

Hotels to Hospitals

At the outbreak of the First World War many British professional women and suffragettes wanted to contribute to the war effort. Outstanding among such women were two doctors, lifelong friends Flora Murray and Louisa Garrett Anderson.

Flora and Louisa approached the War Office requesting that they set up a military field hospital in France.

They were refused, spurned, in fact. Was it because they were women and suffragettes?

So, on the 12th August 1914 – two days after the government set free all suffragette prisoners – Flora and Louisa called at the French Embassy in London.

Initially, the Embassy staff thought the women were requesting funding and equipment, not understanding that they actually wanted to go to France to treat wounded soldiers. In France women doctors were no more welcome in the army than in Britain.

However, the French Embassy did refer Flora and Louisa to the French Red Cross – le Croix Rouge, who accepted their offer. Within two weeks funds had been raised, staff recruited, and supplies marshalled – the “Women’s Hospital Corps” was formed.

Within days the Corps was on its way to Paris and into the brand new Hôtel Claridge, on the Champs-Élysées. Before any rich visitors could arrive at the luxury hotel, war had broken out and the hotel had been requisitioned by the French Government for use as a hospital.

Already receiving casualties, was the hotel Majestic, also in Paris. Here American doctors worked with the Croix Rouge. They were inundated with casualties, so much so, that British women from the Women’s Hospital Corps volunteered to help at the Majestic, while the Claridge was being prepared to receive casualties.

By the end of October 1914, it was clear that hospitals were needed closer to the forty-mile front through Belgium and northern France.

In Boulogne, three sugar warehouses on the quayside had been set up as a hospital. Officially named No 13 Stationary Hospital it was better known as the Sugar Store Hospital. When Flora and Louisa visited – they were shocked and saddened at the conditions in which wounded soldiers were kept. It was clear that hotels made better hospitals than warehouses. The women quickly located the Château Mauricien. This hotel had seen better days, leaking roof, blocked chimneys – quite unlike the Claridge. However, with their customary resourcefulness it was transformed into a “passable hospital”. The only British Army hospital to be run entirely by women.

No 14 Stationary Hospital, was in fact the Hôtel Grand, Wimereux, along with Hôtel Splended, formerly luxury destinations for rich British holidaymakers – they became hospitals for injured British soldiers.

It was with great courage and resourcefulness that civilian doctors and nurses, orderlies, builders, carpenters, and volunteers from all walks of life; despite lack of support from the war authorities, were able to treat the wounded soldiers, in hotel – hospitals.

Lest we forget.