

Sister Whittow – My personal heroine.

By Marion Witton



Photo: L to R: Judith, Forbes, Angie, me, Ann Wright Photo ©Marion Witton.

There are heroes and heroines who are renowned for their courage or outstanding achievements, and then there are those who quietly made a difference to many lives. Mary Whittow was one.

I started at UCH as a student nurse in 1969. After the initial time in Preliminary Training School (PTS) kitted out in our dreadful green overalls that most patients on our ward stints mistook for cleaners, I was given my uniform. It comprised a striped dress rolled over at the already thick waistband so we appeared larger in the middle than at the hips, starched collar that left red rings round our necks, starched pinny, thick black stockings, regulation shoes and a starched hat. Why Should England Tremble? wrote my Granddad when I sent him a photo of our set.

I was dispatched to ward 4/4, a female medical ward run by Sister Whittow. I was completely terrified of her and made many unnecessary journeys up and down the ward with a covered unused and unwanted bedpan, trying to look efficiently busy. In one cubical there was a lady having radium treatment and in the other was someone recovering from gonorrhoea. Being the most junior, I spent my time either barrier nursing the latter to prevent cross-infection, or reverse barrier nursing the other to prevent her from getting infections, convinced that I would end up either sterile or with a venereal disease or in all probability both.

Sister Whittow ran the ward with a rod of iron. Bed wheels were lined up, sheets turned back to the correct width and I doubt if germs would have dared enter her domain. Doctors, including

consultants, waited to be invited into her ward and she commanded the greatest respect for her expertise in the care of every single patient. She knew exactly who could eat what and served the meals herself. Diet was of huge importance to recovery in her opinion, as was having sufficient fluids. "If you don't water a plant it wilts" she was oft to say.

What made her stand out was her daily 'changes' when she instructed the qualified staff to 'man' the wards while we student nurses benefited from her vast knowledge, skills and experience. One day she happen to mention that as a Royal College of Nursing member she was disappointed that UCH had no student section. All the London hospitals enjoyed great rivalry and she felt we were missing out. Bravely I stayed behind and asked her what it entailed. I distinctly remember the words 'attendance at conferences', which, with our 48 hour weeks and only two weeks' annual leave, had great appeal. Before I knew it I was the Chair of UCH RCN Student Section, and spent much time campaigning for better pay and conditions for nurses, solidly backed by Sister Whittow.

I learned so much from this amazing woman. I could never hope to emulate her but I'd like to think she would be proud of her influence on my life and career.