

Miss Margaret Kerr MBE (1925-2008)



July 1962
Sister Kerr at work in the Edinburgh City
Hospital

Margaret was born on 8th February 1925 in Bellingham, Northumberland – a fact she denied in later life as she considered herself a proud Borderer! Her father, Rev. Robert Kerr, was minister at Longformacus and, later at Kelso North and Smailholm. Margaret and her younger sister, Berta were sent to Esdaile School in Edinburgh which educated the daughters of Church of Scotland ministers. She had vivid memories of Friday night bus trips back to Smailholm in the depths of winter.

Life in the Manse at that time of Depression was not easy. The kindness and generosity of neighbours made a lasting impression on Margaret and gave her a genuine affection for country folk.

By this time, she had decided on a nursing career and volunteered as a Red Cross VAD attached to the Royal Navy in Caithness. She recalled VE Day – emptying ashtrays in a ward full of cheering sailors!

By 1950, Margaret was training at Chalmers Hospital in Edinburgh. She then became a Ward Sister in the City Hospital. In the 1970s, a serious hepatitis outbreak occurred. In his book about the City Hospital, Dr Gray wrote:

“Miss Margaret Kerr was in charge of Ward 16A where most of the ill patients with hepatitis were nursed. She bravely led a devoted team of nurses who coped in inadequate accommodation with this distressing and politically sensitive outbreak. In 1973 Sister Kerr was justly recognised for her services during this difficult time by being awarded the MBE”

Friends and colleagues from that time remember Margaret as a dedicated nurse – but also as a formidable ward sister. One former member of the City staff still recalls a glamorous young nurse being sent to wash her face before appearing on her ward – heavy make up not allowed!

When her parents retired to West Linton, Margaret and Berta came to live at home whilst continuing to work in Edinburgh. Eventually, Margaret was needed to care for her mother and sister. She became a member of the local District Nursing team and was able to work in the rural areas she loved.

Margaret and Berta had several years together to work in their garden and entertain friends. A new bungalow was built to improve accessibility for Berta, and Margaret continued to organise a fulfilling life for them both. When Berta died, Margaret found a circle of friends to help and support her while she insisted on maintaining her independence. She died peacefully at home on 29th March 2008.

Margaret loved her dogs, her garden, her books and Border rugby! She was a trusted friend and confidante. But nursing was indeed her life and what mattered to her always was the care and comfort of those in need.

The Creation of 'The Margaret Kerr Unit'

When her sister became terminally ill, Margaret was deeply worried that it would no longer be possible for her to care for Berta at home, and that she would need to become a patient in a palliative care unit (often referred to as a hospice) in Edinburgh. This would have involved a lot of travel and difficulty for Miss Kerr and she felt that her sister would have much preferred to spend those final days at home in the Borders.

Margaret shared with close friends her wish that one day the Borders could have its own palliative care centre. After Berta's death she had no immediate family and it was suggested to her that she might consider making provision in her Will that the bulk of her estate should be made available to help to create such a facility in the Borders. Margaret agreed to this suggestion on the proviso that the medical and nursing professionals in the Borders actually wanted this to happen. She further provided that this opportunity should be explored by her Executors after her death but that, if after a couple of years or so there was no sign of any commitment emerging in the Borders, the funds set aside under her Will should be applied for the benefit of the wider hospice movement in Scotland.

So it was that, after Margaret's death, a Charitable Trust in her name and in her memory was established, and the bulk of her estate was invested for the charitable purposes which she had expressed in her formal writings and in her conversations with her two closest confidantes, who became the Trustees of 'The Margaret Kerr Charitable Trust'.

It became apparent that there were many people in the Borders who shared the same aspiration of creating a palliative care facility in the region, and Margaret's legacy has been the catalyst for the creation of this much needed facility. The Trustees of Margaret's estate have been fully involved at all stages of the project, and are proud and delighted to see the project move forward.

They feel sure that Margaret would be absolutely delighted to see her dream come true for the people of the Borders, and be honoured that the unit will be named in her memory.

1973

Margaret with her mother and sister after receiving her MBE at Buckingham Palace

