

A House and its Residents Back in Time

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Dover has a wealth of old houses just waiting for the stories hidden within their four walls to be told. Every house conceals the story of the previous occupants; their life, family history, experiences and memories, and personal journeys, whether they be happy or sad.

No 4 Victoria Crescent, High Street, Dover.

In June 1993 demolition gangs began the work of knocking down parts of the Royal Victoria Hospital, which was being converted by Sanctuary housing into town centre flats and accommodation for the homeless. The disused and derelict hospital, which had opened in 1851 and was paid for by public subscription, had been empty since 1987. Despite a campaign by patients, staff and Dover residents, the decision was made by the health authority to close the Grade II listed building which had served the town admirably for nearly 140 years.

Mary Hutchinson, of number 4 Victoria Crescent, stood on her doorstep watching the demolition of her beloved hospital where she had worked for many years as the theatre superintendent. She was extremely sad to see the old operating theatre, which was facing Maison Dieu Place, coming down as she had spent many years of tense work there as Sister Yorke. One such operation was one of the first aorta grafting operations ever carried out in the country. Her role in the theatre meant that she had to live extremely close to the hospital, within a three-minute call, so that had made her decision to live opposite in the crescent. Another of her duties was making sure her nurses were safely tucked up in bed by ten o'clock every night.

Watching the destruction of her former hospital from across the road, seventy-seven-year-old Mary looked back on her remarkable life with sorrow and the upmost pride.

Mary was born Violet Mary May Hope Robertson on the 20th of February 1917 in Christchurch Hampshire to Leslie Hope Robertson and his wife Violet Agnes Helen, nee Fletcher. During the Great War Leslie served as a Captain in the Royal Garrison Artillery and then in 1920 he enrolled in medical school to become a dentist.



Mary Robertson Nursing in France 1939

Mary (Violet) trained to become a State Registered Nurse at the King George Hospital in Ilford, qualifying in 1938. She then immediately joined the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, becoming one of the first women to serve overseas in the Second World War.

In September 1939, Mary crossed to France with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), helping to nurse the first casualties of the war. Then she found she was trapped in France with the thousands of troops and the wounded soldiers. Miraculously, there was the dramatic evacuation of Dunkirk in June 1940, where hundreds of little ships joined up with the larger vessels to rescue the thousands of our troops who were trapped on the beaches by the advancing German army. On June 4th Dunkirk fell to the enemy, then Brest, Cherbourg and St. Malo. Hours before France capitulated, Mary escaped from St. Nazaire with the members of the Casualty Clearing Station and Evacuation Unit and many of the wounded soldiers. Mary was the Military Nursing Sister in charge of the last hospital train into Saint-Nazaire. The train was lucky to escape bombing attacks and was thought to be lost to the enemy before it finally arrived at the French port, to great relief. The wounded soldiers were safely put aboard the last hospital ship, HMHS Somersetshire and taken back to England for treatment.

[The troopship HMT Lancastria was not so fortunate, being sunk by a German bomber on the 17th of June 1940 as it was leaving Saint-Nazaire. The Lancastria Association lists the names of 1,738 people known to have been killed. Estimates of total casualties vary widely with the loss of between 3,500 and 7,000 lives including at least 1,000 civilian refugees. It was the largest loss of life in British maritime history. Owing to the immense loss of life the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill,

suppressed news of the disaster through the D-Notice system. There were 2,488 survivors. Editor.]

Months later 25-year-old Mary married 50-year-old Major Harold Ernest Pierpoint Yorke MC in Holborn, London. A divorcee, he was a doctor serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps whom Mary had met whilst in France with the BEF. He was awarded the Military Cross in 1917 for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. His citation read that "He displayed great courage and determination in tending the wounded under heavy fire. Later, although wounded himself, he continued to carry out his work".

In 1941 he was retired from the army due to ill-health, but was sent to work in St. Bartholomew's Hospital under wartime regulations. Married women could not serve in the Queen Alexandra nursing service, so Mary joined the Civil Defence force, working as a nurse in London during the bombings of 1941 and 1942. Whilst working during the Blitz, having been put in charge of the Old Bailey Casualty Clearing Station, Mary was nearly killed when the building received a direct hit, and



Mary and Harold Yorke

she was buried by debris until she was fortunately dug out. After this episode she was put in charge of the Emergency Underground Shelter at St. Paul's tube station where some of the tracks had been filled in with concrete to make more room for those sheltering.

In 1944 Harold Yorke accepted a role with the World Health Organisation in Barbados. He arrived in San Juan on the 22nd of May before travelling on to Barbados. Mary joined him months later with their first child, baby son Harry. It was a very worrying time for the family with all the German U-boat attacks on Allied shipping especially in the Atlantic.

In February 1949, the Yorke family moved to British Guyana, sailing from Liverpool on the ship *Empire Bure*. Daughter Phillipa was born there, only months later. In Georgetown, Mary actively helped with the nursing of the leprosy and tuberculosis patients living there until, in 1954, the family came back to live in Folkestone at 20 Cherry Garden Avenue.

Sadly, just two years later, on the 9th of January 1956, Major Harold Ernest Pierpoint Yorke died at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Folkestone, aged only 64 years. He was buried on the 12th of January and is commemorated with a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone in Hawkinge Cemetery.

Mary returned to work, becoming a theatre sister at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Dover and moving to number 4 Victoria Crescent opposite her place of work. Her son Harry, attended Dover College and then later entered Sandhurst before joining the Queen's Own Buffs, The Royal Kent Regiment. Today it is named the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (Queen's and Royal Hampshires). Her daughter Phillipa, would

have attended one of the schools in the town.

In 1968, Mary married for a second time to 75-year-old Frederick Heap Hutchinson, a retired consulting engineer originally from Cottingham in East Yorkshire. Very sadly he died 7 years later, on the 7th of January 1975.

In her later years, Mary devoted much of her time to raising money for charity, especially for the Poppy Appeal. Every year she could be seen outside the Royal Victoria Hospital with her two dogs, selling poppies for the charity. Having pride in the town of Dover and with her love and welfare of its residents at heart, she frequently wrote letters to the *Dover Express* which were published in the *Readers Letters* section, voicing her opinions regarding the town, raising important matters or making suggestions for improvements. Her passion was writing poetry, setting down many of her experiences of trauma and compassion in verse. In one verse she recalled her first husband Major Yorke's words when he told her, "Tell our children, and remind them to tell in turn, that you stood with their father on the roof of St Bart's and saw the city burn."

Sister Yorke... Violet Mary May Hope Hutchinson of 4 Victoria Crescent, Dover, a remarkable woman who lived a remarkable life, passed away on the 22nd of May 1995 aged 78 years.

Her moving memories and copies of her prose, together with tapes of her reminiscences have been deposited in the archives of the Imperial War Museum as a permanent memento of her lifetime work.

With thanks to the articles of Bob Hollingsbee and Terry Sutton published in the Dover Express and the information found on Ancestry.