

BOW-LEG SAMMY
Heward Coupe

In 1942, Heward Coupe, a Scout with 173rd Sheffield (St James' Mission) Group was awarded The Cornwell Certificate, one of the highest bravery awards of the Boy Scout Association.

He wrote his story.

This is it.

Chapter 1

Recollections

My recollections of childhood come flooding back to the hours I laid in the boys' ward in the Children's Hospital, Western Bank, Sheffield.

Night-times were always the worst as I remember. The noise of the trams grinding along up the hill, the flashes from the connecting wheel making contact with the overhead wire. The flashes always seemed brighter on dark, rainy nights. I don't know why, but they did.

Turning my head toward the back of my bed, I would stretch out my hand, running my fingers along the patterns of the tiles until I could follow the patterns no longer. Then, trying just a little harder to reach a little more only to be reminded by a sharp pain from my leg, that my reach was exhausted.

I would make some sound or whimper, hearing Night Nurse's voice whispering, "Lie still".

Glancing down the bed, I could see through the rails, Nurse sat at the desk looking towards me, her finger to her lips, "shushing" quietly.

I could see her face clearly from the beam of light which shone from the arched green shade of the lamp on her desk, her starched cuffs neatly placed beside her. The glint of the scissors and watch which were fastened neatly to her blue dress. The dazzle of a white apron and cap, a wisp of hair protruding from the cap.

Quietly, she withdrew her chair and came towards me, leaning over the bed,

"Be a good boy," she whispered, "and go to sleep," a phrase which I had heard many times before. "Night Sister will be coming soon". Soothing my head with her hand, I knew I must try to be quiet for I knew too well that Night Sister could be very strict.

"Would you like a drink". "Yes please, Nurse".

She gave me a drink from a drinking mug which was like a small teapot without a lid. I remember well the cold sweet lemon drink. These mugs were only used until we could sit up and drink from a cup. Then, lifting my head with one hand cupped around it, she would reset my pillows. As she did, I can still remember the clean, fresh smell which came from her.

Nurse began to tidy my bed and tucking me in tightly, I could hardly move my arms.

"We don't want Sister to see an untidy bed now, do we?"

At this remark I would turn my gaze to the Ward door in the hope that if Sister came in, I would pass muster. The door would open, Sister would appear and I would quickly close my eyes tightly, in the hope that if she looked in my direction, she would assume that I was asleep.

On making her entrance, the Ward would suddenly take on a different atmosphere, one of fear.

Squinting through my half closed eyes, I could see her dark blue dress, white apron, her small head-cap which was quite distinct from Nurse who, by this time, had begun to put on her cuffs as a

sign of respect, I now realised, as one of the expected courtesies afforded to Sisters, night-time or daytime.

Sister began glancing through Night Nurse's reports, whispering her instructions to a very attentive Nurse, then proceeding to make her bed-round, stopping occasionally at some child's bed, taking down a chart, making some comments to Nurse and then pass on down the Ward.

Stopping at my bed, reaching for the charts, she would read them, look down at me and then to Nurse. She would make a little "uhmmm...ing" sound. Turning the sheets back over the cage, she would inspect my toes which were tightly encased in plaster. She would then move my toes backwards and forwards, which were very painful.

"Try to move your toes, now come along, you must try".

Half asleep, I would try to obey the command, knowing that if I didn't she would repeat the operation. With that in mind, I would try by sliding my hands to the side rails of my bed, gripping as tightly as I could, to ease the impending pain. From past experience, I knew that if I did not move them, out would come the plaster shears, little slits would be cut in and around my toes which was even more painful.

Having succeeded, she would replace the sheets roughly, and with a "good boy" she would pass on down the ward. A quick word or two with Nurse and then she would float out through the door like the Queen of the Night from Mozart's 'Magic Flute'. At the departure of Night Sister, Nurse would remove her cuffs again, neatly placing them on the desk.

A quick look round the Ward, noticing my bed had been left untidy, she came across to remake it, again pinning my arms down.

"You were a good boy when Sister came."

Then returning to her desk, I felt I had won that little battle.

Chapter 2

The Admission

I was beginning to feel drowsy now, but not quite ready for sleep. I could hear other children coughing, stirring in their sleep, creating a restless atmosphere on the Ward. The never ending sound of trams.

Someone dressed in a theatre gown came in. She approached Nurse and in a hushed voice said something to her at which, Nurse rose from her chair indicating that the bed next to mine was empty.

Turning my head I immediately knew what she meant - an admission. I roused myself, coming back to normality quickly. I thought - "who could it be?" Another boy, of course. I wondered what it would be this time, a broken arm or leg or something more serious. Wait, watch and see, I thought.

Nurse had, by this time, switched one of the overhead lights on to enable her to prepare the bed. Also, to avoid waking the whole ward.

The bed, when finished, comprised of a mattress, rubber and draw sheet combined. All the sheets and blankets had been neatly folded together in such a way as to make one large neat blanket, then placed at the foot of the bed. The theatre trolley came in and was wheeled to the bedside. The boy was carefully lifted onto the bed.

"The bed-cage, Nurse, please," someone whispered.

Moving quickly, she was gone, returning with the cage and placing it over the boy's legs. Then folded the blanket - just like wrapping a parcel. It was fascinating to watch.

Nurse brought the screens and placed them around the bed, tightly together, to keep little prying eyes like mine from seeing what was taking place. Ah! But if you were clever, by moving your head backwards or forwards slightly, you could just see between the down-rail of the screen and the edge of the curtain. I could see the boy's face. His head was rolling from side to side. He was making whimpering sounds, also crying a little.

Nurse came from behind the screens and went to the sluice room, returning with the washing trolley, collecting the towel and pyjamas from the ward chest on the way back. She began to wash him very carefully, He didn't care for that much. He kept whimpering as she dried him, then she sprinkled the powder over him. She then carefully dressed him just like a little girl dressing a dolly. Of course, I could dress myself.

This task completed, she tucked him in. Then removing the trolley back to the sluice, she shortly returned with a chart-board and thermometer. Taking his temperature and pulse which were duly noted on the chart-board, she then went away after saying goodnight to Nurse.

"What's your name?" asked Nurse.

"Walter", came the reply.

"Oh, Walter who?"

He murmured something I didn't quite hear, but no matter, I knew his first name. I would have someone to talk to in the morning.

"Are you asleep?" Nurse asked as she turned her head round the corner of the screen.

I did not answer.

"You're not, are you? You can't fool me, you know."

I saw you peeking through the screen, you little nosey parker," she said with a slight smile.

With my eyes closed tightly I said, "Sorry Nurse."

"Of course, if you talk in your sleep, I won't bother to bring you a cup of cocoa."

At this, my eyes opened widely and she went away chuckling. Five minutes later, she returned carrying a hot mug of cocoa.

"Shush, and don't wake anyone, or no more drinks for you my boy. Drink it now and go to sleep."

I did, of course. Shortly after I fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Morning Duties

Waking early to a crescendo of increasing activity on the ward, with light switches being turned on, other children playing in their cots or beds, the volume of noise rather depending on what state of recovery you were in after your operation. While other boys like myself were still recovering from the effects of the ether, like drowsiness and a very dry mouth. Sometimes you could chase your tongue round the outline of your lips, feeling the slight burns on them, a condition relieved by a sip of that lemon drink. Looking back for a moment, I've had a few pints of beer in my time, but none so refreshing as that lemon drink.

Then the routine of the day would begin, temperatures and pulses were taken, duly noted on the charts. Nature calls were answered with bedpans and bottles. Then out from the sluice would come the washing bowls along with the dusting powder, the white spirit and Vaseline which were permanent fixtures on the trolley.

Having your face and hands washed carefully by one of the day nurses who came on early duty, I remember how much better you felt. An exercise I overlooked once out of hospital, at home with my four brothers and sister. Only to be reminded by my mother. "What a nice , clean lad you were when you came home, tut ... tut ... tut ... now look at you!"

Breakfast came and, reaching for our diet cloths, a sort of large size feeding bib, we had porridge, bread and butter with jam and a feeding cup of hot, sweet tea. Sometimes, a boiled egg and toast.

After clearing away the breakfast pots, bed making. This was an art consisting one nurse on either side of your bed. They would peel back the sheets and blankets with great precision, placing them over a chair until they came to your bed cage. In this, they would see your leg which had been slung up and tied with a bandage in a hammock-like form. Untying the knot and lowering your leg to rest upon the bed was very painful. Then the draw-sheet. Being asked to raise yourself on your elbows while nurses swept away any remains of toast or any other offending objects which, in a very short time, would result in a very sore bottom. Having done this, they would re-sling your leg, a quick look at the toes, then proceed with great skill to make your bed until they came to the counterpane. Now this was the '*pièce de résistance*'. When this operation was finished, it reminds me now of the very neat Christmas parcels I receive from my wife.

