The foundation of the Royal Liverpool Hospital Training School for Nurses 1862: History and curriculum

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Background

Modern nursing in Britain could be said to date from 1860 with the formation of the School of Nursing at St Thomas’ Hospital in London. This establishment was launched using funds from the Nightingale Fund, which had been established by public subscription after the return of Florence Nightingale from the Crimea.¹

By 1862 Liverpool was ready to launch its own school, this time with funds donated by the philanthropist William Rathbone. The establishment of the school was undertaken under the direct guidance of Miss Nightingale, a personal friend of Rathbone. Miss Nightingale wrote an introduction to a booklet that described the school’s foundation. In her introduction to the booklet, “Organisation of Nursing”, she said: “I need scarcely say … how I earnestly press for the publishing of this account of the work, as being a pioneer, rather than a model, for similar institutions all over the country”.²

The aim of this paper is to analyse the curriculum and history of the Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School. This analysis will take the notion of curriculum in its broadest sense, and will encompass the recruitment of students, the course structure, the theoretical aspects of the course, the assessment of practice, and the educational aspects of the school building. The purpose of this analysis is to cast light on the processes that underpinned nurse education at the point at which the definition of modern nursing was becoming fixed.

From the vantage point of the twenty first century, meaningful analysis of the curriculum is at best tentative. The picture of what was taught and how learning was assessed can be indistinct. However sometimes there is enough evidence to illuminate the process of converting young Victorian women into nurses, occasionally with great clarity.

Sometimes the antecedents of ideas which have survived to the present day can be clearly perceived. Matters such as the numbers of students recruited and the length of their training can give insight into the prevailing beliefs that

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shaped the training of aspiring nurses. The physical design of the School of Nursing, a purpose built establishment, can say something about the education that goes on inside the walls. But perhaps the lectures and the comments of senior staff about the student nurses give the clearest insight about what was taught to student nurses, or ‘probationers’ in the parlance of the 1860s.

**Methods used**

This study rests mainly on analysis of two sources of documents. The first is of documents stored in the Liverpool Records Office situated in the Central Library, William Brown St, Liverpool. Most of the documents analysed were never intended for publication. This makes it difficult to reference the material. Instead the archive classification index number will be listed as a reference. The methodology has some areas of ethical concern. Many of the nurses recruited to the school were subject to disciplinary activity, and had the right to assume that their punishment would be confidential. Despite the fact that the archive ensures that there is a century of delay before the public can access these materials, the identities of the students have been disguised by giving only their initials.

The second source of documents is derived from comment in the contemporary Liverpool satirical magazine “Porcupine”. This publication included in its columns considerable debate about the public health measures under way in Liverpool and about the state of hospitals in the city.

**Antecedents to the Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School**

The Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School was not the first school for nurses in Liverpool. Another school was open until it was amalgamated into the new school. Its curriculum has been lost and little is known about it apart from its address in Soho Street. There is also some evidence that there was another much earlier school of which even less is known. The Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School on the other hand had a curriculum which one can recognise as a modern model of nurse training.

**Recruitment of students**

There was no formal threshold of educational attainment that probationers had to bring to their training. Abel-Smith is correct to point out that ‘More stress

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was laid on personal qualities than on educational achievement.
5 The Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School was founded before the epoch of compulsory education ushered in by the 1870 Education Act. Qualifications were no recommendation, because they did not exist in the modern sense. It is reasonable to suppose that literacy would be a baseline expectation. On 10 February 1866, the satirical Liverpool journal “Porcupine” depicted the new intake of nurses as ‘clean, bright, active, sympathetic, well trained (and) professional’. Table 1 summarises some of the details noted about the students recruited in the first intakes of the school in 1862 and 1863 and is derived from records stored in Liverpool Records Office.6 The main qualification for a probationer is a personal reference. There is a high incidence of clergymen among the referees. Another item to note is that there is a wide range of religions represented in the first intakes. This is not entirely accidental. The first matron of the school was chosen specifically because she ‘was free of sectarian prejudice and bigotry’.7 In the Liverpool of the 1860’s religious sectarianism was widespread, yet there is no evidence of this in the intake of the school. The non-denominational quality of the school’s intake could itself be regarded as bearing the stamp of Miss Nightingale’s ideas about the place of religious belief in nursing: ‘She was afraid that the care of the body might become confused with the care of the soul, and religious loyalties come into conflict with the responsibility of the nurse…’.8

A further item to note is the date of appointment of the probationers. It does not seem that the intakes were recruited at set points in the year. Rather it appears as though the training commenced at a point to suit both school and probationer. The majority of the students were in their twenties although a number were in their mid to late thirties. While most are single there are two married women out seventeen in total. This conflicts with the widely held modern view that marriage was traditionally an automatic disqualification for nurse training.

While the “Organisation of Nursing” states that provision was made for the recruitment of thirty-one probationers, in fact the practice records reveal that only seventeen were recruited between 1862 and 1863.

Retention of students and, subsequently, trained staff seems to have been a genuine problem in the early years. There is a reference in the “Organisation of Nursing” to the previous regime of hospital organisation where ‘Sobriety was a comparatively rare virtue in a hospital or sick nurses … and consequently the inexperienced and ignorant care of any honest women was preferred’.9 However, in the new system ‘respectability was insisted upon’ and a number of

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6 Register of Trainee Nurses. LRO 614 INF/26/2/1.
8 Op. cit., ref 1, p.19
TABLE 1: Biographical profile of nurse recruits. A question mark indicates an illegible entry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nurse (Gender)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Date appointed</th>
<th>Referred by</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC (F)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>8/62</td>
<td>Matron Bath Hospital</td>
<td>C of E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW (F)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12/62</td>
<td>? Ewart</td>
<td>C of E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM (F)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12/62</td>
<td>Mrs Holmes</td>
<td>R.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JC (F)</td>
<td>Not Known</td>
<td>Deserted Wife</td>
<td>3/63</td>
<td>Rev ?</td>
<td>C of Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR (F)</td>
<td>Not Known</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>4/63</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JM (F)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4/63</td>
<td>James Harrison</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EG (F)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>5/63</td>
<td>Rev Birley</td>
<td>C of E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ME (F)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5/63</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Wesleyan/Methodist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD (F)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>5/63</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>C of E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS (F)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>5/63</td>
<td>Mrs Weyersmann</td>
<td>R.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT (F)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>7/63</td>
<td>Mr Higginbottam, Nottingham</td>
<td>Wesleyan / Methodist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR (F)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>7/63</td>
<td>Mrs Capper</td>
<td>Independant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM (F)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>8/63</td>
<td>Rev Smeaton</td>
<td>C of Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE (F)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>8/63</td>
<td>Thomas Crowdson</td>
<td>C of Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JW (F)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12/63</td>
<td>Mrs Enfield</td>
<td>Unitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW (F)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>12/63</td>
<td>Dr Garside</td>
<td>C of E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12/63</td>
<td>? Ewart</td>
<td>C of E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

nurses were dismissed in the first three months because of repeated drunkenness. One is entitled to infer that this drunkenness was a serious issue. The authorities, however, did not insist upon temperance. An amount of alcohol was not only allowed but officially sanctioned. As a condition of their employment the probationers were given three pints of beer per day. This might in part have been due to the poor quality of the water supply in Liverpool. The last outbreak of cholera in the city took place in 1866, four years after the foundation of the school. Beer may well have been considered a safer option than tap water. The school budget for 1866 was detailed in the annual report for that year. The purchase of ‘Ale, Beer and Porter’ was the fourth highest item on the school’s list of expenses (£142) after meat, eggs, poultry and fish (£309),

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10 Annual reports, Liverpool Training School. LRO 614 INF/17/1.
washing (£165), and groceries, soap and candles (£147). Book expenditure was £4.\textsuperscript{11}

It is revealing that the careers of these early students lasted for such a short time in many cases. Table 2 reveals when and why their careers were cut short.

