



Newsletter 41 – March 2015

Special Edition: Dr Mary Elizabeth Eppynt Phillips

Welcome to this special edition of our Newsletter. We invite you to contribute articles, tips, questions and answers for others to share. Feedback is always welcome. Have you missed an edition? Read the archived Newsletters on our website.

March Meeting Review: “*Dr Mary Eppynt Phillips*” by Hilary Williams.

We were delighted to see a “full house” for the afternoon’s offerings. In the main talk, Hilary Williams, used papers and documents left by Dr Phillips and preserved by her great half niece Mrs Valerie Lewis, to provide an illustrated outline of her life and work. We devote a major part of this Newsletter to Dr Phillips.

Prior to the main talk, Helen Ball gave another short presentation on family history. On this occasion, Helen explained to the audience the value of creating working charts as aids to research. She underlined the distinction between charts as art work or decorations and, much preferably, charts as diagrams or illustrations that bring clarity to family relationships. These working charts can then become as useful as a treasure map in family research.

This month on our Website

Since our last Newsletter (published 20 February 2015) we have added/updated the following:

- **Parish Pages:** added *Llanbedr Ystrad Yw* (twenty-four parishes now available):
<http://www.blfhs.co.uk/members/parishes/index.htm>
- **Monthly Meeting Report:** added report and slide show from the February 2015 meeting:
<http://www.blfhs.co.uk/members/meetings/index.htm>
- **Newsletter:** added Newsletter 41 (the one you are now reading):
<http://www.blfhs.co.uk/members/newsletters.htm>
- **Public News Pages:** updated 24 March <http://www.blfhs.co.uk/news.htm>
- **Members’ News Pages:** updated 24 March <http://www.blfhs.co.uk/members/news.htm>

Check the News Pages every few days and the Noticeboard at least weekly.

Help needed! The next parishes to be tackled are: Llanddew and Llanddewi Abergwesyn. If you can contribute any photographs or textual material relating to these parishes, or if you wish to report any problems with the website, email our webmaster John Ball at john@jlb2011.co.uk

Dr Mary Elizabeth Eppynt Phillips (1874-1956)

Mary Elizabeth Phillips was the daughter of William and Elizabeth Phillips of Presbeli Farm, Merthyr Cynog. Following her secondary education at Brecon Girls Grammar School, she went on to study medicine at University College Cardiff. Graduating from there in 1898 she went to the London (Royal Free Hospital) School of Medicine for Women to complete her medical qualifications. She was the first female doctor to come a Welsh University, into this male dominated profession. It took particular determination and expertise in her profession, to become the well regarded doctor which she turned out to be. She also mixed professionally with some other determined female doctors and they became a force with which to be reckoned.

Her first full time position, in 1905, was as doctor in the newly founded Leeds Maternity Hospital, where innovative and forward thinking policies were established, in the treatment of poor, married pregnant women. The welfare



of mothers, and children remained her prime concern for the remainder of her professional life. These were the days prior to National Insurance and the NHS.

Her next position, in 1908, was as Medical Inspector of Schools for Leeds Education Committee. She worked with voluntary organisations to establish better conditions for babies and school children in the Leeds area.

She then applied for the post of Medical Officer under the National Health Insurance Act of 1911. This appointment was very much in line with Dr Phillips's desire to improve the lot of the poor, especially families.

During this time, she became involved with the Leeds branch of the Suffrage Movement, which campaigned for the rights of women. The Suffragists were a part of an organisation known as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The Suffragists were distinct from the Suffragettes in that the Suffragists aimed to get changes through non-violent means such as political influence, but the Suffragettes were impatient with the lack of speed of change and were prepared to be violent in their methods. Dr Phillips added "Epynt" to her list of names, when she became confused with a local Suffragette of the same name, who had condoned political violence.

Dr Elsie Maud Inglis (1864-1917), an innovative Scottish doctor and suffragist was one of the founders of the Scottish Women's Suffrage Federation. When war broke out in 1914, she suggested that women's medical units should be allowed to serve on the Western Front. With the financial support of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), Inglis formed the Scottish Women's Hospitals Committee. Soon after this, fundraising commenced. This was highly successful and by the end of August 1914 had raised more than five thousand pounds (half a million pounds today), a quite incredible sum. Dr Inglis met with the War Office to offer the hospital and staff to the British Army but was told that they were not needed. "Go home and sit still, woman" had been the response, but undeterred, the hospital was offered to Britain's allies. The first to accept were the French and the Belgians, who were desperate for help due to the dire conditions their soldiers were facing.

Dr Phillips received a telegram from Dr Inglis, asking her to go to Calais to the typhoid hospital, to treat the Belgian soldiers as part of the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service. This she did and she and Dr Alice Hutchinson (1874-1953) soon brought the typhoid outbreak under control. They were there from the winter of 1914 until April 1915.

So began a period of Dr Phillips' life which involved travel to dangerous war situations and involvement in heart breaking medical emergencies. She also worked with other determined female doctors and nurses, who became respected wherever they worked for their skill, expertise and fearlessness.

