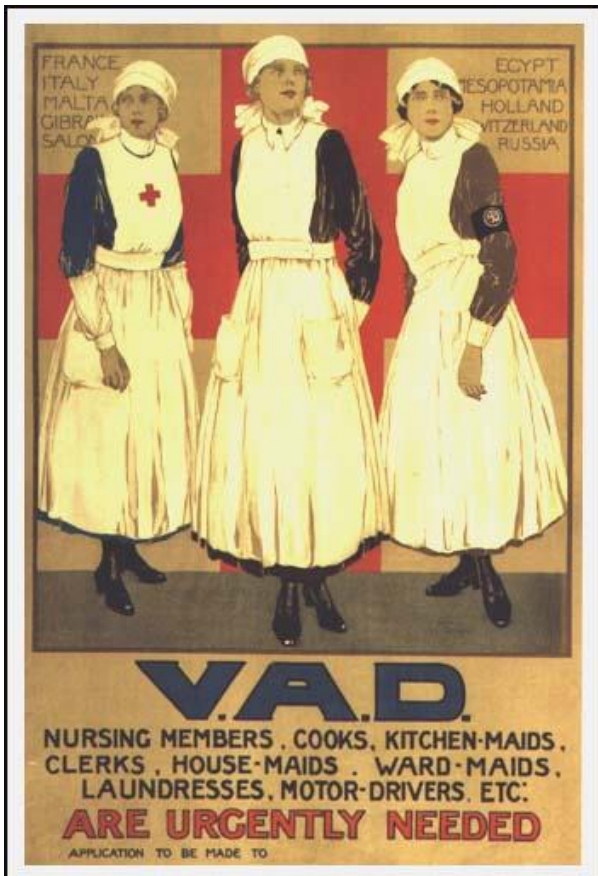


Bessie, Martha and Frankie – Three sisters at war time

Last month's article concerned the brothers Holden. This time I am writing about Bessie, Martha and Frankie Nottage. They were the daughters of Edward Charles (Charley) and Sarah (Sally) Nottage who from 1905 until 1943 were landlord and landlady at the Hand and Crown. Bessie, the oldest, was born in 1894. By the time of the 1911 census she was working as a scullery maid with the Cherry Gerrard family at the Lamer Park estate near Wheathampstead. (The son of that family, Apsley, had joined Scott of the Antarctic and wrote a book about that fateful expedition.) Martha, the second daughter was a court dressmaker in London in 1911. Frances Emily, the youngest was living with her parents at the Hand and Crown at the time of the 1911 census. The only boy and youngest of the family, Richard Charles, sadly died young at 13 in 1913.

All three Nottage sisters, joined the VAD, the Voluntary Aid Detachments, These were set up in 1909 but came into their own during the first world war. Members were commonly known as VADs. By 1914 there were 74,000 VADs, two-thirds of whom were women and girls. They worked as nurses, ambulance drivers and cooks. Most large towns had VAD hospitals. Bishops Stortford had two Harlow also had two. The driving force behind the VAD was a Katherine Furse. Accompanied by two fellow nurses she went to France in 1914 and set up a field hospital in Boulogne. Upon her return to the UK Mrs. Furse became Commander-in-Chief of the organisation. Initially military authorities were unwilling to accept help from women and accept VADs on the front-line. In 1915 however, this restriction was lifted and women volunteers over the age of twenty-three and with more than three months experience, were allowed to go to the Western Front, Mesopotamia and Gallipoli



A VAD recruitment poster



Martha Nottage in her VAD uniform

Bessie and Martha, the two older Nottage sisters, probably joined the VAD in 1916 or 1917. Frances Emily joined in 1918. Her age possibly prevented her from joining earlier. The girls went for training at the Canadian Bexhill VAD hospital (Cooden Beach) and later on were sent to Rouen in Northern France where they lived and worked at the 47th General Hospital of the British Expeditionary Force. Rouen is just inland from le Havre and some 100 kilometres South East of the Somme battlefields. It was on these battlefields, on 1st July 1916 that Johnny Holden died. Johnny was a friend of the family and a particular friend of young Frankie. In fact, a signed photograph of Frankie was amongst Johnny's possessions when he died. Frankie and Johnny were not officially engaged but it is generally thought that they were sweethearts. I would speculate that Johnny's death may very well have played a role in the girls' decision to volunteer for service in the VAD.



