

HEATHER FRADLEY RGN

Though born just too soon to be an NHS baby, I did benefit from the free orange juice and cod liver oil throughout my childhood.

I had no thought of pursuing a nursing career when I did my A Levels, but soon found myself supplementing my student grant by working first at a psychiatric hospital near Lincoln, little changed since it was founded as an asylum in Queen Victoria's reign, from the shared bathwater to the use of restraints – very sad and grim, and a shock to my 17 year-old self.

Then on to Birmingham General Hospital, working as an auxiliary nurse on ward 11 – a large, male 'Nightingale' ward, spending much of my time scrubbing the old metal bedpans and mopping up inevitable floods from the sluice room. I remember doing night duty there when care of over 30 seriously ill patients would be down to one second year student nurse and me. Perhaps little has changed after all. Life on the ward was never dull; my most vivid memory of my time there was chasing a live cockerel from bed to bed (long story!) and eventually capturing it in a brown paper carrier bag to the relief of all, not least the patients whose heart monitors were showing alarming traces.

Much as I enjoyed my work there, it was exhausting and poorly paid, so I found myself a 'proper' job in the Civil Service, married and had three children before deciding in my thirties that I would actually train to be a qualified nurse.

So began three challenging years at the School of Nursing at Selly Oak Hospital, Birmingham (now largely demolished and succeeded by the fantastic new Queen Elizabeth Hospital)

When I joined the hospital in the 1980s all the geriatric wards were still based in the old Victorian workhouse which was little changed apart from bright paint and flowered curtains.

As students we spent about eight weeks at a time in each speciality and I soon decided that neither operating theatres nor Accident and Emergency were for me, while I enjoyed medicine, orthopaedics and obstetrics. I have fond memories of working on an orthopaedic ward during a spell of freezing temperatures and heavy snow, when many of the female beds were occupied by frail, elderly nuns from the nearby convent who had gone down like ninepins and sustained a variety of fractures, while the male beds were occupied by young bikers who had met a similar fate.

Their musical tastes did not always coincide with heavy metal vying with hymn tunes and we nurses struggled to keep everyone happy.

My psychiatric placement was in a new, experimental unit where no-one wore uniform or name badges and where, inevitably, the more flamboyant characters turned out to be staff. I spent much of that summer playing cricket with patients (or were they staff?) and pursuing those who fled the grounds and into the city. I learnt a great deal, and was full of admiration for the resilience and compassion of many of the staff, but was never convinced that the unit provided a safe and therapeutic environment, so it may have been for the good of all when the building (a cheap 1970s construction) began to sink into the marshy ground it was built on and was finally abandoned.

I qualified in 1984, planning to go into midwifery but working instead in a community hospital where the hours were better suited to family life at that time. The hospital had been built as an

isolation hospital for children with scarlet fever and tuberculosis in the early twentieth century, being then well away from the city and exposed to fresh country air – no longer!

I enjoyed my years there, as a staff nurse and later a ward sister, mainly working on stroke rehabilitation wards. Many patients were with us for months or even a year as they slowly recovered, and it was rewarding to get to know them and their families very well during this time. An important part of our role was to work as a team with social workers and therapists to plan patients' return home when at last they were ready, and to do our best to prevent an early return to hospital and in this we were usually successful.

After a move to Ripon in 2007, I worked at the Royal British Legion Poppy Home for a few years before retiring in 2010.