Dr Phillips and Dr Hutchinson were then asked to go to Serbia, where war conditions were atrocious and typhoid was rampant. The team with their equipment left Cardiff on the 20th April 1915 in a ship loaded with ammunition and in danger from German submarines. At Malta, they were asked to stop and help with the emergency situation of the wounded ANZAC troops evacuated from Gallipoli. A reference to the medical team from a grateful ANZAC survivor, gives us a glimpse of their state of health.

The casualties had proved far greater than had been anticipated. Provision had been made for 800 cases, but there were several thousand. He was put with nine hundred others on board a transport. There were two doctors on board and a small number of Red Cross workers. It took them ten days to get to Malta. Most of the wounds became septic. Happily, the Scottish Women's unit under Dr. Alice Hutchison and Dr. Phillips were passing through Malta at the time, and hearing of the plight of the Australians they volunteered their services and set to work "to clean up the mess." Day and night the doctors and nurses laboured unceasingly to save the septic limbs; those they could not save were amputated with great skill; and their names would always be remembered with gratitude by every Australian there.

Following their successful work at Malta, the team then journeyed to Salonica and on into Serbia. According to Dr Phillips' Report, the Consul helping the Team said that they were being sent to a certain town

because it was a nice healthy place. We said we had come for work."Oh, for work", they said, "there is Valjevo, but we wouldn't think of sending English people there. It is such a terrible place". We said that we hadn't come for a holiday and wanted to go where we would be of most use. The next day Dr Milovanovitch told us that we were to go to Valjevo.

Of Valjevo, Serbia, she wrote,

“Valjevo was full of hospitals even the cafes, hotels and schools were over full of patients and the black flag was floating everywhere. Such pathetic sights I have never seen, even the doctors and orderlies were sick and jaundiced – they had all had typhus, typhoid, relapsing fever. The hospitals were still overcrowded with three patients in two beds. – no nursing, no ventilation, no decent beds – there were hundreds of cases of scurvy with their fungaling gums which bled on touching or eating, and their legs all swollen with haemorrhages and intensely painful.”

The Medical Team soon improved conditions and the patients slowly recovered, although many had to have amputations to save their lives.

The Staff were not immune to typhus and diarrhoea. In fact, Dr Phillips wrote in her Report:

“For myself I had had enteritis for 5 weeks but managed to keep on working, with the extra work before Dr Lewis and Dr Davidson could arrive. Then I had to give in. We thought that with rest in bed and treatment it would soon be alright but in spite of everything it continued and we had reluctantly to come to the conclusion that it would never get better, Jaundice having developed. After a few days at Salonica the symptoms cleared so I have come to the conclusion that it was the water which was our one weak point.”

This part of her report gives us a clue as to why, after six months in Valjevo, she was invalided home with a “breakdown” in her health. In an interview that she gave to the *Brecon County Times* in April 1916, the reporter wrote “She escaped the fate of capture which befell a number of British doctors and nurses, through a break-down in health, which necessitated her being invalided home, after six months' service. Her unit, in charge of another lady doctor (Dr Hutchinson) was afterwards taken prisoner. Her journey down to the port of Salonika was very slow, and was made in a train consisting of cattle trucks, in which beds had been placed.”

Following her homecoming and a period of recuperation, Dr Phillips started on a hectic round of lecture tours, aiming to raise the awareness of the work of the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service and to raise money for their war work. As an example of her workload, her tour itinerary in Scotland for the month of February 1916 shows that she had lectures on most days from 8th February to 2nd March, travelling to a different town, and even in the Highlands, most days. Her Tours were well advertised and reported on in local newspapers, including the Brecon and Radnor and the Brecon County Times Newspapers. In many ways, she acted as publicist for the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service.

In about May 1916, Dr Phillips went to serve as a Medical officer in Ajaccio, Corsica. She was promoted to C.M.O on the resignation of Dr Mary Blair. Amongst the war casualties there, she treated Serb civilians who had retreated to the Adriatic Coast, through some appalling conditions, with great loss of life, and who were now refugees in Corsica. She was particularly taken by the young Serbian boys, often orphaned on the journey but who had survived the Great Retreat from Serbia and were very weak and traumatised. Once medically fit, many were sent to new homes in Britain and France.

In 1917, Dr Phillips was recognised for the time and effort which she, like others in the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service, had put into the care of the Serbs, both in Serbia and as refugees in Corsica. She was granted the insignia of the Fourth Class of the Order of St Sava (Officer), by the King of Serbia (Peter I). As this was a foreign Honour, George V had to give his permission for the recipient, Dr Phillips, to wear it. It is interesting to know that the work of the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service is still remembered in Valjevo, with annual commemorations of their work and the care of the cemetery containing the graves of those doctors and nurses who died there.

Another award granted to her was the Scottish Women's Hospital medal for her work with the Serbs. She also received the French Red Cross Medal, for her work with the Belgian wounded.

