

# IN KATE'S SHOES

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BY BLOWN FUSE ©

### VERBATIM STORIES FROM THE WOMXN OF THURROCK

#### KATE

In the height of the summer of 1972 - the 29th of June to be exact - Vicar Bixby Luard and Clara Isabella Sandford Bramston welcomed Kate Evelyn Luard into the world. She was the tenth of thirteen children. Bixby Luard was vicar of Aveley for four years from 1871 when he was transferred to Birch near Colchester. Bixby, a busy man, was also a Justice of the Peace for Essex and regularly sat on the Grays Bench.

Kate was born in Aveley Vicarage, which was in Mill Road. She was known in the family as Evelyn or (more affectionately) as Evie. Although her childhood was spent in Aveley she attended Croydon High School for Girls from 1887 to 1890. The head mistress at that time was Dorinda Neligan, a well known suffragette and campaigner for women's rights in her day. She, too, was a nurse serving in the Franco Prussia War and it could well have been this that influenced Kate in her choice of career.

Kate, having firmly decided she wanted to become a nurse, worked as a private teacher and governess to raise the necessary funds for her training at the acclaimed Kings College Hospital, London.

In 1900, Kate left all she knew of Thurrock and London behind, and served for two years in South Africa in the 2nd Anglo Boer War. On returning home she seemed to pick up precisely where she left off, and resumed her career as a nurse.

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By 1911, at the age of 38, she had worked her way to becoming matron at the Maitland Sanatorium in Henley on Thames. On 6th August 1914, just two days after the declaration of World War 1, aged 42, she enlisted in the Queen Alexander Imperial Military Nursing Reserve Service. Kate embarked on 12th August 1914 to France and Belgium where she served until 17th November 1919. From August 1914 to 1915 she was nursing on ambulance trains and then at clearing stations, moving from job to job, but always at or near the front lines.

On 2nd April 1915 she moved to No. 4 Field Ambulance, a mobile front line medical unit for treating the wounded before transferring them to a casualty clearing station. This brought her close to the front line and she referred to this in her diary as 'life at the back of the front'. She spent these days saving the lives of soldiers as shells fell around her, the deafening shrill of gunfire drowning out the groans of the men whose wounds she nursed. Not one to rest for too long, Kate also worked in an Advanced Dressing Station, a basic care point providing only limited medical treatment and had no holding capacity.

The wounded were brought here from Regimental Aid Posts, which were only a few metres behind the front lines. In small, cramped and often extremely unsanitary spaces such as a support or reserve trench, Kate, knee deep in mud, would tirelessly bandage wounds and provide emergency first aid. On 17 October 1915 she was sent up the line to take charge of No.6 Casualty Clearing Station at Lillers in France.

Her second book, *Unknown Warriors*, commences on this date and in this her letters home are a record of her times in various casualty clearing stations. This included time as Head Sister at No.32 CCS which became one of the most dangerous when the unit was relocated in late July 1917 to serve the push that was to become the Battle of Passchendaele, and where she had a staff of forty nurses and nearly 100 orderlies.

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She was twice mentioned in dispatches for gallant and distinguished service in the field and was awarded the rare distinction of the Royal Red Cross medal 1st class and bar, sharing the same awards as the heralded Florence Nightingale.

It was during Kate's time in or near the front lines that she exchanged many letters with her family at home and they formed the basis of the two books that she wrote: 'The Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Western Front 1914-15' and 'Unknown Warriors 1914-1918' published in 1930 and later republished in 2014, 100 years after the break of World War 1.

In her later years, with memories of her wartime gallantry behind her, Kate lived with two of her sisters, Rose and Clara, in Abbots at Wickham Bishops. The sisters drove an Austin Seven but as they were all on the small side they could barely be seen above the steering wheel, and, according to one local, it looked as if the car had no driver.

86 year old Tom Whitley, who has lived in Wickham Bishops all his life, remembers the sisters. At Christmas the children would go carol singing and the Luard sisters would invite the children in and play the piano while the children sang.

The children would be given something to eat and drink and then rewarded with an apple, orange, sweets and a few pennies for their efforts. In her twilight years, Kate's health deteriorated and she became bedridden in her eighties, sadly passing at Abbots on 16th August 1962, aged 90.

She was laid to rest at St. Bartholomew's Church, Wickham Bishops, next to her beloved sisters Rose and Clara.

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As testament to our local Heroine, there is a Kate Luard Ward at Basildon Hospital, and a Thurrock Green Heritage plaque was dedicated to her memory in the Memorial Gardens, Aveley.

May we never forget Kate's bravery, grit and determination, putting her own life on the line in order to save the lives of others. Kate's story is remarkable, and really shows that us Thurrock women - we really can change the world.

Originally written by Susan Yates for the Thurrock Independent  
Edited and dramatised by Eleanore McCann for Blown Fuse Theatre

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