



The Princess Helena and Ethel Mary Fletcher Fund for Nurses

This fund has been established from four former charities: The Ethel Mary Fletcher Fund, The Trained Nurses Annuity Fund, The Helena Benevolent Fund and The Royal British Nurses' Settlement Fund. These funds were previously managed by the Royal British Nurses' Association and have now been entrusted to the Company of Nurses.

The Royal British Nurses' Association

The Royal British Nurses' Association (RBNA) was founded in December 1887. Dr and Mrs Bedford Fenwick met at 20 Upper Wimpole Street with a number of other 'medical men and matrons' to discuss the founding of an organisation of nurses similar to the British Medical Association. Mrs Bedford Fenwick's main aim was the registration of nurses. A council of Doctors, Matrons and Nurses was formed and drew up the constitution for the RBNA. Her Royal Highness Helena, Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein (the 3rd daughter and 5th child of Queen Victoria) agreed to become the first President.

In 1892 the RBNA received its Royal Charter. Princess Christian in her speech made clear that the RBNA was working towards "*improving the education and status of those devoted and self-sacrificing women, whose whole lives have been devoted to tending the sick, the suffering, and the dying*". In the same speech, Princess Christian warned about opposition and misrepresentation nurses had encountered. Although the RBNA was in favour of registration as a means of enhancing and guaranteeing the professional status of trained nurses, the RBNA Charter allowed it to maintain a list, rather than a formal register of nurses.

Shortly before her death in 1923 Princess Christian, who designed the RBNA badge, told an officer of the RBNA, "*I have loved the Association and I gave it my father's motto - 'Steadfast and True'*". So often she was heard to say of the RBNA, "*The Association shall choose the course it thinks right and I shall firmly stand by it*".

In the 30 years between the formation of the RBNA and the Nurses Registration Act 1919 there was considerable controversy over registration of nursing even within the RBNA. It took

attempts in 1904, 1909, 1913, 1914, 1918 before the Nurses Registration Act became law. Many at that time, including Florence Nightingale with her powerful influence, were concerned that organising nursing would lose the '*Vocational Spirit*'. Those supportive of this new approach included the Matron of St Bartholomew's Hospital Miss Isla Stewart and Matron of Charing Cross Hospital, Mary Cochrane.

The RBNA was certainly one of the first associations of nurses in the world and was the first body of women to receive a Royal Charter. It also held the first ever register of nurses, was the first organisation to establish an examination for a Diploma in Nursing, and the initial steps and plans for the foundation of the Princess Christian's Army Nursing Reserve were made around the RBNA Council's table. The RBNA also established the first Co-operation of nurses in order that, in place of a salary, the nurses should receive the full charges made for their services, less a small commission for working expenses

Very early on the RBNA set up schemes for the benefit of nurses in sickness and old age. For some years the RBNA managed a home for retired nurses but this was lost through enemy action in World War 2. In more recent years the aims of the RBNA were to administer four charities, the Ethel Mary Fletcher Fund, The Trained Nurses Annuity Fund, The Helena Benevolent Fund and The Royal British Nurses' Settlement Fund.

Kings College, London maintains an extensive archive of the RBNA including other documents that relate to the nursing profession

<http://www.kingscollections.org/catalogues/kclca/collection/r/10ro65-1>)

Many of the original documents including the approval of the RBNA Bye-Laws granted by the Lords of the Privy Council and the Petition from Princess Christian asking Queen Victoria to grant a Charter of Incorporation to the RBNA are still in existence. The RBNA archives hold the minutes of the meetings going back to 1887 and other papers that describe some of the debates and struggles going on in nursing before the Registration Act. This is an invaluable insight into the early years of the nursing profession. It would appear that many other documents have found their way into the RBNA archive including papers from the Society for the State Registration of Trained Nurses and many of Mrs Bedford Fenwick's papers. The Register or the '*List of Names*' as the protagonists preferred it to be called is the most important document the RBNA held. It was restored at Windsor Castle in 1989 and contains 10,000 names.

The RBNA survived due to the valiant efforts of many but particular mention should be made of: HRH Princess Christian as President up to her death in 1923; Mrs Bedford Fenwick who kept in close contact with the RBNA up to her death in 1947; Isabel Macdonald who remained secretary of the RBNA up to her death in 1964; and Ann Campbell whose legacy is recognised

in the Ann Campbell Royal British Nurses' Association Award Fund administered by the Company of Nurses Charitable Trust. Richard Bowden should also be recognised for his work in archiving much of the RBNA material over several years.

The RBNA has donated the money for a bench in memory of Ethel Bedford Fenwick which is now in situ in St Helena's Church, Thoroton, Notts near her grave. The bench is inscribed with the RBNA logo with an inscription across the top "*Ethel Bedford Fenwick, The First Registered Nurse*". The RBNA also paid for the restoration of the grave of Annie Brewster in the City of London Cemetery which had fallen into disrepair. Annie was born in St Lucia and became a probationer nurse at the Royal London 1884.