

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Linda Sexton, Suffolk Children in Care – The Story of St John's House

Linda Sexton introduced her detailed research about St John's House to the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at the Village Hall Rickinghall. She had her audience riveted as she explained the provision of care for children in Ipswich from 1871 to the early 1950s using photographs and other materials that she has amassed during her investigation of St John's House.

After 1834 poor relief was only available through workhouses. Families were separated and conditions were purposely grim so as to deter the 'undeserving poor' from becoming a burden to ratepayers. There were 20 workhouses in Suffolk. By the mid-19th Century St Peter's Workhouse in Ipswich had become overcrowded and so the Guardians took the novel step of moving children, initially 53 boys, to a former pub owned by the Cobbold family to the east of the town in 1871. In 1878 St John's House was expanded and girls were moved to the site. There was a strict gender division as boys and girls were accommodated separately and forbidden even to speak to one another. In 1904 a Receiving House was added.

On entry, matron entered a child's details into the admissions book. This included why the child was in the home. Children were bathed and had their hair shaven. They spent two weeks in the Receiving House to establish whether they had any contagious diseases before being placed in a dormitory where they had little personal space, only a hook for their clothes. Photographs indicate that there were probably three times as many boys as girls in the home. Girls were more useful than boys and so were more likely to be accommodated among relatives of the poor.

From 1873 boys were sent to a local school part-time to gain a basic education and also had some industrial training in shoe repairing and carpentry to learn a work ethic. From the ages of 12-14 they were either apprenticed or joined the army or navy. They were not allowed to work on trawlers which were regarded as too dangerous and too hard. The education of girls was seen as less important. They did domestic duties around the home, including the laundry, and had a school room on the site. An inspection in 1898 ended this as standards were so poor that girls were sent to a local school.

St John's House became overcrowded. It had been built to accommodate 250 children but by 1912 it had 400. There was also a severe problem with ringworm. It was decided to adopt the scattered home scheme devised in Sheffield. Houses were bought around the town where small groups of boys and girls were cared for by a house mother. This successful approach lasted until 1927 when it was deemed uneconomic as the numbers in care had fallen and all children were brought back to St John's House.

In the 1930s boys had a very hard time because of brutality and bullying by both staff and other children. Girls had a strict but less repressive regime. In 1940 most children were evacuated to Leicester and the rest were sent to Polstead Hall in 1942. After the war, the children returned to St John's House but a report in 1948 was critical of provision. Its buildings and organisation had become outdated. There was a return to the scattered home model. After 1950 St John's House was gradually closed and most of the buildings were demolished.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24 September at Rickinghall Village Hall when Neil Lanham will be speaking about *The Life of a Suffolk Auctioneer*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy