

Honouring the nurses of two world wars

THE suggestion there should be a memorial for all nurses of both World Wars was first raised two years before the start of the Great War commemorations.

The Nursing Memorial Appeal to raise funds for a memorial was launched four years ago, intending to raise around £50,000. The next stage of the fundraising, to cover the maintenance of the memorial and cost of the site at the National Memorial Arboretum (NMA) in Staffordshire, is ongoing.

Although there are several individual memorials across the country, and some for specific groups at the NMA, there is not one for all nurses. The memorial unveiled at the NMA on 4th June, 2018, honours professional nurses who worked in Casualty Clearing Stations or on hospital trains and ships, and also the unpaid volunteers serving near the front line with the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs).

Possibly the most well known VAD nurse is **Vera Brittain**, born in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. Her recollections as

Earlier this summer RICHARD PURSEHOUSE attended the unveiling of a memorial to the nurses of two world wars

a nurse and losing the men closest to her (fiancé, brother, friends) were published in *Testament of Youth*.

Many Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses had little or no nursing experience but were motivated – they wanted to “do their bit.” Some were inspired by the work of **Lady Ampthill**, who during the Great War had been the Chairman of the Committee for Supplying Comforts to the Regular Bedfordshire Battalion.

Experiences

After the Great War many nurses came back to a life very different from the one they had left, their experiences changing them forever. Lady Ampthill began the VADs Ladies Club, for those returning to have somewhere to share their experiences.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a term that became mainstream during the Vietnam War,

had been described in WWI and WWII in various terms – shell-shock, battle fatigue, or almost euphemistically ‘exhaustion’. Nurses were just expected to “move on” as the soldiers had experienced much worse, the reasoning being mental scars were not as deep as the physical ones.

Designed by sculptor **Georgie Welch**, the memorial has two parts: a sandstone globe measuring one metre in diameter, which rests inside two upwardly-pointing bronze hands sculpted by Georgie (her own hands being the template). The globe was painstakingly engraved by stonemason

Nick Johnson; the land-masses are surrounded by a ‘sea of names’ of British, Dominion, Commonwealth and American nurses and VADs who died during both world wars. So far 1,244 names have been included on the memorial, which is expected to increase to around 1,700 names as the



Margaret Brealey, the Countess of Wessex, Ethel Lote and Major Salt at the unveiling

story about the memorial gains exposure.

It has been difficult to establish the exact number of nurses who died, due to difficulties in finding records. As new information is provided on other nurses, their names will be added to the list and the memorial will be

amended. Around the base is the inscription, “As stars in the dark sky they lit up our world” and space for more names to be incorporated.

Barbara Hallows, chair of the Nursing Memorial Appeal, explained the globe represented where these nurses came from,

served and died, on land and sea; “Quite a few of the nurses who died were torpedoed when on hospital ships.”

Barbara Hallows qualified as a nurse in 1951, trained at Middlesex Hospital and worked as a health visitor for many years in Essex. She wanted

to get involved when she first heard about the idea for a memorial to all nurses: “We’re used to seeing war graves set up for the soldiers who have died, but there’s no talk about the nurses and I thought that the relatives of nurses should also have somewhere they could



Sculptor Georgie Welch and stonemason Nick Johnson



Former WWII nurse Ethel Lote, aged 97, from Aldridge, meets Sophie, Countess of Wessex

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