

**BEST BUYS**

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# How Sylvia followed her calling to heal the sick in rural India

**INTERVIEW**

At the age of 44, Sylvia Wright sold up and moved to India. Thirty years on she talks to Sarah Freeman on why her work to help others is never ending.

SYLVIA Wright had a comfortable life.

Having trained as a midwife and paid her dues on the hospital wards at Leeds General Infirmary, by the early 1980s she was passing on her hard-earned skills and years of wisdom to nursing students in Leeds.

Turning 40 is often a cause to stop and think, but while some go down the now cliched route of fast cars and reliving youthful dreams, there were more serious doubts preying on Sylvia's mind.

A deeply religious woman, she couldn't shake the idea that she was being called away from her suburban existence.

At first she dismissed the idea and carried on with her usual routine and her classes at what is now Leeds Metropolitan University, but as the months turned into years, and following conversations with her parish priest and correspondence with Mother Theresa, Sylvia knew what she had to do.

At 44, she sold her house, all its contents and her car. Having withdrawn her savings and cashed in her pension, by the time she boarded the aircraft for India all that remained of her old life were a few precious family photographs.

"There was nothing I really wanted to keep," she says, remembering the day a friend drove her to the airport. "We all go through life amassing possessions, but when you stop and think, most are of very little importance."

On January 6, 1982, Sylvia landed in Madras, but her final destination was a six-hour drive away on dirt roads to Thiruvannamalai. Eighty miles away from the state capital, culturally and socially it was a world away from the secure life she had left behind.

"Nothing could have prepared me for the shock of moving from the UK to a totally different life of poverty and deprivation," she says. "Health provision was totally inadequate and often non-existent."

What Sylvia saw might have been overwhelming, but it was exactly the reason why she had come. In a place with limited electricity, where water came from open wells and where many



HEALING HANDS: "Nothing could have prepared me for the shock of moving from the UK to a totally different life of poverty and deprivation," says Sylvia Wright. MAIN PICTURE: STEVE RIDING.

of the locals held superstitious beliefs about the cause and treatment of illness, she felt her own Western training might affect real change.

Spending some of her savings on a van, Sylvia equipped it with medicine and set up her first clinic, treating people spread across six villages. The hours were long and often meant working after midnight six days a week, with the seventh reserved for training her own team of medical staff.

Those early days were tough, but 30 years on, the impact is clear. Sylvia's first small hospital, which she opened in 1985, was replaced 10 years ago with a new 220-bed facility which treats 80,000 out-patients a year. Before that her free boarding school for profoundly deaf children was already up and running and in 2004 she opened two day-care centres providing play and physiotherapy for disabled children and, crucially, respite for their parents.

When she returned to Britain to receive her much-deserved OBE in 2008, she said she had dreams of opening her own nursing

college. Four years on, that's another ambition she can tick off the list.

"It is still an incredibly deprived area and with no real industry to speak of, most people work the land," she says. "However, when I first arrived in 1982 the health care was fairly haphazard, the infant mortality rate was high and life expectancy was low and that has improved."

"In the last 10 years the IT revolution has come to India and it has created a new middle class. However, the change has largely been confined to the

cities and there is still much to do in rural areas. Change doesn't come overnight, but the number of children dying has decreased and life expectancy is now around 60-years-old. The school for deaf children was incredibly important because a large number of babies are born with hearing impairments. No one is entirely sure why, but it may be due to the prevalence of inter-marriage.

"Disabled children don't have great life prospects and the school shows I hope that they are valued."

Sylvia insists hers hasn't been entirely a one-woman mission. Shortly after she left, friends back home set up the Sylvia Wright Trust, which she describes as "simply wonderful" and it was money raised by the group which paid for the building of the new college. They've also been vital in raising awareness of her work, but it is Sylvia herself who successfully convinced the Indian authorities that she wasn't some interfering westerner but a woman who genuinely had the people's best interest at heart.

So much so that she now works regularly with government officials on health and education programmes, which have seen the number of new diagnoses of HIV cases drop significantly. It's those kind of breakthroughs, greater than any financial reward, which keep Sylvia going.

"I don't draw a salary, although after all my years in nursing I did discover I was able to draw a small pension," she says. "It's not a huge amount, but it's a little pocket money which allows me to buy things for the school or the hospital. On my birthday the students give me presents of

clothes which they have knitted and those gifts mean more to me than anything money can buy.

