

Whiffin of Whiffin Spit

Part 2: Crimea and After

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The Crimea and Subsequent Postings

After a seven-month break, John Whiffin joined *HMS Vesuvius* (4 guns), later to be ‘turned over’ to *HMS Vixen* (6 guns), serving in the South Atlantic. One of *Vixen*’s tasks was to deliver a British envoy, Sir Charles Hotham¹, to Montevideo with the aim of opening the River Parana to trade. In this he was eventually successful, despite political unrest in the area. Whiffin’s participation was, however, cut short when he was invalided home in March 1853. Although the reason is not recorded, it is possible that he caught the fever described by *The Times* in May 1853 as “raging to an alarming extent” in Rio de Janeiro; Rio was *Vixen*’s first destination when she sailed from England twelve months earlier.

After a period of recuperation, Whiffin’s next major assignment was to the six-gun paddle steamer *HMS Gladiator* on 10 April 1854², where he served throughout the Crimean War as paymaster until 22 May 1857. Despite her diminutive armament, *Gladiator* saw several active engagements and seems to have been used primarily as a troop-carrier.³ In particular she assisted in the August 1854 rescue of *HMS Penelope* which had run aground within range of the Finnish fortress at Bomarsund, located in the mass of Aland Islands in the Baltic Sea. As red-hot shot landed all around, *Gladiator*, *HMS Hecla* and some ships’ boats attempted to drag *Penelope* free. She eventually refloated more than three hours later after her guns, shot, chain and boiler were jettisoned.⁴

In the following year, *Gladiator* was in the Black Sea, first carrying troops to the landings at Kertch at the entrance to the Sea of Azov, and later as part of fleet bombarding the fortress at Kinburn, strategically important in the navigation of the Bug and Dnieper rivers. “The operations at Kinburn are remarkable not only because they witnessed the first employment of

¹ Previously, Hotham (1806 – 1855) had served as Commodore of the West Africa Squadron combating the slave trade. In December 1853 he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, Australia.

² Whiffin took up his post eleven days before Sarah Hornsey’s convict ship *Duchess of Northumberland* arrived in Van Diemen’s Land.

³ See W.L. Clowes on the 1854-56 Russian (“Crimean”) War at <http://www.pdavis.nl/Russia.htm>

⁴ Andrew Lambert, *The Crimean War: the British Grand Strategy*, 1991, ch.13.

armoured vessels in modern warfare, but also because they were among the earliest operations on a large scale in which steam-vessels only were employed.”⁵

So, before his thirtieth year Whiffin had been awarded the Arctic Medal, and the Baltic, Crimean and Turkish medals with the clasp indicating service at Sebastopol.⁶ He remained on active service for another 12 years in a succession of vessels (seven in total) for periods ranging from one week to four years. For most of this time Whiffin was stationed near to home, either in the coastguard (*Pembroke*, *Resistance*) or the Channel Squadron (*Curacoa*, *Warrior*). The Channel Squadron (sometimes called the Channel Fleet) was at this time a renewal of the Royal navy's standing presence in the English Channel and neighbouring waters.

Two of the ships on which Whiffin served can still be seen, *Victory* and *Warrior*. He spent one week in early June of 1862 aboard one of the most famous sailing ships of all, *HMS Victory*, then anchored off Portsmouth as flagship of the Commander-in-Chief⁷; *Victory* remains on display in a Portsmouth dry-dock, the oldest warship still in commission.

At the time of her launch in December 1860, *HMS Warrior* was the most advanced warship in the world, a 6000-builders unit iron frigate driven by both steam and sail. She was big (more than 400 feet long), fast (17.5 knots under both steam and sail) and heavily armed, including ten breech-loading guns capable of firing 110lb shells.⁸ But technological advances made her obsolete within a decade and she was retired from sea service in 1883. She was finally sold from the navy in 1924 after years of service in various capacities and served the next fifty years as a floating oil terminal off Pembroke Dock in South Wales, designated C77. *Warrior* was restored in 1987 by a charitable organisation and is also on display in Portsmouth, the only surviving ironclad of its type.

