

Viewpoint

The Royal College of Nursing: Foundation and Celebration

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The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is a professional association and trade union for nurses and health-care workers. Our archive staff and collections are based in Edinburgh and are accessible for research. The RCN celebrated its centenary in 2016 and this article describes what it was like for the archive team and how our collections were utilised.

To set the scene: back in 2013 the RCN Library and Archive Service underwent a management restructure. Our Library and Heritage Centre at RCN headquarters at 20 Cavendish Square in London received a facelift, which included an entire floor shared between exhibition space and a café. Part of this process was the very swift and targeted creation and implementation of an Audience Engagement Plan and the appointment of a Centenary Project Board. This provided an additional 1½ library staff in London who would help to create an exhibition and events in our main library space, and a Centenary Programme Co-ordinator in our Communications Department in charge of the Centenary Project Board's budget.

Of particular relevance to staff working in the archive and library special collection teams was how the collections would be used, what sort of events would happen and how our past would be represented. We were delighted that even staff from other teams would be facing in the same direction when it came to the RCN's history, but unsure how this was going to work.

First though, a brief historical context for our activities so you can judge if we represented the history well. In the early twentieth century there were professional nurses, trained and working in the UK's hospitals, clinics and private homes, and in the community as district nurses. The traditional hospital hierarchy consisted of the matron with her administrative support, the lady superintendents or assistant matrons and then the nursing sisters below them. The sisters ran the ward using staff nurses who were qualified, and also probationers who were students at various stages of their training, each for different tasks and trained to the hospital's own requirements.

There was no standardised education for nurses in the UK and no registration of qualified nurses. Very little information would have been available about the available nursing workforce, not helped by the widespread use of the term 'nurse'; it would have been hard to know if you were employing

a fully qualified nurse and whether or not that qualification was appropriate. Patient protection was a motivation for Victorian philanthropists such as Sir Henry Burdett, who published his own *Nursing Directory*¹ in the late 1890s, but a more comprehensive approach was needed.

Several small nursing associations existed from the 1880s onwards, some with the aim of changing the professional nursing landscape, but none had the numbers and support needed to influence the government. An early unsuccessful attempt at state-sponsored registration of nurses was made by Mrs Ethel Fenwick, leader of several of these associations. Fenwick had many of the matrons of significant municipal hospitals on her side, but did not have enough support from ordinary nurses or the committees which ran the hospitals.

The College of Nursing founders were Sarah Swift, long-standing matron of Guy's Hospital and later made a dame in 1919 in recognition of her wartime service, and Sir Arthur Stanley, Conservative MP for Ormskirk from 1898 to 1918. Stanley was also Chair of the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St John, which from 1909 had been training volunteers in triage for casualties. With the beginning of the First World War this stepped up a level to help staff at the 3,000 different military and emergency hospitals, casualty clearing stations, auxiliary and temporary facilities that were set up during the war across Britain and Northern Ireland, and in Europe.

Military nursing services were established from the 1880s onwards, but there were not enough full-time military nurses to meet the wartime need, Royal Army Medical Corps and orderlies notwithstanding. Many qualified nurses were in fact military reservists, but more nurses and other staff were required.

Sarah Swift, described by biographer Susan McGann as 'a supreme organiser', was put in charge of the Nursing Division of the Joint War Committee.² Swift was responsible for the distribution of the nursing and volunteer workforce during the war, and discovered that having no definitive list of qualified nurses was a major hindrance to getting this done. She and Stanley worked closely on this issue and resolved to establish a College of Nursing to maintain a register of qualified nurses for the future. Having had personal experience of trying to find qualified nurses for private care, Stanley understood the problem wasn't just about wartime nursing.

Nurses worked alongside volunteers trained in first aid and were glad of the help, but not so pleased to have their professional qualifications ignored when any woman wearing a uniform and apron was referred to as 'nurse' by the wounded and medical staff alike. Whether they resented the volunteers or not, qualified nurses became thoughtful about their own position and future employment, and from 1916 they joined the College in their thousands to protect their professional status. This was the ground support that had

¹ Sir H. Burdett, *Burdett's Official Nursing Directory* (London, 1897–1902).

² S. McGann, *The Battle of the Nurses: A Study of Eight Women who Influenced the Development of Professional Nursing, 1880–1930* (London, 1992).

