

## NURSE FLO, MISS FLORENCE SMITH a RETIRED NURSE, IS INTERVIEWED

Miss Florence Smith, a District Nurse, known to many people in Buckie at one time simply as Nurse Flo was interviewed at her home 9 Craigenroan Place, Portessie in July 1988. The two interviewers were trainees on 'Work Experience' from the Balloch Trust. The work was carried out on behalf of Buckie District Fishing Heritage Society. In June 2003, Allan Fraser, secretary of the Heritage Museum the name having been changed some years later, copied the transcript on to a floppy disc so as to be accessible by computer.

"I was at Findochty and Buckie High School and when I left I was too young to go in for nursing I went to work at Portsoy Fever Hospital. I was there for two years. While I was there the disease diphtheria and scarlet fever were rife in the area from Gamrie to Portgordon and also at that time there were two cases with cerebral spinal meningitis that both died. In 1948 there was an outbreak of typhoid in the Buckie area with 48 cases two of whom died from the disease. There was no return cases although in Main Street, Buckpool there was hardly any modern conveniences and it is a great credit to think that in Aberdeen there was so many return cases yet in the small area in question there was none."

*"How would they have treated the cases?"*

"Oh well, first of all the people who had cases of typhoid, they'd no conveniences therefore they boiled their clothes. They used chloride of lime and they were asked to use chloride of lime in the stools before they were disposed of. The treatment in hospital was sponging; patients had very high temperatures and were receiving treatment for bedsores. They had to have three consecutive negative specimens before they were allowed to be discharged from hospital. The source of the outbreak was traced to a small burn near the Rochomie Reservoir. Nearby there was a small cottage and the lady who lived there had been putting her excreta into this burn. Typhoid cases surprisingly were only found in Main Street, Buckpool with one case in lower Portessie.

After leaving Portsoy I did my general training at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle on Tyne where I spent four years. I did my orthopaedic training during this time, which took one year. Then I came to Dundee and did my midwifery at Dundee Royal Infirmary and from there I went to the Queen's Institute of District Nursing. Unfortunately I lifted a heavy patient and was a year off my work before I got a job as a Health Visitor, part-time to start, with Banff County Council and later I was employed full-time. My work entailed looking after babies, expectant mothers and school children. I had a clinic in Buckie High School once weekly and I did Portessie as well. I also did, in the earlier days, school inspections with the Medical Officer of Health all around the county."

*"What about some of the cases and the maternity side of it?"*

"Things were very hard during my nursing career. I had to use a bicycle and then I did Cullen, Portknockie and Buckie, but when I was doing Portknockie and Cullen I had to use the bus. I went there once a week. Later on I was provided with a car. I had to help everybody, not always planned, many a time I was called in off the street to deliver a baby, just while I was there. I remember once being standing at the bus stop along with others waiting for a bus to Buckie and the clinic when somebody putted me on the shoulder. They asked that I come with them. I went to the house delivered the baby and then I caught the bus to Buckie. Nobody knew that I'd just delivered a baby, it was a quick delivery. I've had a few quick deliveries in my time but that was one of the quickest.

The ambulance service was run by the Town Council, people had to pay for an ambulance in my young day and we had the job of collecting the money from people who couldn't pay. Now that's gone now, thank goodness. The nursing here was very heavy, sometimes I was never in my bed at night being called out here in Portessie, steadily, they just called me out even though I was the Health Visitor. I was called out to anything, including stroke patients who were very heavy to lift. I remember when there was a big epidemic of influenza here and penicillin was introduced and was used for the first time. It fairly helped to bring the 'flu under control. I remember the first case of penicillin was 450 units now it's almost millions of units for the same treatment."

*"If any of the patients couldn't pay for a doctor what happened?"*

"Well I'll just tell you this. Many a time you see, they had to pay for a doctor, it was three and sixpence and during the earlier part of my time fishing was so bad that the men had to work on the road, some of them got no broo (Unemployment Benefit) if they had a boat, but they were very honest and owned up. There was a doctor here, Dr Hendry who many a time didn't put in an account. Now that's true and he helped a gye lot of fowk that nobody knew anything about. That was Dr Eric's father, old Dr Hendry. I mean times you see were hard then. I know myself we had to sell the house, rather than have debt in the boat. My father had the 'Campania' and he went into the pacts for discount with a man who just robbed him right left and centre. That's that house in Strathlene Road, Campbell hid it. Now he robbed him with the result that we didna want any debts and my father was well enough off but they sold the house you see. And yi see nowadays people are getting too much money and they're not appreciating it. They didna get grants for the boats then they hid tae buy their boats.

