

History of Highland Hospitals

Families Maternity Hospitalⁱ Fort George Ardersier 1913

Traditionally, families lived with troops in the barracks at Fort George. There was a military hospital in the Fort but no community nurse and, by 1900, as local nursing associations became established, the disparity in family welfare between military and civilian life would have become increasingly apparent. In 1899, Mrs Douglas Campbell (right),ⁱⁱ an officer's wife, visited Fort George and found family medical care provided by an untrained woman in nearby Ardersier and 'an old doctor whose advice in illness was 'Keep your windows shut' '.



Fort George was the Depot of the Seaforth Highlanders who, in 1906, invited the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association (SSFA) to appoint an Alexandraⁱⁱⁱ nursing sister. A SSFA Nursing Committee was formed which Mrs Douglas Campbell chaired until 1910. In 1907, SSFA spent £400 on building a nurse's cottage and, in 1909, the Seaforths held their first Torchlight Tattoo in Inverness to fund a bathroom for it with a second tattoo the following year. The military married quarters were then very basic and the Fort's MO considered them unfit for childbirth. He and Mrs Campbell, with her husband's agreement (he was now Battalion CO), identified a site, drew up plans and persuaded the War Office to provide maternity facilities. In 1912, a Montrose firm erected a two bed

ⁱ Technically, a nursing home rather than maternity hospital.

ⁱⁱ The Honourable Violet Averil Margaret Vivian, daughter of a baronet married Lt Col Douglas Campbell later Brigadier-General and 20th laird of Douglas of Mains.

ⁱⁱⁱ With the RAF in 1918, it became the Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA). It supplied nurses to areas of need with a local commitment to fund raising. Queen Alexandra was SSFA's first president and their nurses, from 1892, were called 'Alexandra Nurses'. Not the same as Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service - the Army Nursing Service from 1902.

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maternity hospital costing £800 although, by then, the regiment, and Mrs Campbell, had moved elsewhere.¹



The hospital - the only such SSFA facility in Scotland - was situated beside the nurse's cottage outside the ramparts just to the east of the Ravelin Gate Bridge. It had its first two cases in July 1913 and, the following year, of the nurse's 72 cases, 28 were maternity. This level of maternity cases continued and, in 1916, SSFA enlarged the hospital to a third bed which was funded by the 'Officers of the Depot'. The above photograph is from around 1917 and shows the original nurse's cottage on the left, the hospital on the right and the connecting 1916 extension behind the central group of figures.

Nurse Hutchinson was in post when the hospital opened but, in 1912, she was posted to Egypt and was succeeded by Nurse Jessie Owenⁱ who brought her mother as cook. In 1934, Nurse Owen and her mother retired having delivered 353 babies. Her second delivery, in 1913, had complications and the case went to Nairn Hospital but it is not clear if Nairn or other civilian hospitals were used at other times. Miss Owen seems to have been well regarded, for example, she was guest speaker at

ⁱ Mrs Campbell was closely involved in recruiting her and said she looked far and wide for someone with special qualities for life at Fort George.

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the Ida Merry Home AGM in 1930. The picture below, from around 1920, shows her with her mother Mrs Bowdenⁱ at the hospital.²

During the hospital's first decade, SSAFA gave an annual grant of up to 60% of costs but, by the 1930s, this was normally around 25%. The hospital also apparently received a small government grant. The



remainder came from ongoing local fund raising mainly by the Seaforth Highlanders and other regiments stationed at Fort George. From at least the early 1920s, much of the funding came from a large annual fete which continued into the 1930s and 1940s.

There were also annual dances in the 1930s.³

By the 1930s, it was known as the Garrison Family Hospital. In 1938, a trust formalised an executive committee and confirmed that the hospital was for the wives of soldiers deployed at Fort George, wives of civilians working there,ⁱⁱ and wives of soldiers from other regiments living locally. In 1939, the trust fundsⁱⁱⁱ were transferred to the Seaforth Highlanders Regimental Association and, from then, the committee was entirely made up of officers rather than their wives as had been the case initially.⁴

It seems to have closed during the Second World War but reopened thereafter. After 1949, with services now available from the NHS,

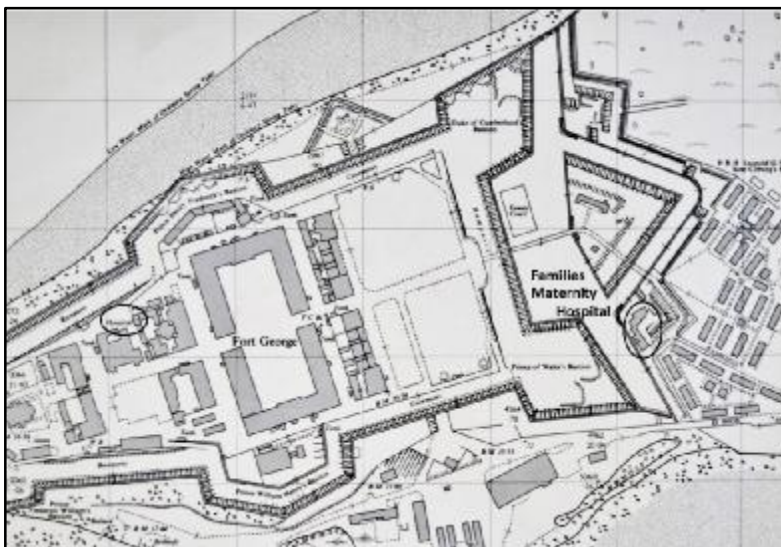
ⁱ Mrs Bowden reached 100 years old in 1942. Nurse Owen died in 1948.

ⁱⁱ The local minister's wife gave birth there in 1925 (Scotsman 19 June).

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1966, transferred to Seaforth Highlanders Family Welfare Fund in Aberdeen. By then, the Depot was in Aberdeen and the maternity unit had closed.

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SSAFA no longer financially supported the hospital. This prompted renewed local fund raising and a hospital fee was charged although the main funding came from the Depot using profits from the Fort George piggery.ⁱ In 1954, a fete raised over £1,000. The voluntary committee continued to run the hospital as well as maternity and child welfare clinics. Up to 90 children attended the welfare clinics and there were around 12 births each year but records of births cease after October 1956 when Nurse Wemyss was in post.ⁱⁱ The hospital closed in November 1956 although the local authority continued clinics for antenatal and other cases for a time. The hospital then became residential before being demolished around the late 1960s.⁵



The above plan of Fort George⁶ shows the Families Maternity Hospital on the eastern (right) end of the fort (circled). Also on the map is the location of the military hospital (also circled) to the west (left).

ⁱ Two pigs were champions at Nairn Show in 1950.

ⁱⁱ In post from the 1940s.

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References

- ¹ Much of the information in this section is from SSAFA Annual Reports held in the SSAFA Archive London
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- ³ Inverness Courier 3 August 1928: Scotsman 4 September 1935
- ⁴ Fort George Maternity Hospital Trust Settlement of Scheme 1965 National Records of Scotland: The Courier 17 February 1912
- ⁵ Caberfeidh September 1954: Inverness-shire Medical Officer of Health Annual Reports: Cumming *op.cit.*: Personal communication (Kirkhill March 2014)
- ⁶ Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 NH7656/7756 1964