

Savernake Cottage Hospital's very own Who's Who

Name: Mabel Blackwell; Matron of Savernake Cottage Hospital 1952 - 1965

Much has been written about Matron Blackwell and her huge enthusiasm for all things Savernake. The interview Val Compton recorded with her just a short while before her death was both entertaining and informative. Matron's last outing from Marlborough Lodge, was to the Savernake Hospital



History Exhibition in 2009 where she derived much pleasure from looking at the pictures of "her nurses". As with so many people, you learn most about their lives perhaps from the eulogy at a funeral and we were able to help with stories and pictures, the research carried out by Janet Louth and Val Compton having yielded quite an amount of information and stories which showed what a determined, feisty but very caring lady she had been.



Mabel Blackwell 1923

Matron Blackwell Interview in the Autumn of 2008

Val Compton; You were going to take early retirement when you saw the advertisement for Matron of Savernake Hospital.....

The subject open, I left the tape running and here are a range of topics, all the words are Matron's who was over 100, with slight edits for clarification only;

Uniforms

We'd asked a Matron from one of the hospital's in London to come to give the prizes – she remarked how smart my nurses were in uniform. She said her own nurses – when she met them out were a disgrace. I said, If they do that here – they don't wear their outdoor uniform again! The visiting Matron enquired if that worked. I said Every time! People asked – how do you get your nurses to wear it? I said, they're proud of it!



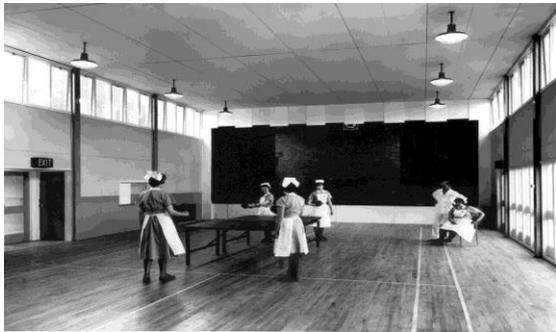
And the Doctors used to come to me and say – I met two of your nurses in the town – they're very smart – why can't Oxford nurses be like that? The nurses had to come to me for certain time in their training and they so got fond of the uniform they wore, they didn't like to think it changed at Oxford – they didn't like it at all.

Routines and Sunshine

The nurses had a list and they'd got to abide by that list. The wards were cleaned once a week thoroughly (like deep clean today) It was a lovely situation for a hospital right on top of a hill and the sun was beautiful. The patients all had lovely chairs to sit in on the balcony. Every one of them.

Fund Raising & Recreation

What we used to do – we used to have a bazaar in the town hall and everybody had given something and the doctor's wives used to take a table for me in the hall from 9am – 1pm, they all came and took a stall. And when they came to take this stall, they brought a lot of lovely things with



them. Really nice things and the stalls were beautiful. They went home empty handed, having sold everything.

The money went to my Recreational Hall – we, the staff bought that Recreation because we had all sorts of things and it was money for the hall. The nurses said they wanted to play in the winter – they wanted a game they could play to keep fit. They

decided on badminton – so I had them taught how to play by professionals – nothing but the best for Savernake and they came and gave their services free! So the nurses were very good players. So we had matches in the evening and people could pay to come in and after a match was over they had a little dance – and they loved that little hop afterwards.

Christmas

Our Carol practices, well – they (nurses) knew they started 6 weeks before Xmas – every Monday night was Carol practice from 9 – 10 and if they didn't attend the practices they didn't attend on the night. I used to tell them if they couldn't give one hour a week – you're no good to me! So I had no more trouble. They all came because they wanted to be in the picture.

We used to come down the stairs of the front hall in pairs, and I was the smallest – with a little nurse – I had to lead. The patients loved it – I've seen old men in tears. We went round all the Wards on Christmas Eve, at 7 o'clock after all the supper things had been cleaned away. The patients were sat up in bed with all nice new nighties on because the photographers were there for the paper. The others used to say – how can you have such a lovely Carol Service – I said we like it and we practiced for it. The doctors and their wives used to come and listen – it was really beautiful. I've got a record somewhere and we sound quite lovely. We've got some lovely photographs of us walking round the wards with our lanterns. I've got a lovely book of photographs which I'll show you. I'll lend you the album!



We didn't decorate the Wards too much because of infection I used to tell them. Paper is very infectious. I said that if you make the patients happy, you don't need a lot of decorations. So what I used to do, Christmas Day, if there was any person in there as a patient and the husband was left alone, he was invited to dinner. If there was a man or a woman left alone in the house through a patient being in my hospital, they were allowed to come for dinner – they were not allowed to stay at home alone. So they were brought to the hospital, about 11 o'clock, they attended communion, we had communion in each ward, the doctors all came and their wives and then they doctors, who gave up their time willingly, dressed up with a cook's cap and used to carve the turkey. That gave the patients such joy!

The turkeys were brought in on a trolley, and the doctors used to carve away, then there would be a Sister put a sausage on, a sister put the meat on – it was so beautifully arranged, the doctors used to take it round to the patients. The doctors used to love it and their children were brought into the kitchen. They sat them on chairs and I always remember all these seven little children belonging to the doctors – because you couldn't get maids to work Christmas Day! The cook would give them (the children) potatoes or sausages and all sorts of bits - their eyes used to pop out – the cook loved having those children. When the trolley came back with something and no one thought I was looking



the children would be given something. I knew it happened! The children were kept quiet and once I heard them saying Matron was coming and they quickly gulped down everything!

