

Stories of the Great War

Noel Playne 1887 - 1970

From the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 women played a major role in Britain's war effort. In the first months there was an advertising campaign encouraging wives and mothers to "*let the boys go*" to the Front. As more men were called to arms there was a shortage of labour in Britain and many women embarked on roles in industry, community service and agriculture unlike anything they had experienced before. Others eventually joined the services themselves and locally women made a major contribution to the home front.

In reminiscences of life in the C20th, reference was often made to the Red Cross Hospital which opened in Nailsworth during the Great War. The hospital was in Chestnut Hill, a private house loaned by Mr. Clissold which opened on 20th March 1915 and in the list of nurses that year there are several from Minchinhampton, among them the Misses C. & E. Beale and Miss N. Playne.

Noel Playne and Chrysogen Beale were already close friends and volunteered for service with the Red Cross for the war effort. Basil Playne, a brother just a year older than Noel, was a temporary surgeon with the Royal Navy and this might have been a factor in her choice of voluntary employment. Noel was the daughter of Edward and Frances Playne and lived at "Springfield" with her mother, who had been widowed in 1907. Kenneth Woolcombe-Boyce, whom Noel married after the war, was serving with the 18th Battalion Royal Fusiliers.

Holy Trinity Parish magazine printed appeals for help in the hospitals and Longfords House, home of her Playne cousins, became a depot for supplies to local and overseas Red Cross hospitals. Chestnut Hill was a "Class B" convalescent unit and mainly received cases from Stroud (Trinity Rooms) or Cirencester (Bingham Hall) Voluntary Aid Detachment Hospitals. The hospital had 25 beds, under the control of the commandant, Mrs. Wilson. Every week hampers of food were collected at the Gables on Well Hill and sent to the wounded in Nailsworth. Local school children also collected for this cause and the Sunday school gave up their prizes with the money being used to buy comforts for the troops. However, Noel's daughter later recalled that her mother's main memory of the Red Cross was of emptying bedpans and scrubbing rubber sheets!

Perhaps it was this that led Noel to change the war work she undertook, for by 1916 she was making shell cases at the Phoenix Foundry in Thrupp, alongside some other friends, sisters Gladys and Winnie Fitch from Besbury. Kenneth had served most of the war in France and was mentioned in dispatches in 1918, finally leaving the army in 1919. He and Noel were married in Holy Trinity on 18th May 1920, setting up home together at "Christowe" on Windmill Road. For many other women who worked, either in the V.A. hospitals or armaments factories, there was no such happy ending to their war stories.