

Nurse's Biography

Sarah Mitchell (1805-1890)

By Bridget Howarth, March 2023

Sarah was 58 when she was appointed nurse in the infirmary of the Mitford and Launditch Union workhouse, and she continued working until she retired from ill health at the age of 70.

Sarah was born in Hoe, just a few miles from Gressenhall, on 30 November 1805, the daughter of John and Beatrice Tuck. She was baptised in the Parish Church on 1 December that year.^[1] When her father died in 1833, a note in the Burial Register recorded that he had been Parish Clerk for 31 years, and would therefore have been responsible himself for compiling the church records.^[2]

Sarah married Robert Mitchell, also from Hoe, in the church where she had been baptised, on 20 November 1828.^[3] They continued to live in the village and when the 1841 census was taken Robert was described as a publican and farmer, employing one female servant.^[4] Robert had taken over as licensee of The Angel, on the Dereham Road, in 1836^[5]. The couple had four children; Richard, born in 1831, John (1833), Beatrice (1835) and George^[6] in 1839.

Sadly, Robert died in 1843^[7] but Sarah continued to manage The Angel for some time and was listed as sole licensee in 1845.^[8]

Despite being widowed, Sarah had another child in 1846. William Mitchell was born on 25 August and baptised in Hoe on 9 September, but no father's name was given.^[9] He, like his older brother, George was given the middle name, Saunders, Robert's mother's maiden name. Sarah was described as a widow and a farmer in the baptismal register so it seems she had continued to manage her husband's land after he died, though it is likely that the family had moved out of The Angel as it had a new licensee; 28 year old George Harrold.^[10]

In the 1851 census Sarah was farming 46 acres and employing 1 labourer.^[11] All her children, except John, were at home with her, and she had three lodgers. Her two older children, Richard and Beatrice, who at 20 and 15 respectively, were old enough to have been working, had no occupation listed, so it can perhaps be assumed that they were assisting their mother on the land or in the house. Over the course of the next 10 years both children were married; Richard, with his wife Amelia, moved away to work as a foundry labourer in Rotherham and Beatrice married a labourer, William Oakes.^[12]^[13] George and William left home soon afterwards, both going into service as grooms in East Dereham.^[14]^[15]

Beatrice's marriage may not have lasted long for her husband's name is only given in the baptismal register against the first two of her six children and he never appears in a census with her. In 1861, Beatrice described herself as a servant and was living with Sarah once again, who, at 56, was described as a Farmer's widow.^[16] They lived in

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Northall Green, near East Dereham, with Beatrice's second daughter Sarah, her first having died the year before.^[17]

**Mitford and Launditch Union,
NURSE WANTED.**
THE Guardians of the above Union will, at their Weekly Meeting, to be held in the Board Room of the Union Workhouse, at Gressenhall, near East Dereham, on MONDAY, the 12th of JANUARY next, proceed to the Election of a Woman as NURSE in the Male and Female Infirmary Wards of the said Workhouse, at a salary of £20 per annum, with Board, Washing, and Lodging in the House.
Candidates are required to be able to write and read handwriting, and must personally attend the Board on the day of Election. Testimonials of character and qualification for the office to be sent to me on or before the 10th of January next.
CHARLES WRIGHT, Clerk.
East Dereham, 30th December, 1862. (3)

On 3 January 1863, an advertisement was placed in the *Norfolk Chronicle* for a nurse in the workhouse in Gressenhall. The post carried a salary of £20 per annum, with board, washing and lodging included.^[18]

The minutes of 19 January record Sarah's election to the post, describing her as a widow, aged 56, residing in the Parish of Hoe.^[19]

A few years later, another advertisement appeared.

^[20] This time looking for a porter and Sarah perhaps mentioned the opportunity to her son. In February 1866, the Poor Law Board sanctioned the appointment of George Mitchell and both he and Sarah were listed together as employees and resident in the workhouse in the 1871 census.^[21] ^[22] George however resigned in November that year to marry Assistant Matron, Mary Ann Murrell,^[23]^[24] and together they took up the tenancy of a local shop.