"Occasionally we do get visits from British nurses and people often say I have created a little LGI in the middle of India, but what really makes it all worth it is when one of the patients say they feel they have been treated with love."

Sylvia is currently making a brief visit back to Yorkshire and will attend a special thanksgiving service to mark her 30 years in India at St Anne's Cathedral in Leeds this Sunday, but before long she will be heading back to Thiruvannamalai where there is still much work to do.

"People tell me I'm 74, but I don't feel it," she says. "I still work from 8am to 6pm and while I may get a little more tired than I used to, I still feel that I have a lot to give. Who knows, maybe in a few years I will feel like I ought to retire, but as long as I'm needed in India I won't be making any plans to return to England."

"I've always been very adaptable, so whatever happens I'm sure I'll be just fine."

sarah.freeman@ypn.co.uk

**FUNDRAISING FOR SYLVIA'S GOOD WORKS**

THE Sylvia Wright Trust is a registered charity set up to support Sylvia's work.

The Leeds-based group is run entirely by volunteers and aims to send 96p out of every £1 raised direct to India to subsidise the running of Sylvia's various projects which amounts to about £188,000. Since it was set up in 1982 it has also funded virtually all

building and equipment costs at the hospital, school for deaf children and most recently the new nursing college.

To mark Sylvia's 30 years in India, a special service will take place at St Anne's Cathedral in Leeds this Sunday at 2.30pm.

■ To find out more about the work of the trust visit the website at [www.sylviawright.org](http://www.sylviawright.org).

## Devastated at fiancé of eight years walking away from wedding

**MODERN DILEMMAS**

**DEAR Alex** I'm exactly three weeks away from what should have been my wedding day, but my fiancé of eight years has suddenly decided he doesn't want to go through with it. I'm totally devastated and I don't know where to go from here, can you help?

I am extremely saddened by your letter, but I believe you are a strong woman who will get through this. You obviously loved him and he probably still loves you and you showed him commitment and loyalty, however he failed to do the same for you. I do suspect, however, that before he made his decision that you already had an inkling that things weren't quite right.

In short it is his loss, which I am sure your friends and family are telling you everyday. There is nothing anyone can say to you which will change the situation in your heart or bring him back into your life the way you want him to be. To feel like your dream has been whipped away from you is incredibly challenging to live with as your emotions are still so raw, but this will pass.

What you need to focus on is not why this happened, but why it got to this stage, so close to your nuptials before it happened. What signs did you ignore? What feelings

failed to warn you that this was not the right path for you? If, like me, you try to follow your inner feelings and let them lead you, then you do experience a happier life there is no doubt about that. But listening to our self over our fears is the biggest difficulty. Our fears are louder and more prominent in our minds so we can easily see them to be our actual thoughts or beliefs, so the trick is to listened carefully and be very aware of how you truly feel.

When a relationship has been working for some time and it does lead to wedding bells it doesn't mean to say that it should happen. There may have been elements of his personality or you two as a couple that didn't work enough to make this the right commitment.

Know that this man is not the only one on Earth and that there are plenty of suitors who will, when you're ready, show their faces. Though you must understand that everything that happens in your life or not, is entirely up to you. You decide on how you continue to feel about what has occurred, how long you decide to grieve your loss, how long you stay confused and injured or how long it takes you to bounce back and be

thankful that you are now in a place to grow more than ever before and eventually find the man who would rather drown himself than ever disappoint you.

■ **Alexandra Watson is a leading happiness coach, success mentor and author. [www.AlexandraWatson.com](http://www.AlexandraWatson.com)**

**QUOTE**



Running is not only a really effective way to stay fit, it is a sort of moving meditation.

- Top model Elle Macpherson, now 48.

**BRIEFLY**

**Vintage fashion goes on show**

THE spring/summer vintage fashion season kicks off this weekend in Ilkley with a retro-inspirational event showcasing one-off pieces and bargain buys, plus an all-day teashop.

Vintage Bazaar, at Christchurch, Ilkley, will feature a range of stalls and mini-shops selling a blend of quality vintage items, including clothing, accessories, furniture, soft furnishings and homewares, with highlights including antique lace cushions, '60s coffee tables, '50s cocktail dresses and unusual pieces of costume jewellery.

Vintage Bazaar is this Saturday, 10.30am-4pm, entry £2, at Riddings Hall, on The Grove, opposite Betty's.

**YORKSHIRE POST Evening Post**

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