

A Few Forgotten Women
for
International Day
Of the
Girl



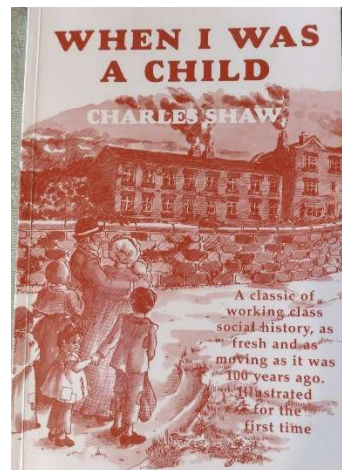
Girls in the Penkhull Homes, Stoke on Trent

For those families who fell upon hard times at the beginning of the 19th century the prospects were not promising. They may present at the workhouse door as a family unit but once over the threshold, after processing, father would be sent to the men's wing, mother to the women's wing and the children to their special area. The children would be fortunate should they see their parents for a short time on Sundays or even only at a religious service.



(Original workhouse buildings at Royal Stoke Hospital)

The New Poor Law of 1834 did nothing to improve the situation for family life or the well-being of children. There were individuals who were concerned both locally, Charles Shaw wrote of his experiences of poverty and the workhouse in Stoke on Trent, in his book “When I was a Child” and Charles Dickens, nationally, both in novels and campaigning, sort to improve the children’s lot.



The plight of girls was the particular concern of the first woman civil servant, Jane Senior, who produced a report in 1873 on the treatment of pauper girls in London. As a Poor Law inspector, she visited district schools and workhouses to see the effect of their poverty on the girls. She consulted Florence Nightingale on analysing and producing statistical reports, using teams of women to track down pauper girls who had left pauper schools the previous year. On the acceptance, in 1874, of her report, her first action was to stop the corporal punishment of female pauper children.



(Jane Nassau Senior 1859 painting by George Frederick Watts, used under Creative Commons License)

To improve the lot of children, who, it was accepted, were being neglected, exploited and mistreated in employment and even in families, letters were sent to the Times and by 1884 the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was founded by Benjamin Waugh. Following the 1st act to protect children from abuse and neglect in 1887, the society's name was changed to The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

To further improve children's lot, Jane designed a system of cottage home type accommodation. This would remove them from the "taint" of the workhouse, (Staffordshire Sentinel 5th July 1909). This idea was gradually instituted by local authorities and between 1870 and 1914 nearly 200 homes were authorized. In Stoke on Trent it was decided, by local guardians in 1899, to adopt the system. Proposals which would cost £7,500 plus an additional £750 for a Muster Hall were sent to the London Board of Guardians in a letter of 17th March 1899. Only minor changes were suggested to the proposal of 12 semi-detached cottages which would each house 12 children. Each cottage was to have a day room, living room, a lavatory on the 1st floor and an outside toilet. The children slept in 2 bedrooms, with a foster mother's room and a spare bedroom for visitors. Similar accommodation was to be found in the Receiving House. There would be the Muster Hall with 2 classrooms alongside accommodation for the superintendent. The Muster Hall was also to be used for entertaining the children and parties were to be held there.

