

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6625

Bolam, Elsie Rose Beatrice

(1880 - 1965)

Born 1 January, 1880, St Kilda Victoria

Died 1 September, 1965, Marysville Victoria

Summary

Elsie Rose Beatrice Bolam (MBE), born in St Kilda, Victoria in 1880, was awarded an Order of the British Empire – Member in January 1960, for services to the community of Marysville, Victoria. She was particularly honoured for her work as an unpaid community nurse, but was also highly valued for her role in promoting tourism to the Marysville district in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. She described herself as ‘Marysville’s best advertisement,’ because she came to the town with the intention of staying for only a year, but instead ‘stayed for a generation’.

Sister Bolam lived most of her adult life in Marysville, working as an ‘honorary doctor’, a tourism officer and a guesthouse proprietor. She loved the native flora and fauna of the district and, in 1922, donated a parcel of land along the Steavenson River to the community for the purpose of fencing it off to create a koala reserve.

Elsie Bolam passed away in September 1965. She never married and lived most of her life in the Marysville house she bought in partnership with her dear friend, Lesley McGowan. She was dubbed ‘Marysville’s Florence Nightingale’.

Details

Elsie Rose Beatrice Bolam was born in St Kilda, Victoria in 1880 into a family that was under stress. The 1883 divorce petition of her father, Thomas Bolam, Inspector General of State Schools in Victoria, against her mother Eva (nee Gill) was played out acrimoniously in the daily newspaper reports of the Supreme Court proceedings, as each parent accused the other of adultery and other forms of mistreatment. A jury was never able to decide the case, so the couple eventually reconciled. The toll on Thomas Bolam’s professional reputation and mental health proved too great for him to bear; he died, possibly from an overdose of chlorodyne, in February 1884. His wife, who passed away in 1928 outlived him by over forty years. Elsie cared for her mother, one way or another, for most of her adult life. She stepped in to relieve Eva Bolam from her duties as Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages for the Armadale, Malvern and Toorak district when she needed a break and cared for her mother when she came to live in Marysville.

Other than this, we know very little of the circumstances of Elsie Bolam’s early life and childhood. We do know, however, that Elsie trained as a nurse and that the relationships she established during this period would be life altering and life-long. One of them, with Miss Helena Brayshay, probably brought her to Marysville around 1914. Another, with Miss Lesley McGowan, was a close friendship that lasted a lifetime.

We don’t know for certain when, where and how Elsie Bolam and Helen Brayshay met, but it is possible that Brayshay, born in 1863, a nurse and nurse educator, met Bolam while she was in training (in Melbourne or Beechworth) or in her early years working in small private hospitals. Likewise, Lesley McGowan (also a nursing sister) and Elsie Bolam possibly met when they were training. Eventually, they all ended up living in Marysville. *Kerami*, the guesthouse that Brayshay bought there around 1914, was the focus of their lives for many years to come.

Brayshay probably bought *Kerami* in 1913 and she asked Bolam to take over the running of the place for a year in 1914. When the year was up, Elsie decided to stay in Marysville and the rest is history. After Brayshay died in 1919, leaving Elsie with some of the proceeds from her estate, Bolam, in partnership with Lesley McGowan (who had continued to work as a nurse in small hospitals around central and southeastern Victoria until at least 1916), purchased *Kerami*, which they then ran for several years. They obviously did a very good job of it: *Kerami* attracted a ‘social’ enough clientele to regularly make the pages of Table Talk. In 1920, they built tearooms, which they called ‘The Crossways’, near the Steavenson River Bridge. In 1922 Elsie donated a parcel of land to the community that was fenced and made into a koala reserve.

Nursing didn’t bring Elsie to Marysville, but her dedication to her vocation is what made her ‘a legend’ in the area. After

arriving in Marysville in 1914, Elsie Bolam served as town's honorary doctor for thirty-five years, taking a break during World War 2, when she temporarily moved back to Melbourne to work as a tourism officer but also as part of Melbourne's emergency services. Marysville's permanent population was too small and 'too healthy' to support a resident full time doctor, so both Elsie and Lesley stepped in to offer assistance. Given that the nearest doctors were either at Black Spur and Alexandra (roughly forty kilometers away), they would treat many non-life-threatening injuries themselves. Elsie was 'an expert bone-setter' who 'skillfully stitched many wounds – with sprained ankles and snake bites being her speciality'. During the 1918-19 influenza epidemic in nearby Healesville, Sister Bolam provided important assistance in organising the emergency hospital.

Sister Bolam did all this without payment or recompense for her expenses. Early in her tenure, she made application to the Bush Nursing Association for financial help, but was advised that 'her casualty station [did] not come within its jurisdiction'. In 1929 a Dendy Street, Brighton doctor provided some assistance with supplies. There is no record of Elsie receiving any other assistance. For thirty-five years, people would walk up the hill to the home that Elsie and Lesley McGowan shared above Woods Point Road in Marysville:

with boils, sprains, cold sore, carbuncles, broken limbs and most of the maladies that beset humanity to find sympathy, kindness and often a cup of tea along with sound medical care.

Elsie Bolam, like her good friend Helena Brayshay, was very active in the Marysville Tourist and Progress Association, serving as both president and secretary for several years. In 1937, she and Leslie were living back in Melbourne, where Elsie was appointed to a salaried position as a Marysville tourist officer to 'put Marysville's attractions before the public'. The pair remained there for the duration of WW2, returning to Little Kerami in the years after the war.

In 1955 the people of Marysville honoured Elsie Bolam when she was chosen to be one of two people who ceremoniously flicked the switch that brought electricity to Marysville. 'Now that we have electricity,' she said, hopefully, 'we may get a small hospital and perhaps a resident doctor.' Until that happens, 'we won't a chance to retire,' she added.

Elsie Bolam and Lesley McGowan were staunch monarchists who would regularly attend the local cinema, dressed in their finest, if a film about the King or Queen was on the program. It is fitting, therefore, that Elsie received an Imperial Honour for service to her community. On 1 January 1960, Sister Elsie Bolam was named in the New Year's honours' list as a Member of the British Empire – Civil Division. That evening, 300 local people gathered outside the cottage where she lived to congratulate her and a public subscription was gathered to purchase a television set for both she and Lesley to enjoy.

Elsie Bolam passed away on 4 September 1965 and was buried in Marysville cemetery. She left all her worldly goods to her dear friend Lesley Elinor Archibald McGowan, who passed away only a year later, at the age of 83.

In 2009, the town of Marysville was destroyed by a firestorm as intense and deadly as any the community had experienced since white settlement. Kerami and Little Kerami were destroyed, although the guesthouse was rebuilt and still operates as an up market accommodation house. Elsie's medal, which had been donated to the local history centre, was found in the ashes after hours of unstinting effort from Mary and Reg Kenealy. They arranged for it to be restored, and it sits again in the Marysville History Centre, a proud symbol of the good that ordinary women can do, and the enduring power and importance of female friendships.

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

Created 9 March 2020

Last modified 9 March 2020