

The advent of Covid-19 and the global pandemic of 2020 presented an extraordinary set of circumstances putting a considerable strain on the National Health Service and the nation as a whole. Extreme pressures were placed on the system, not least in the provision of PPE to frontline workers in the medical profession and care homes.

In the midst of the national lockdown Caroline Gratton, whose daughter worked at the Royal Free Hospital, approached the Foundation Trust with a view to setting up a project in the former Hampstead Old Town Hall (currently home to WAC Arts), to produce clinically approved medical gowns, which would feed directly into the hospital at the end of each day.

Volunteers were sought through the Royal Free Charity and on 4 May 2020 the first group arrived on site and began to shape what would become the Hampstead Gown Factory. Over the coming months a factory setting evolved, systems were refined and over 600 volunteers would attend shifts, each of approximately 50 people; two shifts a day, seven days a week.

This unique project was an incredibly energetic and practical response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Volunteers generously gave their time and were involved in the many processes to create and complete the finished gowns, from cutting, assembling, sewing, finishing, folding, packing, threading bobbins, coordinating, and everything in between.

The Hampstead Gown Factory ran for four months and finally came to a close on 28 August 2020, having produced over 50,000 gowns.

As a volunteer in the Sewing Room I've gradually amassed a collection of photographs which document the people, their hands and the many swift and transitory processes that have taken part in this ephemeral project. This book is a collaboration between Adam Brown and myself and a celebration of some of the people I had the joy of meeting and photographing during this extraordinary time.

*Sarah Nicholl*



# HAMPSTEAD GOWN FACTORY

Photographs by  
Sarah Nicholl  
Design by  
Adam Brown







'The Hampstead Gown Factory was a positive force in a time of fear and uncertainty. Bringing together a supportive, compassionate community for a common purpose.'  
Hannah Tyson



'In the early weeks when the world was closing down and people were becoming increasingly fearful and isolated, the Gown Factory was an oasis of camaraderie and laughter.'  
Liz Cooper







'With the project housed in the WAC arts centre, the rooms were set up with low tables used mainly for child-based activities. I soon discovered after a day cutting and packing that they were far too low. The centre manager Piotr had a brainwave and made small platforms for the tables, which achieved a far better height for working.'

Nigel Hall





'... The rooms are all running now, thanks to all of us, but going forward we need to put some more structure in place. Stock renewal is key, so Cutting Room, can you work out how much material you need a week, find out how we order it and what the turn around time is on delivery...'

Sally Llewelyn





“What’s changed since last week’ was the most used line in the cutting room as the templates, sheet size, fabric or sewing preference from upstairs developed or stock needed to be used up.’  
Kate Gemmell







'My experience taught me the rewards of volunteering outweigh the effort invested... connecting with such a diverse group of strangers, while doing something useful, was one of the saving graces of lockdown for me.'

Patrick Bailey



'My first task was in the packing department. This is where I could view the completed garments, before being packed in boxes to deliver to the RFH. My initial thoughts were that the pattern should be simplified to reduce the cutting, to make the sewing and fit more accurate. Working with Kat, Naomi, Lynn and Antonella, after making pattern alterations and taking on board comments from the RFH, we managed to find a solution.'

Nigel Hall



'Volunteers would gravitate to the same room each day and often the same spot.'

Adam Brown





'We need to remember we are all volunteers, so need to make sure each shift is rewarding and fun for everyone.'  
Sally Llewellyn





'I live alone and convinced I would have gone mad without this amazing project. It has been a life saver, a fantastic social and for a worthy cause.'  
Tristram Wymark











'The Hampstead Gown Factory was a great experience; there were definitely benefits both ways.'  
Joanna Cave





'One young volunteer appeared in the first week and attended consistently throughout, encouraging her mum and a friend to also join.

Her mum told me that her daughter had been really frustrated by the way her school career had ended suddenly and by the inability to sit her A-levels. Volunteering

had provided a positive outlet for her energy and frustration and had helped her overcome the anger she had felt. She was a great volunteer.'

Julia Ward-Lilley







'Whether it was seeing sparkling lights dancing across the ceiling and walls of the sewing room from the secret glitter ball that someone must have hung high up in one of the chestnut trees outside. Or the sound of sewing machines when a sewer really got into a sleeve or belt, as if they were light aircraft taxiing down a runway about to take off. It was the small things like this that I hope to keep remembering.'

Anna Kearvell  
Roberts





'I was fascinated by the flow and dance within and between the different people, rooms and processes - the replenishing of bobbins, the just-cut fabric piling up next to the sewing machines,

the steady stream of gowns to the finishing room, and then in the other direction came the completed gowns for their final folding and packing - back and forth, upstairs and down...'  
Sarah Nicholl





'I miss the strong camaraderie, the stop-start buzz of all the machines, the radio playing in the background and someone inevitably humming along, the rush to complete another

box of 50 gowns before the end of the shift, and catching little snippets of other peoples' lives and experiences of living through such unprecedented times.'  
Joanna Cave





'We were all tiny  
but integral  
parts of a much  
larger organism,  
each connected  
through our  
separate actions...'  
Sarah Nicholl





'On any given day  
you might be  
working alongside  
a radiographer,  
a structural engineer,  
a make-up artist  
or magistrate'  
Adam Brown





'An overseas student who started half way through and whose gown-finishing output was incredible, told me with some emotion that finding the project and being able to sew again in the company of other people had effectively saved her from depression. She had been locked-down alone, far from family and become very isolated and low. The first time she had started to sew a gown it was like a heavy weight had lifted and she could breathe again. It was very moving.'

Julia Ward-Lilley

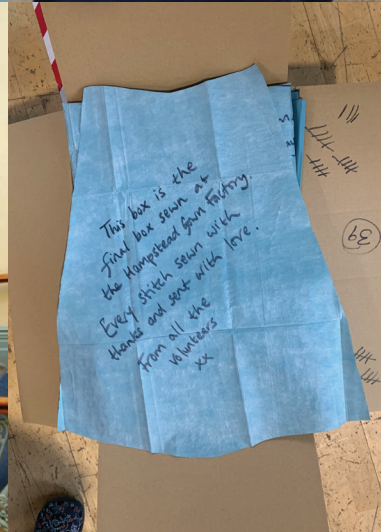
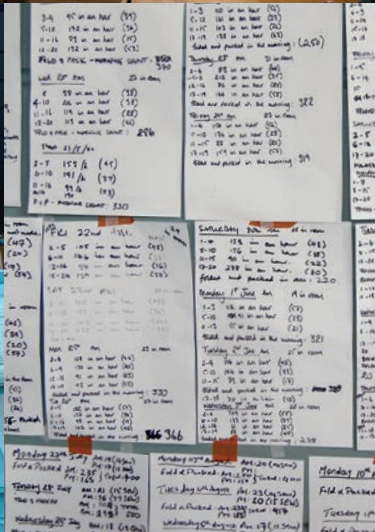


'On the last sewing day I watched volunteers take the odd bobbin as a keepsake and knew I'd been part of something very special, so I took mine.'  
Arlene Scott











## **Acknowledgements**

Huge thanks to everyone who took part in this amazing project. Over 600 volunteers were involved and it is important to recognise each and every one who dedicated both their time and their energy.

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