⁵ See W.L. Clowes on the 1854-56 Russian ("Crimean") War at <http://www.pdavis.nl/Russia.htm> and Lawren Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare, 1815-1914* (2001), p.61.

⁶ It is easy to be sceptical of fictional accounts of the nineteenth century Royal Navy (I am thinking Patrick O'Brian's wonderful *Aubrey/Maturin* series) in which the heroes travel to all parts of the globe. Nevertheless, Whiffin, Kellett, Denham and the rest show that this is not exaggerated.

⁷ The Commander-in-Chief at the time was Vice-Admiral Henry William Bruce who, from 1854 to 1857, was in command of the Pacific Station, based at Callao. One of his actions was to establish a naval base at Esquimalt (that is still in use by the Canadian Navy), just 15 nautical miles or so east along the coast from Whiffin Spit.

⁸ Compare this with *Herald's* 500 bu, 114 feet, and 28-cannons.



HMS Warrior



The Paymaster's cabin, HMS Warrior

John Whiffin was to get one last overseas adventure on board *HMS Curacoa* commanded by Captain Augustus Phillimore. During 1859 – 1862, they served on the South American station, at Montevideo at the mouth of the River Plate and at the Falkland Islands. Indeed, one of the Islands is named after the captain, situated on the east coast of Falklands south of Port Stanley, then a flourishing ship-repair harbour.

There were some intervals ashore for Whiffin, notably two extended periods of approximately one year each, from June 1862 (after returning from the South Atlantic) to July 1863 and from July 1866 to July 1867. During the first of these, in January 1863, he married Frances Alice Brown at the Cross Street Chapel in Manchester⁹, when he was 36 and she was 22¹⁰. Cross Street was a highly prominent Unitarian Chapel, devoted to social activism and good public works. The Whiffin's marriage was performed by perhaps the most well-known of its ministers, the Rev. William Gaskell¹¹, whose wife Elizabeth was the author of insightful novels and short stories centred on the Victorian social structure.

⁹ The original chapel was destroyed by enemy action in 1940.

¹⁰ UK National Archives, ADM 13/71/376

¹¹ Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, 10 January 1863.

The newspaper announcement of the marriage indicates two relations for Frances; her father, the “late Thomas Brown,” and her uncle, H.J. Leppoc. These family relationships require a little untangling to understand the situation. Henry Julius Leppoc was a wealthy and prominent Manchester cotton merchant and local philanthropist, born in Brunswick, Germany, in 1807 to a family of merchants by the name of Cappel (sometimes Coppel). He became a naturalized British citizen in 1845 and changed both his name (by the simple expedient of reversing the order of the letters) and his religion, converting from Judaism to Unitarianism. In 1841 he married Jane Gibson in the Blackwater Unitarian Chapel in Rochdale, by the then Minister of Cross Street. Leppoc’s obituary observed that at the time of his death he was one of the longest serving members of the Cross Street congregation.¹²

Leppoc’s 1861 census return indicates that sharing his house was his widowed sister-in-law, Ann Brown, and his niece Frances A. Brown. A newspaper announcement shows that Ann Gibson married Thomas Brown at Cross Street Chapel, but only in July 1851, too late for Frances to be their daughter.¹³ In a rather sad story, it seems that Frances was Thomas’s daughter from his first marriage. Thomas married Alice Leigh in February 1840¹⁴ and Frances Brown was born nine months almost to the day later, on 4 December 1840.¹⁵ However Alice Brown (nee Leigh) died only a month later, perhaps of complications resulting from the birth. Frances’s middle name, Alice, was appended to her birth certificate after its original registration, presumably at around this time in commemoration of her mother.

