



A World War I Hospital in Paignton, South Devon, England The Benefactor the Patrons and the Matron

David Neely

The establishment of a hospital in wartime needed spacious accommodation, a well-connected fundraising group and a battle-hardened matron.

The benefactor was Paris Eugene Singer (1867-1932), who co-incidentally has a unique place in the history of Rolls-Royce. He was the company's first customer in August 1904 when he bought 1904 Rolls-Royce 10 h.p, 20151. The patrons were wealthy American women in Britain mostly married to Englishmen. The matron had nursed in the Boer War.

***Above:** A 1914 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost on duty at Oldway House. The body was by the English firm of Barker. The windows were covered for privacy as cars played an important role in transferring the more able-bodied wounded to the Hospital. Paris Singer's steward, J H Cooper, is pictured in the passenger's seat. This car is not listed among Rolls-Royces recorded for Paris Singer and it is possible he bought it for hospital work. The signage is an abbreviation of The American Women's War Relief Hospital and not to be confused with The American Women's Hospitals (named after The Scottish Women's Hospitals) established by the War Service Committee of the American Medical Women's National Association in 1917. [Torbay Library Services via americanwomenswarhospital.com]*

Paris Singer was the 22nd of 24 children of Isaac Merritt Singer (1811-1875) by five different women. Issac Singer founded the extraordinarily successful Singer Sewing Machine company. One wit suggested Isaac ran out of names and Paris was simply named after the city where he was born. Paris was raised at the 110-roomed *Oldway House*, which his father commissioned in 1871.



Above left: A portrait of Isaac Singer in 1869 by Edward Harrison May. [National Portrait Gallery, Washington]

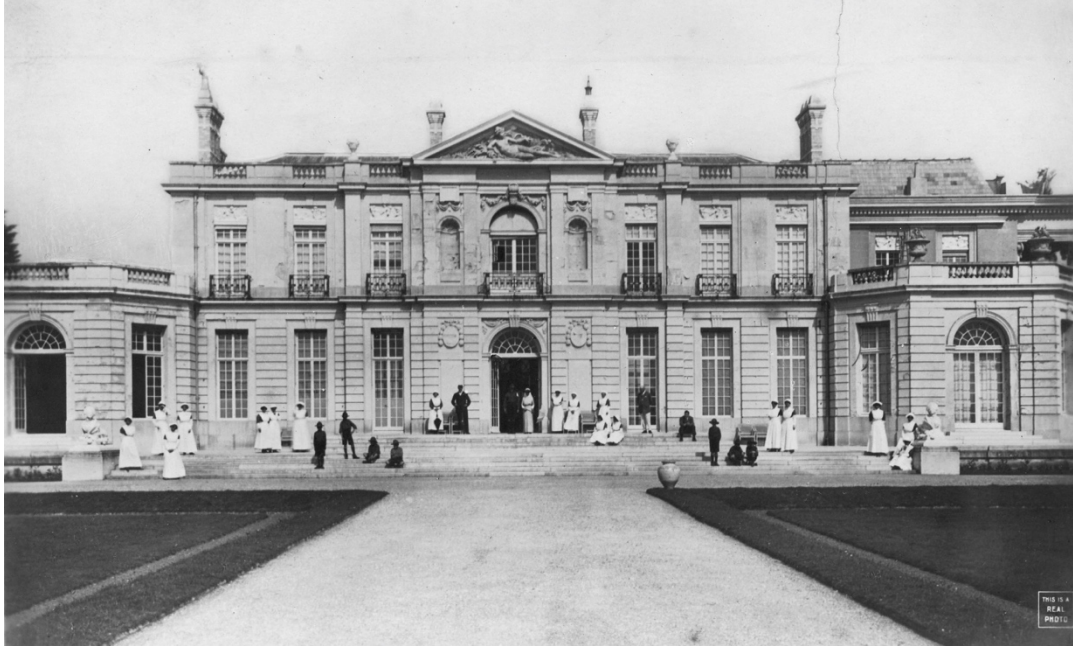
Centre: Paris Singer on his new 1904 Rolls-Royce 10 h.p. chassis 20151 in August 1904, the first owner of a Rolls-Royce car. His passenger is Lady de Grey. [‘Charles Rolls: one hundred years on’, Tom C Clarke, The Roycean, Number 1, 2010.]