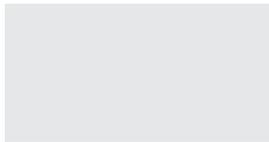


Plate 1 RCN100 logo created for the centenary year.

previously been missing for the push towards legal registration, a definition of the role of the 'nurse' and the establishment of an educational bar.

So how was this celebrated 100 years on? The RCN centenary film³ is something that took us a long time to complete. From the extensive use of archive photographs, to badges, and to the story of our Coat of Arms, the film provides three minutes packed with nursing history. One small update to the 425,000 members quoted in the film, our membership figures are now over 435,000⁴ and a long way from the initial 34 members we started with.

The new Centenary Programme Co-ordinator was a long-standing member of our communications staff who knew how to use archival material to its best advantage. She held the main centenary budget for every activity to do with the celebrations and, aside from major events such as the centenary research conference and a historical showing at our annual Congress, she set about investing in a range of marketable goods. We helped with the designs for all of these items: jewellery based on silver buckles, as well as notelets and badges (Plate 1). No matter how big a programme you plan, people will want souvenirs.

Back by popular and very insistent demand was a special centenary badge. This was deliberately based on the original sterling silver design from 1920, though with gold to represent the centenary and with the emblems of the four nations of the UK. The background is more of a royal than the navy blue of the original, simply to make it 'pop'.

But it wasn't just about marketing, it was more about engagement. And our members really enjoyed participating. We have had constant requests for the centenary film, images and local information, and for our new handling collections (which come with a free library assistant) for events and helping local partners in setting up their own publications, events and exhibitions. For Nurses' Day⁵ in 2017 we had a public lecture and specially printed bunting and other items available for RCN members.

The RCN set up a new website to celebrate 'RCN100' and also to host the new resources that the communications and archive teams were

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLoix_B4CU0I-k_U37dJ8TaNKk01UFHyfK&time_continue=2&v=0wLZ_YQPhjM

⁴ Membership as at December 2018.

⁵ An annual commemoration of the birth of Florence Nightingale on 12 May.

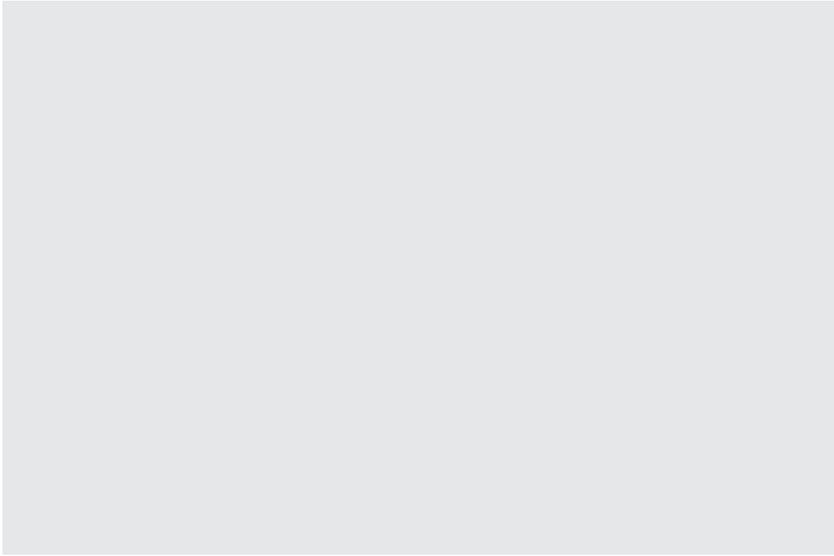


Plate 2 Exhibition at RCN headquarters created to record and promote the achievements of past RCN presidents, opened at the launch of the centenary year celebrations and simultaneously published online.

creating.⁶ There was also a lot posted on various RCN social media such as #RCNLibraries. Having researched a timeline for the history of the College, we had to ensure we could source images for all of the milestones we wanted to include, that it was succinct but accurate, and encompassed all of the different aspects of today's membership and their interests. Fortunately we had help to upload the timeline to the web server.⁷ We also contributed to a mental health nursing timeline and a variety of other web-based historical embellishments to the RCN100 web pages. Most of the material for this came from the special collections and the archive collections of the RCN library.

