Introduction to the Retired Nurses National Home:
The History and Context

The Retired Nurses National Home (RNNH) in Bournemouth is an oasis of calm principally for people who have dedicated much of their lives to the care of others. Castle Lane is one of the busiest and most congested roads in the town but it is the route to the RNNH; travelling past the Royal Bournemouth Hospital and a super store, the turning left leads to a lane which, passing a golf course entrance, brings you eventually to the home. Here it sits in its own grounds of over two acres surrounded by gardens and sporting the architectural features that signify its origin in the 1930s.

Today it is a thriving residence for over 50 nurses or other health care professionals and provides respite care to any member of the public. But its beginnings were small and the original founders of the Home may be surprised at its developments over the years. However there is no doubt they would be glad to know that more than 80 years on it is still providing the care for nurses that its founders believed was their right.

The original idea for the Home came from a nurse (Fanny Thompson) who, when recovering from an illness in 1929, received a letter from a nurse who was in dire financial straits and had little money to buy food after she had paid her rent. Her concern for this lady made her resolve to spend 'the rest of her life' working to provide for elderly nurses. She in fact spent the last 2 years of her life in the Home and when she died in 1967 she must have been content to know how successful her early endeavours had been.

In the autumn of 1929 a fund was set up called the Elderly Nurses National Home Fund. Before the present Home was on the drawing board a local builder donated 4 cottages which he had built at Winkton in 1932. It was agreed to take £200 from the fund to provide furniture and furnishings for these homes. A dedication service was held before the first nurses took up residence; this was attended by 150 friends of the Home. This wide local interest was a feature of the early years and grew to reach national recognition with support from the highest echelons in the land.

It was always the intention that a purpose built home should be provided and vigorous fund raising activities were put in place in the early thirties. These included flag days and bridge drives and subscriptions were sought however the most significant were three bazaars. The first was held over two days at Bournemouth Town Hall and was supported by the 'great and the good'. The second one was held in 1935 and was supported by her Majesty Queen Mary who sent two Minton plates to be sold for the benefit of the fund. There was royal support also at the third bazaar in 1939 where, not only did the Queen send a set of antique spoons to be sold, but the bazaar itself was opened by HH Princess Helena Victoria. By then a London Committee had been set up therefore the Home was built with truly national support at the highest level.

The Foundation stone for the Home was laid in 1937 with full Masonic ceremonial. This was performed by the Earl of Malmesbury in the presence of many members of the local Masonic Lodge. During the speeches that day it was announced by the Countess of Malmesbury that Her Majesty the Queen had graciously sent a donation to the funds as a token of her interest. Building work progressed through 1938 and by December the Home was ready for the first admissions. At this point there was only a central block that provided rooms for 12 nurses. The first matron, Dorothy Lawrence, a former Deputy Matron and

Sister Tutor of Poole Road Branch of the Royal Victoria and West Hampshire Hospital was appointed and moved into residence on 10th December 1938.

As a result of the generosity of Lord Nuffield a sum of £10,000 was given to build the two front wings of the home. These extensions were completed by 1939 and 36 nurses were able to move into residence. Further additions to the Home were opened in 1952 and today the home is capable of housing 67 Residents with the majority in single rooms but as many as 15 in flatlets. An annexe has also been built to add to the available accommodation and in 1982 this was converted to provide 4 flatlets for permanent residents.

By the time the two front wings were built the Second World War had started and, although many bombs fell around the Home, there were no direct hits. The Home was advised in this incidence by the Home Guard, a small party of whom stayed in the home at night. The building was vulnerable as at that time it stood out from the surrounding fields as an isolated unit. Advice was sought from the RAF at Christchurch and a pilot flew over and advised the Home to put green stones on the roof and paint the white patches green. Despite the war, life at the Home went on as usual as it did elsewhere in the country. One significant event that took place in 1941 was a concert given by Lady Sassoon of Keythorpe. The artists were Moiseiwitsch a famous pianist of the time and the singers Isabel Baillie and Trefor Jones accompanied by Gerald Moore. The event raised £340 for the Home.

