

Chailey Heritage, North Chailey, Sussex

Grace Mary Hannan was born in 1870 in Lewes, Sussex. The eldest of four children born to Cloth Merchant, James Hannan and his wife Thyrza Rogers. Grace was educated at Wilton House School (Catsfield Place), Catsfield, near Hastings in Sussex. She eventually became a Wesleyan deaconess, working in the West London Mission and living in the Bermondsey Settlement, where she met her husband.

Grace had read Juliance Horatia Ewing's book (1885) 'The story of a short life' which inspired Grace to start the 'Guild of Brave Poor Things' and to help children with disabilities living in London and her motto was 'Happy with My Lot'. She married Charles William Kimmins in 1897 and became active in charitable foundations concerned with children's play and the welfare of the poor and disabled children. She was made a CBE in 1927 and a DBE in 1950.

Dame Grace Kimmins was most famous for her work in Chailey, Sussex where she founded the Heritage Craft Schools and hospitals for crippled children. She acquired a former workhouse, just outside Lewes (on Chailey Common) in 1903 and brought 7 disabled children from the East End of London to 'their place in the country' – this was the first purpose-built school for children with disabilities in the UK. The children mainly had disabilities resulting from treatable medical conditions such as: TB, Rickets and Polio and conditions resulting from poor home environments and violence.

During and after the wars (WW1 and WW2) injured soldiers were also treated at the heritage as the hospital was a pioneer in the use of prosthetics.

Chailey Heritage was also well known in the 1960's with the treatment of Thalidomide victims and the Chailey Heritage Foundation still supports children and young people who have complex physical disabilities and health needs through their school, boarding houses and hospital. The latest venture, 'futures @ chailey heritage' provides a transition service for young adults with physical disabilities in a life skills centre.

Ada Vachell, Dame Grace Kimmins friend, founded a similar facility in Bristol, but this closed in 1987 after 80 years' service.

Dame Grace Kimmins died aged 83 in 1954 in Haywards Heath hospital. Punch magazine described her as 'in her quiet, practical way is probably as good a friend as London ever had'.

Janice Brinley Codd October 2023

References

Chailey Heritage history on <https://www.chf.org.uk>

Chailey Heritage School and Grace Kimmins on <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>