

## The Servant's Bell

Lissie House was an adventure playground for us patients.

A huge old grand country house built in a bygone era for the Richardson family, local linen mill owners in Lisburn, and their servants. (Apparently it was built around 1807. In 1941 its owner, one Colonel Lindsay offered it to the Belfast Hospital for Sick Children as a refuge from the air raids on the city of Belfast. In 1947 the house was bequeathed to the hospital and was used as a childrens convalescent home until 1988.)

It had a grand entrance hall with a curved staircase up to the first floor. Each of the huge rooms had very high ceilings and a very fine ornate fireplace. Of course some the rooms had been converted into hospital wards when I was there but you could still see that we were in a grand country mansion.

Old buildings have always fascinated me. I love castles and old tumbledown cottages. I often imagine the lives of the people who originally lived there. Lissie was no different in that respect. I tried to examine every detail of the old house. I regularly sneaked out of my ward and went 'exploring'.

One of the first places I found at the back of the house was the kitchens. A huge room filled with shiny stainless steel and huge hanging pots, spoons and knives. The main appliances in the kitchen had obviously been modernized as it looked just like a school canteen kitchen. I was amazed to find another set of smaller stairs towards the back of the house. These also went to the first floor. They ended in a 'secret' door in an upstairs corridor. It was 'secret' because from the other side of the door it looked like there was no door there at all. These were obviously servant's stairs. Finding the stairs got me to thinking and wondering about the lives of the servants. They had a lot of fires to set and keep stocked with coal and turf. Did I not read somewhere that bells placed in the best rooms called the servants? So I went searching. Right enough I found the little call buttons in my own ward. Just each side of the large fireplace was a round wooden button with wires coming out of it.

These bells were not original to the house and had been installed much later. I then went searching for possible locations for where the bell wires ended. I felt there needed to be some sort of call-box indicator to let servants know what room they were wanted in. After some searching I found a small, unused annex to the kitchen and there high on the wall was a wooden box with names of the rooms on it. Wooden steps I had found near the back of the house helped me to get up and examine the box. It obviously didn't work as I had already tried the buttons. However there was a large metal electrical switch alongside it that was pointing OFF. Excited in my discovery I carefully switched it ON. Nothing happened. I scurried down and made my way back to my ward. Once I pressed the button in my ward I could hear the faint ringing of the call-bell way back in the kitchen annex. It only

rang for a short time though some of the nurses heard it too and wondered where the noise came from.

After that first time I had great fun. I kept ringing the bell at odd times and from different places in the house. I told a few of my friends and we had great fun pressing the buttons and ringing the bell. The poor nurses were exasperated trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. One of them even started to believe that the house was hunted.

We were caught of course. Mary, in the girl's ward, was too slow getting back into bed one night and after questioning, she told all. I had to show the Staff Nurse where the bell was and they got an electrician in to disconnect it.

It was great fun while it lasted.

