

## Miss Jessie Brown MBE

*“My hope is that there will be accommodation of this kind in every village in the country.” – Miss Jessie Brown MBE.*

Jessie Vera Lawford Brown MBE died on 14 April 1983 at the age of 95. She had a remarkable career, one achievement being the foundation of Reepham Housing Trust – eight bungalows for the elderly/disabled known as Sunbarn Walk.

Jessie was the only daughter among seven children of Colonel F.D.M. Brown VC. Her early education was directed by a series of governesses, but later she studied history at the Oxford Home Students (now St Anne’s College). Her academic career was discarded when she joined her friend Olive Sankey and answered an appeal from Agnes Hunt, the founder of a new hospital at Baschurch in Shropshire, to train in orthopaedic nursing. After two years Jessie passed the examination for the Society of Trained Masseuse (now the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy).

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Agnes and Jessie went straight over to France but were soon frustrated with conditions over there and returned to Baschurch, which became a military hospital. It became obvious that aftercare clinics had to be established in the main market towns of Shropshire, but transport was a problem. Undaunted, Jessie acquired a second-hand motorbike, learnt to ride it and by 1917 thirteen orthopaedic clinics had been established throughout Shropshire. In 1918 Mr G.R. Girdlestone asked Jessie to help set up clinics in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. He could offer no salary but arranged a small sum from a special Red Cross fund if a survey of all disabled people in the area was carried out – just the sort of challenge Jessie enjoyed.

In 1924 Sir Robert Jones received a call for help from Nepal. Princess Mani, the five-year-old niece of the King of Nepal, was ill with poliomyelitis and it was decided to send Jessie to help. Within three days she set off by sea to Bombay, then overland to Kathmandu. There was no road from India to Nepal in those days, so Jessie was either carried or rode on the back of an elephant for the three-day journey. During the next 10 years she visited this brave little girl several times and after Mani’s death in 1935 a ward was built at the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre as a gift from her grateful parents.

Everyone who knew Jessie Brown was constantly reminded of her aims – that every patient must be instilled with the real joy of life irrespective of their handicap and that one must work until the disabled person is independent and can earn a living. It became necessary for Jessie to return home to Yateley to look after her ageing mother, but she soon had the outbuildings of her home converted to a unit where physically handicapped people could learn hand-block printing. Grace Finch, a patient at Henley Clinic, was persuaded to come to Yateley to help and together they soon had money raised and a training scheme for handicapped girls was launched. New buildings were opened in 1952 and bungalows in 1956. Yateley Industries is now a most successful residential sheltered industry and employs more than 40 men and women.

In 1968 Jessie “retired” to Reepham, so it was during her retirement that she was the inspiration behind the building of eight bungalows for the elderly/disabled which became Reepham Housing Trust.

Jessie placed little importance on personal possessions and was therefore able to move on without regret and full of enthusiasm for a new venture. In 1952 her work was recognised by the award of an MBE but she appeared far more interested in the success of her many projects. Many of us feel privileged that she touched our lives and hope we can pass on some of her enthusiasm and joy of life.

*Jan Henry*

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