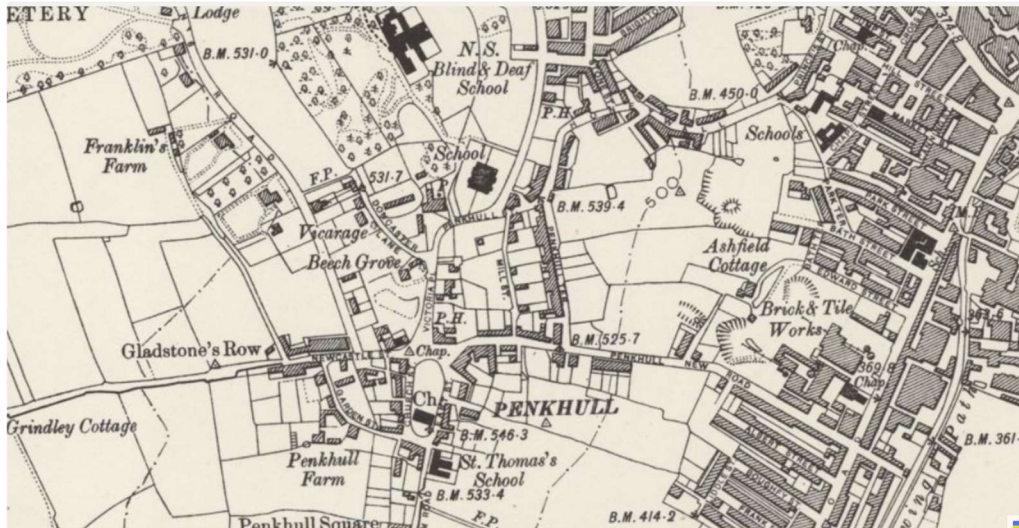


(Image permission from Richard Talbot MBE)

It was also a place visited once a month by the local barber to cut hair. Building was to be carried out by local builder Charles Lyman. Finance was via a loan for 30 years.

The ideal behind the system was for the children to be able to experience family life. This was not universally accepted as each home had a “foster mother” and although each “mother” could run it along her own lines there was an external regime imposed. There were other solutions proposed whereby the cottages were built separately in amongst local people’s housing or a system which had been used by some workhouses of “boarding out” children to local families. The latter system of “boarding out” was adopted by neighbouring Union of Wolstanton and Burslem. Yet the Stoke on Trent’s home’s system was, by 1909, also being considered by Wolstanton.

The system adopted by the Stoke on Trent Guardians was for a block of cottages, built in Penkhull.



(Map from FMP, 1911 census. Permission)



(Kind permission of close up of area from Richard Talbot MBE's book, The Royal Manor of Penkhull)

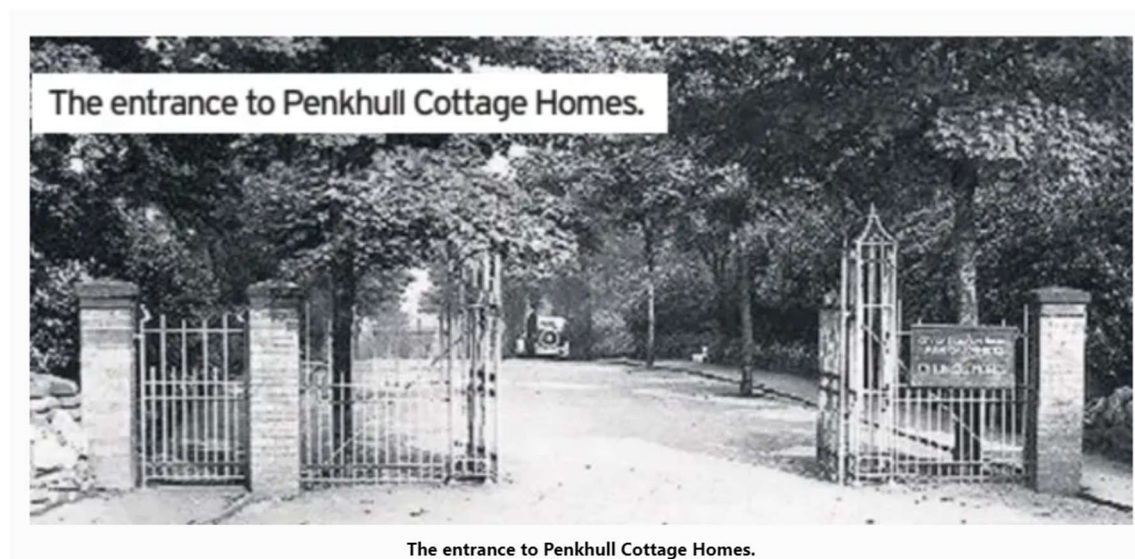
Each cottage was to have a foster mother, overseen by a Superintendent and a Receiving Officer, in the Receiving House. The first Superintendent was a Mr Till with his wife acting as matron. The cottages were originally to house 12 children each. Penkhull Cottage Homes were formally opened on Friday 19th Dec 1901 by the Right Honourable Henry Chaplin, MP. The Staffordshire Advertiser of Saturday, December 21st 1901 described in detail the ceremony and the background to the institution.