And then, Christmas Day, the doctors and nurses and sisters mixed together for the dinner in the maids' large dining room. So all the doctors would have a chicken or turkey leg, roast potato or anything

that was going – they had their lunch that way and the children having nibbles in the kitchen. It was a lovely atmosphere. It was a very happy time at Christmas. I remember Dr Tim coming and the young doctor who lived in the High St – I know their faces but I can't remember their names so well now.

I had a lovely recipe for Christmas pudding. And those were made about 6 weeks before Christmas and put on the shelf in the larder and kept to be boiled.

Tea time - everybody came to tea as well so no one was left alone – the patients' relatives who would have been on their own came for the day. Some even helped – got one peeling potatoes once.

Food

We had 90 beds at that time and then we went over 100. It was happy! The patients were woken with a cup of tea and then everybody had their breakfast. There was a hot trolley – same as the dining room ones – they were filled with hot food or cold on the rack below. Those trolleys went to the kitchen to be filled with hot food for the patients – there was a cold rack as well for ice cream

because we had our own ice cream. We used ice cream quite a lot with the sweets – that's better than custard. They said our food was very good. Well, a major point – I said that good food meant good wounds and that's how I won the point. When they said you must keep your patients on so much per person – and I said it was impossible when you have special diets to give, you cannot keep a patient on a certain amount because diets mean money – and I won the point!

I always remember the person from the food department that was in charge said, Matron, why do you get these things here that the other hospitals can't? I said, I don't take no for an answer! That was the truth. I didn't want any nurses who weren't too clean either, so I didn't have them!

The Secretary of Swindon, who was in charge of all the hospitals couldn't understand why after a harvest festival day, on the Monday morning I would get a telephone message saying, we've had a lovely harvest festival and we want everything to come to Savernake. So I used to get someone with me and I would get a car – you should have seen the marrows and things – so I was very lucky – my food bill was so low compared with the other hospitals. Well, we used to get boxes of eggs, fruit, vegetables – it was all given to us – all for Savernake Hospital.

There was one Farmer – he rang up he said I've got a field white with mushrooms – can you bring someone? We got them, and I asked some patients if they liked mushrooms, because they were going to have a lovely surprise if they peeled them all! They were all sat up in bed peeling them! And the next morning I gave them bacon and mushrooms for breakfast. Oh, when they saw the mushrooms they thought it was lovely.

We had joint Agas – they had rings – two rings cooked and another was kept cooler – we had a very big kitchen. Swindon was so fed up because our kitchen was the size of theirs – and look at the amount of patients we had compared to them. We had a lovely fruit store built because when the churches had their harvest Festivals and the congregation insisted it all went to Savernake. I always went to fetch it, taking a porter with me, to give a personal thank you. I think a real thank you went a long way.

When boxes of sweets came – they went to the children's ward. If they were good on taking nasty medicine they were given a lovely sweet – that sort of thing. They weren't wasted. Bags of cabbages, bags of onions.....

Operations

We had one very busy ward – women and one men's ward – they were very busy. They had operations every day but Sunday. Operations were performed by different Surgeons. Some Surgeons were allowed to send their patients in to the hospital to be operated on.

There were two theatres going. Tuesday morning it started about half past nine, Mr Scott from Oxford would start in theatre at nine o'clock! He used to bring his own plaster Sisters. Mr Scott would see patients who needed plasters changing or maybe operating on, so he was there at nine o'clock – and he had his breakfast there when he got there in the morning, with the anaesthetist. I knew about Orthopaedics, that's why he was using Savernake Hospital so much – it was saving him a lot of trouble and the doctors in the town. He saw the patients at nine o'clock then go and have a damn good breakfast with the anaesthetist and then he had Out Patients. They didn't have lunch till half past one – he would see up to ninety patients on a Tuesday, operating in the afternoon. When

he finished at Savernake he'd go up to the Children's Hospital in case there were some children to see. He was often at Savernake till 6 o'clock in the evening.

Children (*nb We later learned later that Matron had been a trained midwife and were given this beautiful photograph of her as a youthful nurse*)

We also had a lovely children's ward – beautiful. People were very kind and it was ice cream day on tonsils day! You know after poor kids had their tonsils out, they thought the ice cream was lovely. It was a very happy children's ward – and then they took it to Swindon. They wanted to close Savernake but the people wouldn't let them. They were jealous of Savernake – I don't mean to sound conceited but we were so well thought of in the town – people gave so generously to us where they didn't get it at the other hospitals.



It was a very happy hospital – I was allowed lots of scope. There were some very good reports of the hospital from the patients. I had very nice nurses and I taught them that it was alright to look nice in uniform, but kindness was the most important thing. You can do so much with kindness – quietly.

End of Interview

Mabel Savina Blackwell was born in Derbyshire in 1903 and died in 2009 at the age of 105 years. She spent the last years of her life in Marlborough Lodge, a care home noted for its' amazing quality of care and kindness – something Matron would have both noted and appreciated. Although her health was failing, she had an unexpected "good" day as the Savernake Hospital History Exhibition was drawing to a close. Marlborough Lodge pulled out all the stops to get her ready for an outing they knew she would thoroughly enjoy. It was a fitting final outing for this memorable lady.

