

A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY HOSPITAL MATRON: MARGARET BLAGUE

(*Matron of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1643-1675*)

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For the young William Blague the year 1627 was a very important one for after having been apprenticed to John Davyes a freeman of the Company of Barber-Surgeons of the City of London, he was admitted to the Freedom of this Company on 20th December of that year¹ and shortly before this date on 14th October he had married Margaret Flint in the Church of St. Martin Ludgate.² William was not a native of London. His father William Blague the elder, gentleman, whose eldest son he was, lived in Sonning-on-Thames but two of his sons William and his younger brother Bennony came to London for their education.³ The latter had found employment in 1623 as servant to the ageing Clerk of St. Bartholomew's Hospital in Smithfield, Thomas Squire, whom he succeeded in August 1643 until his death in October of the same year.⁴ Of William's bride Margaret Flint we know very little. She may have been a daughter of Thomas Flint, haberdasher, who lived in the parish of St. Martin Ludgate in the early part of the 17th century though her name does not occur among the baptisms in this church's registers. It is not known where the young William Blague and his wife lived during their married life and he may have practised outside the City. In due course four children were born, three sons John, Henry and William, and one daughter Margaret. On 6th December 1641, after having been married fourteen years, Barber-Surgeon William Blague wrote his last Will. In it he divided his personal estate into three equal parts: one part was for "my lovinge wife Margarett Blague", one part was for his four children while the third part was needed for his funeral expenses and any outstanding bills. What remained after his debts were paid was also for his wife "the better to educate and bring upp my children as is fitt in the feare of God and good nourture". His wife was made executrix "hopinge shee will have a speciall care to provide for my said children and for their education and for their porcions and mayntenance and all other things there unto incident as my trust in her is in this behalfe". The Will was proved exactly a week after he wrote it and Barber-Surgeon William Blague must therefore have died between 6th and 13th December 1641.⁵

No sums of money are mentioned but there may have been some capital as William's father had died in Sandford in the parish of Sonning-on-Thames in the Autumn of 1640, leaving him half of all his money and goods. It is, however, impossible to judge what the financial position was of the young widow but even if William had thought that she would be able to manage, times were changing rapidly. London was no longer very prosperous; Dutch competition in the Indies and Continental wars had interrupted trade, bringing unemployment in the Port of London and elsewhere. The King was facing trouble in Scotland and the Scots damaged the Newcastle coal mines and coal prices went up in London soon followed by the prices of other commodities. Large groups of poor unemployed people joined by young apprentices demonstrated in the London streets and must have made life difficult and perhaps at times even dangerous for women. It was not an easy period for a young widow with four small children. Apparently she was in need of more income because of the rising cost of living. As her brother-in-law Bennony was employed by St. Bartholomew's Hospital it was quite likely he who told her that the Matron Mary Lyatt had died. Mrs. Margaret Blague immediately applied for the post. No other candidates are mentioned

in the minutes of the Governors' meetings and on 2nd June 1643 she was appointed Matron of St. Bartholomew's Hospital.⁶

When she was appointed her "charge" or duties were read out to her: she had to receive the sick when they were admitted and to put them in "convenient places", she had to supervise 15 sisters and to ensure that in their spare time they did some work such as spinning or sowing "that maie avoyde ydlenes and be profitable to the poore of this house". As Matron she had also to supervise the hospital bed linen and blankets. A special warning was given by the Governors that "there shalbe noe tiplinge kepte in the Matron's cellar nor any more beare or ale to be layd there but what the Governors . . . conceive to be of very necessity for the use and occasions of the poore" which is a reflexion on the practices of the previous Matron rather than on Margaret Blague herself. In 1643 the Governors offered her an annual salary of £6 13s. 4d., a house and perquisites mainly of the cellar which amounted to £33 2s. 0d. In 1657 it was ordered that Matron should receive the annual sum of £40 besides her dwellinghouse which had an annual value of £4.⁷ She earned the same as the Renter, half as much as the Cook who received £20 a year and more than the Clerk with £32 and the Steward with £34 who both also lived on the premises. With some income of her own Margaret was now apparently able to manage with four children.

