

An introduction to Mildmay's history.

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Gertrude Villiers Stuart, born 20.1.1878, a deaconess at Mildmay during 1900-1906
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An introduction to Mildmay's history

From fighting a cholera epidemic back in 1866 to tackling AIDS in 1988, Mildmay has never been short of the pioneering spirit. Unique as an independent Christian charitable hospital, it nurses young chronically sick and severely disabled people and also contains Europe's first AIDS hospice and continuing care unit for men, women, children and babies.

Mildmay's pioneering work began in Victorian times when cholera had broken out in London's East End. An appeal for help was sent to Rev William Pennefather, who lived in the Mildmay Park area of nearby Islington. In response, two young deaconesses in his charge volunteered to go into the badly affected areas of Bethnal Green. Thus the vision was created and Mildmay was founded.

'heal the sick and preach the gospel' became the motto in those early days. The deaconesses - who received no salary for their labours - swiftly made Mildmay famous for the remarkable way in which many people were restored to health and also discovered new life in Jesus Christ. In the words of Professor Sir Norman Anderson OBE, this early missionary work set the scene for future events. "The result was a hospital which has combined, in a unique way, a service of love and medical skill ... with an almost incredibly long roll of honour of doctors and nurses who have found their way to every quarter of the globe."

After moving to its present site in 1892, Mildmay served for many years as a charitable foundation caring for the community in medical, social and spiritual contexts. Its fight for financial survival during times when larger institutions were favoured bears witness to how faith has prevailed.

Problems there may have been, but there were also moments to savour. Mildmay has rejoiced in the royal patronage shown to it over the years. In 1938 when Queen Mary arrived to open the Outpatients extension, "Nurses formed a guard of honour and sang to the National Anthem with gusto as she passed between their ranks."*

1939: Upon the outbreak of the Second World War, patients were evacuated, leaving staff to man an empty hospital - scene of so much excitement and activity just one year earlier. Although factories and warehouses in Sweet Apple Square were completely devastated in the bombings, the adjoining Mildmay remained virtually unscathed. The hospital had gained a safe reputation in more ways than one and accordingly staff would spend the night in the labyrinth of corridors which form the basement.

In 1948 Mildmay was nationalised. Following a Government Commission's report that hospitals with less than 200 beds were uneconomic, NHS policies favoured larger hospitals and high technology. Consequently, more funds were ploughed into these to ensure their survival - at the expense of smaller hospitals, such as Mildmay. Its relative smallness was therefore a matter for concern. "The hospital had escaped the official axe so far, but how long could it continue to live if it ceased to grow?"*

The closing down and subsequent sale of the Memorial Hospital in Newington Green - close to where the Pennefathers had lived - provided Mildmay with the much-needed capital for an extension. In 1965 Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra opened the new extension, which enabled an increase in provision to 72 beds.

Sadly, in 1982 Mildmay was closed, but although the hospital was 'down', it was definitely not 'out'. Undeterred, Mildmay survived its history of chequered fortunes, thanks largely to the unswerving loyalty and generosity of many Christians and local people - Mildmay was, and continues to be, highly respected, whether among the original East Enders, the Jewish population or the Bangladeshi people who form an interesting backcloth to the hospital. Christians and locals actively petitioned for Mildmay's reopening, with the support of others nationwide. In January 1983 there was a banner march from Mildmay to Trafalgar Square, followed by addresses from many distinguished speakers.

In May 1984 the Minister for Health issued approval for Mildmay to reopen, on the understanding that the hospital should benefit the local community and be financially viable. In combination with the continued generosity of benefactors and, of course, the power of prayer, Mildmay reopened in October 1985 as an independent - not private - Christian charitable hospital. Two and a half years later, in recognition of its extensive refurbishment and service development, the hospital - containing its new AIDS hospice - was officially reopened by Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra. Cause to celebrate, indeed!

Reference *THOMPSON Phyllis 'No Bronze Statue', Kingsway, 1982.

A new publication on the life and times of Mildmay is currently being researched.

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