The advertisement that Sarah had responded to in 1863 did not call for trained nurses nor specify any particular experience, other than that candidates were able to "write and read handwriting". This was not unusual at the time; workhouse Guardians quite often put female inmates to work in the infirmaries and when they did appoint from outside, were looking for a literate woman with perhaps some experience of caring for children or a family member, rather than a qualified nurse.

"Before 1863, not a single trained nurse existed in the infirmaries in the provinces. Where guardians appointed salaried and skilled nurses they were trained by experience only and not through organised instruction."^[25]



Miss Louisa Twining

There was growing concern about conditions in workhouses across the country, and especially about the care of the sick and elderly. Pressure was growing for improvements to be made. Miss Louisa Twining, whose family owned the famous tea business on the Strand, took a particular interest. She published a number of articles in the 1850s and 1860s raising awareness of the plight of the pauper. She herself served as a Poor Law Guardian in Kensington and helped establish the Workhouse Visiting Society in 1864.

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In her article entitled *History of Workhouse Reform*, published in 1893, she mentions the findings of an inquiry instituted in around 1865, looking at the number of *paid* nurses employed in workhouses. In most, it seems, it was the paupers themselves who attended the sick. Change began in Liverpool that year when Agnes Jones, a highly trained nurse, was appointed superintendent of the infirmary in the enormous workhouse there. ^[26] Reform was inevitably slower in the provinces due to lack of available facilities.

The Guardians at Gressenhall will have been aware of these developments. In May 1865, the Poor Law Board issued a circular promoting a better system for nursing but, despite concerns about increasing numbers of sick in the infirmary, employing a trained nurse at Gressenhall, rather than a competent local woman, may have been thought an extravagance, and the pool of trained nurses locally may also have been very small. ^[27]

The idea of training nurses for workhouses from amongst the inmates had been considered in 1855 and was sanctioned by the Poor Law Board 3 years later, but Twining suggests that it was "*never found practicable owing to the generally degraded character and antecedents of this class.*"^[28] However, in 1879, as a direct result of this proposal, the 'Workhouse Infirmary Nursing Association' was formed to train nurses specifically for work in infirmaries. In 1893, Miss Twining was proud to report:

"[there are] now one hundred and thirty nurses at work throughout the country, many of them trained by the funds of the association; the demand for the nurses being beyond the number that can be supplied".

Poor Law Inspectors arrived at Gressenhall in 1868, and Sarah's work will have been carefully scrutinised. The inspectors were to look closely at the state and suitability of the building, and report on the care that inmates received. The Guardians set up an internal committee to respond to the recommendations, and their first report, presented to a meeting in January 1869, provides a glimpse of Sarah's world:

"... we must impress on the Guardians the necessity for engaging an additional paid nurse. The present nurse attends both to male and female patients on opposite sides of the building and we think she is overworked – there are at present 30 in the male infirmary, 35 in the female infirmary, 3 lying-in women. She is of course assisted by such of the paupers as can be relied on – but we submit that such an arrangement does not meet the requirements of so large an establishment as the Mitford and Launditch Union House." ^[29]

The committee suggest that the alterations demanded must be carried out gradually. Among the issues raised by the inspectors was concern about the spread of disease; that the fever ward was too close to a water closet used by others in the ordinary sick ward, and that the itch ward opened out onto an exercise yard used by able bodied

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women and illegitimate children. Some major alterations were therefore considered necessary.

The committee also had concerns that the layout of the building did not lend itself easily to change, especially when coupled with "*the necessity for keeping male and female paupers apart from each other*", but they did acknowledge that the "*sick wards are at this moment more crowded than is desirable*". Instead they suggested a number of changes that could be made to the buildings that would help improve care and safety within the workhouse, in particular with regard to infectious diseases and the need for isolation. They proposed providing an additional sick ward for women and children, with a nurse's room alongside; a lying-in ward, and a completely separate ward, away from other buildings, for fever and other contagious diseases.