"The homes which are 12 in number accommodate 140 children the homes being entirely lighted by electricity.... Prior to the

opening the children, who were dressed in non-distinctive attire so different to the common workhouse uniform, paraded for a short time under Mr Till, Superintendent. The fact that the ground was covered by 2 or 3 inches of snow and that the air was sharpened by a severe frost accounted for the opening ceremony being short The Mayor, Mr. Yoxall, (who was also the contractor!) presented the Right Honourable gentleman, (MP Mr Chaplin) with a golden key, which Mr Chaplin acknowledged by saying that he should treasure it was a most happy recollection of his career."

There was an extensive description covering many column inches of the luncheon which followed the ceremony with toasts and speeches. One sentence at the end described,

"The proceedings shortly after concluded but in honour of the opening of the homes the 140 children belonging to them were entertained to an excellent tea"



(Image permission of Richard Talbot MBE)

It was soon clear that there were more children than places. The 1909 Report outlined a solution of leasing more properties. A detailed breakdown of the report in the Staffordshire Sentinel of 5th July 1909 gave an analysis of the rising figures of children due, it was thought, to the declining state of trade in the district. More properties were added, boarding out continued, and 9 children

were sent to other certified homes. In March 1908 there were 153 children in the homes rising a year later to 209, 90 being girls. Of the 209 children in 1909, 108 had parents in the workhouse, there were 24 orphans, 40 had been deserted and 37 "relieved" without their parents. 177 were legitimate and 32 illegitimate. The union received children from surrounding parishes; 70 from Hanley, 56 from Stoke, 40 from Longton 39 from Fenton and 4 from Stoke Rural. Some children were apprenticed, or girls put into service. They were also sent for training, sometimes at great distances, some girls being sent to housewifery schools in the south of England. The average numbers for the years prior to the 1911 census were, 1904 -**165**, 1905 -**172**, 1907 -**161** and 1909 -**182**. Expenditure varied from £2659 in 1902-3 £2509 in 1906-7 and £3200 for 1908-9. Later statistics revealed that in 1911, 63 children were abandoned outside the house of the Receiving Officer.

Although each foster mother could organize life in her individual home there was a standard routine to follow. Older girls were expected to carry out household tasks and help with looking after the younger girls, such as bed time routines, after which they could have some time to themselves, once the next morning's breakfast table had been set. Each home had breakfast at 7.30 am. This consisted of cereal, bacon sandwiches for younger children and bacon, eggs and coffee for older girls, after which the younger girls were allowed to play, while the older girls carried out household duties. Lunch, consisting of stew, peas, potatoes, cabbage followed by egg custard or stewed apple and custard and was at 1pm with tea of beans on toast or tomatoes and ham sandwiches, jam and bread and cake with milk which was at 5pm. Outside staff included a cleaner employed at each house from 9 am to 2pm.

Girls on first presenting at the home were taken to the Muster Hall where the matron carried out the admission. It is possible that they were temporarily housed in the Receiving House

because from the 1911 census in the Receiving house was Mary Ann Kelsall who was only 2. This must have been a temporary home as in the admittance records she was admitted on 20th February 1911, was born in 1908 and placed in the nursery. From admission they then were taken to the sewing room, to be given a new set of clothes; 3 pairs of shoes and 2 blazers, one for school, one for best. A raincoat and 2 more coats, one for school and one for best. The younger girls had a tunic and day blouses, skirts and Dayella blouses for the older girls. They were given cardigans and blouses, 2 nightdresses and a pinafore. Some of the clothes were made in other local institutions such as woollen items from the blind workshops in Fenton. Once a month clothes were inspected, and old ones thrown away. (This also applied to the crockery in the home). On leaving the home the girls were issued with new clothes.