Bed-making completed, the nurses would then start to dust the ward. The desk first and then the long ward chest with its polished top, umpteen draws and cupboards which contained pills and bottles of various sizes and colours, bandages and splints. There was another cupboard to which only Sister and Staff Nurse had a key. That was the Drug Cupboard. What was buried in there I never really fathomed, at least not then.

Whilst other nurses dusted around your bed, another would carry out the flowers, which had been kept in the sluice room all night, and place them around the ward, which, when finished, looked very lovely. With the beds all neat and tidy, they were lined up like guardsmen on parade, I might add. Also, those blue and white counterpanes so immaculately tailored.

About now Staff Nurse would arrive and having consulted Night Nurse about the overnight happening, Night Nurse would gather up her belongings, with a little wave bid us goodbye went away

leaving Staff Nurse and her charges to prepare for the arrival of Day Sister, which was an everyday event, but to me, at that time, was the symbol of authority. Also to some Staff Nurses but definitely the junior nurses.

Upon her appearance, she would just stand inside the door, casting her eyes round the ward, a little smile on her face indicating that she was pleased with its appearance.

"Good morning Staff Nurse, good morning nurses."

With another little sweep of her eyes, her smile now broadening - "Good morning children."

We all replied with various degrees of volume, again depending on how well you were.

Moving directly to her desk, by now of course, Staff Nurse had neatly placed her cuffs about her wrists whilst the nurses who were still busy with their duties after responding to Sister's greeting, carried on with added zest.

I knew by now, having spent years in and out of hospital, and so many operations, what form the next two hours would take.

Chapter 4

Pre-Med for the Doctor

The ritual of bed-rounds began with much the same procedure as Night Sister, with one slight difference. No whispering now. That is not to say Sister spoke loudly, certainly not, but she did possess a certain manner in her voice which left you in no doubt whatsoever that she was Sister.

"Mr Fawcett and Mr Holdsworth¹ will be coming this morning, Staff Nurse."

I could hear her quite clearly.

"So let's have everything ready and looking nice."

"Very well, Sister," replied Staff Nurse.

I had somewhat misgivings about his visit. Would he or would he not wriggle my toes? Of course he would - you should know better that that lad! I would recognise him when he came in.

"He's my new Doctor now. Dr Broadley used to be, but not now," I said to my mate in the next bed.

"Who?" he replied, "Dr Fawcett?"

"Nooo, Dr Holdsworth."

"Oh," came the reply. Following on, he asked, "Does he 'urt yer?"

"Well, only a little bit," I said, "sometimes." For I was much older than he was and Sister expected the older boys not to frighten the younger ones, which had the effect of making you feel a tiny bit important.

"I want to go home to me mam, I don't like it here," he cried.

"Shush. Don't shout. Sister will hear you."

"I don't care if she does. I want to go home to me mam," he said as the tears welled in his eyes.

I've done it myself, but I knew it was to no avail. I used to cry sometimes when they used the plaster shears, but I also knew by now that you couldn't go home just by crying. The crying continued. I turned my gaze across to Sister who was looking in my direction. Our eyes met.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Sister," I replied "It's Walter. He wants to go home."

"Oh dear," she replied. "I'll come over in a minute. Talk to him then, Heward, until I get there."

"Yes, Sister."

¹ Sir Frank Wild Holdsworth, FRCS (1904-1969)

He was still crying.

"Hey!" I said, "Would you like a spice?"

"Nooooo!" came the reply. "I want to go home to me mam," he said as the tears began to flow freely, streaming from his eyes down his cheeks.

"Listen," I said. "Doctors will be coming soon and when they've seen you they might let you go home."

"But I want to go home, NOW," he cried louder.

At this, I knew that all my efforts to console him had failed. Sister duly came over. Leaning over the cot, her voice changing to a half whisper, almost soothing, she said, "Now, now, Walter, be a good boy, don't cry."

I knew this wouldn't work, it never worked on me when I was his age.

She would then take down the side-rails of his cot and sit on the bed with her hands clasped in her lap, gently taking his.

"Can you take me home, Missus, pleeeeeease."

"No, Walter, not today, but soon," she said.

'Missus', I thought, now what will she say? But she never said a word, only to reassure him that he would be going home soon.

I later tried to explain who the woman he had called 'Missus' was. He knew Nurse as 'Nurse', but Sister, she was dressed differently which may have confused his understanding.

Days later, I think he understood because Sister sometimes, if you were very poorly, would give you just a little more attention. She seemed to have the gift of being able to deal with any situation and always would appear to be in complete control.

