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## Nursing Biography: Catherine E Bennett

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USA Bureau of the Census (1915) **State Census: New York** Washington: US National Archives. Record: 1915/New York/02/04/White Plains

USA Bureau of the Census (1920) **Federal Census** Washington: US National Archives. Record: 1920/New York/625\_1279/4A  
USA Bureau of the Census (1930) **Federal Census** Washington: US National Archives. Record: 1930/New York/1666/17b

## NURSING BIOGRAPHY

### Catherine E Bennett

Claire Chatterton, The Open University

In the last edition of the bulletin I wrote about the exciting transformation of Dunham Massey Hall near Manchester (Chatterton, 2014). This stately home was the seat of the Grey family, the Earls of Stamford, and is now managed by the National Trust. Dunham Massey has marked the centenary of the First World War by telling the story of when it became the Stamford Hospital, a Red Cross auxiliary hospital in which 282 wounded soldiers were treated between April 1917 and January 1919. The ward, soldiers' and nurses' recreation room and operating theatre have all been recreated and currently replace the grand interiors.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of this project has been the chance to find out more about the staff and patients who were there when it was a war hospital. One of the most well-known members of the nursing team was Lady Jane Grey, the sister of Roger, Lord Stamford (the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl), who worked in the hospital as a VAD. The nurse though, who caught my imagination was Sister Catherine Bennett, a trained nurse who came to the hospital as a Sister and was to become its' Matron in January 1918.

The hospital was well documented in a

variety of sources. There are photograph albums, extensive collections of letters and diaries (now deposited in the John Rylands library special collections in Manchester) and Sister Bennett's own 'Record of the Patients' which she kept for Lord Stamford, in which she listed each patient as they were admitted with their diagnosis and notes on their nursing care (facsimiles of which have been on display at Dunham.)

Her Red Cross record card reveals that she was engaged as a Sister there at £2 per week in April 1917 (Red Cross, 2015). She was 28 years old and appears to have been born in Mile End in London's East End. Her father, John, was a baker's labourer at the time of her birth and her mother was called Jessie. She was the second child of a family that would grow to 13 children, two of whom seem to have died. Census entries show that the family moved around East London and her father's occupation was to change to that of a lamplighter in the 1901 census and then a lavatory attendant in the 1911 one. If I have found the right Catherine Eva Bennett, she was therefore from a large Cockney working class family. By 1911, the census reveals that she was aged 22 and working in Kent at the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital in Margate as a nurse. This voluntary hospital cared for poor, deprived children (often from London's East End) who had scrofula, a term originally applied

to tuberculous disease of the lymphatic glands but later extended to include other forms of tuberculosis affecting the abdomen, bones and joints. It was later to become well known as an orthopaedic hospital (St Clair Strange, 1991). In 1917 when she moved to Dunham she came from Devon. It would seem that having gained some nursing experience in Margate she had most likely trained as a general nurse there. During her time at the Stamford hospital at Dunham she appears to have worked hard and provided high standards of nursing care, being described as a “tireless and dedicated nurse,” but it was not always easy (Stubbs, 2014, 8). Penelope, Lady Stamford (widow of the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl and mother of the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl and Lady Jane) was the mistress of the house at Dunham and was also Commandant of the hospital for the British Red Cross. She therefore oversaw the running of the hospital and it is clear from correspondence that there were sometimes friction between herself and her Matron, both of whom appear to be strong women. In 1918 the hospital closed for six weeks to give all the staff a rest and it is clear that Sister Bennett was exhausted. She was unhappy with Lady Stamford about some proposed bed closures and this together with the long hours of work and the death of a patient, following brain surgery, appear to have affected Sister Bennett. On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1918, Lady Stamford writes in a letter to her son, that she has offered to pay for Sister Bennett and her friend to have a holiday by the sea. “Poor little Matron = she is so excellent in essentials but she has been cross and tactless with the men lately. Not herself at all” (JR, 1918a). The following day, in his reply, he notes “I expect that Matron will want another rest before long. She wears herself out much too quickly” (JR, 1918b). After her time at Dunham she had little time

to rest as she went to nurse for the Serbian Relief Fund in March 1919. In a letter to Lady Stamford in September that year she wrote of her life in the camp, which was in a rural area of Serbia. She was training local girls in nursing skills, spoke of her love for the little children from the orphanage and being asked to take charge of the isolation hospital. “Being very keen to have some experience of Typhus, I consented to do so” she said “and have had the time of my life, the theory was very thrilling in my training days, but I found the practice even more so.” Interestingly, she also is clearly trying to mend bridges with Lady Stamford, at one point thanking her for her being like a mother to her during her time at Dunham and then describing herself as the “small cross sister of Dunham” who wishes her departure from there had “gone differently” (JR 1919).

By 1920 she was on the move again. It appears that she went to Australia as her name can be found on the passenger list of the P and O boat, SS Borda, which sailed for Sydney on the 14<sup>th</sup> January. In 1925 a nurse called Catherine Bennett married a clergyman, Rev Walter Ashbury Smith, in the Melbourne area and it seems likely that the couple returned to England in 1927 or 8, by which time she was nearing 40.

My research is ongoing into this interesting nurse’s life and career. Her story illustrates the stress and strains that many nurses were to experience during the First World War, not only nursing overseas but also on the home front in the UK (Wildman, 2015). It also illustrates how a working class woman from a large East End family was able to travel around the UK and abroad, thanks to the opportunities that her nurse training had provided her with.

## Acknowledgement

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## CONFERENCE REVIEWS

### UKAHN Annual Colloquium

9 July 2015.

### The Infirmary Museum, University of Worcester.

Jane Brooks, University of Manchester

The Annual colloquium of the UK Association for the History of Nursing took place at the Infirmary Museum at the University of Worcester this year. Our most especial thanks goes to Mark MacLeod of

the museum and to colleagues at the Institute of Health and Society, at the University of Worcester for providing us with such an excellent venue. The day started with an introductory address by Jenny Pinfield, programme lead for pre-registration nursing at the University and a warm welcome from this year's convenor, Dr Stuart Wildman. The first paper 'Britain's Fight Against The Cruel Sea' Disaster Nursing and the East Coast Floods