

Memories of the NHS – still in the shadow of the poor law

The NHS was already in its third decade when I began my nurse training at the General Infirmary at Leeds (L.G.I.).

Prior to July 5th 1948, the LGI had been the city's 'Voluntary' hospital where the 'deserving' or 'respectable' working classes could be admitted if sponsored by an individual who contributed to the endowment of the hospital or paid for via an organisation such as a hospital insurance fund.

Leeds also had another major hospital – St. James' Infirmary. St. James', or 'Jimmy's' as it is popularly known, had previously been the Workhouse or Poor Law Hospital.

A memory that has stayed with me is that of an elderly woman who was admitted to my ward during a night shift. Although she was very poorly and in need of urgent care, her main concern was to be reassured about which hospital she had been admitted to. She was anxious that she had been brought to the LGI and not the 'Workhouse' even though, at the time, St. James' was a rapidly expanding and was becoming one of the largest and most well-known and respected hospitals in the UK (and beyond).

Prior to this I had not appreciated how any association with the Workhouse was so feared and that the stigma of pauperism was still strong many years after the Poor Laws had ended.

Other memories, are perhaps pertinent to the current publicity about women's roles and rights in the centenary of women's suffrage. The influence of Florence Nightingale on having nurses with the right moral character was still in evidence when I began my training.

During my interview for training I was asked what my father did for a living. No doubt they were trying to establish whether I was of an appropriate background to become an LGI nurse?

One of our introductory lectures contained a warning about accepting a drink if socialising with medical students as apparently they were likely to spike your orange juice with alcohol!

I later heard a rather scathing comment that, unlike St James', the LGI didn't train nurses – it trained 'ladies who wanted to find a doctor to marry'!

Student Nurses had to live in the Nurse's Home for the first six months of training. Men were strictly not allowed in our rooms – even my father wasn't allowed on the day I arrived. The rationale we were given for this rule was that men were fire risks!

If we went out at night, the Nurse's Home was locked at a certain time and if we were late we had to telephone the Nursing Officer (think Hattie Jaques) from A&E and she would then escort us through the hospital to the Nurse's Home. You did not make a habit of being late.

Despite all of the above I did qualify, but I didn't manage to bag myself a doctor (in truth, I never tried). I did spend many years helping to train new student nurses – they were spared the lecture on drinking with medics.

