

From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history

HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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Call the midwife? Yvonne delivered 1000s of times!

Long-term Hatfield resident Yvonne Stephens had a 40-year career as a nurse and midwife in the local area. She kindly recounted her interesting story to the editors:

Born in Campbellville, Guyana, South America, Yvonne (née Duncan) was the eldest of sixteen children. She would often look after her younger siblings, this perhaps forming the seeds of her future career choice. Her caring role did not stop at children – she recalls mending the broken legs of the family's chickens too! Yvonne's mother once invited her to be present at the birth of one of her younger siblings – which she declined. After leaving school, Yvonne had jobs as a housekeeper and then became a typesetter. She also learnt to do shorthand and typing.

The staffing shortage in the NHS from its inception in 1948 - and throughout the 1950s - led the Ministries of Health and Labour to launch campaigns to recruit staff from abroad,

in conjunction with the Colonial Office; Guyana was under British control at the time. Yvonne's mother saved up the money to send her to Britain to train as a nurse. The process of migration was easy as Yvonne had a job to go to. Her passport was Guyanese but she had dual nationality.

The journey began with a flight to Trinidad, and then a three-week journey on the ship *Columbie*. Yvonne travelled with a friend who was also going to train as a nurse, and met new friends on board. And she almost didn't make it to Britain as she met a man on the ship, who wanted to take her to France and marry her!

Yvonne Duncan arrived in Southampton on 3rd November 1957, aged 18. With her strict Catholic upbringing, she was shocked to see boys and girls kissing on the platform – as this would never have happened in Guyana. From there she travelled to Kent, to begin her training at St. Mary's Hospital in the small village of Etchinghill, near Folkestone. She recalls it being cold and bleak.



Yvonne during her nursing career

Contact the Editors:

c/o Mill Green Museum, Hatfield, AL9 5PD
Chairman: **Mrs Chris Martindale**



Call the Midwife! Yvonne Stephens continued....

The hospital building was a former workhouse, given to the NHS in 1947. St. Mary's specialised in geriatric care. Some of the elderly folk had not seen black people before, and were wary at first, not wanting Yvonne to touch them. She had to gradually gain their confidence. She was often the only black person in her group of nurses in the classroom, and was once asked by a teacher "Are you sure that's your name?" Such was the ignorance of the day. After two years, Yvonne had completed her SEN (State Enrolled Nurse) qualification. She wanted to continue to train as an SRN (State Registered Nurse), but as this was not on offer at St. Mary's, Yvonne moved to London to carry out two further years at St. Olave's Hospital in Bermondsey.

Around this time Yvonne met her husband Remi, and they were married in 1962. Yvonne had been working as an SRN for about 18 months when she took a career break to have her first child. After a difficult labour, she wanted to learn more in order to be able to help other women through childbirth, and so began training as a midwife.

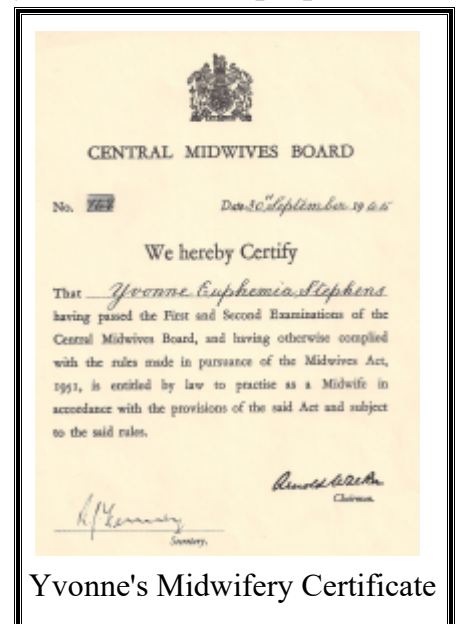
Yvonne's husband was working at Mowlem's in Hatfield, travelling daily from London, and the family moved to a flat in Galleycroft Court in the town centre which was offered to them by the New Towns Commission. Yvonne continued her midwife training at the recently opened QE11 hospital in WGC. She found Hatfield to be a friendly place and her neighbours were lovely. She also witnessed the increasing local population as more people arrived from London to live here further to the post-war New Towns house building programme.

From 1965 Yvonne was a fully qualified midwife working three nights a week at the QE11, whilst her husband was at home with their children. The delivery suite had four prep rooms and four delivery rooms, and there would be an average of 2-4 births per night. From 1971 she was the Midwifery Sister - and Sister Stephens is how many recall her.

In order to become a Community Midwife, Yvonne went back to the wards to gain post-natal experience. From 1975 she was delivering babies in the home and was given a blue Mini car to use on her rounds. It was serviced at the ambulance station. People would call for the midwife from a telephone box, and she would attend with an assistant. If there were problems then Yvonne could call the hospital, who would send a paediatrician or consultant - the 'Flying Squad'!

Yvonne had a no-nonsense way of dealing with nervous dads. She would tell them, "I can't care for your wife, your baby *and* you - please leave if you're going to pass out"!