Discussions continued for a couple of years, with detailed correspondence back and forth between the Guardians and the Poor Law Board, and further visits from the inspectors and an architect. The importance of fireplaces in each of the rooms, high ceilings and proper ventilation, were of particular concern. [30]

The most immediate impact on Sarah, of course, was the employment of a second nurse. An advertisement was placed, in which it stated that candidates were to be prepared to attend either the male or female ward, "*as the Guardians may determine*". [31]

MITFORD & LAUNDITCH UNION.
NURSE WANTED.
THE GUARDIANS of the above Union will, at their weekly meeting, to be held in the Board-room of the Union Workhouse, at Gressenhall, near East Dereham, on Monday, the 15th of March next, proceed to the election of a woman as NURSE in the Infirmary Ward of the said Workhouse, at a salary of £20 per annum, with board, washing and lodging in the House.
Candidates are required to be able to write and read handwriting, and to be prepared to attend either the male or female ward, as the Guardians may determine; and must personally attend the Board on the day of election. Testimonials of character and qualification for the office to be sent to me on or before the 18th day of March next.
CHARLES WRIGHT, Clerk.
East Dereham, 24th February, 1869.

Mrs Rebecca Baker, [32] aged 37, was appointed in March 1869 [33] and the Visiting Committee were able report in November that "*There is now a nurse for the male as well as one for the female sick paupers*". [34] A bedroom was provided for each woman near their respective wards so that they could be always available. Like Sarah, Rebecca had no specific nursing training but stated in her application that she was a 'monthly nurse'. This would have been a private arrangement, with Rebecca helping within a household, looking after a woman and her newborn baby, until the mother felt strong enough to manage alone. Rebecca was also a widow; with 3 children and, like Sarah, would probably have nursed her husband in his final illness.

Sarah and Rebecca would have been on call at all times of day and night, ready to deal with any kind of sickness or infirmity, from fever and infectious disorders to the diseases of poverty and decay. Smallpox and scarlet fever would have been a constant worry and there had been instances of both in the workhouse since Sarah had been at Gressenhall. [35]

Among the inmates at Gressenhall there would also have been a number who were classified as 'weak minded' or 'imbeciles'. Those who became violent and a danger to

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themselves or others would have been moved to the lunatic asylum, but the nurses would have had to manage them until this was established.

In September 1872 Mr Wilkes, Inspector for the Commissioners in Lunacy, reported that there were 15 men and 5 women described as of 'unsound mind' at Gressenhall and he suggested a further two women and another man be added to these.^[36] Most were unsound through age, but some were more difficult:

"John King [...] I found him without shirt or stockings which he had destroyed and his clothes were in a torn and dirty state, and any attempt to make him wear proper clothes and to prevent him destroying them, produces much excitement. Most of these patients are in the Sick wards under the charge of paid nurses."

"A few months ago an epileptic patient named Barker threw himself out of these windows, though without injury, and was at once removed to the asylum."

Sarah and Rebecca were both appointed under the terms of Article 213 of the General Consolidated Order of the Poor Law Commissioners, 26 July 1847 which described the duties of a workhouse nurse:

"To attend upon the sick in the sick and lying-in wards, and to administer to them all medicines and medical applications, according to the direction of the Medical Officer; to inform the Medical Officer of any defects which may be observed in the arrangements of the sick or lying-in ward; to take care that a light is kept at night in the sick ward." ^[37]

They will have received help and advice, when necessary, from more senior staff in the workhouse, and more specifically from the Medical Officer, James Vincent, when he made his visits three times a week, but on a day to day basis, they will have been left to cope alone.

Sarah could also expect to assist Dr Vincent as necessary and a claim that he submitted in July 1869 for additional fees gives a flavour of the kind of issues they were dealing with: ^[38]

- *Girling, for acute rheumatism after confinement – continued for 14 weeks. £2*
- *Tapping and injecting for radical cure man Newby for hydrocele. £1*
- *Frances Durrant; fever after confinement. £2*
- *Woman Betts, after confinement for phleg dol – continued for ten weeks. £2*
- *Amputation of Charlotte Beckham's diseased leg. £5*

Sarah will have been on hand to help with surgical procedures and other interventions when required and will surely have assisted with the amputation of Charlotte Beckham's leg, and her recovery afterwards.

