

Ethel Gordon Manson

True founder of modern nursing

Her journey from matron of Barts at the tender age of 24 to relentless campaigner for the professional status of nurses, means Ethel Gordon Manson can truly be described as the founder of modern nursing.

Ask the person on the street today who founded modern nursing, and you'll more than likely be told 'Florence Nightingale'. Yet the first name on the world's first nursing register, set up in Britain in 1919, belongs to Ethel Gordon Manson (or Bedford Fenwick as she became on marriage).

This formidable woman, was to spend 30 years campaigning for nationally recognised, standardised qualifications for nursing and for a state register of nurses.

That she succeeded was a tribute to both her far-sightedness and tenacity, as among her opponents at the time was that most famous of nurses, Florence Nightingale, along with many doctors, who were against the 'professionalisation' of nursing.

Born in 1857 into a wealthy, cultured family, and raised near Nottingham, nursing was not regarded as a first choice occupation for a young lady like Ethel. Yet she appears to have been determined to pursue this path from an early age and, at 21, entered training as a pay probationer nurse at Nottingham Children's Hospital. She left soon after for London, working at Whitechapel and Richmond, before arriving at Barts in 1881, almost certainly the hospital's youngest ever matron.

Too young – and too attractive

Her appointment was not without controversy – some of the senior medical staff objected on the grounds that she was too young – and too attractive. None of this stood in her way. In the eyes of one observer, Miss Manson 'swept through the hospital like a whirlwind', instituting reforms that were to change the course and status of nursing forever.

She improved training and working conditions; became the first matron to help mark nurses examinations (previously the preserve of doctors); recruited trainee nurses from a wider social and geographical sphere than before and introduced



special probationers – ladies of 'superior' class who could train for three months on payment of a fee.

In 1882, she extended nurse training at Barts to three years and in 1886, she founded the Trained Nurses Institute, designed to give middle-class people access to Barts-trained nurses on payment of an appropriate fee.

Uniforms were introduced for sisters and all nurses began to wear caps of a standard design.

She also introduced blue and white material for the dresses of certified nurses and probationers in their second and third years.

Forced by the convention of the day to resign her post as Barts' matron when she married Dr Bedford Fenwick in 1887, Ethel had already revolutionised nursing at Barts, and her fight to improve the status of the profession had only just begun.

A woman to do business with

As part of her ongoing campaign, she founded the *British Journal of Nursing* in 1893 – editing it from 1903 until 1946 – using it to press home her views on the professional status of nurses. She helped form the British Nurses Association and, in 1899, was instrumental in founding the International Congress of Nurses, becoming its president for the first five years. At the opening conference, she stated: "I venture to contend that the work of nursing is one of humanity all the world over."

Yet her struggle for the three key planks of professional nursing – three-year, standardised training, a nursing register and a General Council of Nurses, all supported by an Act of Parliament – took 30 years and review by five Government select committees before it became law in 1919. As Mrs Bedford Fenwick, she was able to witness the passing of the act from the Public Gallery of the House of Commons.

Along the way, Ethel proved herself equal to the establishment figures she encountered. She did not suffer fools gladly and, as Lord Inman recalled in his autobiography: "Mrs Bedford Fenwick was a woman with whom it was possible to do business on terms of complete subservience."

But she never faltered, working tirelessly to promote higher standards of professionalism within nursing until her death in 1947 at the age of 90. Today's nurses owe this determined moderniser a huge debt of gratitude.

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