Thomas Brown’s 1851 census, performed on the night of 30 March of that year just a few months before his second marriage to Ann Brown, shows him as a cotton spinner and manufacturer, living with his mother and Frances in Broughton, Lancashire. However, we know from Leppoc’s 1861 census that Ann was already widowed by then. In fact, sadly, Thomas died a little over a year after his marriage, on 4 September 1852.¹⁶

When Henry Julius Leppoc died on 30 October 1883 his estate was worth an immense £65,000. In addition to numerous bequests to his family and friends, to local educational and welfare societies and the Cross Street Chapel, he left £200 to Whiffin (misspelled), £250 to each of his eldest children (Walter and Alice, also mistakenly named Elsie), and £150 to each of the four other children, for a total of £1300. In his own will, Whiffin acknowledges this bequest from his “late dear and esteemed friend Mr. Julius Leppoc”, as well as “certain monies and properties” placed in trust for Frances at the time of their marriage. Clearly, there was a close connection between the Whiffin’s and their extended Manchester family,¹⁷ but how did Whiffin come to marry Frances?

¹² Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, November 3, 1883

¹³ Manchester Times, July 12, 1851.

¹⁴ Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, February 22, 1840.

¹⁵ Birth certificate, Frances Brown, registered 23 December 1840, with the name Alice “added after registration”

¹⁶ Manchester Times, September 11, 1852.

¹⁷ These close connections remained because in 1891 we see a 23-year-old Mabel visiting her grandmother, Ann Brown, in Broughton (1891 England & Wales census).

Unfortunately, that is not an easy question to answer because the information that remains does not point to any direct connection. Tantalisingly, Leppoc's 1861 census shows that a Sarah A Whiffin was visiting at the time of the census. John Whiffin had a sister named Sarah who would have been about the right age but there is no other evidence to suggest that it really was she who was visiting the Leppoc/Brown residence two years before the marriage. Other somewhat tenuous connections are that Julius Leppoc's bother James was a resident of London, and therefore may have known the Whiffin family, and that Whiffin's brother Henry had a visitor from Manchester staying with him at the time of the 1851 census. But perhaps a more likely connection comes through a William Harding Whiffin, born and christened in Deptford in 1803, who married an Ellen Brown in Manchester; they had a daughter Sarah A. Whiffin of about the right age for Leppoc's 1861 visitor. Was William Harding Whiffin the uncle of John George, and Sarah his cousin?

John and Frances Whiffin had six children together. Their names pay respect to their ancestry: Alice Leppoc (b.1864), Walter John (b.1865) and Mabel Leigh (b.1867) were born in Dovercourt, near Harwich on the east coast of England where Whiffin served in the coast guard on *Pembroke* from 1863 to 1866. Harold Leigh (b. 1870), Janet Leigh (b.1872) and Florence Leigh (b.1874) were born in Rock Ferry, just across the River Mersey from Liverpool, where their father's coast guard duties next took him on *Resistance*.

Whiffin retired from the Royal Navy in 1873 at the age of 47 with the rank of Paymaster-in-Chief, a position equivalent to a Captain and awarded for "long and meritorious sea service." His retirement pay after 20 years of active service was £305 per annum. Whiffin's career was certainly successful. Although information is limited, one gets the sense of a competent officer, well liked and respected. But his progression through the ranks was steady rather than spectacular. Perhaps opportunities for advancement after the end of the Crimean War were fewer, or possibly he preferred a more domestic life?

