

Health and Humanity The Philanthropic Medical Workers of St John's in the Late Nineteenth Century Part 2

This is an edited version of a talk given by Dr Jenny Stephenson for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor on 27 March 2026.

I have already introduced you to three of the prominent medical personnel among our pew renters in 1890-91. This week I share with you the history of two people, neither doctors nor academics, whose wealth, talents and care for others changed the well being of many in Sheffield and in Europe.

Lady Frances Hadfield (1862 – 1949) : Pew 5

Mrs Marianne Hadfield was the renter of the pew. She was Robert Hadfield's widowed mother. His father (also Robert) died in 1888 and the family moved from Whirlow (from his house called Parkhead) to Fairfield in Ranmoor.

Frances Belt Wickersham was born to a wealthy American family in Philadelphia. Her father was a steel company executive. The family met Robert Hadfield (1858-1940) who visited Philadelphia from his father's steel firm in Sheffield to learn about their business. Robert and Frances married in 1894 and moved back to Sheffield where Robert ran his father's steel firm. He went on to become Master Cutler in 1899 and was knighted for his discovery of Manganese Steel in 1908. This stronger steel had important engineering uses, especially during the war.

When the First World War broke out, Robert Hadfield generously gave money for the war effort, but it was his wife who used the money and her many skills to great effect for British and American soldiers in a war-torn area of France. Despite the great risks, she bravely travelled to France in 1914 to set up a busy war hospital, using the £75,000 (equivalent now to about 9 million) which her husband made available to her.

Lady Hadfield trained as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse. We see her in the photograph in the uniform.



Lady Hadfield in the First World War

Above this though, lady Hadfield, fluent in French, used her considerable administrative powers to set up and run a 100-bed emergency hospital in the building of a large hotel in Wimereux near Boulogne. It came to be called The Lady Hadfield Hospital.

She was an excellent administrator with a heart motivated by concern for others and a desire to help injured and dying soldiers who had put themselves in danger for their country and others. The injured were transferred to her hospital daily from camp hospitals on the front line, often in huge numbers. It was very busy all the time, day and night, and she organised a very effective nursing and ancillary team to cope with the demand. She was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1918 for services in the war. The hospital closed in 1919 having treated over 16,000 patients.

With the coming of the Second World War, Sir Robert again gave funds – this time of one million pounds, (equivalent to 120 million today), as did the Hadfield's friend Major-General Sir Edward Louis

Spears. Lady Hadfield was entrusted to use it wisely for the coming humanitarian need. She was by then 77 and directed everything from home.

She and Lady Spears created a mobile field hospital, which occupied an area at the battlefront and took in the casualties. It was referred to as the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance and was vital because it moved with the front line. It made its way across France via Bordeaux to Arcachon, re-equipped in Britain briefly before locating in the Middle East then North Africa, Italy and finally in France where it was dissolved in 1945.

It thereby had taken care of around 22,000 wounded patients and arranged appropriate evacuation across three continents, masterminded by Lady Hadfield.



Grand Hôtel des Anglais et des Bains de 1914 à 1919 Hôpital N°5 Croix Rouge Britannique.



Nov 23-28 Rue Carnot, ©2020 Wikimedia - courtesy of Google Maps 2023

The Lady Hadfield Hospital 1914 and 2004, photographs with thanks to her family.

William Edgar Allen (1837 – 1915) : Pew 68



William Edgar Allen

Edgar Allen did not have a direct connection with medicine, but he owned a Sheffield steelworks. He was a very caring gentleman, and felt a responsibility for his employees injured in the course of the work, and who needed swift and affordable recuperation. He used his funds in 1911 to open a facility to rehabilitate workers from his own and also other local steelworks and pits who were affected by industrial accidents.

Edgar Allen Institute in Gell Street offered physiotherapy and exercise to damaged stiff joints and muscles, these treatments enabling men to work again. He paid for the equipment and running costs fully himself. This was before the NHS in 1948.

However, during the First World War the value of the Institute was recognised and it was then used for men invalided or discharged from military hospitals.

Inventive and responsive, Edgar offered another wartime public service: he set up a local fire brigade. Each man wore a tin hat, but these hats were lined with leather to protect the fireman's head from scalding.

Edgar was not in good health for quite some time, dying abroad in 1915, leaving a legacy of £2,000 a year for ongoing costs of his Centre.

From 1st Nov 1946 his centre became known as Edgar Allen Physical Treatment Centre, moving to West Street. During the Second World War it offered further capacity for treating wounded soldiers as well as the local patients. It eventually closed in 1979 as its physiotherapy services moved up the road to the Royal Hallamshire Hospital.



Author's photograph taken at the National Emergency Museum, West Bar 2025.