

# Bygones



The 20th century revisited – with archive photographs and readers' own contributions

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## College founder pioneered care

THE only child of Sir Redvers Henry Buller and his wife Lady Audrey Jane Charlotte daughter of the fourth Marquess Townshend, Audrey Charlotte Georgiana (Georgiana) was born at Downes, Crediton in Devon on August 4, 1883.

From the start of her life she was greatly influenced by her father's exemplary Army record, he having served as a successful General before retiring to Downes to become a country gentleman in the early part of the twentieth century. For a soldier to have survived many major battles into retirement was in this period, unusual to say the least.

Having inherited many of her father's qualities including that of leadership (which in his case had seen him fighting at the forefront of major battles in Canada, South Africa, Egypt and China), Georgiana, an only child, was initially educated at home. She was soon seen as a head strong and determined girl at whatever she chose to do. In 1907 she attended the Phonetic Institute Bath and there gained a Pitman's Shorthand Certificate before in her late twenties becoming involved with the newly formed Voluntary Aid Organisation (VAO) later to be renamed the British Red Cross Association. Her decision to assist the VAO was to be a precursor to her helping numerous charities.

In 1914 Georgiana was appointed the VAO Deputy County Director in Devon. Her many hobbies included reading and gardening but, like her father, she was also an excellent horse rider, often seen at the hunt. As preparations for the First World War were put in hand it was during 1914 that

### Famous DEVON FIGURES

Awarded the Royal Red Cross for her work in supporting charities, in the 190th of this series Torbay Civic Society Chairman IAN L HANDFORD examines the life of LADY GEORGIANA BULLER

Georgiana fell from a horse and seriously injured her spine. During her convalescence the VAO approached to ask for her assistance with the provision of extra hospital beds in the Exeter area. This made her determined to immediately end her convalescence.

The VAO wanted to establish 160 extra hospital beds in Exeter in preparation for what they believed would be the impending casualties of war. Within a year their estimate had been exceeded when no less than 1400 additional beds created. Although this was a staggering increase, in fact all of the beds were in constant use at Exeter's now renamed hospital — the Red Cross Voluntary Aided Hospital.

Not long after the establishment of the additional accommodation the War Office were given full responsibility to run all military hospitals. Thankfully they recognised Georgiana's potential and appointed her Army Chief Administrator at the again renamed hospital, which now became the Central Military Hospital Exeter. With the affiliation of no less than 48 small auxiliary hospitals put under Army control in Devon, the enlarged complex was renamed again, to become the Exeter War Hospital.

Georgiana was the first woman in the Army to play such a major role and now her career mirrored her father's, demanding high standards and discipline and always total commitment. This led to some staff believing her unreasonable although she

never expected any more of them, than of herself, which in time gained her the respect she was due. Throughout the war her hospitals admitted over 35,000 patients and most on average stayed 25 days. With the war over, and because it was some time before she was demobbed, she was by then both physically and mentally drained.

In 1920 the now renamed British Red Cross Society awarded her a Royal Red Cross (First Class) and on December 24, that year she became a Dame of the British Empire. Having recovered her good health it was not long before Georgiana was being approached again, this time by two leading Devon clinicians who wanted to establish a county orthopaedic hospital. Having carried out her own investigations, Dame Georgiana soon determined there was indeed an acute need for such a hospital. Dedicating herself to the new cause she soon found that most children suffering from orthopaedic problems, had no hospital alternative and were being treated at home. In realising the task before her required a major commitment of time and tremendous funding, neither fazed her. The new project was pursued with her usual vigour and six years later in 1927 the doors of the Princess Elizabeth Orthopaedic Hospital, Exeter were finally opened to young patients for the first time.

In retrospect it seems that Dame Georgiana had made her objective in life to ease the pain and disability of others

because in addition to the amazing achievement in establishing the Princess Elizabeth hospital she also founded and worked for the Central Council for the Care of Cripples and was Chairman of the Devon Association for Cripples Aid. As if this was not enough she also served as a Justice of the Peace for more than 20 years and used her strategic ideas and great vision to assist numerous committees. Finally, she was a keen supporter of the Girl Guide and Boy Scout movements and assisted the St John Ambulance Brigade.

Her undoubted visionary ideas ensured the establishment of new training colleges to assist the disabled. She was convinced that physically disabled people needed rehabilitation facilities in order that they might ultimately take their rightful place back in the community. This ensured that the disabled were given every opportunity to obtain intensive professional training. Her first college, St Loyes Residential College of Training and Rehabilitation of the Disabled Exeter was established in 1935 and today the building exists not far from the University campus. The college was unique and although initially there was much opposition from those unable to understand her vision, she eventually enlisted the support of Labour Minister Ernest Bevin who understood her ideas which ultimately allowed disabled people an opportunity to return to the workplace. Georgiana later established her second college, the Queen Elizabeth Training College at Leatherhead.

As Chairman of St Loyes for many years, Dame Georgiana then established a British Council for Rehabilitation. Founded on the belief that State resources ought to be combined with voluntary effort for the benefit of the disabled, by 1947 this extra-ordinary visionary had additionally initiated



LAUDED: Dame Georgiana Buller (right) in 1951

preparatory training courses for those facing long stays in hospital which even included access to academic work. Financial resources then as now, were a determining factor when trying to establish anything new, but it seems that Georgiana was as adept at raising finance as she was at attracting an ever increasing number of volunteers to her causes.

Her vision and her expanding army of volunteers ensured that many amazingly events were held. The volunteers ran a "flower ball" at the Savoy Hotel, London in 1947 while at Exeter they even undertook a playtime exhibition. Being a member of the Ladies Empire club Dame Georgiana was influential in all things she did. She continued her interest in all the departments of her colleges even though they were constantly expanding. By retaining a hands-on role she was sometimes portrayed (as reported in an Annual Report of one College) as being far too persuasive, yet her vision and wishes were generally admired, so much so that ultimately even sceptics embraced her ideas.

With the establishment of colleges these were later copied by a rival group who

then established Portland College at Nottingham. Using a similar mission statement to St Loyes, Portland College became the model to a number of other similar establishments around Britain. Dame Georgiana would indeed have been proud of her vision in creation.

On March 11, 1953 as guest of the weekly BBC programme Woman's Hour, Dame Georgiana was publicly able to explain her extraordinary work for charity on behalf of Britain's disabled. Knowing her father had never had this airtime opportunity (although he is often remembered by historians) we can only wonder how Sir Redvers might have inspired others into active service, thus mirroring his daughter's actions for her many charitable causes.

On June 22, 1953 Dame Georgiana Buller DBE, worker and benefactor extraordinaire for charity, died at her Bellair home on Topsham Road Exeter from insidious carcinoma. Today she lies still at the Holy Cross Church Crediton in her beloved East Devon.

For further information about Torbay Civic Society write c/o TCS 137, St Marychurch Road, Torquay TQ1 3HW.



HOME BASE: Dame Georgiana Buller's home Bellair, Topsham Road which shows the damage it sustained in wartime time bombing in 1942



MODEL FOR MANY: St Loyes College in Exeter which was founded by Dame Georgiana Buller in 1935