It was now approaching time for the dressing trolley. It was brought in by the Staff Nurse followed by a young nurse. It was spotless, white and clean, and contained basins of various shapes and sizes, tweezers and scissors and a collection of other instruments. Rows of sticking tape, neatly arranged along the side-rails and on the bottom shelf were those dreaded PLASTER SHEARS. A strong smell of ether and other antiseptics seemed to encircle it. I did not need it, thank goodness, for my wounds were encased in plaster, but some children would for the children in our ward were not all plastered up. We sometimes had children in from other wards when their ward was full, so their dressings had to be changed.

It was getting time for the doctors to arrive, but before that, we always had bottles and bedpans and of course ... bed tidying.

"Children, I want you to lie as still as you can when the doctors come," Sister said. "So put your toys in the lockers, please. Ask Nurse to help you if you can't do it, and NO talking when the doctors are here."

I knew that was coming the moment Sister stood at the door of the ward in that certain stance.

Chapter 5

The Arrival of Doctor

The doors were opened and fastened back for the great entrance of the doctor and his students.

"Hey, Walter," I whispered. "That's Doctor Holdsworth in the middle."

Sister would be in close attendance now, after placing cuffs about her wrists.

We were not all his patients, but Sister would guide him with great assurance towards his.

Silence descending upon the ward as if by magic and he would ask the Staff Nurse to uncover your bed, head or feet depending upon where the injury or operation was. Looking down, he would make a quick inspection of his handiwork. Turning to one of the students, he would say, "Mmmm, what do you make of that, laddie?"

Mmm, the student would do one of two things. Either press his hands deep into his pockets, make some instant diagnosis - which was wrong - or be brave and examine the surgery which had been done.

Looking at Mr Holdsworth and beginning to speak in 'Doctor's' language which, if correct, would bring an instant response from Sir, like - "Very good, laddie, very good indeed."

At this, the other students would look at each other wondering who would be next.

Moving down the ward very slowly, Mr Holdsworth would be talking to his students. He asked questions as he walked along. Stopping abruptly sometimes and turning on his heels, doling out case histories of the children in his care. They listened with great respect for he was a very clever and talented surgeon.

I realise now just how gifted he was, when I look at my feet sometimes and think how fortunate I am seeing and remembering other children I knew. Much later in my life, I learned that he had received a knighthood for his work. It was in orthopaedics. Only once did I have the opportunity to thank him. It was many years after, when I was in the Royal Infirmary, Sheffield. He performed his last surgery on me. It was late one evening. He came into the ward to inspect my foot, along with a Sister Poole, I think her name was. They were talking at the foot of my bed.

"Excuse me, Sir." I remember he looked towards me.

"Thank you for all you have done over the years for me, sir."

He looked deeply at me for a moment and then at Sister. Turning to me again and tapping his hand on the foot of my bed.

"That's alright, George," and walked away.

As he did, I thought - "He must remember me after all these years - 'George', he said. That's the name he used to call me by when I was a boy."

I saw him two or three times after that when I attended outpatients. I shall always carry the memory of that bed encounter. I should explain why, if only to try and express my personal gratitude to all the nurses, sisters and doctors and administrative staff of Western Bank who, through care, devotion to their calling in life, and if I may say it, love, helped one little crippled boy to a full and normal life, after what must have seemed to my mother and father at my birth, almost impossible. For you see, at birth, I was diagnosed as having a very severe congenital condition known as talipes². To you and I as laymen, my feet were back to front and locked together. A further complication appeared some six or seven weeks later, namely infantile paralysis³ which must have added to the doctors' problems.

Between being admitted to the children's hospital at some four or five weeks to reaching the age of fourteen, I received some twenty-seven operations under Doctors Broadley, Fawcett and Mr Holdsworth.

The references which I have made in previous chapters are memories of a child of some six or seven years of age, but are indelible. Not at all painful times, but to give this reader some guide as to what life was like in hospital in 1933, as I remember. You may say: "How can I remember so far back in my life?"

After writing some thousand words or so, I thought the same. I put my pen down. Could my imagination be running away with me? Had my 39 years in amateur theatre had some influence on my thinking - Walter Mitty, perhaps!

With that thought in mind, I rang from my home in Leicestershire to Western Bank Hospital. There, I was connected to a Miss Ashe. I gave her a brief outline of what I was attempting to write. She was most helpful and two days later I received a copy of a publication by a well-known local historian and writer, a Mr Peter Harvey who, in 1976 had written a history of Western Bank Hospital dating from 1888-1976.

I opened the book and there on page 16 was a photograph of the boys' ward, virtually as I have described it. To say I was astounded would be an understatement, I just could not believe my eyes. I knew that I had to put some credence to my writings, and there it was.