In the meanwhile the situation in the country had become worse: Civil War developed between the King and Parliament. General Fairfax leading the Parliamentary troops defeated the King's army, the King was executed and Oliver Cromwell was made Protector of the Commonwealth. During the Civil War wounded soldiers were brought into the Hospital some of whom had been fighting on the side of Parliament. A Civil War is a tragic event, nearly everyone in the country taking sides, causing troubles and problems among the common people. In 1647 the first of Margaret Blague's many difficulties occurred. A sister in the ward where Fairfax's soldiers were nursed had shown quite openly that she was on the King's side. The soldiers, probably quite rightly, complained that she withheld their allowance from them—presumably food—and that she used abusive language wishing the head of General Fairfax "upon London bridge". Naturally they protested against this insulting language and the situation became so difficult that Mrs. Blague asked the Governors to step in. They called the parties to their meeting and suspended the sister until further order.⁸ She was not dismissed, obviously because the Hospital staff and the Governors sided mostly with the Royalists. One can see this clearly in the Registers of the Church of St. Bartholomew the Less which is the Parish Church of the Hospital. Usually not more than 20 marriages a year were registered for this small parish but after about 1642 this number had been increasing steadily and in 1648 the Vicar William Hall entered 384 marriages in this Register. This was partly because during the hostilities a number of people fled from their country home to London and the population of the parish must have temporarily increased but when one looks at the names of the parties it appears that most of them came from other parishes and that some were no doubt Royalists as for instance Penelope Verney, daughter of Sir Edmund Verney, the King's Standard Bearer, who married John Denton of Fawler in Oxfordshire on 1st October 1646, and her sister Elizabeth who married Edward Peyto Esquire of Chesterton in Warwickshire on 27th January 1647–8. On 25th April 1648 Charles Villiers, Earl of Anglesey, married Mary Viscountess Grandison, mother of Barbara Villiers and on 10th September of that year John Scowen married Mary Scudamore another well-known name in Royal circles. The Vicar of St. Bartholomew the Less was apparently on the King's side and the Governors who must have known this, did not disturb him in his duties.

Apart from the incident with the sister in 1647, the Hospital authorities were not immediately affected by the Civil War and the change in Government. Whatever the Governors' feelings were when the King was brought to the scaffold, life in St. Bartholomew's continued undisturbed until October 1650 when at a meeting of the Governors on the 28th of that month the name of Colonel Pride suddenly appears among those who were present.⁹ He had not been officially elected nor does he seem to have been invited. This ardent follower of Cromwell cannot have been very welcome in the Royal Hospital of St. Bartholomew. He was nevertheless asked to become a Governor in the usual way that is after the duties of this office were read out to him but, as the Clerk noted in the minutes of a meeting on 29th November 1650, he "had occasion to goe away before his charge was read unto him".¹⁰ For more than a year the Hospital was left at peace while Colonel Pride joined Cromwell in his campaign against the Scots and Charles II which came to an end at the battle of Worcester on 3rd September 1651. Back in London he decided to fight against what he considered wrong elements among the Governors and the staff. On 28th February 1651-2 he came to a Governors' meeting and we read that "It was propounded by Colonel Pride . . . That there are several offences and losses in the poores Revenues by some Governois and Officers in managing of the affaires of this howse, In prosecution where of to have a right understanding of every particular allegacion" a committee was formed which included Colonel Pride himself. A few days later on 1st March the Colonel came again to a meeting but this time his accusations were more specific and personal for he "himselſe did read severall articles or complaints containing 2 sheetes of paper some particulars reflecting upon Mr. Treasurer and the rest against Humfrey Fox Steward and . . . George Lambert (porter)".¹¹ Later evidence shows that the accusations were connected with the buying and distribution of the patients' food. The Governors decided to pass them on to the persons concerned "that they might prepare their defence". On 5th March they met again to hear the answers of the accused and to discuss whether or not to call witnesses. After a long and, we may imagine, heated debate they did not come to a decision on this point but only instituted a Committee of six Governors of which Colonel Pride was again a member, to discuss the Hospital's organisation. The Clerk was ordered to copy out the rules of this institution and send them to the Colonel.¹² Not until 15th April were two witnesses called to give evidence against the Treasurer, the Steward and the Porter. The first one was Samuel Brodstrett, the Hospitaller, whose task it was to look after the spiritual needs of the patients and who had also to supervise the distribution of the food. He was a most unsatisfactory official who in October of the same year had to be reprimanded for neglect of duty. The second witness was the cook, Margaret Horne, who in the past had been suspected of dishonesty.¹³ Again no decision was made but a new committee was appointed to discuss the complaints as well as the evidence of the two shaky witnesses. It met a number of times but was always adjourned and nothing more was heard about the misappropriation of the Hospital's money.