Now about the nursing, as I say, things were very heavy I mean yi hid a lot o' work to do. Yi hid tae go many a time yi hid tae go oot at night and there was only two District Nurses in Buckie and I was the Health Visitor. Now they've got sixteen or eighteen you know. The work was varied. Then we hid TB there was a TB survey and I organised that. All the fishermen were done and we had the thing at Buckie harbour and it was surprising

how many cases were discovered. With the introduction of penicillin for pneumonia cases and that and other infections has fairly helped. It has reduced the number of deaths, because there was quite a number of deaths. For children the immunisation for diphtheria and for poliomyelitis. Now I did a survey of nearly all the fishermen in the area, ell most of them came over to my house. On Sunday night I had a clinic here and we did the fishermen and anybody over 18. We gave them injections for polio. Injections of one kind or another has greatly reduced the incidence of diseases. You rarely hear of cases of diphtheria now or scarlet fever and if you do the attack is likely to be mild. Injections were brought in for whooping cough of course, there is a doubt, you know what I mean, some people don't agree with immunisation for whooping cough but it has really helped because many a child died with whooping cough. So to my mind it was a good thing."

*"Did you hae onything tae dee wi the mobile X-ray units?"*

"Well it was me, yes. We had the X-ray unit in a big van and we discovered quite a lot on the mobile X-ray unit. They also did a survey for diabetes. Dr Lawrence, Bill Lawrence and that's the way we saw that the fishermen all got tested. It was an awful lot of work, sitting here and writing out little pots. Jimmy McRae gave me the number of boats, a' the boat's names and I hid tae get the numbers o' the crews on each ane and I hid a plastic bag WI' the pots. Things have changed now, I mean, most confinements were done at home prior to 1948 and the start of the National Health Service."

*"What would the lighting have been like in the house? Would it have been gas?"*

"Well we hid gas bit in Deskford it wis hurricane lamp and they were known to go out at a delivery. But we managed; yi jist hid tae boil yer things on a pot on the fire. See in the country areas, the cottages hid nae loos or anything like that. "

*"It must have been very hard especially going on you bike to all those places."*

"Well of course I didna do the maternity. I only did relief to the district nurse when she was off. I did Portgordon when she was off. I was pulled off the street many a time. But then as time went on I mean things began to improve and I got another Health Visitor who shared the work and it wisna sae bad. Things have changed greatly now the nurses have their hours, better pay if I had the pay that they have now I would have a new car I can tell you. I got nothing for three months when I started nursing, not in Portsoy but in Newcastle, nothing for three months then I got fourteen shillings a month. You got that three months at fourteen shillings a month added on when you left. You had to pay for your exams and the uniform. It cost over £100 for my uniform, that's right, so they're well off now only they dinna realise that they're well off. Of course I could never do it now this modern technology you know, I mean, nae at my age. I do agree to give that people with higher technology a better pay but they don't always get this. This also applied in my day; great differences existed within the nursing profession. I was chairman of the College of Nursing for Banffshire and I remember a discrepancy that existed then. A SEN (State Enrolled Nurse) was getting more than a fully trained nurse was, a general trained nurse was. It didna give the nurses the initiative to go and do their training. But I mean that's changed now. Dr Buchannan MOH for Banffshire introduced a the register of old people in the county and that was another thing that was done. There was also a paratyphoid outbreak in Portknockie but they traced the carrier. It was awfully funny because workmen from Ireland were working on a farm nearby laying pipes in a field and there were cattle there. Now we went to get specimens from everybody we'd to collect specimens with the result that I got one specimen from this workman but the other workman was so quick in giving me a specimen that I was very suspicious. . It was an outside toilet and before the women had changed it, you know. I thought that's affy queer and that was the carrier. Then there was a typhoid epidemic in Aberdeen. Well it was here that we did all the men, fishermen, tested them here.2

*"When you collected the stools from the fishermen or anybody, there wouldn't have been laboratories then, would there?"*

"Yes in Aberdeen. You had either to post them or if there was a large amount as during the typhoid outbreak in Aberdeen I used to go in the car with them."

*"How long did it take for the result to come through?"*

"It took a few days. That's the typhoid, diphtheria etc. You had to provide three negative specimens."

*"How many hours do you think you put in day?"*

"Well about fourteen anyway, fourteen hours."

*"I suppose you'd have been working over Christmas as well?"*

"Yes. I was three years without a holiday."