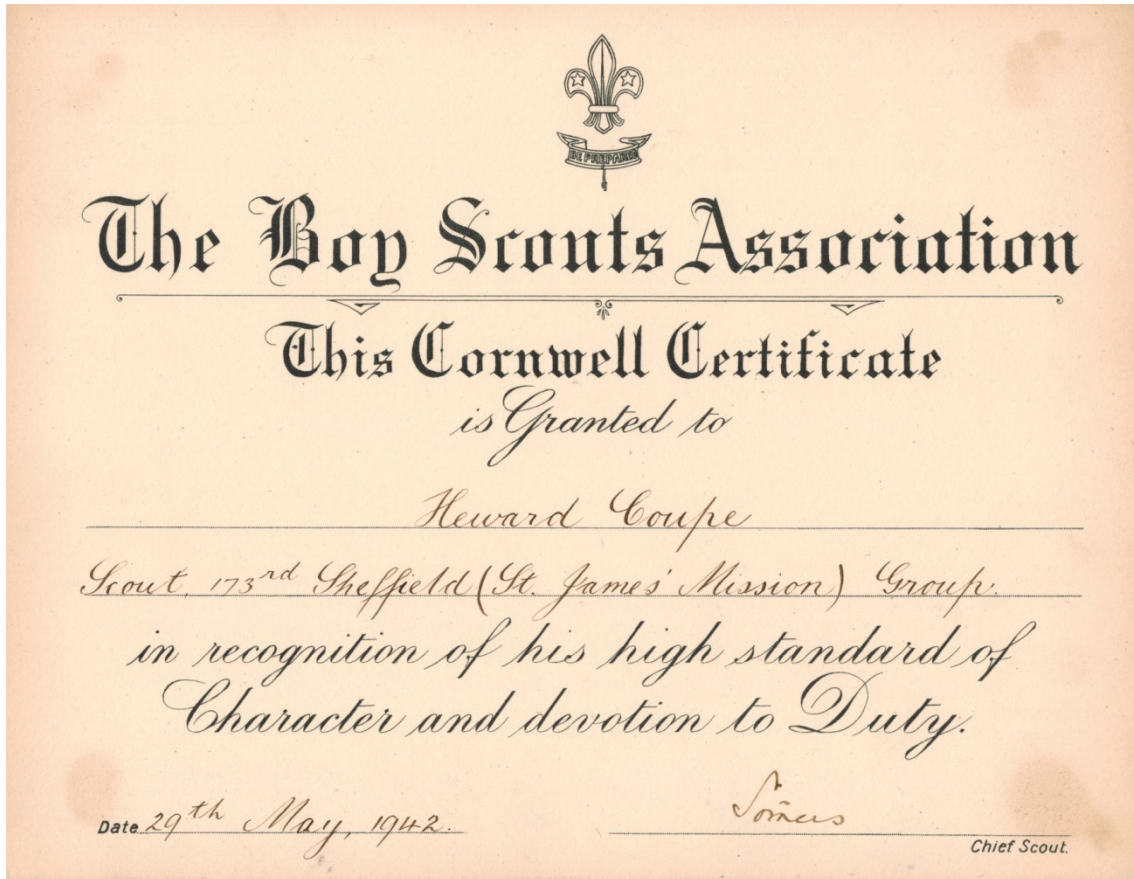
I am sure that, whatever my achievements have been, they are largely due to the influence of the sisters and nurses who taught me to read and write when time permitted, my BC and many other things like obedience, self-respect, the will to get better which I have tried to live up to all my life.

So, children, there is a brief account of my early life. I hope it will help you to understand and to be grateful for the help and care you are receiving, as Western Bank Hospital helped me.

I hope, one day to sit down and continue to write the rest of my experiences, of Christmas-time in hospital, Easter-time and many other happy times I spent there. Till then, may God bless you all.

² Commonly called 'club foot'.

³ Poliomyelitis



The Cornwell Certificate and Badge⁴.

⁴ The Cornwell Scout Certificate was introduced around 1936 for awarding to an individual who did not quite meet the requirements for the Cornwell Badge. Later there was a small cloth badge that was to be worn on uniform. The last one was issued around 1971.



Heward Coupe receiving the Cornwell Certificate in 1942. It was presented by the Lord Mayor of Sheffield, Mr Charles Mitchell



The Boys' Ward, Sheffield Children's Hospital⁵

⁵ Peter Harvey, *Up the hill to Western Bank*, The Centenary Committee, Children's Hospital, 1976, p 16