



Friends of Savernake Hospital and the Community

Savernake Hospital History – Accounts from WW1

We are always delighted to receive personal accounts - and stories passed down through the generations - from those who worked or stayed at Savernake Hospital in the past. Not only does it help paint a fuller picture of the Savernake Hospital of yesteryear, but also, more generally, of the local social history of Marlborough and the surrounding villages.

We were very therefore very interested to receive the following information from a recent visitor to our website, Jean Blackman:

" I found your website very interesting and have a story to share. My mother, Elsie Violet Blanche Sweet,[referred to as Violet] often told me about her time nursing at Savernake Hospital during the First World War. She started working as an unqualified nurse at Savernake Hospital in 1915 or maybe 1916, when she was about 20 years old and was trained on the job.

She had heard that the mansion house in which the hospital was based had been made available for use as a military hospital during WW1 by the rich owners as a contribution to the war effort.

She also told me that when the indoor space at the hospital was fully occupied, marquees were erected outside to create additional space for hospital beds. Every morning, the nurses would open up the marquees to allow fresh air to circulate. On some occasions, deer from the surrounding forest wandered into the marquees and around the beds to the delight of the wounded soldiers, who sometimes fed them their sandwiches. This seemed to lift the spirits of the wounded men.

I wonder if anyone else has heard about these marquees and the visiting deer. Unfortunately I don't have any photos from my mother's time at Savernake, but would love to see any that you have from the WW1 period."

The Friends are very fortunate to have both Janet Louth, their chairman, and former committee member, Val Compton, who have spent many years compiling historical accounts, photographs and reports from various sources about Savernake Hospital since it was established in the 1800s. However, as regards the WW1 period specifically, the Friends have relatively few photographs.

Janet contacted both Jean and Jean's brother, Tom, who mentioned that the lady in

charge took no pay. Friends know that, although Miss Evelyn Rossell Lavington did not become matron at Savernake Hospital until 1919, she took no salary during her years there. She was, prior to this, involved with the Red Cross Hospital in Marlborough. Coming from a local family, she would have known Savernake Hospital well, and it is quite possible that she would have had involvement with Savernake Hospital, taking wounded soldiers during WW1. We therefore think Jean's mother, Violet, might have known her. (see further details about Matron Lavington on the Friends website: <http://www.friendsofsavernake.org/savernake-hospitals-historical-whos-who/>).

Janet wanted to check that the reference made by Jean in her email to "the mansion house" was not a reference to Tottenham House, given the connections between the two establishments. However, Jean and Tom were certain that their mother's memories related to Savernake Hospital; further Janet has found no record of Tottenham House taking wounded soldiers during WW1 (although many large estates did).

Since first being in touch with Jean and Tom, Jean has unearthed some photographs of her mother from around the WW1 era when Violet was a nurse. We cannot be certain where or when they were taken. (We know that Violet moved from Savernake Hospital to Great Somerford near Malmesbury and went on to be a registered nurse and qualified midwife.) However, one of the photographs is of Violet and another nurse in front of what looks like temporary/nurses' accommodation. Possibly this was at Savernake Hospital?

We – and of course Jean and Tom – would be delighted to hear from anyone who might be able to provide more information about Savernake Hospital during the WW1 era – and especially if that information might be able to answer some of these unanswered questions.

For more information about the history of Savernake Hospital, please visit the Friends website at www.friendsofsavernake.org



Violet Sweet and another fellow nurse – outside temporary/nurses accommodation – was this Savernake Hospital?



Violet Sweet – mother of Jean Blackman – who worked at Savernake Hospital during WW1



Violet Sweet picking flowers



Violet Sweet – signed photograph



Violet and a group of fellow nurses