Coopers Hill

After retirement from the navy, Whiffin turned his talents to a new purpose. In 1871, a new educational institution had opened at Coopers Hill in Surrey, admitting students to train as engineers and later foresters and telegraphists for the Indian Public Works Department.¹⁸ The Royal Indian Engineering College (RIEC) was the brainchild of General Sir George Tomkyns Chesney.¹⁹ Results of the entrance exam were published in *The Times* and prize day at RIEC was quite a grand affair. RIEC placed great emphasis on building 'grit' as well as developing practical experience in engineering and the related sciences. At the time, a significant part of an engineer's job in India was related to cost accounting so the curriculum included elements of accounting for the first time in an engineering qualification. The course was developed and initially taught by Chesney, based on his experience in Indian public works accounting. Whiffin's

¹⁸ Richard Hornsey, *Imperial Engineers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

¹⁹ Fittingly, this building formed part of Brunel University, known for its specialisation in engineering, until its sale in 2007 for housing development. The estate cost £55,000 in 1871 and was sold for £45 million in 2007.

younger brother, Henry William Sharp Whiffin,²⁰ had been sent to India in the late 1850s and again in 1864 as part of a review of Indian Accounts.²¹ Chesney was head of the Indian Public Works Account and Finance Department at the time, so it is plausible that HWS Whiffin met Chesney then. HWS Whiffin also served for many years as the external examiner for the accounts course at Cooper's Hill. After Chesney's departure in 1880, J.C. Hurst, a former subordinate of HWS Whiffin in the British War Office, taught the course on a contract basis from 1882 onwards. It was perhaps with the aid of the connections between his brother and the College that John Whiffin came to be appointed secretary to the RIEC in 1878,²² continuing in this capacity until his death in 1892. His annual salary was £300, in addition to his Navy pension of about the same amount.

We do not know what Whiffin did between his retirement from the Navy in 1873 and joining RIEC in late 1878. The only record from this time is in an article in the *London Daily News* on 14 December 1877 requesting Christmas charitable donations to the London Female Penitentiary, "an asylum for fallen and penitent young women ... for upwards of seventy years." Donations were to be sent to John George Whiffin, although it is easy to see Frances's influence here.

It may have simply been that Whiffin was spending time with Frances, who was reportedly sick for several years before her death in on 24 July 1883, aged only 43. She died at 2 Clifden Road, Twickenham of chronic nephritis, kidney disease, with her husband by her bedside.²³ Her death certificate noted that she had suffered from this condition for several years.

Whiffin lived in at least two houses in Twickenham during the years he worked at RIEC, situated about 15 miles from the College: 2 Clifden Road, and Kelso House in Strawberry Hill. The newspaper announcement of Frances's death gives her address as 2 Cophall, Twickenham, but the death certificate and the 1881 census both indicate the Clifden Road address. While we do not now know which house on Strawberry Hill Road was Kelso House, the street comprises large, ornate Victorian villas, some with names and some with dates ranging from the mid- to late-1880s embedded in their walls. The house would have therefore been quite new when

²⁰ HWS Whiffin retired from the War Office in 1870 as Accountant General where he had been instrumental in the civil service reforms, particularly with regards to ordnance. These changes also led to the creation of the RIEC. Owing to his involvement in a scandal at the War Office in 1871 (see Accounting careers traversing the separate spheres of business and government in Victorian Britain, by J. Black & J.R. Edwards, *Accounting History* 2016, Vol. 21(2-3) 306–328) HWS Whiffin went into private practice and was an early member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. His business, Lovelock, Whiffin and Dickinson, merged with Price Waterhouse in 1900 (W. Habgood ed. *Chartered Accountants in England and Wales*). According to the 1881 census, he was married with five children. Like his brother, he served in the Crimean War.

²¹ BPP 1866 (462) East India (accounts). Copy of report to the Secretary of State for India of Mr. Foster, one of the commissioners appointed to inquire into the mode of keeping the Indian accounts.

²² Henry Julius Leppoc's nephew, Albert James Leppoc Cappel, served in the Crimea and had an Indian connection, becoming Director of the Indian Telegraph Department in 1883. He probably knew John Whiffin and may have made or strengthened the Coopers Hill connection.

²³ Frances Whiffin death certificate issued 25 July 1883. Her young doctor, Dr. John Rudd Leeson, also lived on Clifden Road. Leeson had trained in Edinburgh with Joseph Lister, pioneer of surgical bacterial control, later writing an account of his time with Lister. Leeson later practiced medicine in Twickenham for many years before retiring and devoting himself to public works, eventually becoming the town's first mayor.