**TABLE 2: Reasons for termination. A question mark indicates an illegible entry.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nurse</th>
<th>Date of termination</th>
<th>Reason given for termination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EW</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td>‘Left in disgrace from a moral fault’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>‘Want of sobriety’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>1896 [sic]</td>
<td>‘Died’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JM</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>‘Not found to be morally reliable at all times. Broke some rules for months and told probationers not to speak of it to Lady Superintendent’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EG</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td>‘Her temper is not perfect but she has done much to improve it. Gets much attached to her cases. Died of typhoid fever.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>‘From want of education very difficult to manage…She was parted with for want of punctuality and impertinence’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT</td>
<td>No date</td>
<td>‘Very steady and clean. She is not very wise but always anxious to please. Gives satisfaction to medical men, though not always to Lady Superintendent. Left for an undoubted untruth and taking money from the friends of a patient,’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>‘A wonderfully steady and good nurse. Most quiet and unassuming. Has a great deal more in her than she appears to have. A great favourite with everybody. July 1867 MR left without notice and from curious reasons. Her Lady Superintendent has cause to believe not to pursue a virtuous life’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JW</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td>‘…passed her first year with a degree of credit but not without having frequent reproof for pride…at the end of her probation she left on a visit home and whilst she was away various little trifling acts of dishonesty came to my knowledge which prevented me making her a nurse. She then caught typhus fever and went home. I declined having her back.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td>‘Appointed district nurse 1865. Discharged Sept 1865 for breaking her engagements, having married and not ??? steady beliefs’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the seventeen students recruited between 1862 and 1863, at least eight were lost to the service in the first five years. The exposure to typhus and typhoid fever underlines the heroic aspect to hospital work in the 1860s. In 1865, Agnes Jones, another protégée of Miss Nightingale, lost her life leading

pioneer work in the Workhouse Infirmary in Liverpool during a typhoid outbreak.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{The school building}

Although the School for Nurses was established in 1862, the building was not opened until 1863. Until the building was ready and opened on hospital grounds, nurses were housed in a building at 58 Bedford Street South which was cleared in the twentieth century for the University of Liverpool campus. Pictures of the Infirmary in 1890 clearly depict the school (Figure 1). Although the Victorian architecture of the old Infirmary has been preserved, the School of Nursing has been demolished. Dodds discusses the phenomenon of the destruction of evidence of nursing history in the demolition of the built environment.\textsuperscript{13} In Liverpool’s case what may well have been the first provincial purpose built school of nursing, donated from the hand of William Rathbone himself, is now a car park (Figure 2).

Although described as a ‘school’ there is little in the layout of the building to suggest scholarly activity. The plans do not include a lecture room or even a classroom. There is a day room and a matron’s room standing at the entrance of the building suggesting as much a moral role for matron as an educational one. She could observe everything which happened in the school including the arrivals and departures. Describing the head of school as ‘Matron’ indicates that the distinction between nurse education and nursing practice was blurred from the outset. The “Organisation of Nursing” put it this way: ‘The lady superintendent of the school is also a matron of the hospital’.\textsuperscript{14} The physical proximity of the school to the hospital suggests anything but academic distance. School was home and home was school and both were hospital.

That the latter was the case is not a matter of inference. It was explicitly stated as an assumption in the “Organisation of Nursing”. The pamphlet makes the point that the school was the ‘absolute property of the infirmary’. This concept of a school of nursing had support from the highest of sources. Miss Nightingale herself made the point in a letter prefacing the booklet that ‘all those who wish to nurse efficiently must learn how to nurse in a hospital’.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} J Cosbie Ross, J Ross, \textit{A gifted touch: A biography of Agnes Jones} (Worthing, Churchman Publishing, 1988).
\textsuperscript{13} Op. cit., ref 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Op. cit., ref 2.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
Figure 1: The Royal Infirmary 1890. The School of Nursing is clearly visible in the top right section of the hospital estate, next to the boiler house.

**Nurse education and further education**

Nowhere in any of the texts is the issue of academic recognition of studies raised or even considered. The head of school is called Matron, not Principal or Headmistress or Professor. Connection with other educational structures does not seem to have been an issue for the pioneers of nurse education in Liverpool. To be fair, the structures of modern education were themselves still in development. The University of Liverpool had to wait for another twenty years to be established as a degree awarding entity. Academic recognition for nursing studies was not to be recognised as desirable for another hundred years in the UK, though in the United States it was addressed much earlier.