Above right: Portrait of Paris Singer photographed in Florida, America. [Florida Memory State Library and Archives of Florida, MSC4984]

Paris married Cecilia Henrietta August (Lillie) Graham (1867-1951) in 1887 at Hobart, Tasmania. Lillie was born at Kojonup, Western Australia, between Perth and Albany. They had five children born between 1888 and 1894. Lillie’s maternal grandfather, John McKail (1808-1871), left Portsmouth, England, in February 1829 onboard the *Parmelia*, which carried the first British settlers to the Swan River Colony. It arrived in Perth, Western Australia, in June 1829. McKail left the Swan River Colony in 1835 for Albany a journey that took seven days at the time. There he married and raised the family.



Above: Portrait of Lillie Singer and her daughter Winnaretta. [Singer family]



Above: A postcard of the “American Women’s War Relief Hospital, Oldway, Paignton, Devon, 1914”. Paris Singer can be seen to the left of the archway at the centre in a dark suit. The grandeur of Oldway House and homage to the Palace of Versailles is apparent. And expensive. But Paris is said to have inherited a weekly income of \$15,000 from interest alone, about half a million dollars today. (Postcards such as this had on the bottom right an inscription, “This is a REAL PHOTO”!) [americanwomenswarhospital.com/gallery.TOL034]

In August 1914 Paris Singer offered his home *Oldway House* at Paignton in Devon, England, and converted it to a military hospital at his own expense. Lady Paget (1881-1958) formed The American Women’s War Relief Fund on 5 August 1914 just a few days after war was declared and became the President. Miss Gertrude Fletcher, from Sydney where she gained her nursing qualifications, was appointed as matron on 14 August 1914. The Hospital began treating wounded soldiers as soon as September 1914.

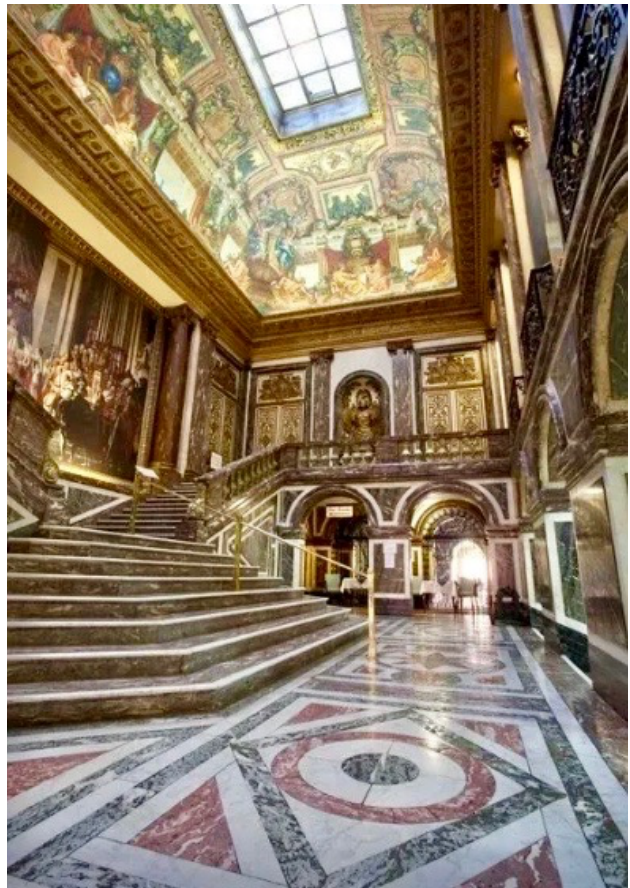


Left: South and east elevations of Oldway House. The rotunda on the far right was converted into the St. George Ward. [Private collection Paul Hope via americanwomenswarhospital.com]



Top and right: The ceiling over the grand staircase was painted by Carl Rosner, who had worked on murals at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. It took him six years. [Gethin Thomas My World Photography]

Above: Paris Singer's study at Oldway House. [Singer family]



