The Latest:

Grave restoration ceremony for pioneering nurse Annie Brewster

On 29 March 2022, leaders from the English nursing and medical professions, the Corporation of London, and other supporters came together at the City of London Cemetery in the London Borough of Newham to mark the rediscovery and restoration of Annie Catherine Brewster's resting place. Alexis Keir, Public Participation Manager in our Public Participation Team shares his reflections on the life, contribution and legacy of Annie Brewster, one of the first Black nurses to have been identified as working in Britain, and who was renowned for the dedicated care and kindness she gave to poor, elderly patients with eye problems.

The hub story:

Grave restoration ceremony for pioneering nurse Annie Catherine Brewster – The Vincentian 'Nurse Ophthalmic' 1858 - 1902

By Alexis Keir: Public Participation Manager in our Public Participation Team

Annie Catherine Brewster was born on the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent in 1858. Her father, Pharour Chaderton Brewster was a Black merchant of Barbadian descent. When Annie was twelve, he took her, her sister and the girls' stepmother to live in England. Annie's family settled in South London, and in 1881 at the age of 23 Annie began her training as a nurse at the London Hospital, now called The Royal London. In 1893 Annie's father, sister and stepmother moved to the United States, but Annie stayed behind in England and continued working at the London Hospital.

When I visited Barts Health NHS Trust Archives and Museums in 2021 the skilled and dedicated staff there helped me to trace the path and progression of Annie's nursing career at the London Hospital which had been recorded in thick, heavy volumes of training and ward records.

One glowing reference in the training reports said that Annie was *'a thoroughly satisfactory probationer…. quick, thorough and active. She was a favourite with all the sisters under whom she worked…. She was gentle and kind to her patients…'*

However, as a result of my research I did have doubts about how Annie's skills were initially valued and recognised. A different record said that Annie apparently initially failed her nursing examination because of her 'lamentably deficient education' rather than any lack of nursing skills. This despite the fact that nine years later in 1890 despite the earlier judgement about her education, Annie wrote a long and extremely eloquent letter which appeared in the London Daily News defending the hospital against accusations that nurses were treated to harsh discipline and unduly onerous tasks with poor meals and inadequate consideration of their welfare. But nonetheless Annie did receive a certificate to the effect that her work was excellent and her conduct very good. She was appointed to the hospital's nursing staff in 1884 and in 1888 gained the title of 'Nurse Ophthalmic'. This was not just the designation of the ward she became responsible for, but over time an expression of deep affection conferred by her colleagues.

Annie gave the London Hospital 20 years of service, becoming much loved especially for her work with elderly patients with eye problems. But she passed away unexpectedly aged 43 on the morning of Tuesday 11 February 1902 on the hospital's Victor ward, where she was receiving what was meant to be a routine operation to remove 'a large fibroid', not thought to be malignant.

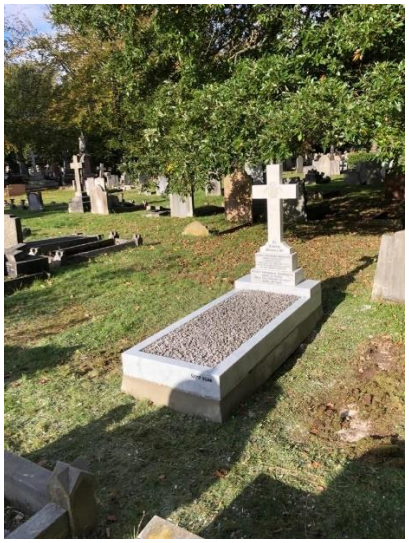
Annie was much mourned – her Matron's entry in the Register of Sisters and Nurses noting her death said:
'Annie Brewster, best known to all her Hospital friends as "Nurse Ophthalmic," spent the best and happiest years of her life at the London Hospital…… With her quick intelligence she became very skilful in the treatment of eyes and her kindness to the poor old people who passed through her hands during this period was unwearied. Hospital friends mourn her loss and keep her in affectionate remembrance.'

Annie was buried on Valentine's Day, 1902. No family were present. She was laid to rest in a plot owned by the London Hospital and paid for by the hospital governors.

Annie's story might have ended there, except that 117 years later in 2019 a historian called Stephen Bourne went in search of her resting place. Bourne is a diligent researcher of the presence and contribution of Black people in British life. The cemetery's administrators expressed strong doubts that after such a long period any physical indication of the grave would remain, but after searching for several hours he found what he was looking for: a large heavy stone cross, broken and deeply buried in thick grass and the memorial stone bearing a dedication. He had to use tissues to uncover Annie's name, but it was there.

Sidebar:
"Annie was clearly a trailblazer, and she is understood to be one of the first Afro-Caribbean nurses who worked in Britain during the late 1800s. I am so pleased that the significance of Annie and her story is now being discovered, celebrated and recognised, and her contribution is just one example of the importance and impact people from other countries have had, and continue to have, on healthcare in England.
"While we must continue to improve equality for our NHS people and celebrate their diversity, I am proud to say that now around one in seven NHS staff in England report a nationality other than British, and more than 200 different nationalities are represented within our vibrant and diverse NHS family."
Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent OBE our Chief Midwifery Officer.

The grave before restoration



The grave after restoration

The ceremony

His Excellency Cenio E. Lewis, High Commissioner for St Vincent and The Grenadines, and Alexis Keir, manager in our Public Participation Team

On Tuesday 29th March 2022, leaders from the English nursing and medical professions, the Corporation of London, and other supporters came together at the City of London Cemetery in the London Borough of Newham to mark the rediscovery and restoration of Annie Catherine Brewster's resting place. The restoration was jointly organised by the Company of Nurses and the Royal British Nurses' Association.
Moving addresses were given by the Master of the Company of Nurses, Mrs Frances Davies, and the President of the Royal British Nurses' Association, The Rt Hon Anne Milton.

The day ended with an address by His Excellency Cenio E. Lewis, High Commissioner for St Vincent and The Grenadines. The High Commissioner noted that nurses from Saint Vincent were still following Annie's path to come to England to support, develop and enhance the NHS. And his final comments were about vision, the field in which Annie had developed her expertise. The High Commissioner made the point that vision is about seeing in all sorts of ways: knowing what is in front of us, understanding what is real and not real, and our belief in what is possible. Annie Brewster in her selfless dedication and lifelong service laid examples for us all in every single one of these ways.

About the Author

Alexis Keir is a manager in the NHS England Public Participation Team. He is also a writer whose family are from the island of Saint Vincent. Alexis has been researching the lives of Vincentians, like his own parents and the Vincentian nurse Annie Catherine Brewster, who over the last two centuries made the journey from the Caribbean to begin new lives in England.