**The structure of the course in Liverpool**

Training nurses, responsible for the education of probationers, were given charge of some forty patients. Each training nurse was given a probationer to teach. The student nurse was given two months on a medical ward followed by two months on a surgical ward. If ‘sufficiently trained’ she was put in charge of a medical ward for four months followed by four months in charge of a surgical ward. In all the training lasted twelve months. After four months training the
nurses could be rotated on to night duties. When their training was complete they were kept on for three years and were assigned to duties in hospital, on the district, or in private nursing.

**Theoretical education**

It is difficult to guess from our day what the details of the nurses theoretical education consisted in. Certainly the informal curriculum that took place on the wards is difficult to recreate. Even the more formal taught sessions are not recorded from the schools first years. It is known that one Dr Inman gave lectures, and this work was taken up on his retirement by Mr Long FRCS, a consultant surgeon at the Infirmary. He started teaching nurses in 1866 and in 1878 published a collection of his lectures which were given between 1866 and 1873.\(^{16}\) These published records give some inkling as to what the probationers

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\(^{16}\) James Long. Lectures to Nurses. LRO H 610.73 Long.
were taught in this pioneer establishment. The contents of the lectures are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Contents of James Long’s *Lectures to Nurses* (LRO H 610.73 Long.).

The chapters are set out to introduce nurses to the concept of nursing. Miss Nightingale’s role in the formation of nursing is given full credit. Following this, various clinical techniques are described. In all there is what might be described as a systems approach to nurse education. Body systems are given separate attention with chapters relating to circulation, respiration and so on. Most of these general headings would be familiar to most modern nursing students. Closer examination however reveals the differences between the 1860s curriculum and a modern approach. The chapters on clinical technique, for instance, give detailed advice about practices which have long since
disappeared. Such techniques included leeching of patients and applying ‘blister therapy’ to them. The underpinning theory for leeching and blistering are not given, as though the writer assumed that the nurses would already be convinced of their efficacy. Indeed Mr Long is of the view that leeching had fallen out of favour unjustly: ‘Now they are rarely used … less frequently, I think, then they ought to be in some cases’.\(^{17}\)

The only considerations offered in relation to leeching are technical. Why they are used is less clear, as though it is assumed that everyone understood their purpose and function. Students were told that the leeches should be ‘lively’ and should be single use. There is no mention of haematoma evacuation or anticoagulation for instance, which modern nurses might recognise. Their use does not seem to have any local function. If their use was to deal with a local problem such as haematoma or abscess one might expect that the leech be put in the vicinity of the problem. But Mr Long specifically counsels against putting the leeches over an area that is too vascular. The sternum, the instep and behind the ear are the favoured sites. Where the puncture site refuses to stop bleeding Mr Long advocates the use of flour as a haemostatic agent. Failing that he advocates the use of a cobweb to stop the flow of blood or the fur from a beaver hat.

Whatever the source of Mr Long’s ideas on medicine, there is no sign in his lectures of anything we would regard as evidence. No references of any type are quoted in his collection. The closest the lectures come to a scientific approach is in the outline of anatomy and physiology. Evidence for his remedies is entirely anecdotal. The only ‘evidence’ that any of the treatments worked is derived from the seniority of the physicians who used them.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the early chapters of the book where techniques are outlined. In the chapter concerning ‘Poultices’ there are various recipes offered for poultices of differing types. The recipes combined ingredients such as bread, mustard and linseed oil. Recipes obtained from eminent physicians are described with strict instructions as to ingredients, temperature and application times with little or no reason offered for any item other than the eminence of the physician developed them. Douches, which were prescribed by Dr Radcliffe of Oxford, are regarded as so effective that Mr Long sent his patients all the way to Oxford to receive this therapy.

Mr Long’s first lectures are on the nature of nursing. It has to be said that, considering the youth of the nursing profession, Mr Long has some very firm ideas about what nursing is and what it is not. In common with the prevailing ideas of the time he took a gendered view of nursing: ‘Nursing is, however, the special province of women. They have a natural tendency to it’.\(^{18}\) He also took the view that there was a moral aspect of the practice of nursing.


