

## A Remarkable Life: Nursing in WW1

Wednesday October 1

Chris Hewis was our speaker today. He is currently Treasurer for the Society of Lincolnshire History and Archaeology as well as Chairman of the Saxilby and District History Group. It was this connection that led him to discover the remarkable story of Jean Bemrose, when her nephew Dean brought an attache case full of her memorabilia to his attention in 2014, the result of an appeal for archive material. Jean had been a nurse in the Great War and her case contained her uniform, autograph books and a unique collection of photographs. It was a historian's dream.

Her father was an agricultural labourer, moving around with the work, but finally settled in a Saxilby cottage. The eldest son became an ambulance driver whilst Jean went to the Liverpool Workhouse Infirmary, a renowned training facility for nurses, run by none other than The Lady with the Lamp herself, Florence Nightingale. No surprise they were known as Nightingale Nurses. Their services were soon needed as the war, which had been feared, began in 1914. 3,000 hospitals had already been set up in anticipation. If you play golf at Belton, you're standing on the site of one! Christ's Hospital was a military hospital too.

In December 1914, Jean enlisted and began to move from hospital to hospital, filling her autograph books as she went. Many of the contributors were clearly in love with her and indeed she was a striking young woman. In 1915 she was promoted to sister at the hospital at Etaples, a small fishing village, where poems, jokes and drawings continued to fill her albums. Her case also included a diary by Elsie Tranter, an Australian volunteer, who graphically described how she had to perform 10 amputations in succession amidst the stench of rotting flesh. She stated that "This war is absolute hell" and deplored "How these boys suffered." Those doctors and nurses were truly dedicated individuals to be able to endure such trauma themselves whilst helping others. The photos and illustrations Chris showed us brought these places and people vividly to life.

Etaples hospital was destroyed "by mistake" by German bombers in the last year of the war. Bombs and machine guns were deliberately used and many patients and dedicated staff were killed. During this terrifying onslaught, Jean and her colleagues remained to tend the wounded, for which many were awarded the Military Medal including Jean herself. After their investiture, they were invited by Queen Alexandra to Marlborough House, so impressed was she by their self-sacrifice and courage.

It is no surprise that many nurses left the profession after the war. However, the importance of trained nurses was recognised in the founding of the Royal College of Nursing in 1916. In the 1930s, Jean bought a hotel with her sister, Edith Emily. After WW2 she moved to the Isle of Man for much needed tranquillity, but visited Saxilby and her parents regularly. She died in 1968.

In his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque states: "A hospital alone shows what war is" and I tend to agree. The courage of these nurses and their modern counterparts deserve both our admiration and gratitude. Thank you, Chris, for introducing us to this remarkable young woman.

Barbara Pearce