GENERAL

# is call the midwife based on a true story

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## Is Call the Midwife Based on a True Story?

Since its debut on BBC One in 2012, **Call the Midwife** has become one of the network's most beloved dramas, winning hearts across the globe with its tender portrayal of midwifery, community, and the social changes of post war London. Viewers often ask*Is Call the Midwife based on a true story?*The answer is both yes and no. The series draws heavily from real-life experiences, yet it also employs fictional storytelling to craft compelling narratives. This article explores the origins of the show, the real people and events that inspired it, and how the series balances authenticity with dramatization.

## What Is Call the Midwife?

Call the Midwife is a period drama that follows a group of midwives working in the East End of London during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The show focuses on their professional duties, personal relationships, and the social issues of the era, such as poverty, racism, and the evolving role of women in society. The narrative is set against the backdrop of the **St. Olave's Hospital**and the surrounding community, offering a vivid snapshot of life in a time of both hardship and hope.

While the characters—Nurse Jenny Lee, Sister Monica Joan, Sister Ruth, and others—are fictional, their stories are rooted in the real experiences of midwives who worked in similar environments. The series' creator, actress and writer Lynda La Plante, based the show on her own mother's memoirs and on the books of a former midwife, which we'll discuss in the next section.

## Origins of the Series: From Book to Screen

### The True Story Behind the Books

Call the Midwife is adapted from a series of books written by **Joanna Trollope's mother, Jean Innes** (née *Joanna L. Trollope*), a midwife who worked in the East End during the 1950s and 1960s. Innes authored a memoir titled *"The Midwife's Tale"*, detailing her experiences caring for mothers and babies in a time when medical technology was limited and social services were in their infancy.

Innes's writings were published in 2009 and 2010, and they captured the challenges and triumphs of midwives in a working class community. Her book was praised for its candid portrayal of the emotional toll of childbirth, the camaraderie among staff, and the social issues that shaped the lives of the families she served. The books served as the foundation for La Plante's television adaptation.

### From Page to Television

Lynda La Plante, known for her gritty crime dramas, was inspired by Innes's memoirs and decided to bring the world of midwifery to the screen. She wrote the first script, consulted historians, and recruited real midwives as advisers to ensure authenticity. The series premiered in 2012 and quickly became a hit, winning multiple awards and garnering a dedicated fan base.

La Plante's adaptation is a blend of historical research and creative storytelling. While the core themes and settings remain true to Innes's experiences, the characters and specific plotlines are fictionalized to create engaging drama

and emotional depth.

## True Stories Behind the Episodes

Many episodes of Call the Midwife are directly inspired by real events that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Below are some notable examples:

- Polio Outbreak (Season 2, Episode 4) – The show depicts a local polio outbreak that forces the midwives to manage increased hospital admissions and fear. The real-life polio epidemic that struck London in 1957 led to widespread vaccination campaigns, and many hospitals experienced similar surges in patient numbers.
- Birth of a Baby in a Crowded Ward (Season 1, Episode 2) – In this episode, the midwives must deliver a baby in a cramped ward with limited resources. This scenario mirrors the conditions at St. Olave's Hospital during the post  war baby boom, when overcrowding was common.
- The Arrival of a New Baby with a Rare Condition (Season 3, Episode 5) – A baby is born with a congenital heart defect, and the midwives must decide whether to refer the infant to a specialized clinic. The episode reflects the limited medical options available at the time and the emotional burden on families.
- Racial Tensions and Integration (Season 4, Episode 1) – The show explores the challenges faced by a young biracial mother who struggles to find a supportive community. This storyline is based on the growing diversity of London's East End in the 1960s and the social tensions that accompanied it.
- The Struggle for Professional Recognition (Season 5, Episode 7) – The midwives confront institutional sexism and fight for better working conditions. This mirrors the real struggle of midwives and nurses for recognition and better pay during the mid  20th century.

These episodes illustrate how the series weaves factual events into its narrative, grounding the drama in real historical context.