Whiffin moved in; and indeed, the Clifden Road house was built after 1868 since the Ordnance Survey map of that date shows the street but not the houses. There is no evidence to suggest whether Whiffin commuted to work using the frequent rail service then in place,²⁴ or whether he lived in College. But given his large family and Frances's poor health, one suspects the former (and there is no indication of accommodation being provided for administrative staff of the College).

With this 1882 photograph of the staff of the RIEC, we finally get a sight of John George Whiffin himself, at the age of around 56; he is second from the right in the back row.²⁵ In rather marked contrast, it must be said, to the academic staff, we see in Whiffin a confident man of business, relaxed with hand on hip, sporting a prominent moustache and a shrewd gaze. The College President acknowledged both Whiffin and Pasco in his 1887 Prize Day speech:²⁶

Besides the professors, there are two members of the staff whom I desire specially to thank for their never failing help. The first is our Secretary, Mr. Whiffin, formerly Paymaster-in-Chief in the Royal Navy, and the other the Bursar, Mr. Pasco, who was also a naval officer. Both of these men are standing witnesses to the excellence of naval training.

We know little else of his activities during this time; the Oracle student College magazine recorded his arrival in the College in underwhelming and inaccurate fashion in its November 1878 edition: "We regret to say that Captain Ball, so long secretary, has left us this term. His place is taken by B. Whiffen, Esq., late Paymaster-in-Chief, R.N." We know that Whiffin administered the entrance examination process for the College²⁷ and communicated with current students about their appointments to India.²⁸ The only other indirect knowledge of Whiffin's actions as College secretary comes from a letter written on 24 May 1890 by one of the professors, George Minchin, complaining of a request circulated by the Secretary asking for details of the professors' external activities for reporting to the India Office.²⁹

²⁴ The frequency of the rail service is mentioned in one of Minchin's letters, along with other indications from Cooper's Hill Magazine and elsewhere.

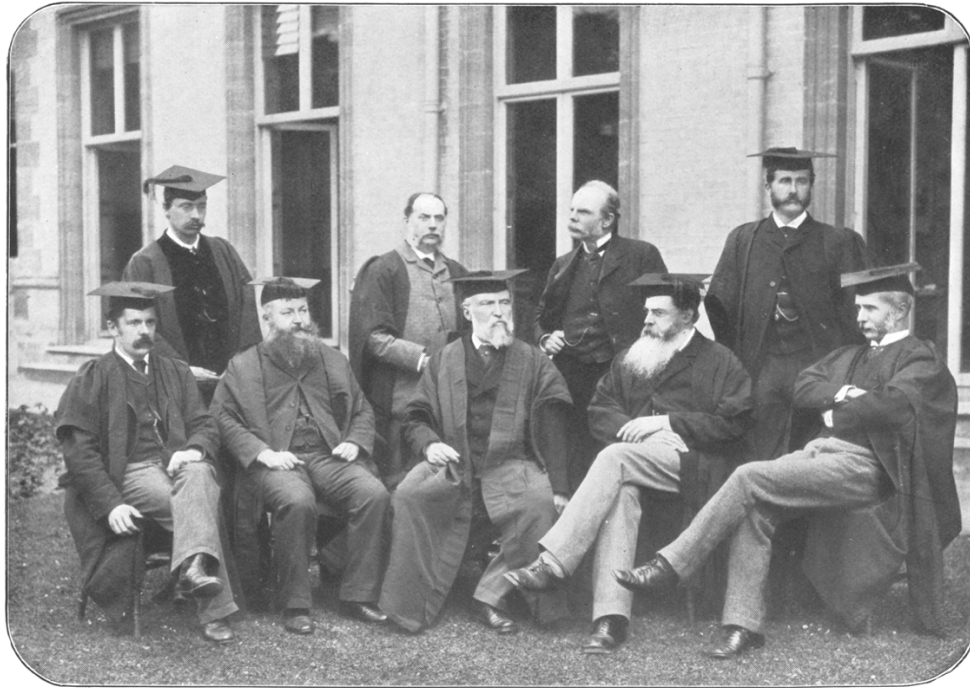
²⁵ From General Sir Alex Taylor G.C.B. R.E.: his times, his friends and his work, A. Cameron Taylor vol.II, 1913, Williams and Norgate. The presence of Prof. Stocker who was appointed in 1883 suggests this photograph was in fact taken in that year, not 1882. The Bursar, John P. Pasco, was also a former Navy Paymaster, who retired in 1867. He was the grandson of Lieutenant Pasco, Nelson's signal-man at the Battle of Trafalgar who hoisted the famous "England expects every man to do his duty", reputedly changing Nelson's original "England confides" to "England expects", with its rather different connotation, because "expects" was a standard signal flag and "confides" was not. John P. Pasco died on 26 April 1913, aged 76.