On entry and on leaving, the girls received a medical, repeated every three months. It included weighing and measuring. The house mother had to submit reports on the girls including name, age and there were also personal questions; their reaction on admission, personal habits and attitude to staff and other children, including recent development and progress, and school attendance, educational ability and health. It also included interests and how often parents and relatives visited.

The Admission Books recorded: when the children were admitted/ surname/ Christian name/ sex/ weight/ when born/ religion/ a section headed Description divided into subsections; if parents were in the workhouse/ orphaned/ deserted/ if other children in the homes/ legitimate/ illegitimate/ next columns were; name and address of parents or friends/ the home the child placed in/ if sent into a trade/ date of discharge/ weight/ where gone to/ and finally remarks. All the columns were not always completed. There were 2 books to take the records from 1901 to 1924 after which records are sealed. If siblings entered either together or at different times or had a sibling already in the homes, they were not necessarily admitted to the same home.



(Image permission from Robert Talbot MBE)

There were not many entries in the Admission Books for the early months of 1901 or 1902, most were boys but Beatrice Heaney entered on 20th November 1901 while Florence Steed entered 3 days later on 23rd November. Perhaps there was not a strict method of recording admissions at the beginning as probably most were entering from the workhouse as were Beatrice and Florence.

The stories of both Beatrice and Florence show how sad the lives of many of the children were. It wasn't obvious from census records that Beatrice or Florence had been in the Penkhull Homes, they only appear at the homes in the Admission Books. Beatrice's entry reads:

Entered; Nov 20 '01:

Female:

Weight; 2st.11lb:

Born; 9 '96:

Religion; C.of E.:

Ticks for; other children in homes and legitimate:

Name of friends or relative; Edward Goodall, High St. Tunstall:

House 4:

Discharged; 13 Jan '09:

Remarks; Boarded out in Shelton.

Two of Beatrice's brothers, Walter and Reginald, and sister, Gertrude were recorded with her. They had entered on different dates, the boys placed in house 11 and Gertrude in house 3. They were discharged on different dates, Walter to work for a farmer in Goldenhill, Reginald to another farmer at the opposite end of the City, in Tittensor. Gertrude was boarded out in Etruria.¹

The Heaney's entries do not mention their parents. Father, Thomas Heaney was a police constable from Scotland and mother was Lissetta Harvey Rowley. They were married in a civil ceremony in the parish of Wolstanton in 1878. In 1881 the couple were living with Lissetta's sister, as visitors, in the hamlet of Newchapel. Their first child, Annie, had died aged one. By 1891 they had moved to Penkhull and May, Lillie, James, Joseph and Francis had been born. In the next 10 years six more children, including Beatrice, had been born but tragedy struck the family.

On 10th July 1899, father, Thomas died of Cardiac Mitral disease and exhaustion, aged just 51. He was working as a colliery watchman at the time. His death left Lissetta with a large family, 6 children under 7, to care for. This event must have hit the family hard as in 1901 the younger children were in the workhouse, while the older ones were boarding in various parts of the City, beginning employment, James recorded as a "young hewer" underground. Unfortunately, Lissetta was found as an inmate in goal. A later report in the Staffordshire Sentinel of Thursday October 1st could explain Lissetta's incarceration. On this occasion she had been arrested for being drunk and disorderly, despite spending time living with the Salvation Army. When arrested she claimed that she had fainted and could not be drunk, as she had only had 2d worth of whiskey in the afternoon and a glass of beer at night, but had not eaten.

¹ I am using "The City" to mean the six towns which make up the district of Stoke upon Trent. The six towns of Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton (the one Arnold Bennett forgot) and Longton were only amalgamated in 1910 and became a City in 1925.

