

FROM THE ARCHIVES - 2014

Elsie Moreton Davies 1893 - 1973

Some years ago, a small brown and square case was donated to the archives by Mr. and Mrs. Berthels of Frodsham, who had been given it when their friend, Miss Davies, died in the early 1970s.

Inside I found an almost complete WW1 nurse's uniform, photographs and certificates. I folded the uniform in acid-free tissue paper, stored it away and filed the documents. It seemed too 'fragile' to remain in its small case and needed expert care, but all the museums I contacted had neither the space nor the funds to store or display it.

So it remained, until 2011 when Cllr Allen Wales called a meeting to discuss Frodsham's First World War memorials to the Fallen. I mentioned Miss Davies's uniform and it seemed probable that it would form part of future commemorations. There had to be a story and gradually one emerged.

Elsie Moreton Davies was a member of a well-known Frodsham family, J. G. Davies & Co. Builders and Contractors since 1840, whose yard and home were at the junction of Fountain Lane and Main Street. There were five sons - Donald, Herbert, as well as triplets - Algernon, Bertrand, Colin and daughter Elsie, the eldest child.

The family home, the three floor Brook House, built about 1830 in the late Georgian style and listed Grade 2, stands empty and neglected today. A warren of rooms, its walls and windows cracking, faded net curtains with an air of mystery and sadness which children might weave stories around. Over the last hundred years the house has changed from a comfortable well-to-do home to varying business premises.

Elsie Davies and her mother, Edith Ellen, were V.A.D. nurses, (Voluntary Aid Detachment) at the Frodsham Auxiliary Military Hospital 1915-1919 in the converted roller-skating rink behind the Belmonte Hotel below Overton Hill. Here, was the station where 3,435 servicemen were nursed back to health, many being Australian and Canadian.

Elsie was a member of the St. John Ambulance Association, part of the British Red Cross Society. According to the two certificates in the archives, she qualified to render "First Aid to the Injured" in February 1917 and passed a course of "Instruction in Home Nursing" in 1918.

On December 28th, 1917 Elsie (V.A.D. No. 70 in the County of Cheshire) had served for thirteen months, (2,688 hours) in her first year as a nurse and was thus recommended for the War Service Bar (a medal awarded in recognition of contributions to nursing). On October 17th, 1918, after serving a further 2,496 hours, she was recommended for a second War Service Bar.

From the Archives, a copy of "From Battlefield to Blighty", written by Arthur R. Smith, has this to say from a member of the family, Miss Mary Gold about two Australian relatives, recuperating in a Manchester military hospital:

On hearing of their arrival, John Gifford Davies cycled to Manchester, found the boys and asked for them to be transferred to Frodsham where their relatives could visit them. The request was granted and they were duly moved to the hospital at Overton. The Davies family had a further connection with the hospital. For a time both mother and daughter served there as volunteer nurses. Sadly, Algernon died of his wounds on the 27th October 1918 in West Flanders whilst in action with the Cheshire Regiment. The North Porch of St. Laurence's Church was restored in his memory in 1928. There is a plaque to this effect inside the porch.

Recently I was given a Davies' family contact by Mrs. Dorothy Smith of Frodsham, and I eventually received a letter from Mr. H. K. Davies who, until earlier this year lived in Cheshire. His father was Herbert Victor Davies, Elsie's brother. He returned regularly to Frodsham for Runcorn school reunions, which he attended throughout WW2 and where he met his wife, Kathleen.

His daughter Kerry, with whom he lives in Penarth, Glamorgan, has written down his memories for him. Kerry is Elsie's great niece and god daughter. He says his memory is not too good but he lists the many Davies and Moreton family connections (too numerous to mention here) and their lives after the war.

He remembers:

My grandmother Edith, when she was young and active, every year at Remembrance time, placed a wooden cross with a poppy attached in the grass around the small memorial where the car park at the side of the church now is, one for each and every one of those named on the memorial. It was a pretty and moving sight.

At the back of Brook House, where one of Davies' yards used to be, and at the entrance to the joiners' work shop, there are two bricks in the wall on the right hand side (I think) of the entrance door, one containing the initials of my grandmother (EED) and the other for Auntie Elsie (EMD)

PS Elsie never worked or married after the 14-18 war, she just stayed at home for the rest of her life, eventually living by herself at Brook House"

The story continues because Mrs. Chris Thomas of Springbourne, as a young physiotherapist, remembers treating Elsie then almost 80:

This is the lady I met, I think in the early 1970s when she was still living at the same address as the one given in the 1911 census, Brook House, Fountain Lane, Main Street. I know that she lost some of her brothers in the 1914-18 war. (Note: confirmed as one).

Chris remembers Miss Davies summoning, with the aid of a small bell, her elderly maid, who then climbed the stairs, with great difficulty, to see what was wanted.

Kerry recalls Elsie's maid:

Miss Jane Neild, affectionately known as Janey, who started work at Brook House when she was 15, and lived, stayed and worked there until well into her 80s. She was a lovely lady and we visited her on many occasions when eventually she had to move to a nursing home in Runcorn, which coincidentally was located opposite the original gateposts to Halton Lodge, which was my Granny's family, the Grices' home, for many years.

Several items, including Elsie's uniform and certificates, a sand stone slab on which an Australian patient had carved the outline of (maybe) his own head with a bush hat, a 1919 Peace Souvenir Programme, gaiters, a triangular teaching bandage, an Officer's Etiquette book, photographs of the Military Hospital, cartoons and so on from the archives, have been placed on display.

These have been part of larger WW1 exhibitions in several locations including the Frodsham Library, the Community Centre, a History Society Speaker meeting, St Laurence Church Heritage Weekend and the Town Council's Exhibition in Castle Park Arts Centre.

By the end of this year, Elsie Davies's 100 year old voluntary nurse's uniform will be nervously washed and ironed once more and carefully folded back into its case, but as with the bigger event, she will not be forgotten.

My grateful thanks to Mr. Arthur Smith who gave permission to quote from his book and to reproduce the Davies' family photograph; to Mrs. Dorothy Smith and Mr. Nick Smith who always give me such knowledgeable information; Mr. Keith Davies and his daughter Kerry, who shared their memories of Aunty Elsie; Mr John Hughes, for his excellent exhibition archive photographs and Mrs. Chris Thomas who provided the final human touch to this young Frodsham nurse and who also researched the 1911 census to confirm details of the Davies family.

Kath Hewitt (Archivist)