In July 1652 Colonel Pride "haberdasher" (*sic*) had his duties read out to him and his name was officially entered in the minute books as a Governor together with another supporter of Cromwell, Mr. John Ireton, brother of General Ireton, alderman and sheriff of London.¹⁴ Yet Pride seems to have lost interest soon after this date for of the 55 meetings of the Governors held in the next 10 months he attended only 9 and after April 1653 he hardly ever came. The last time he is mentioned is on 14th November 1656 when his name was entered as Sir Thomas Pride, knight, being knighted by Cromwell in January of that year.¹⁵ Alderman Ireton came only twice, on 13th July 1654 and on 27th March 1657. The Governors had

successfully frustrated any attempt of Cromwell's followers to influence the Hospital's affairs but it must have been difficult a time and a great relief when Colonel Pride died in October 1658. The only victim of this period was the Vicar of St. Bartholomew the Less, William Hall, who resigned on 25th September 1654 "of his own accord and free will" but one wonders how much pressure had been put on him.¹⁶ After his resignation the number of marriages in this Church gradually came down to pre-Civil War figures. Two days after Parliament decided to call back Charles II, on 7th May 1660, the Governors ordered that "the sheild of the States Armes being the Redd Cross and Harpe bee taken downe in the Court Hall and the Kings Armes put in the Roome thereof and alsoe that the Kings Armes obscured in the two tables in the Compting House bee refreshed and made good at the charge of this house".¹⁷ If only Colonel Pride and Alderman Ireton could have known that the King's arms were hidden in the table in the Counting House, the meeting place of the Governors, where they sat while accusing the Treasurer and the Steward.

The Committee which had to investigate Colonel Pride's accusations did no work at all but the Committee formed on 5th March 1651-2 to study the rules of the Hospital made a number of decisions some of which proved to be of historical importance. Some of these rules concerned the work and the position of the Matron and when studying the new instructions one can see exactly what must have been worrying Margaret Blague and what her ideas and wishes were. In the first place it was laid down that no one could be a sister unless she had previous experience as a nurse. Only if Matron approved of her work as a nurse could the Governors appoint her to a sister's place. This is the first time that the word "nurse" is used in the Hospital's records though assistants to the sisters had been known since 1646 obviously because more work had to be done when soldiers wounded in the Civil War were brought into the Hospital.¹⁸ It shows that Mrs. Blague must have suffered from incompetent sisters. She very likely also persuaded the Governors to appoint sisters only when they were unmarried or widows without children for there had been difficulties with children who were brought to the wards to live with their mothers while they were on duty. The old rule that sisters had to obey Matron was again repeated and Margaret Blague made good use of it by complaining about undisciplined sisters some of whom were dismissed, as for instance Dorothy Ridley who listened at doors and windows of the room where the Governors met, repeated inaccurately what she heard, especially any discussions concerning sisters and "thereby causeth many differences in the howse".¹⁹ Also Jane Toppin was dismissed because she sold "severall potts of Phisick to stranners"²⁰ and a few other sisters were reprimanded for drunkenness and for taking money from poor patients but it is interesting that within the next ten years comparatively few sisters misbehaved and after that complaints gradually faded out altogether. Margaret Blague seems not only to have managed to keep discipline but also to have chosen suitable new women, always unmarried ones or widows. One more duty was given to Matron by this Committee. As one can expect in a period when the Puritans were in power, Matron received strict orders to see that sisters and walking patients went to church "every Sabboth Day (to) attend the hearing of the Word of God", and to hear prayers on Thursdays and Saturdays in the morning and in the afternoon.²¹

It was also stressed that food should be bought by Governors, called Almoners, who were specially chosen for this task, attended by the Steward. As could be expected Colonel Pride was the first to be chosen together with the Governors Major Blackwell and Mr. Wilcox.²² Some dishonesty in dealing with food must have been apparent and though the Governors did not accept the accusations against the Treasurer and the Steward, they obviously blamed

the cook for misappropriating the food of the patients which was given to her by the Steward. To avoid this in future the Committee made a rule to oversee the cook with the support of Matron and two of the Almoners to "take such vigilant care to have one of the poore women patients by turnes throughout the wardes weekly or daily as they thinke meete to oversee the cooke that shee doe not make any holes in the beife to lett the gravy and fatt boyle out, and alsoe to see the beife bee boiled in fower pound pieces and to skymm the pott before she putts in the oatmeale, with a flatt skymmer with holes and not with a ladle and not to omitt to putt in the oatemeale in due tyme and that afterwards when the fat arriseth the pott bee nott skymmed any more to take off the fat from the broath and that the patient shall continue in the kitchin untill the meate is drest and delivered out and if the cooke shalbee remiss or disobedient herein, wee shall adiudge her fitt to bee dismissed this howse".²³