The family was by the mid 1900s scattered around the City and Lissetta moved away altogether to Wigan in Lancashire where on 16th April 1906 she married coal miner, Absalom Harter who was 15 years her senior. Beatrice, also after being discharged from the homes on 13 Jan 1909, was recorded as a servant for 32 year old commercial clerk, Thomas Robson in 140 Boughey Road, Hanley, after which, she also moved away to London, where she was employed by sisters Mary Dorothy and Francia Irene Lane, in Kensington Park Gardens. She died in August 1985 aged 89.

Florence Steed's family had moved about the country by the time that the family arrived in Stoke on Trent. Her father, Henry was a railway shunter, born in 1857 in Canterbury, Kent. He had married Sarah Ann Barratt on 12th July 1882 at Hampton Wick. Sarah was born in 1860 in Forton, Staffordshire. Four children were born in the south of England, the family moving sometime after 1889 to Hanley, where 5 more children were born. Florence's birth however, was registered in Hackney. On 27 November 1899 Sarah Ann died aged just 40 of Paturition Eclampsie, a complication of pregnancy.

On the death of Sarah, Harry was 17 and Sissey 15, so the older children could have helped with looking after the younger children but there were more distressing events happening in the household. The Calendar of Prisoners for 1900 gives a very clear picture. On 9th Feb 1900, just a couple of months after Sarah's death, Henry was remanded on a charge of

"unlawfully and carnally knowing Sissie Emma Steed, (his eldest daughter) a girl then above the age of 13 years and under the age of 16 years, to wit of the age of 15 years and 9 months and on 22nd Jan 1900 unlawfully and carnally knowing said girl."

He was tried on March 8th and found guilty of attempted assault and given 18 months hard labour. Had this been happening while his wife was still alive and was it only after her mother's death that Sissie had felt able to bring it into the open?

As a consequence of these tragic events the family was broken apart, with the younger children, by 1901, in either Stoke Union or Stafford Union workhouse. Sissie however left the area and in 1901 was to be found in the Mount Vernon Green Lancashire Refuge for Women, in West Derby, Liverpool. Her fortune seemed to improve, as in the Summer of 1909 she married Herbert Done Roberts and later that year they had a daughter, Hazel. In 1911 sister, Harriet was visiting them. Sadly, Sissie's good fortune was not to last as according to the Pension Cards for the 1st World War, Sissey was a widow. She passed away on 15th Feb 1953. Sissie's move to Liverpool may have encouraged other siblings to move there also, as we have seen that Harriet was there in 1911 visiting Sissie.

Florence had entered the workhouse but as the Penkhull Homes were opened in the winter of 1901, she was moved there.

Her admission entry was:

Admitted; 23rd Nov 1901:

Female:

Weight; 2st 6lb:

Born; 1895:

Religion; C.of E.

Description; ticks for other children and legitimate:

Friends or relatives; Rachel Barrows, 98 Charles St. Hanley:

House assigned; home 3:

Discharged; October 25th 1909:

Remarks; To service with Mrs Lloyd, Hanley, Ashworth's Lodge.

Brother, Walter had been discharged in May 1908 to work for Mr. W.H. Hall butcher of Church St. Hanley.

Florence also left Hanley and in Liverpool, in June 1921, she married Joseph Breheny, who came from Sligo in Ireland. This must have been just after the census as Joseph was boarding in Liverpool, in the same house as Harriet. Living there also was Nellie Florence Steed, who had been born around 1914. Her father is recorded as being deceased. Could she be Harriet's daughter, as we know she had been in Liverpool living with Sissie. However in 1921 Florence must have been close by in Liverpool, for her marriage to Joseph to have been so close to the census but I could not find her in the census.

Joseph died on 6th May 1939 aged 56 and is recorded in the Catholic Burial Registers as being buried in Yew Tree Cemetery in Liverpool. The family were living at 25 Dodge Street and were still there when Florence is recorded with their daughter, Dorothea May, who was born the 10th April 1922, in the 1939 Register. Dorothea married Robert J. Ellis in December 1944. Florence lived to be 85, dying on 23rd Feb 1981, still living in Liverpool.

