

Isla Stewart – One of nursing's true champions

To Isla Stewart, being matron of Barts meant she held the biggest job in the nursing world. Yet her fight to modernise the profession to which she dedicated her life extended far beyond the walls of the hospital she loved.

Today, we'd describe Isla Stewart as a high-flyer. Practical, tough, ambitious yet caring and progressive, she was a woman ahead of her time, keen to grab the opportunities that came her way in 19th-century Britain.

Imagine, then, her excitement, as she wrote to her mother in 1887 that: "The biggest appointment in the nursing world is vacant, and I am going to have a try for it."

The post in question was matron of Barts – and Isla triumphed, beginning a career dedicated to winning recognition – and registration – for nurses.

Born in Scotland in 1855, Stewart trained at the Nightingale School at St Thomas's Hospital, and was made sister after only nine months as a probationer. By 1885, she was matron of the emergency smallpox camp run by the Metropolitan Asylums Board in Darenth, Kent and, a year later, became matron of the Homerton Fever Hospital in east London.

Long campaign

When she won her dream job at Barts, Stewart succeeded Ethel Bedford-Fenwick (formerly Ethel Gordon Manson) – herself a nursing pioneer and a woman who became a close ally in the long campaign for state registered nursing.

As Barts' new matron, Isla Stewart advocated practical experience on the wards for her nurses,

who faced 14-hour days. "Nurses go on duty at 7am," she declared to *Murray's Magazine* in 1890, "and for the next three hours they work really hard, making beds, scrubbing lockers, sweeping, polishing, dusting and doing the hundred and one things that produce that air of comfort and cleanliness so characteristic of a well-kept hospital."

Although always a firm believer in ward experience over theory, Stewart built on Mrs Bedford-Fenwick's three-year nurse training programme, issuing new regulations, including a 23-35 age limit for probationers, an entry exam,

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trial period and further exams at the end of their first and third training years. Starting salaries were £2 a quarter in the first year, rising to £5 quarterly in the third year, with a hospital certificate and staff nurse post for a year at the end.

Stewart founded one of nursing's first professional bodies, the Matrons' Council, in 1894, and, five years later, set up the International Council of Nurses (she was a pioneer of international co-operation) and then the League Of St Bartholomew's Nurses, designed to promote high standards and provide social and financial support for members.

Progressive nursing

With Mrs Bedford-Fenwick, she continued to step up the campaign for state nurse registration, firmly establishing Barts' worldwide reputation for the quality of its progressive nursing.

Isla loved Barts and once wrote, that: "There is no life, I think, happier than that of a nurse in a hospital to which a medical school is attached. The interest in the work is so acute, the life around so changing"

Isla Stewart died in 1910. Her obituary in the *British Medical Journal* in March that year read "Naturally tolerant, generous, kindly and peace-loving, she always stood firm where vital principles were involved and placed the welfare of the cause she had so much at heart above all personal considerations."

Nurses, she said, were hard-working women who slept soundly and ate heartily. In hard-working, independent and inspirational Isla Stewart, the nursing profession found one of its true champions.



Nurses' memories on DVD

"All the people coming in were ageless because they were all covered with grey ash from buildings being burned down," remembers former nurse Kay Erskine (who qualified in 1939), of wartime Barts. The memories of 45 members of the League of St Bartholomew's Nurses, ranging from those who qualified in 1939 to the 1980s, now form part of a unique oral history DVD and slide show – Barts Nurses Remember – covering themes such as WWII, wards, nurses homes, uniforms and education. The DVD is available for £12 online at www.bartsleagueofnurses.org.