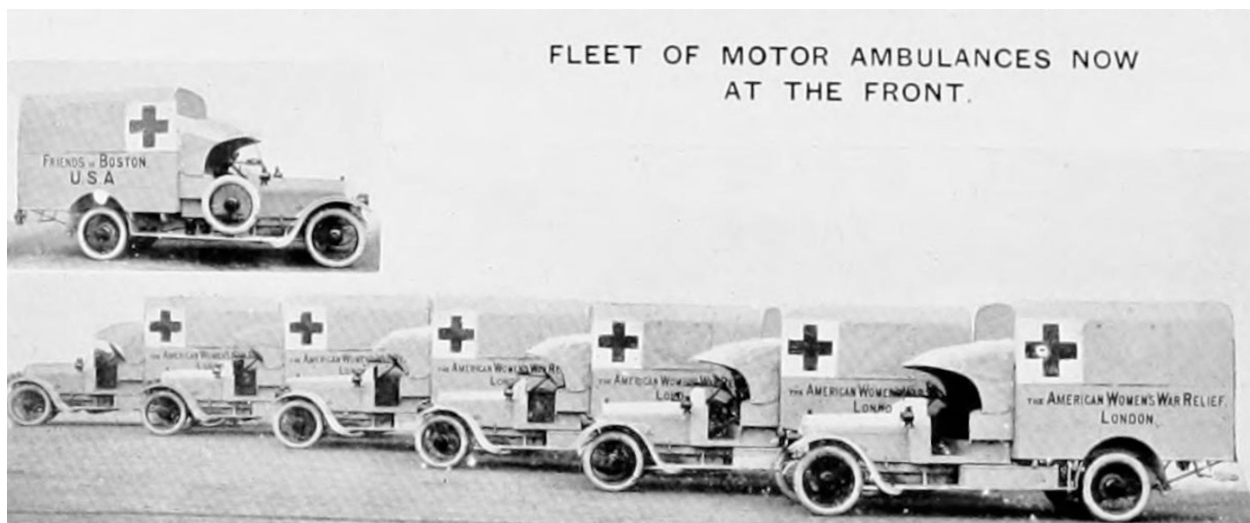
Lady Randolph Churchill (1854-1921), an American-born British socialite and mother of British prime minister Winston Churchill, was instrumental in persuading Singer to donate the house to use as a hospital. It was a noble gesture by Singer, an heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune, because, inspired by the Palace of Versailles, he rebuilt the family home between 1897 and 1910. Now it needed to be equipped with some 200 beds, an operating theatre, radiographic studio, pathology laboratory as well as anaesthetizing and sterilization rooms. Even the marble steps on the grand stairway had to be covered in wood as they were too slippery for hospital use.



Left: *The Executive Committee of The American Women's War Relief Fund. Paris Singer standing top left, Lady Randolph Churchill seated second from the left, Lady Paget seated fourth from the left and the Duchess of Marlborough on Lady Paget's left. [The American Women's War Relief Fund, Report of Work August 1914 – August 1915]*

Right: *The Economic Relief Committee of The American Women's War Relief Fund was chaired by the Duchess of Marlborough, formerly Consuelo Vanderbilt, who is seated centre in the front row. Circled top right is Lou Hoover, American philanthropist and later first lady of the United States. Circled top centre is Elizabeth Reid, American philanthropist, who also set up a military hospital in France. [The American Women's War Relief Fund, Report of Work August 1914 – August 1915]*





Above: The American Women's War Relief Fund sent seven ambulances to the front in 1914. [The American Women's War Relief Fund, Report of Work August 1914 – August 1915]

Paris's older sister, Winnaretta Singer (1865-1943), also an heiress to the family fortune, was a patron of the arts and a philanthropist. She helped Marie Curie convert private limousines into mobile radiology units to assess wounded soldiers at the front in World War I.

Gertrude Fletcher was born in 1866 fifth child of eight and the only daughter of John Horner Fletcher (1833-1917), teacher and Methodist lay preacher, and Eliza Bale (b 1834). Her father was principal of Wesley College, Auckland. She was born in New Zealand as were all her brothers except the last one who was born in Maitland, NSW, where her father was a teacher. The family moved from New Zealand to Australia in the mid 1870s. Four of her brothers were ministers of the Methodist and Congregational Churches. Professor Scott Fletcher (1868-1947) was the foundation Master of Wesley College in the grounds of Sydney University.

Miss Fletcher trained at Sydney's Prince Alfred Hospital from 1891 to 1897. In 1897 she left Australia for specialist nursing training in London and Edinburgh. She was the night superintendent at Princess Christian's Hospital in Pinetown near Durban during the Boer War. Miss Fletcher served for eighteen months in South Africa during the war years of 1899 to 1902. She received Princess Christian's Army Nursing Service Reserve badge given to her by Princess Christian, who as Princess Helena (1846-1923) before her marriage was Queen Victoria's third daughter and fifth child. Princess Christian took an interest in nursing and established the Princess Christian's Army Nursing Reserve in 1897. Following the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, Queen Alexandra insisted on replacing Princess Christian as President and it became Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service on 27 March 1902.