The Penkhull Homes are recorded in the 1911 and 1921 censuses, therefore extra information for the children can be added from the admission books but there are those like Beatrice and Florence who enter and leave between censuses

Some of the cottages were segregated but not all. In 1911 the Superintendent's house had besides Mr and Mrs Fereday, (the Superintendent and matron), and a servant, only one female, pauper inmate, Nellie Boulton, from Hanley aged 14. Along with the Receiving Officer, William Sheldon and his wife Deborah, in the Receiving Officer's house, there were mixed sexes with 7 female and 7 male children. The ages of the girls ranged from 2 to 15. Three of the older female residents were engaged in industrial training either domestic or laundry work.

The other houses had female foster mothers. Recorded as “New House”, Sophia Jane Harrison, was described as “nursery assistant”. She had the help of a servant to look after the children of which 10 were girls. There were 2, 16 year olds and 8 toddlers aged 2 to 5. The 2 older girls were undertaking industrial training in domestic subjects. They probably also had to help look after the toddlers.

House 1 had 10 girls overseen by 27 year old, Alice Wilshaw and her servant. There were 10 girls, five older girls, 3 in industrial training, which included dress making and 5 younger girls. Harriet Leese alone was foster mother for 9 girls, whose ages ranged from 6 to 15 in House 2. None of the older girls was involved with industrial training. House 3 was under the guidance of Ellen Glover and housed 8 girls, mostly older, just one being 7 and only one involved with training. Long term foster mother, Lily May Brown, (she was still there in 1921) looked after 7 inmates, aged 7 to 15 in House 4, with one in training. 11 girls lived in House 5 under the watch of Elizabeth May Jones. Four were 12 and 14 with one learning dressmaking. 12 girls lived with Agnes Walsh in house 6, 6 above 10 and 6 under 10. The 13 year old and 14 year old were engaged in laundry work and dressmaking.

The foster mothers were not only drawn from the local area, Sophia Jane Harrison was from Durham, Ellen Glover from a short distance south, from Gailey, Lily May Brown from over the border from Nantwich in Cheshire. Also from Cheshire, in Winsford, was Agnes Walsh. In 1911 the children were mainly from the local area, except Ada Fuller in house 2 from Forest Gate in Essex; Florence Preston in house 3, from Bilston, in South Staffordshire; Norah Hessian in house 6 from Manchester.

Foster mothers like Lily May Brown stayed at the Homes for many years. The Staffordshire Sentinel of 13th July 1923, reported the presentation made to Miss E Storer who had been a foster mother for 20 years, starting not long after the homes had opened.

There was an unmistakable testimony to the pleasure the foster mothers find in their work in the happy little ceremony at the Homes on Thursday evening, when Canon D. Nunan, of Stoke, who is the Chairman of the Board of Guardians, made a presentation to Miss E. Storer, one of the foster mothers, who recently completed 20 years service at the Homes. She became a foster mother, in fact, only a year or so after the Homes were opened.

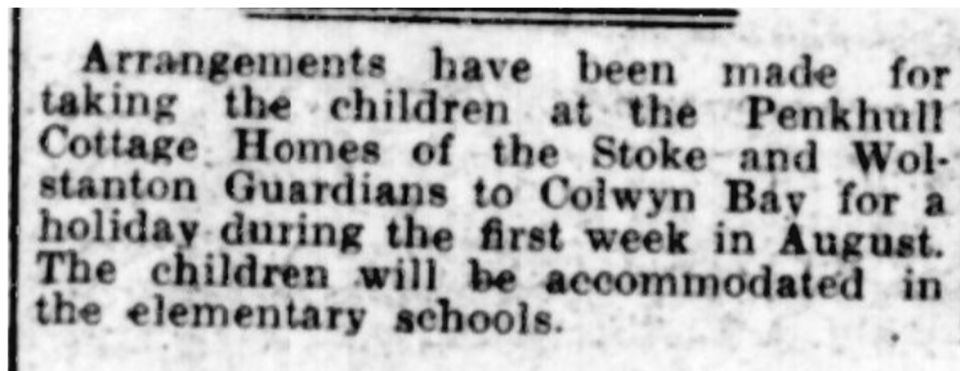
It was probably arranged that there were several older girls in each house so that household duties and care of the younger girls could be shared out. Babies who were born in the workhouse were removed from their mothers and placed in the Homes. The children were only allowed visits on the first Saturday of the month between 3 and 5 pm.