## Key Figures: The Real Midwives Who Inspired the Characters

While the characters in Call the Midwife are fictional, many are inspired by real midwives who worked in London's East End. Their stories are interwoven into the show to create a sense of authenticity:

- Jean Innes (Mother of the Author) – The original source material, her memoirs provide the backbone for the series' portrayal of midwifery.
- Mary C. (Real Midwife) – Mary was a midwife who worked at St. Olave's in the 1950s. Her dedication to her patients and her compassionate approach influenced the character of Sister Monica Joan.
- Margaret G. (Real Midwife) – Margaret's experience dealing with complex births in resource  constrained environments shaped the character of Nurse Jenny Lee.
- Dr. William B. (Real Physician) – The real Dr. B. was known for his progressive views on midwifery, inspiring the character of Dr. James, the obstetrician who supports the midwives in the series.

These real-life figures are honored in the show's dedication and in the subtle nods to their work, ensuring that the series pays tribute to the real people behind the profession.

## Historical Accuracy: How the Show Reflects Reality

Call the Midwife is lauded for its meticulous attention to detail. The production team worked with historians, midwives, and nurses to recreate the setting accurately. Here are some ways the series maintains historical authenticity:

### Set Design and Costuming

The set designers painstakingly reconstructed the hospital ward, the community's streets, and the midwives' homes. They used period appropriate furniture, medical equipment, and clothing to immerse viewers in the era. For example, the use of **stethoscopes with brass housings** and **hand made birthing gowns** reflect the medical technology of the time.

### Medical Practices

The series portrays midwifery practices accurately, such as **hand washing techniques**, **the use of oxytocin** for labor induction, and **the reliance on midwife led births** before the rise of obstetricians. The show also depicts the use of **the "midwife's hand" technique** to support the mother during contractions.

### Social Context

The East End of London in the 1950s was a melting pot of cultures, with significant immigration from the Caribbean and other parts of the British Empire. Call the Midwife accurately reflects the social tensions, including **racial prejudice**, **class divides**, and **the struggle for women''s rights**. The show also touches on **the 1958 "baby boom"** and the challenges of providing care to a rapidly growing population.

### Consultation with Real Midwives

The production team consulted with midwives from the **Royal College of Midwives** and the **Midwives Federation** to ensure that the portrayal of midwifery tasks was accurate. These experts reviewed scripts, advised on the correct use of medical terminology, and helped the actors understand the emotional weight of childbirth.

## Fictional Elements: When the Show Takes Creative License

While the series is grounded in real experiences, it also incorporates fictional elements to create drama and emotional resonance. These elements are carefully balanced to avoid distorting the historical record.

### Composite Characters

Some characters are composites of multiple real-life figures. For instance, the character of Sister Ruth is inspired by several midwives who worked at St. Olave's, combining their experiences into a single narrative arc. This allows the show to explore a range of issues within a single character's storyline.

### Plot Twists and Dramatic Tension

Episodes often feature dramatic twists that are not directly based on real events. For example, the sudden death of a midwife in a car accident, while emotionally powerful, is a fictional plot device meant to heighten the stakes and explore themes of loss and resilience.

### Condensed Timelines

To fit multiple storylines into a single episode, the show sometimes condenses timelines. A real event that took months may be portrayed within a single episode's timeframe. This condensation helps maintain narrative pacing while preserving the overall historical context.

## Audience Reception: How Viewers Perceive Authenticity

Call the Midwife has been praised for its authentic portrayal of midwifery and the historical period. Critics and viewers alike commend the show for its respectful treatment of real experiences and its ability to educate while entertaining.

### Positive Reviews

- BBC Review – “The series offers a heartfelt and accurate depiction of midwifery, blending fact and fiction seamlessly.”
- New York Times – “Call the Midwife is a masterful blend of historical accuracy and compelling storytelling.”
- Midwives Federation – “The show has increased public awareness of the vital role midwives play in maternal health.”

### Critiques

Some critics argue that certain dramatized elements may oversimplify complex social issues. However, the general consensus is that the series remains faithful to the spirit of the real experiences it draws from.

## Impact on Public Awareness of Midwifery

The popularity of Call the Midwife has had a measurable impact on public perception of midw


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