Following the end of the War, Dr Phillips was involved with The Ministry of Reconstruction, a department of the government which existed after World War I in order to provide for the needs of the population in the post war years. She helped to draw up the “Report of the Committee on Ancillary Health and Kindred Services for Women”.

Now aged about 45, what would her future be in Civvy street? She applied for and got the position of Assistant Medical Officer of Health and Assistant School Medical Officer for the County Borough Merthyr Tydfil in March 1920. So she moved back to Wales and lived in Merthyr Tydfil. In September, the Medical Officer wrote a testimonial for her. He described her achievements in the Borough to date.

As Assistant Medical Officer of Health:

- She was working with and developing the Maternity & Child Welfare Centres – attendance now more than doubled.
- She had started two additional Maternity & Child Welfare Centres, making the total of four centres.
- She had succeeded in enlisting the aid of both the St John's Ambulance Brigade and the Red Cross in the work of the Centres.
- She had excellent organisational skills.

He referred to the great experience of her work in Leeds with Maternity and Child Welfare.

She continued to be interested in her home area and was in correspondence with Sir John Lloyd in 1924, regarding the establishment of a Museum for Brecknock. John Lloyd informed her that a Brecknock Society for those interested in establishing a Museum was being formed with the annual fee of 5/- (about £12 in today's value). Her links with Brecon can be seen when in June 1946, she presented a chalice veil in memory of Mrs R Le Brocq, to St Mary's Church, Brecon in celebration of their 50 plus year friendship. I am still to find out who this lady was, and this was obviously her married surname. **[If you have any information, please contact Hilary]**

During the 1920s and 1930's Dr Phillips went on a series of foreign tours. These became the sources of lectures which she gave on her return. The tours which we know about were

- Czechoslovakia: The High Tatras (possibly 1920s as she refers to the new Republic (1918))
- A "Tour through Yugoslavia with Miss Annie Burnett" in 1928.
- A 10 day tour of Egypt – date unknown.
- Palestine - November 1934 into 1935 (i.e. during British Mandate).

She kept notes of these tours and she showed a great interest in history, archaeology and culture as well as flora and fauna. Whilst in Palestine, she visited British Mandate Hospitals and clinics to see how these dealt with mother and baby health.

Dr Phillips was a wonderful speaker, according to the newspaper reports, and she gathered great crowds to her lectures. The anecdotal style of her Talks is seen in a report which said that "whilst she was serving at a Malta Hospital, filled with Australian wounded, a man was brought in, and after he had received attention she asked him how he was feeling. "Pretty tidy, indeed now, ma'am" he replied. Recognising the expression, Dr Phillips inquired where he came from, and it transpired that he, like the doctor, hailed from Brecon!"

In January 1930, she was presented with an inscribed silver teapot on the occasion of her Retirement from the services of the Merthyr Tydfil Corporation with the good wishes of the Staff. She was now 56 years of age. In 1931 there is evidence that she was living in London; from 1934 onwards, she was in Deal in Kent and by 1947, she was on Oulton Broad, Suffolk, which is where she died, quite suddenly on 1st August, where she had lived for the last decade of her life. She was in her 82nd year. She is buried in Merthyr Cynog alongside her mother. Her mother had made her home with Dr Phillips, in both Leeds and Merthyr Tydfil, following her widowhood and she died whilst they were in Merthyr Tydfil.

It has been a privilege to find out about this remarkable Breconian. She needs to be far better known. Her desire to improve the health and well-being of mothers and children remained with her all her life. She and her peers certainly helped to change the attitude of governments which gradually improved the standing of women in British society. The development of the National Health Service, National Insurance and Social Security, were also built on the foundations of the work of women like Dr Phillips and these became the monumental and iconic structures of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Related websites

Women's Suffrage

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage_in_the_United_Kingdom
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Union_of_Women%27s_Suffrage_Societies

Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service

- <http://scottishwomenshospitals.co.uk/>
- <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/138.html>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Women%27s_Hospitals

Malta and the ANZACs

- <http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk/190.html>

The Great Serbian Retreat

- <http://www.firstworldwar.com/diaries/greatretreat.htm>

PROBERTs of Lower Chapel – Can You Help?

We are trying to trace any living descendants of a PROBERT couple buried at the Bethesda Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, Lower Chapel. Their gravestone gives the following names and details:

William PROBERT *Penlan*, died 31 May 1881
Ann PROBERT *Bwlchhenllan*, died 17 April 1904

If you are descended from this couple, or if you think you know who is, please get in touch with Hilary Williams via the contact details listed below.

NEXT MEETING

Date and time: Wednesday, 1st April 2015 at 2:00 pm
Venue: Brecon Library
Subject: “*Reflections on Brecon Housing*” by Harley Simpson”

BLFHS WEBSITE: Our website address: <http://www.blfhs.co.uk>

CONTACT DETAILS

If you wish to respond to or comment on an item in this newsletter, or contribute to the next newsletter or to our website, please contact our Chairperson:

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