

Florence Kaye

Matron of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary &

Nurses' Advocate for the Implementation of the "Joint Hospitals Scheme"

By Diane May

Florence Kaye, Matron of the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary from 1935 until 1958, was a principal figure in the successful implementation of the "Joint Hospitals Scheme". A highly trained and intelligent nurse and manager she helped to guide the hospitals and their staff through the transition to the Foresterhill site and beyond through two decades of peace and war and a health care revolution with the creation of the National Health Service. A remarkable woman, her preparation for and commitment to the "Joint Hospitals Scheme" and to the subsequent creation of the National Health Service can best be understood through an examination of her long and distinguished nursing career.

Florence Elizabeth Kaye was born in the village of Delph in West Yorkshire on the 28th of December 1898, the daughter of David Emmanuel Kaye, a Warehouseman, and Mabel Harriet Winterbottom. She was raised in rural West Yorkshire before deciding to embark on a nursing career.

Florence Kaye commenced her nurse's training working as a sick children's nurse at Manchester's Children's Hospital in Pendlebury. After gaining some experience she then decided to undertake her general training at the General Infirmary at Leeds. An outstanding student she was a member of the first group of only nine nurses to graduate with a Diploma in Nursing awarded by Leeds University in 1926 gaining a First-Class Honours in Anatomy and Physiology.

Progressing quickly through the ranks of nursing Florence was appointed Deputy Matron at Clayton Hospital in Wakefield in 1930 before returning to Leeds Infirmary to the appointment of Deputy Matron in 1933.

In July 1935, following the announcement of the retirement of Matron Elizabeth Edmondson, Florence Kaye applied for the position of Matron at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and, after a successful interview on the 8th of August, she was offered and accepted the position on the same day.

It is interesting to note that, according to her obituary in the Independent newspaper, Florence Kaye was originally supposed to interview for the position in July but was overseas in the Soviet Union studying the health service under the 10-year Soviet plan, reflecting her interest in the state provision of health care. Apparently, Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Directors were so keen to interview her that they allowed her to defer her interview until August 8th.

When the new Matron commenced her role on October 1st, 1935 the plans for the "Joint Hospitals Scheme" were well underway. The new Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital had already officially opened on January 31st, 1929 on the Burnside end of what would become the Foresterhill campus with extensions added in 1934. Thanks to an extensive fund-raising campaign building work was underway for the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary to open in 1936 and Aberdeen Maternity Hospital, to open in 1937 as well as for a new nurses' home and facilities including a Joint Steam Laundry for the site.

Matron Florence Kaye was responsible for taking on the responsibility of planning and implementing the transition and transfer of nurses and patients from the existing Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, based at Woolmanhill in the city centre, to the new much expanded Foresterhill location. Given the large expansion in staff requirements she also had to manage a recruitment drive overseeing the appointment of many new staff including nurses, maids and masseurs (now called physiotherapists). In addition, given the creation of a nurses' home linen and supplies had to be ordered for the new homes and plans had to be made to move nurses to the new facilities.

Thanks to the remarkable efforts of Matron Kaye and her staff the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary opened as planned on the 22nd of September 1936 at a ceremony presided over by the Duke and Duchess of York.



Photograph showing nurses parading past the new Aberdeen Royal Infirmary at Foresterhill on the opening day in 1936

In addition to her duties as Matron of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and her responsibilities relating to the implementation of the “Joint Hospitals Scheme” Florence Kaye was also appointed to the position of Principal Matron of the 1ST Scottish General Hospital of the Territorial Army Nursing Service. She was to serve in this position through World War 2 until the disbandment of the service in 1950.

In 1951 Matron Kaye, as a mark of respect for her service as Principal Matron with the Territorial Army Nursing Service, was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the New Year’s Honours List.

An advocate for the professional status of nurses Florence Kaye was a committed member of the Royal College of Nursing. She assumed the role of Chairman of the Scottish Board of the Royal College of Nursing in 1945-147 and was a member of the UK Council of the College. She also was an active member of the General Nursing Council of Scotland, elected Convenor of the Council's Education & Examination Committee in 1944, as well as being an active member of the Scottish Matrons' Association and the International Council of Nurses. She also went on to serve as a member of the Scottish Health Services Council from 1951 until 1954.

A strong supporter and advocate for the creation of the National Health Service she argued for the representation of nurses in the management of the new system and was the first nurse to be appointed to serve on the North-East of Scotland Board.

Throughout her time as Matron at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Florence Kaye worked tirelessly to enhance the training of nurses. She advocated for nurses to have protected study time away from the wards and in 1948 introduced a block training system which allowed nurses to have systemic teaching and to have time set aside for sitting examinations.

In addition to supporting the training of nurses, one of Matron Kaye's legacies at the hospital is the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and Associated Hospitals Nurse's League which she founded in 1937. The League, the first of its kind, was set up to allow existing and former Infirmary nurses to meet annually to discuss advancements in nursing as well as to socialise. As a result of the League's discussions it was agreed that Aberdeen Royal Infirmary should have a badge to show their pride in the institution and a new badge was created for nurses in 1937.



In 1958 Matron Kaye decided to retire from her position at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and to settle in Harrogate, Yorkshire where her late parents' had lived. She was

fortunate to have a long retirement during which she kept in touch with other Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Staff.

As a tribute to her work as Matron and as a major contributor to the success of the “Joint Hospitals Scheme” Florence Kaye was invited back to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in September 1986 as an “Honoured Guest” at a special exhibition to mark the 50th centenary of the opening of the hospital.

On December 28th, 1998 Florence Kaye celebrated her centenary along with her former physician friend Lady Aberdeen. Articles were posted about the special occasion in Aberdeen newspapers and she responded with letters of thanks for good wishes and gifts including a crate of champagne sent to her by the Aberdeen Nurses League. In a letter sent to the Aberdeen Press & Journal and printed in the paper on the 28th of December 1998 she noted

“I’ve had a wonderful life. In my head I do not feel 100. I had a wonderful time in Aberdeen and still have many friends in the city”.

Florence Kaye died in Harrogate on the 8th of May 2001 at the age of 102. In a wonderful obituary published in the Independent newspaper she was recognised fondly for her incredible achievements.