My ancestor was a midwife

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Women have supported each other during childbirth throughout history, and the title ‘midwife’ is apt as it comes from the phrase ‘with women’. In previous centuries, childbirth was an all-female affair, with the labouring mother surrounded by a group of close friends and relatives known as ‘gossips’.

Until the 20th century, the most common way for a midwife to learn her trade was by means of an apprenticeship. Often daughters followed their mothers into the role. In 1737, Sarah Stone published a short book, *A Complete Practice of Midwifery*, in which she revealed that she was both the daughter of and the mother of a midwife. No formal qualifications were necessary for the role, but by the early 16th century midwives needed a licence from the church to practice. Licences were hard to obtain, as applicants needed good character references and testimonials from prominent people such as members of the clergy or local doctors. Six women also had to vouch for the midwife’s competence. The convention for ecclesiastical licensing eventually died out in the mid-18th century.

For centuries, many women gave birth with the help of a ‘handwoman’, also known as a ‘handywoman’, a local woman who had some experience in assisting with deliveries. Doctors or surgeons were only called...
**CASE STUDY**

**Maternity homes**

Although many women gave birth in their own homes, maternity homes or by hospital stay grew up from the mid-18th century onwards. In 1749, the British Lying-In Hospital in Holborn, London, was among the first in the country. Founding more of these institutions around the country took longer; the first came to Liverpool near a trust set up in 1841, and Nottingham had no maternity home until 1908. The 1858 Maternity and Child Welfare Act compelled local authorities to provide maternity care for residents. Despite this, many others continued to work for some time after being opened in 1833, at 5.94 deaths per 1000 births. More needed to be done. This drive to improve mother and child welfare led to the establishment of maternity homes being established. In Scunthorpe a purpose-built maternity hospital, the Maternity Home, was opened in 1836 by Sir Kingsley Wood, then Minister for Health. The new state-of-the-art Maternity Home boasted 46 beds, six isolation beds, an operating theatre and labour ward. It also had an antenatal department, a nursery for the newborns, and as well as full staffing. In July 1948, the home was closed after the umbrella of the newly formed National Health Service, before this time mothers had had to pay a fee for their deliveries at the Maternity Home. Now it was midwives-led, with the support of the mothers’ own GPs. The Scunthorpe Maternity Home was in use for almost 60 years before it was eventually demolished in 1994.

**GLOSSARY**

**MAN-MIDWIVES**

A midwife could find herself working in crowded, noisy and unsanitary conditions especially within industrial city slums, where people were packed several rooms. The popular 18th-century midwife, based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worthy, brings life to some of the domestic settings midwives encountered in the 1950s. Jennifer worked for a scheme run by an Anglican charity in Poplar, East London. The Community of St John organisations provided maternity care and continued to do so after local authorities were required to offer this service. In the 1990s, Nicky Leop and Billie Hunter collected accounts by midwives in the pre-NHS era and published them in *The Midwife’s Tale*. This book gives a real insight into the pay and working conditions experienced by midwives in the early 20th century. Raising her practice in the 1930s, Mary W. explained that she had to work as an independent midwife because married women were discouraged from working in hospitals. Midwives at that time were expected to live in the attached nurses’ accommodation. Mary described being constantly on duty, delivering an average of 80 babies a year. Pay was low, and in the 1920s a midwife employed by a nursing association was paid just £84 a year. In the 1930s, independent midwife Mary W. charged 30 shillings per delivery, but during the Depression era she was often paid by families in instalments.

**Early training**

In 1881, the Marion’s Aid or Trained Midwives Registration Society, later renamed the Midwives Institute, was formed by London midwife Zepherina Venable. The group campaigned to achieve government recognition for the status of trained midwives. It established an insurance scheme in 1881, which ensured that midwives received an income if they had to go into quarantine after attending a woman with puerperal fever (post-partum infection). They also covered expenses if a midwife was required to attend an inquest. A year later, as a result of their lobbying, the 1912 Midwives Act for England and Wales entered the statute books. The Act regulated the training of midwives and also outlawed untrained women practising as midwives. At first, to register, a midwife needed to have practised for a year and to provide a written testimonial to substantiate her good character. For a few years, handbooks could get around this act and continue to work as long as they did not call themselves midwives, but this loophole was closed in 1918. By the 1950s, midwifery required a two-year training course or a year’s additional training at a recognized school. While there were lectures and much learning-by-rote, most of her training, which took the place of the

**In the 1920s, a midwife often earned less than a bricklayer**

**SOURCES**

- For more details on midwives in the past, see *The Midwife’s Tale*. Nicky Leop and Billie Hunter have collected a range of stories from midwives in the pre-NHS era in their book. These give an insight into the pay and working conditions experienced by midwives in the early 20th century.
- For a first-hand account of midwives’ lives, see the memoirs of midwife Jennifer Worthy, who worked in Scunthorpe in the 1930s. These are included in the exhibition *The Midwife’s Tale*.
- For more information on midwives’ training, see the records held by the National Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) and the College of Midwives (www.rcm.org.uk).