By this he did not refer to the handling of difficult moral dilemmas arising from practice, but rather in detailing the moral qualities he regarded as essential in an aspiring nurse. Again, the tone of his discourse carries much certainty considering the youth of nursing as a discipline, though it is unlikely that many of his students disagreed with him: ‘Now what are some of the essential qualifications of a nurse? Gentleness, forbearance, painstaking patience, foresight and continuous attention’. He also advises his students to regard themselves: ‘Not as our servants but as fellow workers with us; you are in fact students as we all are’. He also advises his students to regard themselves: “Not as our servants but as fellow workers with us; you are in fact students as we all are”.

On matters of nursing proper, Long echoes the views of Miss Nightingale in asserting that the nurse’s first duty in caring for a sick person was to ‘nurse the room’. Emptiness and ventilation were key issues in the care of a sick person. To look at the room in which a sick person was cared for, he argued, might incline one to the view that: ‘Fresh air might be the greatest enemy we have’. Interestingly, Long attempts to define health in one of his lectures, describing it as: ‘the standard and natural condition of the living body’, adding that ‘it implies freedom from pain and sickness’.

Assessment of theory

There is nothing in the archive relating to how the theoretical aspects of the curriculum were assessed, if they were assessed at all. Nowhere in Long’s lectures is there any mention of examination or any other type of assessment aimed at the theoretical aspects of the curriculum.

Assessment in practice

The training of the student nurses in 1862 consisted of a twelve month cycle of duties on the wards of Liverpool Royal Infirmary. These duties were broken down between surgical and medical wards.

Monthly accounts of the pupils’ actions and progress were filled in a ledger (Figure 4). Although there is some reference to the skills acquired by the nurse it is notable that much of the assessment is aimed explicitly at moral aspects of the nurses bearing. The practical, skill based aspects of the assessment are somewhat basic. They include ‘sick cooking’ involving gruel and arrowroot. There is also the ‘cleanliness of utensils’.

Most of the assessment concentrates on the moral character of the probationer. Items such as ‘Sobriety’, ‘Honesty’ and ‘Trustworthiness’ point to an assessment which was as much intended to put distance between the new

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model nurse and her predecessor as any assessment of clinical skills. On 10 February 1866 the previous model of nurse was described in the ‘Porcupine’: ‘The old fashioned British nurse with her ignorance and her coarseness, her gin and her snuffbox’. If nurse training is a combination of knowledge, skills and attitude, the practice documentation of the 1860s seems to focus special emphasis on attitude.

Underlining this last point, the right hand side of the ledger is reserved for a miscellaneous column in which a summary of the probationer’s subsequent career is noted. On numerous occasions this is signed by MM. This is likely to be Mary Merryweather, the first matron of the school. She was a graduate of the first intake of the Nightingale school at St Thomas’ and came to Liverpool to head the school. Described as a ‘suffragist’, Mary Merryweather went on in the 1870s to be a member of the executive of The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts which united women from all over the country in opposition to the forcible treatment of women suspected of
being infected prostitutes.\textsuperscript{23} This organisation had been founded by, among others, Josephine Butler, also from Liverpool.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In reviewing the history and the curriculum of the Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School one is struck by the extent to which the landscape of nurse education has changed since the days of the Lady Superintendent and her probationers. It is rare in our day that nurses face the risk of contracting fatal diseases. In 1862 contracting typhus was an everyday risk as has been demonstrated from the above documents, but smallpox and typhoid were also present in the community.

One is also stuck by the similarities in the issues facing nurse education. How educated does a nurse need to be? How do we balance practice and theory, community and hospital, work discipline and personal autonomy? These were issues that taxed the pioneers and continue to tax us to this day.

Lastly, one is struck by regret that the building that housed the Royal Liverpool Infirmary Training School has been pulled down with little or no regard for its place in the history of the nursing profession in Britain. This was indeed an historic monument to nursing in the British provinces. It is a pity that so little evidence of its structure has been preserved to this day.

\textbf{Acknowledgement}

The author would like to express his gratitude to the archivists at the Liverpool Records Office (LRO) for their assistance in finding relevant materials from the archive, and to the LRO for permission to use copyrighted material.

\textsuperscript{23} Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Records of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. \url{http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/vcdf/detail?coll_id=10482&inst_id=65&nv1=search&nv2=basic}