

Nightingale and Workhouses

After the wave of workhouse creation prompted by the 1834 New Poor Law, workhouses were gradually integrated into aristocratic visiting practices to the local poor.

In 1858, Louisa Twining set up the Workhouse Visiting Society, aiming to draw the attention of the middle and upper classes to poor standards of health and nursing care in workhouse infirmaries.

Nightingale took a strong interest in workhouse infirmaries – the only hospital-type institutions available to 80% of the population – and was a passionate advocate for their reform. She saw no reason why workhouse inmates should receive inferior medical and nursing care simply because they were poor. Indeed, she opposed the central idea of the Poor Law, arguing that ‘the principle must be not to punish the hungry for being hungry’.

In 1865 she proposed three key measures that she called the ‘ABC of Workhouse Reform’. Point A was that the treatment of sick, insane, incurably ill people – and of children in general – should be completely separated from the system dealing with the able-bodied poor. Points B and C proposed a centralised management system for medical relief, financed through government taxes, to ensure universal provision. This was, in effect, a proposal for something approaching a National Health Service, more than 80 years before the NHS was created.

When the Nightingale School for training nurses was created at St Thomas’ Hospital, London in 1860, it

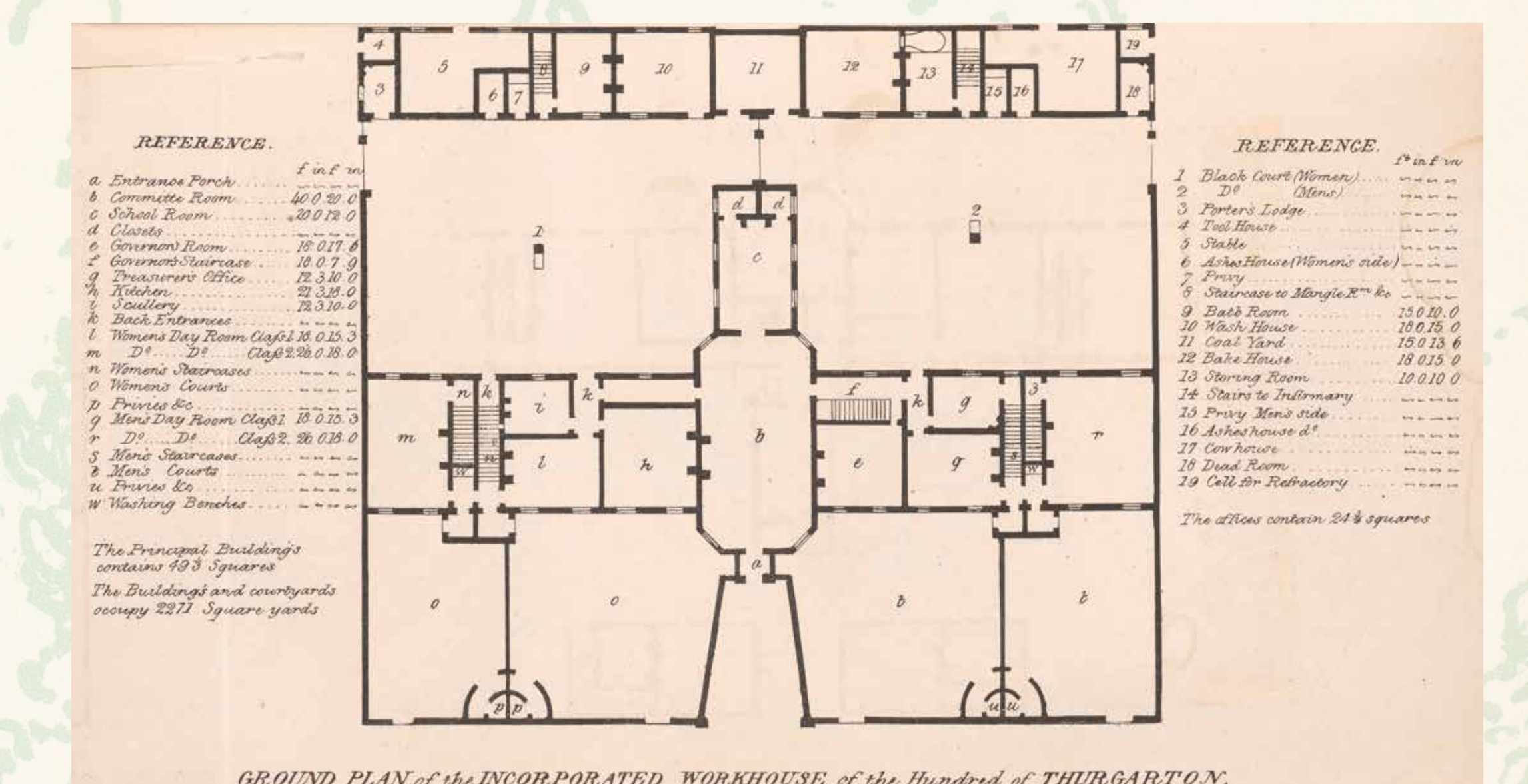


Florence Nightingale and Sir Harry Verney with a group of nurses, n.d. Claydon House Trust, Verney/Claydon Estate Papers, From Verney 13/47.

quickly began preparing nursing teams to send into workhouse infirmaries. Assisted by funding from philanthropist William Rathbone, the first team entered Liverpool’s Brownlow Hill Workhouse Infirmary in 1864. However, this mission had a tragic outcome when the matron, Agnes Jones, a protégée of Nightingale’s, died of typhus and exhaustion in 1868 – a reminder of the risks being run by those who sought to improve conditions in neglected and underfunded infirmaries.



Marylebone Workhouse, new casual ward for the poor, 1867. Courtesy of Wellcome Collection.



Floor plan of Thurgarton workhouse from *The Anti-Pauper System* by John Thomas Beecher (1834). The infirmary can be seen labelled ‘k’. East Midlands Special Collection Pamphlet, Not 414.L44 BEC.