Staff at the Bexhill VAD hospital photographed in July 1918. It is very possible that Frankie Nottage is amongst the nurses in this picture.



A Canadian Hospital under canvas



**Staff at 47 General Hospital BEF at le Treport
Martha is on the front row on the left**

It is very likely however that the Nottage sisters did not just serve at Rouen but at a number of different VAD hospitals. One photo mentions le Treport, a place on the coast near Dieppe. As the sisters had received their training at a Canadian hospital, it is quite likely they served at least part of their time looking after wounded soldiers from that country. As for living quarters these, like some hospitals, were often situated in country houses. Bessie, in one of her postcards home complains of having to walk up 8 flights of stairs to reach her bed. Indeed, Bessie and Martha were faithful correspondents. Luckily quite a lot of that correspondence and a lot of period artefacts were kept by the family. Bessie's son Richard was a keen archivist. "Oh how we dream of walking down Hand lane to come and see all of you again" they wrote. Martha had a gentleman friend as well, a New Zealand soldier who wrote to her but who sadly died in action.

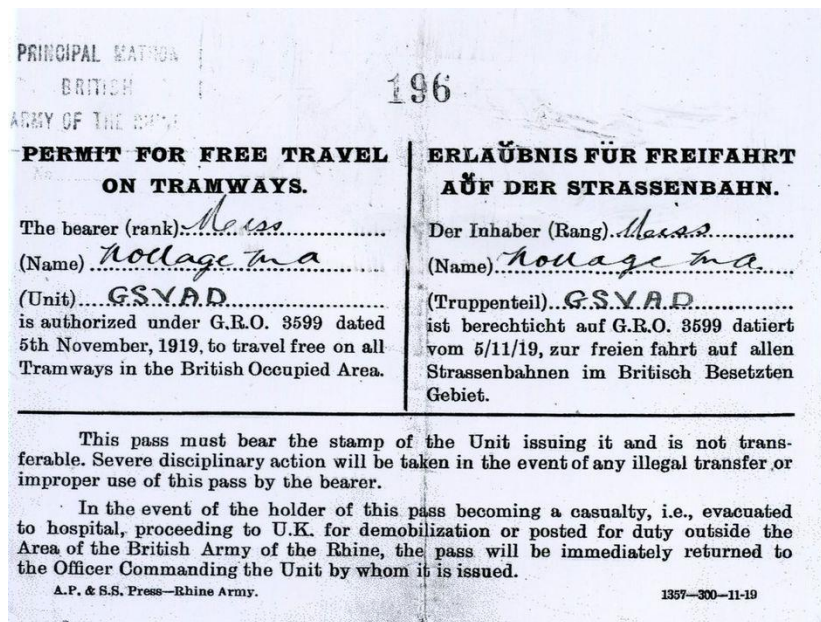


A postcard from "ANZAC Dave" to Martha



Martha's uniform armband

After the war ended Martha and Bessie stayed on for another year or two in Germany. They worked with the Army of the Rhine there and were based in Cologne. Upon return to civilian life Bessie decided she wanted to see a little bit more of the world. With her parents' blessing she duly sailed from Liverpool on HMS Empress of Britain in December 1920. In Canada she married a fellow passenger she had met on the boat. Bessie and her husband did not stay in Canada for long however. In 1925 they returned. Being rather poor though they registered their young son Richard as an infant rather than a child. Thus they saved on the cost of the passage back! Luckily nobody discovered this little white lie.



Army (and VAD) staff got free travel passes when they served in Germany!!



Martha's medals

Martha went on to exploit her talents as a seamstress and court dressmaker. I was shown a bespoke nurse's cape neatly decorated with many badges from various army regiments. She then went on to serve in the Red Cross until 1964 and was duly decorated. Bessie went on to serve in the ATS during the second world war and was a founder member of the British Legion in our area.

Frances Emily worked with her parents and became second in command to her mother as landlady at the Hand and Crown. From 1943 she took over the management of that pub. Wait for the history of that establishment in a future article.

Sources for this article were: Jeanette and Bill Fretton, Mrs. Sally Elkins, the 8th Canadian Field Ambulance photograph album Spartacus educal.com, scarletfinders.co.uk, and Wikipedia. Thanks also go to Eric Willison. Meanwhile, the High Wych History Project still needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468