We asked Yvonne about the changes in the profession over



Yvonne today

the years. Her reply was "The technology". During her career she saw the introduction of scans and foetal monitoring. Previous to this she would not always know in advance if a mother was expecting twins! However, the basic equipment which she carried in her bag to deliveries remained similar; sterile supplies, clamp for the umbilical cord, scissors and foetal stethoscope. Yvonne retired in 1997, and still lives in Hatfield.

NORTHCOTTS By Brian Lawrence

A visitor to Northcotts today will find a block of flats, built as part of the re-development or as some would say, the destruction of Old Hatfield in the 1960s.

The site on which the present Northcotts and the nearby Hatfield Social Club now stand was previously occupied by a substantial residence of the same name which was the home of a number of important personalities over the centuries and for much of its final 150 years it was used by different bodies undertaking vital roles in support of the local community. The origins of Northcotts can be traced back to the 17th century when its extensive grounds stretched from the Great North Road to Park Street and at least one early reference describes the site as "The Farm". Among the earliest residents were members of the Searancke family, wealthy local brewers and property owners and it is recorded that there were maltings on the adjoining land in the early eighteenth century.

Later in the century an eminent surgeon, James Penrose, came to Hatfield and in 1789 he took on the lease of Northcotts and a few years later became Surgeon Extraordinary to King George III. By 1839 a local curate Rev. Benjamin Peile and his wife were known to be running a boarding school from the premises and this continued until c.1860 when the school closed.

Following the arrival of the railway in 1850 the house became the home of one of the early General Managers of the Great Northern Railway, Seymour Clarke, who also resided at Hill House during his time in Hatfield. Northcotts was the home of another General Manager of the Railway Company, Oliver Bury, at the beginning of the 20th century and the railway connection continued when the house became the home of a former General Manager of the Eastern Counties Railway and director of the Metropolitan Railway, Sir William Birt, who died there in 1911.

Following the outbreak of WW1 Northcotts was occupied by the Military Authorities and in 1916 it was offered by Lord Salisbury as a hospital for sick and wounded soldiers. The building was soon adapted, equipped and opened by the Red Cross as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) Hospital. With strong support from the local community the hospital treated almost 800 men by the time it closed in February 1919.



The VAD nursing staff at Northcotts

After the War, The Hatfield Men's Social Club took up occupancy there and the house was equipped with a billiards room, a bar, and games and reading rooms. Apparently, in the inter-war years public baths were set up in one of the out-houses where a bath could be had for 6d (2½p) with a towel provided but bathers were required to bring their own soap!

Part of the grounds of the house were for many years rented by Mr A A Dollimore, a well-known local greengrocer, who used to store equipment there and cultivated the land for business uses,

specialising in growing rhubarb, much of which was taken to market. The house served the community in many different ways during the final half century of its existence. Between the wars part of the building was taken over by the Herts County Council as a Maternity Centre and School Clinic and it was there that I experienced my first encounter with the school dentist. During the country's darkest hour, in 1940, the Home Guard (originally the LDV) was set up and Northcotts became the Headquarters of the 14th Herts Battalion, under the command of

Lt Col R N Greenwood, conveniently located when undertaking training in Hatfield Park. It is interesting to note that one relic of the Home Guard period still remains in the grounds of Northcotts. It is the base of a gun emplacement located in the southern corner of the site just behind the boundary wall. When it was installed several courses of bricks were taken out of the wall so that a gun could be mounted on the spigot and trained through the wall to guard the station entrance and the Great North Road. The wall has now, of course, been re-instated but it is still possible to see a piece of reinforced concrete that was inserted in the wall as support (see picture).

With the approach of the end of the war the Home Guard was disbanded but Northcotts continued to be the meeting place of the local Boy Scout Troop, known as the 1st Lord Cranborne's Own Group and it is likely that both the Scouts and the Men's Social Club continued to meet there until the site was redeveloped with the building of the block of flats and the Hatfield Social Club.



60 years ago the 'Modern Meeting House' at Hilltop began

In the early 1950s the Hatfield Development Corporation (HDC) planned for a neighbourhood centre for South Hatfield to cater for the 8,000 people who would eventually settle in that part of the New Town. There were to be 18 shops, a small public house, a social centre and a church.

By 1957 about 4,000 people were housed in the area and the shops had been built, but the HDC discovered that no public funding would be made available for the social centre and pub. Eventually the Corporation joined with brewers Arthur Guinness & Co and McMullens to design and implement a larger social centre - with the brewers providing the finance. And in September 1958 the construction of it commenced. The HDC set up a Users Committee for the social organisation and then leased the premises back from McMullens for three days a week at an annual rent of £250. This joint scheme was viewed as 'an imaginative social experiment' for its time. But just 3 months earlier some sections of the community had 'grave doubts' with the proposals and a public enquiry ensued before the go-ahead was approved. The centre included: grill bar, public bar, saloon bar, an off-licence, cafe, children's clinic, kitchens, a hall to seat 200, three committee rooms and cloakrooms.



Lounge Bar



Cafe