Left and right: The Sydney Mail carried this photo on 10 October 1917 with the news that Miss Fletcher had been awarded the Royal Red Cross (first class), a military decoration awarded in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth for exceptional services in military nursing. The medal she wore on her collar was awarded to her by Princess Christian in South Africa and inscribed, "Princess Christian's Army Nursing Service Reserve". [The Sydney Mail and Australian War Memorial REL/04568]

On her return to England, Miss Fletcher was invested by King Edward VII with the South African Medal. Having met the King in this official role she would soon meet him again in her own professional capacity. When Sir Frederick Treves, the Royal Surgeon, was about to perform emergency surgery on the King he sent for Nurse Fletcher and she was present at the operation and afterwards attended the King together with another nurse. Treves was renowned for his surgical treatment of appendicitis and is credited with saving the King's life in 1902. It was a heroic medical decision to operate just two days before the planned coronation. To Edward's outcry of "I have a Coronation on hand", Treves is said to have replied, "It will be a funeral if you don't have the operation."



Above: The staff of the Hospital. Matron Fletcher is in the second row centre. [Paignton Heritage Society]

When Queen Mary visited the Hospital on 12 November 1914 she was received by Dr Beal and Matron Fletcher, who conducted a tour of the wards with the Queen.



Above: Queen Mary visited the Hospital in November 1914. Lillie Singer is sixth from the left, then Queen Mary, behind her Paris Singer, next Lady Paget, next Dr Beal and Matron Fletcher on the right. [americanwomenswarhospital.com/gallery.TOL033]



Above: The wounded came by hospital train from Southampton and arrived at Paignton station, where vehicles of all shapes and sizes were used to transport them to the Hospital. Those on stretchers were transported by ambulance. Those who could walk were taken in private cars and as seen here in the Great Western Railway charabanc. This is the arrival of the second contingent of wounded at Paignton on 16 October 1914. Paris Singer is in the foreground with the boater hat. [americanwomenswarhospital.com/gallery.to1038 and 37]



Above: An ambulance.
[americanwomenswarhospital.com/gallery/TOL26]



Above and inset: A postcard from 1914 of the Alexandra Ward, later the Paget Ward, formerly the ballroom and a colour image of the ballroom from recent times. [americanwomenswarhospital.com/gallery/TOL008]

Miss Fletcher's service at the Hospital was marked by this item from *'The British Journal of Nursing'* dated 15 May 1915. "On the occasion of the resignation of Miss Gertrude Fletcher as matron of the American Women's Hospital, Oldway House, Paignton, she was presented by the American sisters with a lovely little silver travelling clock in a leather case. An inscription on the clock stated that it was from the Sisters of the American Red Cross Units D and F, 1914-1915. The Commandant, the Secretaries and the English Sisters presented Miss Fletcher with a case of silver teaspoons and a silver matchbox, while the probationers' gift was a lovely travelling rug and cushion and a gorgeous bunch of pink roses and carnations and lilies of the valley. A great crowd collected at the door of the Hospital and at the station to bid her farewell. Miss Fletcher takes up her duties as Assistant Matron at the Norfolk War Hospital, Thorpe (1,400 beds), on Saturday next."

Extracts of Miss Fletcher's letters to her father were published in the Australian press. The arrival of 121 wounded (In *The Farmer and Settler*, Sydney, 31 December 1914), "Two shot through the chest, and one probably typhoid, are the worst. No matter how bad the wounds may be they are all so jolly and fit, though naturally the two chest men and the typhoid case are too sick. One of our first batch died last week. We knew he was hopeless from the beginning, and yet he was a very cheery soul right through. That is, so far, the only death. For the first few days after their arrival the work is stupendous. Legs, arms and feet have to be put in baths all the time. In one small ward there are sixteen four-hourly fomentations. Just imagine what that means! The way they respond to treatment is wonderful. Suddenly the tension relaxes, and you wake up to the fact that the hospital is brighter, because they are all better. In war nursing the work must always be spasmodic like that. But the strain on everybody at first is tremendous, even on an old, seasoned nurse."

AMERICA'S PRACTICAL SYMPATHY WITH BRITAIN.

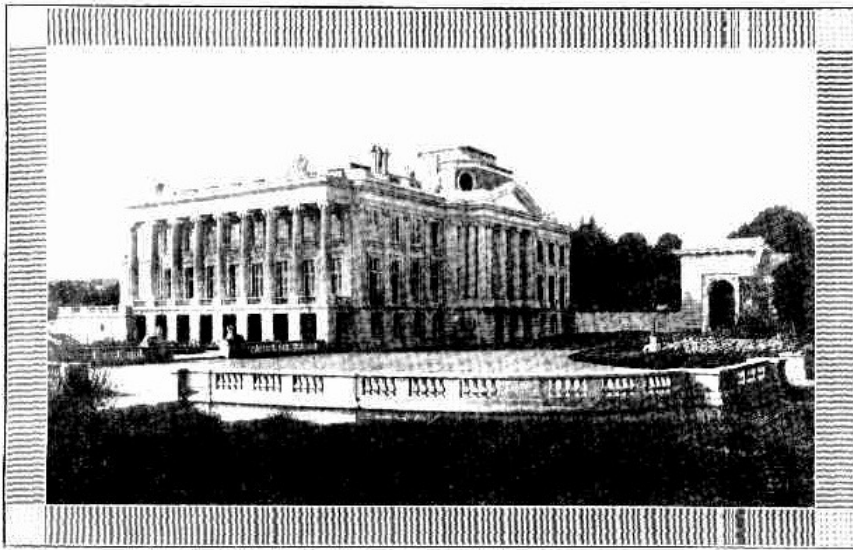


The Singer Staff at the Singer Hospital.