Another innovation was that patients could be dismissed if they were disorderly.²⁴ Though Cromwell's soldiers brought some trouble to the Hospital, this was nothing as compared with the problems caused by those who had taken part in the first Anglo-Dutch war (1652-1654). Many of these wounded men managed to get out of the building during the day time. They came back at night drunk, insulting and beating other patients in their ward. Sisters, not even Matron, could keep them in order and in the end the Governors discharged two of the most unruly ones²⁵. This rather drastic measure seems to have improved the situation and though in the second and third Anglo-Dutch wars many wounded from the Navy came to the Hospital, no complaints have survived about undisciplined behaviour.

The orders composed by the Committee instituted on 5th March 1651/2 increased the responsibilities of the Matron and enhanced her position. They regulated the functions of sisters and nurses and they formed the basis for the conditions as we know them today. Margaret Blague became the first Matron who gave advice for appointments of sisters and nurses and at the same time she was made responsible for honesty in the kitchen and the just distribution of food while in the case of difficulties with unruly patients she knew she would get the support of the Governors.

A Civil War and three Naval wars seem a great number of troubles during the time of one Matron but Mrs. Blague's trials did not finish here. There were still the Plague of London in 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666. When the plague began to spread in the late summer of 1665, the two physicians Dr. Micklethwaite and Dr. Tearne went to the country. In September 1665 the two surgeons Henry Boone and Thomas Woodhall were called before the Governors who wanted to know whether they were prepared to remain in attendance of the sick in the Hospital or whether they would prefer to put another surgeon Mr. Gray in their place until the infectious disease had died down in the City. Mr. Woodhall never appeared personally but sent a Mr. Thomas Turpin to represent him who told the Governors that "the business was too hott for him". Mr. Boone came to the Hospital in person but "desired to bee excused to doe the service" and in the circumstances the Governors were forced to appoint Mr. Gray to the post of surgeon though "for the busieness only of the pestelence".²⁶ Of the regular administrative staff the Clerk, the Steward and the Renter stayed and on the medical side Matron, her 15 sisters with an unknown number of nurses assisted by the Apothecary Francis Bernard. It was an extremely anxious and busy time for all concerned, every one doing work that had to be done whether it was their official duty or not. Matron was constantly about to try to make her patients as comfortable as possible, preparing broth and warm drinks with her own hands "to the great perill of her life" as the Governors said. Though the Apothecary worked hard and helped as much as he could, the medical

supervision was totally inadequate with only one temporary surgeon and no physicians. The Great Fire of London did not reach the Hospital but it must have been a terrifying experience to see the fire creeping nearer to the building in which so many sick people were gathered.

The Governors showed themselves extremely grateful to those who had carried on during the Plague of 1665 and they rewarded the faithful officials with handsome sums of money.²⁷ Matron, however, did not want the money for herself for though she had been for many years a professional woman she remembered her duty towards her children. Two of her sons had died young and they were buried in the church of St. Bartholomew the Less: William on 17th February 1646-7 and John on 13th June 1653. Her son Henry was probably married by 1665 and he does not seem to have been connected with the Hospital. Her daughter Margaret had apparently married a Mr. Yeates for she had a son called Thomas Yeates but her husband must have died young. As a widow she married Edward Harding, citizen and merchant tailor of London and in due course she had two other children, Edward and William. It was for this young family that Matron Margaret Blague used the reward offered by the Governors after the Plague. When she was appointed she was given a house on the premises but in 1664 she took another house "near the South gate" which—as it appeared—she took for her new son-in-law Edward Harding. As the house was old, it was rebuilt in the same year with "a shopp and a kitchin backwards on the first story" and the house being "three storyes and a halfe high". The lease was granted to Edward Harding for 21 years for which he paid the Governors £200.²⁸ His mother-in-law secured this lease for him for 31 years without any extra payment on his part.