²⁶ *The Indian Forester* 13 (1887): 481.

²⁷ He was paid £50 for this component of his job, on top of his £250 base salary.

²⁸ This is mentioned in the 3rd September 1887 entry of the diary of Coopers Hill student Ernest Hudson (Hudson Papers, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge).

²⁹ Minchin to Sir Oliver Lodge, dated 24 May 1890. Archives of University College London MS Add 89/72.



COOPERS HILL STAFF, 1882.

Prof. Unwin. Mr Pasco, R.N. Mr Whiffin, R.N. Mr Heath.
Prof. Stocker. Prof. Wolstonholme. Sir Alex Taylor. Prof. Reilly. Col. Edgcome.

*John George Whiffin (second from right, back row) and the Cooper's Hill staff, 1882.*³⁰

RIEC was eventually closed to new admissions in 1904 due to a complex mixture of politics, finance and changing times. To complete a circle, from my point of view, its closing was one of the catalysts for the foundation of the Oxford University Department of Engineering, from which I graduated a little less than 80 years later.³¹

John George Whiffin died of influenza, his son Harold at his bedside, on 7 January 1892 in one of the great 1890-91 influenza outbreaks. Rudyard Kipling described the scene:

³⁰ From Cameron Taylor, *General Sir Alex Taylor*.

³¹ In the battle between the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to take over the forestry program from RIEC Oxford prevailed and several RIEC staff transferred to the University in 1905. The associated professorship in forestry effectively came at the expense of that in engineering, causing the engineering supporters to renew their efforts. Approval for the professorship in engineering came late in 1907 and the first students arrived the following year. (A.M. Howatson *Mechanics in the Universities* publ. Department of Engineering Science, University of Oxford, 2008.)

... and then to London to be married in January '92 in the thick of an influenza epidemic, when the undertakers had run out of black horses and the dead had to be content with brown ones. The living were mostly abed.³²

Deaths in London from influenza rose from 95 per week in the first week of January, when Whiffin died, to a peak of over 500 deaths per week at the end of the month and into February.^{33, 34} His obituary appeared in *The Times* on the 11th January and he was buried in the Twickenham Cemetery on 12 January. Whiffin was also memorialized in the Cooper's Hill Chapel.

John George Whiffin left an estate valued at £1402 3s 8d.³⁵ In his will, he thanks God for "the blessings he has granted me during my long and eventful life," which as we have seen is no exaggeration. Whiffin then proceeds in his will to request that he be buried in the same grave as his wife, Frances, which indeed happens. The Whiffin grave in Twickenham Cemetery is difficult to find, being entirely overgrown with ivy. In fact, the first indication that you are in the right place comes from the latter addition of Mabel Leigh Whiffin's (d. 1928) inscription on the kerb of the grave, reading: "Also of Mabel Leigh Whiffin R.R.C.³⁶ daughter of the above who died Nov^R 3RD 1928 Territorial Matron. Served also in France during the Great War." Cemetery records indicate that Frances and John are buried together, along with Janet Leigh Whiffin, who died in August 1927. However, through the dense ivy it can just be made out that the headstone also commemorates the death in 1900 of Walter John Whiffin, the elder son.