By 1921 the situation had changed and the children were drawn from a much wider area, Manchester, Macclesfield, Burton upon Trent, Sandbach, Crewe, Market Drayton and Nantwich. The 1921 census also gave extra information about the children, whether their parents were alive or dead which was of assistance when the admission records did not give any information about the parents as was sometimes the case. However, the admission records did often give other clues, such as in prison, the workhouse, ("in the house"), the asylum or missing. Several of the older girls were still involved in industrial training, of domestic service, laundry work or dressmaking.

In 1921, 11 girls were housed in Mr and Mrs Fereday's house with a servant, a visitor and a foster mother. In house 2 there were 14 girls with one foster mother. Ages in these 2 houses was wide. Two foster mothers looked after 9 children in house 3. Twelve were looked after in house 4 with just one foster mother. In house 5, 10 children resided with one foster mother. Mr and Mrs

Sheldon, who were also officials in 1911, looked after only 5 girls in house 7. Two nursery attendants and a servant looked after the nursery, where there were 9 little girls and 4 boys.

Mr Richard Talbot MBE has done extensive research, by interviewing former residents, into the lives of more recent occupants of the Penkhull Homes. He did discover that it was not always the rosy picture that the philanthropists had envisaged but there were attempts to provide the children with some more enjoyable times. The Staffordshire Advertiser of 13th July 1929 reported that a holiday was arranged in Colwyn Bay



A day trip to Llandudno.



Children on a trip to Southport.

(Images permission from Richard Talbot MBE)

This article is an introduction to the story of the Penkhull Homes. I hope that over time each house in the 1911 and 1921 censuses could be researched to discover the lives of the children who grew up in this regime, which was aimed to help the children of families who had fallen upon hard times. When the column in the 1921 read both parents dead, upon checking those girls can be found coming in and out of the homes multiple times such as Lily Ruby who was born in October 1910. Over the following years she was admitted on multiple occasions to the Homes as her family suffered hardship and the death of her parents.

Children were placed in the homes for a range of reasons for abject poverty, unemployment, family breakdown and desertion, abandonment, criminality, death of parents and orphaned, physical abuse and ill treatment, being mal nourished, single mothers unable to cope or simply parents not caring. Children were also physically removed from parents by the authorities, sometimes without saying goodbye to their families. When there, they sometimes did not remain but were sent to training establishments, sometimes at long distances across the country. Some were even sent to start new lives abroad in Canada and Australia.

The Homes continued until the mid 1980s. It might have been a laudable concept in the beginning but for many the experience of life in a cottage home was not what had been envisaged as the ideal.

If anyone has an ancestor who was in the homes between 1901 and 1924 if they contact the Few Forgotten Women Team, <https://www.fewforgottenwomen.com/contact-us>

I will endeavour to find their entries in the admission books and to point them in the direction of census entries.

Ann Simcock 2024

Sources:

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<https://www.workhouses.org.uk/StokeUponTrent/>

<https://www.thepotteries.org/>

Record collections for censuses, criminal registers on Ancestry,
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Family Search

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StaffordshireBMD

Workhouses in the Potteries by Diane Baker (1984 City of Stoke
on Trent Historic Buildings Survey)

Thanks are extended to the staff at Hanley Archives for all their help and advice.

The Penkhull Homes Admission Books: S/A/PCH/1 & 2

Thanks to Richard Talbot MBE for his kind permission to use his images from his Book, "The Royal Manor of Penkhull"