The RCN presidents were crucial to celebrating our 100th year. This honorary post is held by elected members of the College but, sadly for us, nobody knew who they were from the anonymous-looking portraits that hung on the walls of our headquarters. During 2013 we researched these ladies and wrote up short biographies for them, the information from which would later be used to create a wall in January 2016 (Plate 2) and also a web page.⁸ We

⁶ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/centenary>

⁷ <https://edu.hstry.co/timeline/the-royal-college-of-nursing>

⁸ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/centenary/projects/presidents-exhibition>

used quotations from their work, images from the collections and wider online resources to find out what we could and bring it all together.

These amazing women (sorry, no gentlemen have yet held the post) are now well recognised and have appeared in numerous publications and presentations as members claimed and celebrated their new nursing heroes. It is nice to be able to name a famous nurse besides Florence Nightingale.

Based on a 1930s design from the archive, a banner was created by The Townswomen's Guild (TWG). The call for such a banner had come from General Secretary Janet Davies, with the design chosen by President Cecilia Anim in collaboration with the ladies of the TWG. It was officially presented by the TWG as a gift to the RCN in January 2016, at an event which also launched our film, exhibition and other centenary activities. The banner has since been transported to events all over the UK, where members have responded well to it. Interestingly, the College has never had its own banner and this seems to have filled a very real physical gap, most noticeably at the RCN Congress in Glasgow in June 2016, an event for 6,000 member delegates where members queued up for photographs.

Another successful Congress exhibit was the nurse built entirely from Lego for charity during the event and named 'Poppy' by our members. It was based on the banner design but given a modern interpretation with the nurse wearing scrubs. One thing was missing from Poppy at Congress: her RCN badge. And yes, our members did notice!

Working with the library's audience engagement team and designers, the centenary exhibition was installed in December 2015 and was also published online.⁹ The exhibition had to be in place by January 2016 and remained in situ until January 2019. The main sections of the exhibition are 'Then', 'How', 'Who', 'What' and 'Now', and, as the exhibition curator hired in 2015 moved to another job well before the launch, it was up to the audience engagement and archive teams to pull together and make it all happen.

We had a big job on our hands to create an installation showing a map of UK nursing badges. These much-loved items are not a cataloguing backlog priority but we just had to include them even as we faced the inevitable selection process, and it was a bit of a scramble to organise once it was confirmed that this would be a part of the exhibition. Bar a couple of badges specially purchased, all of the remaining items, images and information came from our own archives and resulted in a map installation about five feet tall which contained just under 500 badges. Members come in and ask, 'Where is my badge?' And no, the map doesn't contain every badge design created – we don't yet have examples of all of them.

RCN staff have really engaged with the centenary as well. Events included a centenary bake-off, centenary 'shilling' awards made by directors for special work, tea parties, and fundraising events for the nurses' charity, the RCN Foundation.

⁹ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/centenary/the-voice-of-nursing>

The RCN motto ‘tradimus lampada’ (we carry the torch) refers to the lamp representing professional nursing. The popularity of the idea of handing on this emblem from one generation of nurses to the next means it is a common motif in many of the badge designs and ceremonies associated with the profession. A copy of a Crimean war lamp held in our collections was carried in a centenary relay walk which began in Exeter in April and finished in Belfast in September. Over 400 RCN staff gave up a day to walk over ten miles on a route between the RCN’s sixteen offices on a predominantly picturesque but often urban route. Both the walk and the carrying of the lamp were real talking points with members of the public and, interestingly, the lamp remains a major symbol for nurses and nursing today.

A centenary celebration isn’t simply about media or marketing use of collections or even about writing history. It is about the balanced engagement of the community of users with archive collections and information to create a sense of ownership. We produced a special centenary edition of our magazine for trade union activists, our representatives in the workplace. The archive staff were interviewed about their work during the centenary year for both the staff magazine and the regular membership *Bulletin*. The Edinburgh office participated in its first Open Doors Day and we launched ‘Save Our Story’, a new initiative to encourage members of some of the RCN’s specialist nursing forums to donate records of the forum activities to the archive. These activities largely take place outside the administration of the RCN so this was a chance to obtain records we wouldn’t normally have seen.

The centenary created a whirlwind of activity, much of which was self-perpetuating among enthusiastic members and staff, and extended to considerable public interest too. There is more to come and it’s up to us to support the activity for as long as people want to engage with their history: while 2017 was the 50th year of our annual Congress meeting of the membership, 2019 is the 100th anniversary of the passing of the State Registration Acts and 2020 will be the centenary of our membership in Ireland, and so it goes on. And hopefully we’ll be there for them all.