Margaret Blague was Matron from 2nd June 1643 to the day of her death on 12th February 1674/5, that is for nearly 32 years. She was buried on 16th February 1674/5 in the church of St. Bartholomew the Less. In her Will she divided £430 among her son Henry and his son and daughter, and the three children of her daughter Margaret. She left £20 to the poor of the Hospital to whom she had devoted the best part of her life and some money to the friends who had supported her in carrying out her often difficult duties: the Treasurer Richard Mills, the Steward and a few Governors. Nothing was left to her daughter though she was residuary legatee but then Margaret Blague had given her a great financial support in 1665.²⁹ No picture is known to exist of this remarkable Matron but while reading the records one gets the impression of a practical and intelligent woman. She had her sorrows and worries for she lost her husband when the children were still small and two of her sons died young. She was a brave woman who did not sit down and ask for charity and pity but worked hard to support her children. She made good use of her experience as a surgeon's wife which brought her knowledge of nursing and a feeling for discipline and the value of training. One can understand that she wanted sisters to have been nurses before being appointed to their responsible posts for in a sense she had been a nurse herself while her husband was alive. As a housewife and mother she knew no doubt how to cook and how to make sick people comfortable in a homely way. Being a brave woman she brought this into practice in the Hospital during the Great Plague. She was not an educated woman whatever her social background may have been for she could not write but signed her name clumsily, painfully drawing a capital M and a capital B linked together.³⁰ She was a devoted mother who always had the welfare of her children or grandchildren in mind and she was a warm friend. The Renter Peter Moulson who died in 1674 a year before Matron, mentions her in his Will as "my dear worthy loving friend Margaret Blague . . . to whom I acknowledge my Great bounden Thankfulnes for

her great paines and care about me in my severall great sicknesses".³¹ If her husband Barber-Surgeon William Blague could have known the life his widow was going to lead, he could not have written better words in his Will about "my lovinge wife . . . hopinge shee will have a speciall care to provide for my said children . . . as my trust in her is in this behalfe."

- ¹ City of London. Guildhall Library. *Admissions to the Freedom of the Company of Barber-Surgeons of London 1522-1664*. Ms. 5265/1 f. 74 recto.
- ² *Ibidem*. *Boyd Marriage Index 1538-1837*.
- ³ Somerset House. Wills: Prerogative Court of Canterbury. Coventry 128.
- ⁴ Archives of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London. *Journal of the Governors*. Ha 1/4ff. 278 dorso, 280 recto, 280 dorso.
- ⁵ Somerset House. Wills: Prerogative Court of Canterbury. Evelyn 154.
- ⁶ Archives of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. London. *Journal of the Governors*. Ha 1/4 f.274 recto.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*. *Orderbook* Ha 4/1 f.21 recto.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*. *Journal of the Governors*. Ha 1/4 f.322 dorso.
- ⁹ *Ibidem*. *Journal of the Governors*. Ha 1/5. f.58 dorso.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*. f.59 recto.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*. ff.78 recto. 78 dorso.
- ¹² *Ibidem*. ff.78 dorso, 79 recto.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*. ff.80 dorso, 81 recto.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*. f.85 dorso.
- ¹⁵ *Ibidem*. f.176 recto.
- ¹⁶ *Ibidem*. f.137 dorso.
- ¹⁷ *Ibidem*. f.260 dorso.
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*. ff.77 dorso, 78 recto.
- ¹⁹ *Ibidem*. ff.153 dorso.
- ²⁰ *Ibidem*. f.180 dorso.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*. f.87 recto.
- ²² *Ibidem*. f.81 dorso.
- ²³ *Ibidem*. *Orderbook*. Ha 4/1 f.2 dorso.
- ²⁴ *Ibidem*. f.28 dorso.
- ²⁵ *Ibidem*. *Journal of the Governors*. Ha 1/5 f.129 recto. See also: G. Robinson, "Wounded sailors in London during the First Dutch War, 1652-1654" in *History Today*, January 1966.
- ²⁶ *Ibidem*. *Journal of the Governors*. Ha 1/5 ff.375 recto, 375 dorso.
- ²⁷ *Ibidem*. f.380 recto.
- ²⁸ *Ibidem*. ff.338 dorso, 340 recto, 343 dorso, 344 recto, 357 dorso.
- ²⁹ Somerset House: Wills Prerogative Court of Canterbury 1675 f.11.
- ³⁰ Archives of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London, *Salary Book* Hb 12/2 *passim*.
- ³¹ Somerset House. Wills: Prerogative Court of Canterbury; Bunce 74.