The Motor Ambulance Corps.

The Singer Staff at the Singer Hospital. The ambulance is the property of the British Government. The ambulance is the property of the British Government. The ambulance is the property of the British Government.



NOW AN AMERICAN HOSPITAL: GLEBE HOUSE, PAIGNTON, SOUTH DEVON.

This is the main building of the American Hospital, which has been converted from a house of 1842. It has been converted into a hospital since the outbreak of the war. The building is the property of the British Government. The building is the property of the British Government.



The Paget Ward, with 25 Beds.



Scene of the Convalescent Patients.

On a lighter note (In the *Warwick Examiner and Times*, Queensland, 11 January 1915), "Our patients adore the gramophone. We have four, and one ward has been so disconsolate without any instrument that it touched my heart, so that I promised this morning they should have a gramophone of their own. Within two hours an American and his wife arrived to be shown over the hospital, and by the greatest good luck for my promise, the husband had to do with gramophones or gramophone records, So, of course, my promise was fulfilled very quickly, and the gramophone is to come to us in three days' time. The men are in the seventh heaven of delight. In the other wards they have been in the habit of setting their gramophones going at the break of dawn. But I

had to stop them, as it drove Mr. Singer mad! He had one in the room next to him, one underneath him, and two others in different parts of the house. But the men are really nice – such good souls. I must be off to bed. I keep awfully late hours."

Above: This illustrated news item of the Hospital and Miss Fletcher pictured in the top left photograph reached readers of The Sydney Mail on 13 January 1915.

By 1939 Miss Fletcher had retired and was living in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. She died in September 1954 in Hampshire, England, at the age of 88.

Paris Singer had an affair with the famous dancer Isadora Duncan. Their son died tragically at the age of three when the car he was in plunged into the river Seine. Their relationship had begun sometime before 1909. This may account for Lillie Paris petitioning for restitution of conjugal rights in 1910. While Paris and Lillie were both at *Oldway House* when it was the Hospital they divorced in December 1918. By this time Paris was involved in real estate developments in Palm Springs, Florida, America. Singer Island in Florida is named after him. He later lived quietly in France and died in London at the age of 65.

Isadora Duncan was killed in a car accident in Nice in September 1927. She was a passenger in an Amilcar CGSS on the Promenade Des Anglais, when a gust of wind blew a long scarf she was wearing around her neck over the side of the car. It became entangled in one of the wheels and dragged the dancer out of the machine onto the road. Her neck was broken.



*Left: Isadora Duncan and Paris Singer.
[Library of Congress, Arnold Genthe
Collection]*

Over the four years to 1918, some 7,000 soldiers were treated and nursed back to health in luxurious surroundings at *Oldway House*.

The Paignton Urban District Council purchased *Oldway House* in 1946 from the Trustees of the Singer Estate. In November 2024 *DevonLive* reported Torbay Council is looking for a commercial partner to bring *Oldway Mansion*, as it is now called, back to life. The first phase of restoration work will include repairs to the 13 different types of roofs and is expected to be completed by the end of 2027. It is being funded by £1 million from Torbay Council and £8 million from the UK government.

Acknowledgement: Assistance from Tom Clarke. David Neely, Sydney, December 2024.

Postscript: Another of Paris Singer's Rolls-Royces at Paignton



Above: 1905 Rolls-Royce 10 h.p., 20162, with its second body, a Barker two-seater phaeton, and registered AX-148 on 13 January 1906. It was with C S Rolls & Co. as stock and then owned by Paris Singer from 14 December 1906 to 1917 when Paris moved to America. The car passed to W M Graham, a relative of Lillie Singer. It is pictured here at a carnival at Paignton Green on 7 September 1928 during Graham's ownership. The car was presented by Rolls-Royce to the Science Museum, London, in 1935. [Paignton Heritage Society CARN 0037; Dissertation on the pre-40/50 h.p. cars by Tom Clarke in Fasal and Goodman, The Edwardian Rolls-Royce]



[blog.scienceandindustrymuseum.org.uk]