In February that year James Vincent had written about the two-day-old child called Durrant (probably the son of Frances, above), who had been found dead in his mother's bed. Sarah will have nursed and cared for mother and baby after the midwife left and any complications would inevitably have needed additional nursing care. On this occasion, the baby had been seen by the nurse just an hour before and had seemed to be in good health, so his death was unexpected. An inquest was arranged at which Sarah will have provided evidence.^[39]

Unfortunately, Rebecca Baker was to work with Sarah for just 9 months, resigning in December 1869.^[40] No reason was recorded at the time, but she was married on 1 January 1870.^[41]

Rebecca's replacement, Leonora Margetts began work on 4 January 1870, and appeared, on paper to be ideal.^[42]^[43] The 28 year old had claimed previously to have worked as a nurse in the Norwich Union workhouse, so Sarah may, quite reasonably, have assumed that she would be an immediate help to her, and certainly not need training. Leonora, however, was not to prove an asset. She had claimed in her application to have been working in Norwich Union workhouse immediately prior to taking up the post and had left to take up 'better employment'. A reference was requested which confirmed that she had indeed worked at the Norwich workhouse but many years before, in 1864, and as a female warder, not as a nurse. She had been discharged two months later for inefficiency.^[44]

Very quickly, the Guardians in Gressenhall came to a similar conclusion. The minutes record that a complaint of misconduct was received by the Visiting Committee^[45], and this, alongside a report provided by the Medical Officer, was enough for them to decide that she 'was not competent to fill the situation of Nurse.'^[46] Leonora was given a month's notice and an advertisement placed for a replacement.

Alongside the difficulties of coping with this constant change in staff, Sarah also faced the upheaval of the major structural changes beginning at Gressenhall, and the pressures placed on her of building works in and around the infirmary. The major works were completed over the next year or so, but continual improvements and changes were a feature of the remaining years of Sarah's time at Gressenhall.

By the 1870s, workhouses were seeing increasing numbers of sick and infirm paupers being admitted and steps had to be taken to provide and care for them. In April 1871, work began to convert the East Wing at Gressenhall into an infirmary, a separate fever and isolation ward was built and a tank was installed in the roof to provide flushing lavatories and water to taps. The Inspector's report in September 1871 reports that "*Great alterations are now being carried out ... which are calculated to remedy all the defects mentioned in my last report*".^[47] These works would undoubtedly have greatly

improved conditions for Sarah and her patients in the longer term, but things must have been quite difficult for a time.

The next nurse to work with Sarah was 35 year old Elizabeth Flood.^[48] She had been widowed at the age of 28, and prior to coming to Gressenhall had been cook and housekeeper at the Rectory in Stanfield.^[49] She had one daughter, Margaret, who remained in Stanfield and lived with her grandmother.

Elizabeth worked in the workhouse infirmary for four years and this fact alone must have given Sarah a better sense of continuity. However, it seems that Elizabeth may not have been an easy person to work with. In February 1874, the minutes record the decision to dispense with her services 'by reason of her repeated acts of insubordination'.^[50]

Hannah Laws, the next nurse, had been a cook in the Downham Union workhouse for 12 years which meant that at least she would have an understanding of how workhouses operated, and she came with a good reference.^{[51] [52] [53]} She was 49 when she joined Gressenhall and unmarried, but had one daughter, Sarah Anne, born in 1844.^[54] Although not a qualified nurse, Hannah did describe herself as a nurse and charwoman on the 1851 census.^[55]

The Guardians had, until 1874, engaged the services of a midwife in Dereham to attend when required, but in March that year she had given up the post, and Sarah had been carrying out her duties on a voluntary basis. At a meeting in December, the Guardians sought to recognise this additional responsibility.^[56] The midwife, Mrs Kirk, had been paid 2s 6d for each delivery, amounting to an average of £2 each year. After some correspondence, the Local Government Board gave their approval for Sarah to receive an additional £1 per year backdated to the date of Mrs Kirk's retirement.^[57] Hannah was to also to receive an additional £1 per year for covering Sarah's work in the infirmary while she was occupied elsewhere. This arrangement would involve no additional cost for the workhouse and meant that they no would no longer need to send to Dereham for the midwife at all hours of the day and night. All future advertisements for a workhouse nurse included this additional £1 per annum midwifery payment.