Walter entered the Royal Naval College in 1883 as a Probationary Lieutenant in the Royal Marine Artillery, the unit of soldiers at sea, in this case specialising in sea-borne military landings and so forth. He spent several years after passing out from the College in Greenwich, before returning to become assistant to the Professor of Fortification and promotion to captain in 1894. Walter Whiffin's commanders were glowing in their praise: "Smart officer, good judgement," "great tact and firmness in dealing with men," "a zealous officer with good judgment and physique." His service record also identifies his fair ability in French as an asset. In 1900, Walter joined the new, state-of-the-art battleship HMS Goliath, bound for China. Sadly, he was not destined to get there, and died off the coast of Aden in the Red Sea on 28 June 1900 of 'heat apoplexy,' and buried at sea.³⁷ A memorial inscription to this effect was included on the Whiffin family headstone in Twickenham Cemetery.

³² Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* 1935, Ch.5.

³³ On the Influenza Epidemic of 1892 in London . Author(s): B. Walter Foster and J. Tatham. Source: *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1650 (Aug. 13, 1892), pp. 353-356

³⁴ In his journal, another Twickenham resident, Abraham Slade, wrote about 1891-1892: "It has been a very sickly winter. Influenza and bronchitis have carried of many thousands." (<http://www.twickenhamurc.org.uk/history/slade7.htm>)

³⁵ England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1861-1941

³⁶ Royal Red Cross

³⁷ *The Standard* (London, England), July 04, 1900, 1.



The Whiffins' family gravestone in Twickenham Cemetery.

Mabel Leigh Whiffin also became a highly competent and valued member of her profession, nursing. Her story is an interesting one and is told by her lengthy and detailed official service records³⁸ and in the diary of a young nurse named Beatrice Hopkinson working under Mabel in both England and France.³⁹

Mabel's official record relates to her service in the Territorial Forces Nursing Service, an organization established to provide medical care for the country's volunteer army. During peacetime nurses in the TFNS were expected to work as usual at their civilian hospitals, reporting every second year for training in a military hospital. During times of emergency, territorial force hospitals were to be set up throughout the country in hotels, schools and other accommodations and staffed with members of TFNS. During WWI, this organization was in full swing and TFNS members were also being used to supplement nursing staff in casualty clearing stations abroad.

Correspondence in Mabel's file begins in 1915 with the Principal Matron of the TFNS 3rd Western General Hospital in Cardiff looking for a new Matron. At the same time, the Matron-in-Chief of the TFNS has received a recommendation from London for Mabel Whiffin, who is looking for ways to serve the country because "all her people have been in either the army of

³⁸ UK National Archives catalogue reference WO/399/15442

³⁹ Published as *Nursing through Shot and Shell: a Great War Nurse's Story*, edited by Vivien Newman, Pen & Sword Books 2014

Navy so that she is most anxious to do what she can for the War.” The same letter reports that Mabel is “a most excellent organizer and manager ... and is exceedingly capable in every way. She is very tactful and exceptionally nice to work with.” It also explains that Mabel trained in St. Thomas’s Hospital in London, becoming Ward Sister, Theatre Sister and Casualty & Out Patient Sister there before becoming Matron at Chesterfield for about 6 years. While the opportunity in Cardiff did not work out, Mabel was notified on 5 May 1915 that she had been appointed by TFNS as a Matron and would be appointed to a vacancy when one arose. Only three days later, she was informed that she had been appointed Matron in the 2nd Northern General Hospital (a 1900-bed hospital with more than 200 trained staff) in Leeds, starting in a week’s time.

