KINGSWOOD HOUSE RESEARCH PROJECT

This research was produced as part of a collaboration between the Dulwich Society Local History Group and Kingswood Arts, the community group that runs Kingswood House in Dulwich. We researched the servants who worked in Kingswood House when it was a private home and a community artist then made an exhibition to share the stories, which now hangs in the café at Kingswood House. If you are related to one of the families who served the house please get in touch, the Dulwich Society would love to hear from you. Email history@dulwichsociety.com
For details of the house and the other servants who worked and lived there please go to https://www.dulwichsociety.com/local-history/kingswood-house-who-worked-in-a-house-like-this

IRENE LAYMAN 1888 to 1973
Masseuse (Pioneer Physiotherapist) Massey Harris Convalescent Hospital WW1
Kingswood House Dulwich

During WW1, the Massey Harris Company took over Kingswood House, Dulwich on behalf of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the CEF, for use as a convalescent hospital attached to the Bromley Hospital, which was treating wounded Canadian soldiers. The convalescent hospital was staffed mainly by Canadian Doctors and Nurses but there were some local volunteers, mainly younger ladies, who helped with the treatment and nursing of the soldiers. Irene Layman was one of these local ladies. She took on the responsibility of undertaking physiotherapy to assist and speed up the recovery of the wounded soldiers. At the time physiotherapy was in its infancy and she was referred to as a masseuse.

She kept an autograph book, which was filled with the comments, poems and cartoons of her patients. Amazingly, this autograph book turned up in the drawer of a sewing machine in a Winnipeg flea market and is now available online at Autograph Album of Irene Layman | Canadian War Museum .

So, who was Irene Layman? In the 1911 Census, she is 23 years old and living with her father, Arthur, and five siblings at 4 Dulwich Wood Park, Upper Norwood. She is the oldest of Arthur's children. They were all born in Bermondsey or Croydon but she was born in Kansas City in the USA. It is not clear what her parents were doing in Kansas in the 1880s, but by the early 1890s when her sister, Rhoda was born, they were back in London. Arthur lists his profession as jeweller or silversmith and on the death of his father took over the family pawnbroking business in Bermondsey. He was a long-term Bermondsey Councillor and in 1910/11 he was Mayor of Bermondsey. Sadly, Alice, his wife and Irene's mother had died of cancer in 1906. During Arthur's time as Mayor, Irene would accompany him to functions in the role of Mayoress.

Douglas, her brother, was educated at Dulwich College from 1906 to 1913. On leaving the College, he went to St Thomas Hospital to study medicine. On the outbreak of World War One in 1914, he went to France to serve first in a base hospital and then as an assistant surgeon on a hospital ship. However, he felt that he should be fighting at the front and enlisted in the Lancashire Fusiliers. Sadly, on 22nd February 1916, his first day in the frontline he was shot and killed. This must have had a traumatic affect on the family. Early the next month, March 1916, preparations began at Kingswood House to convert it into a convalescent home for wounded Canadian soldiers. Representatives of Massey Harris, the Canadian agricultural machinery company, had identified it as a suitable house and grounds for the convalescent hospital that the company wished to set up as their contribution to the war. The hospital, which officially opened in June 1916, was right on Irene's doorstep.

There is no record of her official medical training but this was a time when all willing volunteers were welcomed. The Massey Harris Hospital produced a regular printed bulletin. Bulletin 10, November/December 1916 reports the recruitment of an unnamed local masseuse, “specially qualified in massage and the “Swedish Movements,” which sometimes form a necessary adjunct.” Irene is named in a group staff photo in Bulletin 15 for August/September 1917 and from this she can be identified in an earlier photograph of the massage patients and nurses for June 1917. The earliest dated entry in her autograph book is April 1917 and the latest October 1918.

Like many of her contemporaries, especially after her hospital experiences, she probably found it hard to settle back down to pre-war life. In March 1921, Irene emigrates to Canada. Her Canadian immigration papers state that she is coming for an extended visit, her occupation is masseuse but she intends to carry out domestic work. Her destination in Canada is MacRorie, Saskatchewan, a very small rural settlement and her contact there is listed as Covellio. She was joining Arnold, her other brother, who is listed alongside her and the Covellio family, in the Canadian Census of 7 June 1921. He had emigrated in 1919. Arnold, born in 1896, had studied at Dulwich College and served in the Northants Regiment in WW1.

On 14 February 1928, Irene married William Henry Mellow in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He was a farmer and in the 1931 Census she now calls herself a homemaker and her allegiance is to Canada.

Her father had died in September 1927. He had remarried in 1917. In his will he had left £2000 to his wife with the remaining some, £6800 split between Irene and her two sisters Rhoda and Marjorie. A reasonable inheritance for that date. Rhoda was married and Marjorie was single and worked as a school secretary in Bexhill. Marjorie is recorded on passenger lists as travelling several times to Canada to visit Arnold and probably Irene as well. Irene and Arnold are also listed on passenger lists as separately visiting England in the 1950s. So, the family kept in touch.

In February 1960, Willliam Mellow died at Sanford, Manitoba. Irene and William are not recorded as having any children. It seems that her and Arnold’s ties were with their sisters and their families in England. In October 1960, She and Arnold travel to England to stay in Bromley, where Marjorie was living. They planned to stay for 11 months. However, Arnold died in July 1961, in hospital in Maidstone. It seems that Irene decided to stay on in England. She died on 3 September 1973 in Havant, Hampshire.

So, what happened to her possessions in Canada? Were they mostly sold off, including her sewing machine with its hidden treasure? The autograph album was found by Dick Steppler when he bought the sewing machine at a Winnipeg flea market. He was fascinated both by Irene and a particular entry in native American. He sent it to the producers of a Canadian TV series “Ancestors in the Attic”. They researched the album and broadcast a programme based on it in 2006. Unfortunately, the programme does not seem to be easily accessed in the United Kingdom. A digital version of the album is available online as detailed above.

In 2010, Irene Layman was cited in an article of the pioneers of physiotherapy by Suzanne Evans, “Coming in the Front Door a History of Three Canadian Physiotherapists through Two World Wars”. The article quoted a poem by Private C P McCathy from the autograph album which stated how appreciated was the strong and painful massaging which helped patients regain use of their hands and limbs. This was just one of over fifty entries that bring to life the humour and stories of the wounded Canadian soldiers that Irene treated.