place in North Devon.

The records of the Feoffees of Pilton United charities throw light on the action the charity took in the early 1890s to aid the plight of the sick and needy of the parish, which was serious enough to justify the engagement of a properly trained parish nurse, both to care for the sick in their homes and to educate them in the practice of simple hygiene and cleanliness, which must have been difficult to achieve in the circumstances. This was a major undertaking for a hard-pressed charity, with many calls on its resources, but in September 1892 the decision was taken to proceed. Apart from employing a trained nurse, providing her with a uniform, medical supplies, etc., the project also required a furnished house, a housekeeper and an overseeing committee –



quite a commitment. The committee comprised fourteen formidable ladies of the parish, headed by the vicar's wife, Mrs. Bagley.

The house, property of the Feoffees, was in St. Margaret's Terrace, appropriately very near the site of the old St. Margaret's Leper Hospital, founded over 800 years earlier to care for the sick of the parish. The Devonshire Branch of the Rural Nursing Association was approached, and on their recommendation Nurse Lavinia Tidy was appointed in January 1893 at a salary of

one guinea per week¹. Her housekeeper was Mrs. Conibear, who was paid 2s 6d per week. A leaflet describing the duties of the nurse was produced, setting out sixteen very precise rules of conduct, prefaced by the following:- *'The Nurse is to give her time, strength and trained skill to promote recovery from illness and to relieve suffering. She must be an example of order, neatness and helpfulness, must avoid gossip and be careful never to interfere with the religious opinions of her patients.'*

This was no picnic for Lavinia – she was on duty for long hours each day and had to travel about the parish on foot. Although the centre of Pilton was fairly compact, with cramped housing close to the main street, the outlying areas must have been quite a challenge, stretching from Upcott in the west to Raleigh in the east, and from Pottington to Playford from south to north. Amazingly she recorded an average of 493 visits each month, which is about twenty each day, trudging from one to the other in all weathers and dealing with all manner of distressing cases. It is not surprising that poor Lavinia did not stay in post more than seven months – she resigned in August, so Mrs. Conibear also lost her job and her home.

Two months later Nurse Hart and Mrs. Godfry arrived in time for the onset of winter and its attendant ills. It is noted in the committee minutes at the time of this new appointment that *'The Committee are satisfied that the work done by the Nurse is of inestimable service to the poor of the parish of Pilton and strongly recommend that it should be maintained in as generous a manner as possible'*. Unfortunately no further information is available regarding terms of office or successors. For fifty years these paragons of devoted service tended the sick of Pilton until the late 1940s, when the welfare state was established. The Feoffees no longer needed to supply this service. Nurse Lomas and Mrs. Feeseey were the last appointees and the house with the brass plate outside where Lavinia Tidy and Mrs. Conibear began their duties was once more occupied by rent-paying tenants. Community nurses carry on their important work of caring for the sick in their homes in much improved circumstances, travelling about in cars, and where homes have electricity and water laid on – and without the scrutiny of the fourteen formidable ladies of the overseeing committee.

¹ The photograph shows Pilton Street around the time of the appointment of the first Pilton Nurse. Thanks to Shaun Winfield for this image.