*"You must have been exhausted."*

"It was exhausting, yes. Just a day off now and again."

*"Of course there wouldn't have been very many antibiotics then, would there?"*

No. I mean as I've said the first case of penicillin in Buckie I think it was 450 units, something like that, it was certainly under a thousand and it was an elderly lady and it came from Aberdeen City Hospital. That was the first case."

*"I think Dr Hendry said there was only about five antibiotics at that particular time."*

"Yes there was penicillin, you see, with pneumonia cases, you had to sponge them that was the treatment, and the same with the fever bit now with antibiotics you don't need that. See the same with going into hospital for operations you get up with stroke patients now, its greatly improved because they're no longer kept in their bed, they're made mobile. Physiotherapists do a great job. People had to pay for their maternity too, oh yes, but I

mean but not the nurses, paid the doctor but the doctors worked long hours I would say. They were on call night and day. I mean it was all very well perhaps in the days of summer but I remember 1947 with the amount of snow we got here. There were no roads to Cullen. There was a car submerged in the brae here, the Strathlene Brae and the only way we could get access was on the railway line and we had to walk through snow so deep – about this depth. To go to Deskford you had to get a snowplough. So they hinna that now.”

*“What were the ambulances like then?”*

“There was no heating in the ambulances. It was hot water bags. The ambulance was run by the Town Council. There was no heating, no, nom, and only one ambulance driver. Oh yes, you’d to lift the patients as well.”

*“When you were doing the schools were there any interesting cases?”*

“Well its awfully funny. There’s a little boy, the teacher took him out for the bathroom maybe every so often, less than half an hour and he says, ‘I’m nae gan wi’ a wifie tae see me peeing.’ I says, ‘Yi’re nae gan WI’ a wifie, that’s the teacher’ and I says, she stands at the door.’ ‘I’m nae gan WI a wifie’, he says. I say, ‘Come away now’. He says, ‘I’ll ging wi’ you bit I’m nae gan wi a wifie.’ I’ve a cartoon; a lady did a cartoon for me showing me, a teacher and a loonie on the toilet. Oh aye we hid some rare times.”

*“Can you describe the changes you have seen in forty years of nursing in the Buckie and Banff area?”*

“There are so many things to relate, but I have been given a very short time to do this. Before I started doing my General training I spent two years at Campbell Hospital, Portsoy. There were 48 cases of typhoid in one area of Buckie. Scarlet fever and diphtheria were rife but with the introduction of Antitoxin you hardly see any cases now. TB has been reduced greatly as a result of the Mobile Unit. Whooping cough caused many deaths but now children are immunised against Diphtheria, Whooping Cough, Poliomyelitis and Tetanus and all children are TB tested at school and all girls are given measles vaccinations at 13 years of age. I did weekly visits to school. I had a clinic in my house on Sunday night giving fishermen and people over school age polio vaccinations. I was the only Health Visitor who also assisted the District Nurse but in 1948 all the district Nurses were taken over by the County. Work was very hard, sometimes night and day and all confinements were done at home. Pneumonia and stroke patients required heavy lifting but now with the introduction of penicillin pneumonia cases are now treated with drugs. Stroke patients are now made mobile if possible. I had to use a bicycle on my rounds. A diabetic survey was carried out by the Deputy Medical Officer and the District Nursing Staff in Buckie. I had the job of seeing that all fishermen were done and that entailed quite a lot of work. Each boat was issued with a plastic bag containing specimen pots for all the crew. The Buckie boats came in and at the wheel was this handsome skipper full of zeal. The nurse asked him to perform an act he’d done since he was born but to his spouse, beside the nurse he shouted loudly, ‘What, from here?’

Water; water everywhere, now a bloated bladder shrink, water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.

I was called out one night to a man who was ill and when I saw him I sent for the doctor. The doctor came, examined the man and the wife said the doctor, ‘Is he deed, is he deed?’ The doctor didn’t reply but he didn’t know that he gave his head a nod and she went into a panic and said what would she do without him. A whispering voice from the dead said, ‘Maggie, I’m nae deed.’ Wheest, John’ said the wife, ‘the doctor kens best.’

The doctors are now in partnership together. So now you see when to the doctor you should go, whom you get you do not know. Dr Who?

There is now a Health Clinic with a large staff. I’m so pleased that they are getting better off duty, better pay and each one have a car. So spare a thought for the elderly nurses who had to do the heavy work and for very little pay and I for one is now a disabled person, Nurse Floe.”