

BRITISH NURSES IN HONG KONG IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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By the beginning of the twentieth century, nursing as a profession for western women was already well established. Single British women were embracing the chance for adventure in far away lands and accepting the physical challenges in exchange for their own independence. In Hong Kong the need for qualified and experienced western nurses was great and the colonial government had sufficient funds to pay for them. Nurses received a good salary and, by and large, fair conditions.

Edith Kelsey and Winifred Everingham applied for nursing positions in Hong Kong in 1912. Both were in their early 30s and were well-qualified, experienced nurses with good references in different fields of nursing – Edith specialising as a fever nurse and Winifred in nursing infants. Although they did not know each other prior to their arrival in Hong Kong, it is likely that they later became acquainted since the western nursing fraternity comprised only 15-18 European nurses at any time. The family background of each of these ladies was similar. Neither had family money to live on or to attract a suitable husband. They needed to work to keep themselves and possibly help their siblings.

Edith Kelsey was born in 1881 in Hampshire, the daughter of a former mariner who, with his sailing days behind him, opened a fishmongers' shop in the centre of Havant. Edith was one of 8 siblings - 7 girls and one boy. Her mother died when Edith was 13 and her father later remarried. In her application for the Hong Kong nursing position, Edith stated that she had left school in 1894, the same year her mother died. She was possibly withdrawn from school to look after her 3 younger siblings. She therefore had only 7 years of schooling, however the handwriting on her Hong Kong application is well-formed and confident and she had clearly been well-enough schooled to apply successfully for nursing training, which required a good level of literacy and numeracy.

In 1900 Edith was accepted to train as a nurse at the City Sanatorium in Canterbury. She earned certificates in general nursing, midwifery, massage and fever nursing. In a glowing testimonial, the Matron stated that Edith was "a good worker, quick and very resourceful in an emergency ... she had entire charge of the Small-pox Hospital during an epidemic of small-pox, and gave entire satisfaction." At the time of her application, Edith was working in private nursing in connection with London Hospital. Her salary was £50 per year.

Winifred Everingham was born in 1879 in Kensington. Similar to Edith, Winifred lost a parent at a young age. She was one of 6 children, all girls, and was only 4 when her father died. Winifred was in a rather better financial position than Edith. Her father had worked in London as an East India Company broker. On his death Winifred's mother inherited the sum of £2,114 from her husband's estate and therefore was not forced out to work. However, this was not sufficient money to keep a family of 7 for any length of time and provide dowries for 6 daughters. Winifred must have understood that she would need to earn her own living.

Winifred was educated at a private ladies school in West Sussex where she was a residential governess, in other words she was paying for her education by teaching younger children in the school. In 1899 at the age of 20 she began training as a nurse, first at the Children's Hospital in East London, and later at St George's Hospital, Hyde Park Corner and the Infants' Hospital, Vincent's Square. Most of her training and experience was in the nursing of infants. However in 1908, Winifred joined the Navy Nursing Service and was posted to the Royal Hospital, Haslar in Hampshire where she remained for only 9 months. In her Hong Kong application she stated that she "left ... because she did not like the work". The interviewing committee were not happy with this explanation so Winifred explained that there had been very little nursing to do, which was corroborated by her referees.

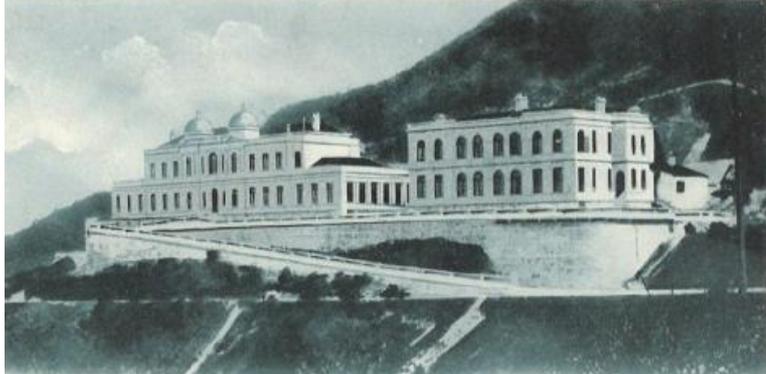
The Hong Kong application process for nurses was rigorous as their application forms, which still exist in the Colonial Office papers, show. Successful applicants needed to be well trained and hold validating certificates, have at least 5 years experience and supply good references from their employers. Having been interviewed and deemed successful candidates, the final hurdle was to pass a medical examination by a doctor in Britain designated by the Hong Kong Government.

This accomplished, they were then invited to sign a contract of employment. In 1912 the standard contract set the starting salary at £110 per annum, the term of employment was 3 years. A first class sea passage to Hong Kong was allocated, even though male government employees of a similar rank were given 2nd class passages. This was most likely as a result of their being single, unaccompanied women and their safety could be more easily assured in 1st class. The nurses were also provided with furnished quarters at the hospital as well as uniforms, laundry services, fuel, lighting and servants to attend to their requirements.