Two years later, Mabel had clearly asked for permission to go overseas to assist in the war effort. In April 1917 received orders to transfer to the Northern 2nd Line Hospital and passed her medical on 27 April. When she returned to England a year later on leave, she indicated that she was in charge of the 59th General Hospital near St. Omer, France, where she was responsible for getting it operational in time to receive wounded from the Passchendaele offensive at the end of July 1917.

During this time Beatrice Hopkinson’s diary related how much she and the other nurses both admired Mabel professionally, and loved her as a person. Mabel seems to have had a knack of balancing the needs of her younger colleagues with the need for discipline and getting the job done. She was broadminded with the nurses, attentive to her patients and a great calming influence on all concerned.⁴⁰

Mabel did not return to France after her leave. Instead on 17 December 1918 a memo was prepared saying she was “urgently required for an important appointment.” This proved to be a re-assignment to the 2nd Northern General Hospital, Beckett’s Park Extension, starting 9 January 1919. On hearing the news, the Assistant Matron in Leeds said that they would be “lucky and very glad” to have Miss Whiffin back again. Later that year, Mabel wrote to the Matron-in-Chief of the TFNS to acknowledge receipt of her certificate stating that she had been mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig’s dispatches from France in November 1918. When she was demobilized on 23 February 1920, Mabel’s certificate read:

Miss Whiffin has the highest professional ability and is an excellent organizer. She possesses great tact, common sense and sound judgement, and maintains excellent discipline. She has a very pleasant personality and a cheerful temperament, and inspires her nursing staff with zeal and loyalty. Her hospitals have been run most smoothly and efficiently and her general influence has been excellent.

The confidential reports on her service in France written in early 1919 are similarly glowing in their praise of Mabel’s accomplishments. These accolades, surely one that would have made her late father John Whiffin immensely proud, makes the following events particularly sad. A series of letters in Mabel’s file, dated 17 - 22 December 1920, report that she was “seriously ill from

⁴⁰ Nursing through Shot and Shell: a Great War Nurse’s Story, edited by Vivien Newman, Pen & Sword Books 2014

overwork and strain, and has been sleeping badly.” Miss Innes, Principal Matron at Leeds General Infirmary, says “Poor Miss Whiffin has had a complete mental breakdown ... It is a tragedy because I am sure no woman could have had a more active and acute brain.” Miss Innes went on to describe all of Mabel’s wonderful qualities, “men and women who worked with Miss Whiffin admired her greatly,” while lamenting her “heart breaking” current condition, in which she “imagines and talks of air raids.” Mabel’s senior colleagues are clearly very concerned that she should receive the best care and accommodation.

Happily, Mabel was able to recover slowly and was able a few months later to write a letter of thanks for her care. But it was not until the August of 1921 that she wrote to say that she had returned to work, not as a Matron but in charge of two houses used by nursing staff at the Ruskin Park Pension Hospital. She says in rather shaky writing “I think that when I am quite settled that I shall be happy here but everything is very strange but all are most kind to me.”

Mabel continued to serve in the TFNS, now as a volunteer, until she was forced to resign in August 1928 upon reaching the upper age limit for service, at 60 years old. Mabel died on 3 November of that year.

Dame Ann Beardsmore Smith, Matron-in-Chief of the newly renamed Territorial Army Nursing Service attended Mabel’s funeral at Holy Trinity Church in full uniform but could not go to the cemetery because of another engagement. The last letter in the file is one from Alice Leppoc Whiffin acknowledging her receipt of a letter of condolence from Her Majesty Queen Mary.

John and Frances Whiffin’s remaining three children died over a four-year period, Harold in January 1938, Alice in January 1941, and Florence in January 1942. Of the six children, only Harold and Florence married. Harold married Ethel Wade in 1914 but it is not clear whether they had children. Florence married Clement Drabble of Vicarage Road, Twickenham, a clerk in an engineering office at the time, and had at least one son.