On 25 October 1875 however, Hannah Laws was also to resign from her post as nurse at Gressenhall "*for the purpose of filling a situation of a different nature which she preferred*"^[58].

The Clerk reported her resignation to the Local Government Board two weeks later.^[59] He stated that the Guardians had not yet looked to replace her, but his letter was annotated by the Inspector, Courtney Boyle, recommending that they to do so: "*Having regard to the size of this workhouse, the situation of the wards and the number of sick which at my several visits have been in the house*"

Nevertheless, a suitable replacement was not found until April 1876, putting considerable pressure on Sarah once again. Added to this, Sarah was 70 and finding the work increasingly difficult. Annie Randall was a widow who moved to Gressenhall from Finsbury Square in London.^[58]^[60] She was 39 and had one child, though not dependant on her, and stated that she had been a nurse before moving to Norfolk.

By the end of July, Sarah clearly wasn't coping, even with help from Annie, and a fortnight's leave of absence was approved on the recommendation of the Medical Officer, Dr Vincent.^[61] Annie Randall would then have been expected to manage Sarah's work, as well as her own, after only 3 months in post. When the Inspector, Courtney Boyle, returned in October 1876, he acknowledged that there was just one nurse "*who he questioned very carefully and who seems able to attend to the cases at present in the Infirmary*".^[62]

Sarah's leave of absence was extended by a further month in August and initial plans put in place to confirm that she was no longer capable of carrying out her duties, for reasons of infirmity and to arrange for her to leave.^[63] Sarah's resignation was formally received at the next meeting of the Guardians on 18 September and a superannuation award was discussed.^[64]

The Clerk was charged with seeking approval from the Local Government Board, and his letter of 30th September explained their calculations.^[65] In addition to her annual salary of £20 a year, and additional £1 midwifery payment; her board, lodging, and 1 shilling a week beer money, was valued at a further £18 4s a year. A superannuation award of 8s a week, or £20 16s a year, would provide a pension equivalent to just over half her total annual salary.

The Clerk's letter included a statement from Dr Vincent, testifying to Sarah's infirmity, and a transcript of Sarah's resignation:

Gentlemen,

I take the opportunity of thanking you for your extension of leave of absence from my duties until this day, to enable me to recruit [sic] my health as far as possible. I regret however to find that my infirmities are of such a nature as to compel me to resign my situation as Nurse at your Workhouse and I shall therefore be glad to be released from such office at your earliest convenience. I wish to express my [deep?] of the many acts of kindness and forbearance received from you during [the] 13 years and upwards which I have been in your service, and if you can further extend your kindness by granting me a superannuation allowance I shall be very grateful for the same.

I am Gentlemen, your obed't servant, Sarah Mitchell

Dr Vincent also added a very touching, personal comment on his dealings with Sarah: "*I have also much pleasure in bearing my testimony to her excellent conduct as Nurse during the time she was under my observation.*"

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A month later Annie Randall was accused by one of the inmates of being 'intoxicated'. Despite the Guardians finding that this was without foundation, Annie obviously decided that either this, or the added responsibility was too much, and she gave in her notice, leaving the workhouse without any nurse at all.^[66] An advertisement for a new nurse was placed in November, and it seems the Guardians had become mindful of the arduous and responsible nature of this work. The advertisement specified that candidates should be '*strong and active, not less than 25 years, nor more than 40 years of age*'.^[67]



After retirement, Sarah made her home with her brother John's widow, Sophia Tuck. In the 1881 census they were living together, with Sophia's granddaughter, Emily Rix, in Quebec Street, in East Dereham.^[68] Sarah was described as a superannuated nurse, Sophia as a retired farmer, and her granddaughter as their companion.

Sarah died in East Dereham, at the age of 84, but was buried back in her home village of Hoe on 8 October 1890 to lie alongside the husband she had lost 47 years earlier.^[69]

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