If a nurse made the choice not to serve the full 3-year term she would be obliged to pay back the cost of her passage to Hong Kong thereby giving a financial incentive to stay for the full contract term. Should a nurse sign on for a further 3 years she would be eligible for a salary increase to £130 per annum. A further 3-year contract would attract a salary of £150 per annum and the right to be placed on the pensionable establishment of the Colony.

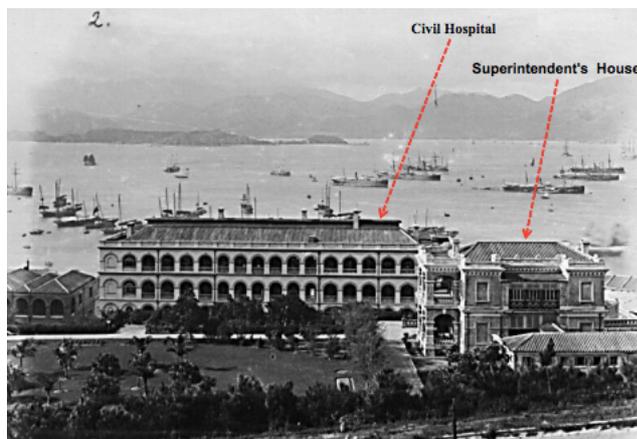
Hong Kong residents were able to choose, rather than be admitted to hospital, to be nursed in their own homes. The employment of private nurses was a pattern established in the nineteenth century when many hospitals were unpleasant and sometimes dangerous places. In the 1920s the government fee for this service was \$200 per 30-day month. If the patient could not provide food and lodging for the nurse extra fees were charged and the nurse was billeted at the nearest hospital. It was mandatory for all new nurses arriving in Hong Kong to serve a term nursing in private homes. Their contracts stated, "You will be primarily employed in private nursing but when no so engaged you may be employed in any of the hospital of the colony." The fact that private nursing was made conditional before nurses could be transferred to a hospital may demonstrate that private nursing was not popular with the nurses. Some reasons for why this may have been the possible loneliness of working without hospital colleagues, maybe not being treated well in the household [i.e. not being a servant but also not having equality with household members], not being able to learn new procedures as one would in the hospital environment.

Edith, who was appointed on 7 April 1912, served as a private nurse until 26 January 1913, a period of almost 10 months. She was then assigned to the Victoria Hospital for Women and Children, in Barker Road on the Peak. This is a little odd since it was Winifred who was a trained paediatric nurse. However it seems that nurses were not assigned for their speciality.



Victoria Hospital for Women and Children,
Barker Road, The Peak

Winifred who was appointed on 3 September 1912 worked as a private nurse for a period of 14½ months, until 14 November 1913 when she was transferred to the Government Civil Hospital in Hospital Road, Sai Ying Pun.



Government Civil Hospital

The government hospitals had nurses quarters attached. For the most part these hospitals were said to be well appointed and equipped. Kennedy Town Hospital on the Praya was probably a less desirable posting for nurses. It was primarily an infectious diseases hospital and had a western matron and 3 or 4 western nursing sisters. The staff quarters were built in 1910, but in the Budget Report for 1925, Mr. Holyoak painted a gloomy picture of working in this hospital. “Under no circumstances can the conditions ... be considered favourable to recovery from serious illness, and in this connection we would pay a well deserved tribute to the Matron and Nursing staff there, whose labours under most trying conditions especially during the heat of summer – cannot be too highly commended, and we consider the scale of pensions upon which they retire needs substantial increase, and trust the Government will assure us that this shall be gone into and revised

favourable at once.” It is unclear if pensions were increased but the nursing staff must have appreciated the sentiment of this report.



Kennedy Town Hospital – formerly the Police Station

Both Edith and Winifred finished their 3-year contracts in Hong Kong. At this time Winifred formally resigned on 25 January 1916. On 19 June 1916, with the battles of World War I raging, Winifred joined the British Red Cross Society & Order of St. John and went to serve in France. She served until November 1918 and earned the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Following the war Winifred's name appeared on the Register of Nurses along with her younger sister, Annie. Winifred never married. She died on 15 May 1956 at the age of 76. She willed her estate to Annie, a substantial amount for a single lady who had earned her own living of £2,070.

Edith chose to sign a second contract to stay on in Hong Kong for a further 3 years. However on 8 October 1917 she resigned from this position. She did not lose any benefits from resigning more than 9 months before the expiry of her contract term because she left to perform “war work”. Edith's name does not appear in the list of UK nurses serving in WWI. However she may have taken up war work other than military nursing. Following the hostilities Edith's name appeared on the Register of Midwives and she was again attached to the London Hospital in Whitechapel. Like Winifred, Edith never married. She died in 1965 in Dartford at the age of 85.