Dorothy's diary

Stephen Hancocks peruses the diary of a young Victorian dental nurse which was unexpectedly found on a dusty shelf of the BDA library.

Unless through some unlikely chance connection few if any of us are likely to have come across a young lady by the name of Dorothy Niblett who lived in Sprintingfield, Suffolk in the later years of the nineteenth century. Yet in a thoughtfully written diary of her teenage years she describes in a graceful script her work as what can only be classed as an early dental nurse.

Indeed, we find her musing on her first day assisting Mr Butterbold, a local dental surgeon: *April 25th: A glorious spring day on which to take up my newest and yet most daunting position, that of parlour assistant to Mr Butterbold of Finchdean. As I approached the front door of the high and elegant Thurston House I could not but be over-awed by the grand surroundings in which I was to be engaged.*

The first morning seems to have passed in a whirlwind of new experiences as she is introduced to the instruments of the profession and the whys and wherefores of surgery life. *Verily had I been in the conference parlour (as*

we must make known the room in which Mr Butterbold plies his surgical skills, not surgical

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room nor operating chamber nor any other such mention which might unsense or make at ill dispose such patients as seek his services) but a few minutes when to my surprise did Squire Lomax enter for consultation on a molor [sic] tooth which was causing him great pain.

A less than speedy and clearly quite dramatic extraction later and our Dorothy was scurrying around mopping up blood from the arms of the operating chair and attempting under some duress to soak up the worst of the stains from the floor beneath. Mr Butterbold was clear in his

loudly expressed desire that this overspilling of human juices as he expostulated them be expunged as quickly as it was possible

to absorb them lest the next patient see them and be over anxious

as to their origin. In addition Mr Butterbold impressed upon me that the rug was of the highest and most expensive quality from the East, although I myself am sure I have seen such weaves for sale quite cheaply at the market at Sudbury. But I said nothing of this instance.

From these early beginnings we learn that life in the 'conference parlour'

progressed with much the same pattern on a daily basis. A range of clientele patronised the Victorian dental surgeon although our heroine notes on more than one occasion that farm hands or those toilers in various manual occupations were more like to be attended to in the rougher surroundings of the hay loft than in the comfort of the parlour and at a rate of exchange that was of a lower order and which Mr Butterbold escribed as more of a charitable service of health to the nation than a way to make any income for a reasonable livelihood. Indeed such operations took scant time to conclude before the patient was fair ejected back to the cobbled stable yard beyond.

It was in September of the following year that Dorothy describes perhaps her most amusing observation. The Dowager Lady Frumpton attended Thurston House amidst much secrecy although a good deal of obsequiousness from Butterbold as by our dental nurse's account the *scrapping and boughing [sic]* was of a sight to behold and it was all I could do to prevent laughter to slip from my mouth as I noted the petticoat of the Lady hitched up behind from her travel in the elderly carriage. My assumption was that she would seek relief of pain as was the custom here but instead she asked if it were possible to 'lighten my teeth upon the uppermost jaw to give the appearance of perhaps a younger person?' To my further surprise Mr Butterbold brought forth from his walnut veneered cabinet a tincture of apparent rarity that, low and behold, when applied with sable brush and finest braided cloth did as miraculously lighten the good Dowager's teeth as it did the scullery sink when later I washed out the material.

Much else of Dorothy's journal makes fascinating reading as the local magistrate descends to observe the standards of hygiene practised and a man of legal standing offers advice on how to deal with patients who seek mischief in making complaint about services dispensed and who should themselves be likewise dispensed. The small leather-bound volume stops abruptly two years later with nary a hint of where her life might have taken her but that she wishes in her musings in all things I trust that my life will continue with its path of development in the professions of verifiable worth. Unquestionably a model for us all.