The war also caused the official opening of the Home to be delayed until 1946. This was done with due ceremony by Lord Nuffield and was attended by the Mayor of Bournemouth; both welcomed by the Countess of Malmesbury. There was music by the Bournemouth Military Band and tea in a marquee on the lawn as well as a religious ceremony all capped by a rendering of the National Anthem.

In the early years, there was considerable interest in the Home shown by the major hospitals in the land. The minutes of the General Committee record donations as a result of an appeal by the Kings Fund from Guys Hospital, St George's and University College Hospital to name but a few. The Royal College of Nursing visited seeking advice on the building of both a convalescent home and another home for elderly nurses that were to be funded by two well-known charities of the day. The Bournemouth Home was a fore runner and model for others to follow. The Home began life as a residential home but it quickly became clear that there were times when the Nurses required more care and a sick bay was set up in the early years. The need for this gradually expanded and in March 1965 it was visited by the Deputy Medical Officer of Health so that it might be registered as a nursing home; this designation lasted until 2001.

In the 1970's the Home changed its name from the Elderly Nurses National Home to the Retired Nurses National Home. It has continued to provide care for retired nurses, but society has changed since it was initially opened and with it the needs of retired nurses. In the days when the Home was established, it was the custom for nurses to spend their entire working life living in the Nurses Home and never to own property. Their pensions were meagre and there was frequently hardship. It was often the custom for nurses to move directly from the nurses home where they lived while they worked to the Retired Nurses National Home. At least one of the fairly recent resident did just that and complained that the new residents were much more feeble and frail and thus less able to tend the garden and run summer garden fetes as they did in the past.

The Home now provides primarily residential care or independent living as well as offering rooms for respite care to the public at large. However, with good care, many nurses do stay there until they die; many find great comfort in knowing this is possible. The care staff are NVQ trained but there are no qualified nurses on the staff any longer and the Home now has a Manager rather than a Matron. There is also continuing education and training within the Home for staff organised and managed by the Deputy Manager. The Home has always had excellent quality reports.

The residents are a very interesting group of people; their backgrounds are very different and many of them have had overseas experience including, for example, travelling round the world in the immediate post-war years and setting up a hospital in Northern India. There is a range of activities in which they may participate. A series of seminars have been set up on the latest aspects of nursing care and local practitioners have been brought in to lead these. Handicrafts and art courses are provided and a reading group use the library visits to pick best sellers to read and discuss. Movies and programmes of topical interest are regularly shown on DVD on the large screen television. The upstairs sitting room is an activities room including a place to read books and use computers. Many residents enjoy playing board games or doing jigsaws and these activities are also being catered for. The Home also has a Chapel and services are held here on a regular basis.

One of the favourite activities, and one which has a long history amongst the retired nurses, is the gardening club. This year three raised beds have been created outside the dining room. These contain both flowers and vegetables and are easily visible from inside the Home. The greenhouse sports a wonderful collection of ripening tomatoes and there is a very useful herb garden to the side. Over the years two special gardens were created in the grounds. One is the Edith Cavell Memorial rose garden and the other the Hillier garden, created through donations of shrubs and plants from the Hillier Garden at Romsey in Hampshire.

It was the custom in the past for the home to organise a summer fete that was well supported by local people. The League of Friends took part in this and also organised other activities for the residents including outings to places of interest. When Royal College of Nursing congress was held in Bournemouth, a group of nurses from the Home visited the Exhibition. They had a great time making use of every opportunity to update themselves while acquiring free samples wherever they could. They were very well received by the RCN officers from the southwest, who made quite a fuss of them.

The old days of waiting lists of nurses anxious to gain entry to the Home are long gone. Nurses do not live in nurses homes while working any more and many older nurses seem unaware of the Home's existence even in the Bournemouth area. People have been able to own their own property and only when they feel unable to care for themselves adequately do they seek somewhere else to live. Nowadays it is often the children of the older nurse who seek accommodation for mother or aunt or father or uncle. Residents are older when they first enter the Home. However many do still live independently, walk down to the super store to do their shopping, drive their cars, or go off on holiday but always knowing they have a caring place to which they will return and a place which will look after them as long as they need it.

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