

## **School for Training Poor Girls, Kenton**

The School for Training Poor Girls, Kenton (often referred to as the Kenton Industrial Home for Girls) was established in 1861 and had closed by September 1892. It was certificated between 12 January 1863 and 9 December 1892 as a residential school, licenced to take 24 girls.

### **Background to Certified Schools**

'Certified' Schools were independently run homes which were licensed to receive children those who would otherwise be living in workhouse accommodation. The system was introduced by the Poor Law (Certified Schools) Act of 1862, largely brought about by the efforts of the Honourable Mrs Emmeline Way, founder of the children's home and training school Brockham in Surrey. The Act allowed the Boards of Guardians, who operated the Poor Law system, to pay for pauper children to be boarded out in such establishments. In most cases, the homes also took children other than those from workhouses. Certified Schools included a wide variety of homes, ranging from small local establishments run by single individuals, up to very large institutions run by national organisations such as Barnardo's or Waifs and Strays' Society.

'Boards of Guardians often found it very convenient to board out children in Certified Schools. This could happen if they had insufficient accommodation of their own, or only a small number of children to deal with, or as a way of dealing with children who had special medical, educational or religious requirements. Many Certified Schools were set up by the Roman Catholic community to take Catholic children out of workhouses so that they would not be in danger of losing their faith. Certified Schools usually provided training in practical skills to equip children for later employment. For girls, this was usually directed to preparing them for domestic service.

'Certified Schools were licensed by the central Poor Law authority (originally the Poor Law Board, then the Local Government Board and, after the First World War, the Ministry of Health). It should be noted that the holding of Certified School status does not necessarily reflect when the establishment opened or closed down. An existing home could apply for certification at any time, or resign its certificate if it decided to give up taking Poor Law children. If a School moved to new premises, underwent a change of management, or changed the type of children it was taking, then the old certificate would be withdrawn and a new one issued'

(Source: Peter Higginbotham <http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/CS/> [accessed 5 September 2016])

It is also clear that these homes were seen as a way of eventually reducing the amount of Poor Law Rates by breaking a cycle of pauperism. It was thought that if children could be removed from the workhouse environment and trained in industrious habits they would not themselves become paupers in adulthood.

### **The Kenton School**

No records for the school appear to have survived, so it has been necessary to attempt to reconstruct the history of the school from other sources. These include trade directories, census returns, maps, and newspaper reports.

### **Patronage**

The 'Industrial Home' in Kenton appears to have been established in 1861 by the Countess of Devon (Lady Elizabeth nee Fortescue). After her death in 1867, her widower the Earl of Devon, William Reginald Courtenay 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Devon, assumed support for the school until c1873, when their daughter, Lady Agnes took over its patronage until its closure in 1892. Lady Agnes Elizabeth Courtenay (1838 – 1919) married Charles Lindley Wood, later 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Halifax, in 1869, so is variously referred to as Lady Agnes Courtenay, Lady Agnes Wood and the Viscountess Halifax.

(Sources: Kelly's Directories of Devonshire, 1866, 1870, 1873, 1879, 1883, 1889 and 1890)

### **Location**

The school was situated in South Town, the southern end of Kenton towards Starcross. Directories and census returns all simply state 'South Town.' No maps of the period identify the location of the school. However sales particulars from September 1892, when the furniture and effects were sold on the instructions of Lady Halifax refer to Southtown Farm and Industrial Home, Kenton.

(Source: Daily Gazette 23 and 29 September 1892)

Southtown Farm was later renamed Marsh Farm and the farmhouse converted to cottages, now known as 1 and 2 Marsh farm.



Southtown Farm, Kenton, now known as Marsh Farm, site of the Kenton Industrial Home for Girls

### **Census returns**

In 1871 the school is identified as 'Industrial Home, South Town'. There were three resident members of staff and eighteen pupils. Staff comprised a Matron, Schoolmistress, and Laundress. The pupils are referred to as 'Scholar and inmate of industrial home.' The pupils are aged between 9 and 15. Nine of the pupils were born in Devon in various parishes, only two were born in Kenton itself. The remaining nine came from further afield, mainly Dorset and the London area,

The 1881 census records the school as 'Industrial Home, Kenton'. On this occasion there were just two resident members of staff and twenty-three pupils. Recorded staff on this occasion consisted of a Matron and a Schoolmistress. On this occasion just three of the pupils were from Devon, one from nearby Starcross, one from Exeter and one from Exmouth. The remainder came from a wider range of locations than previously, including London, Berkshire, Surrey, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, and Oxford. Pupils' ages range from 8 to 15.

The final census on which the school is shown is from 1891. On this occasion the address is once again given as 'Industrial Home, South Town'. There are two resident members of staff, a Matron and Teacher, and an Assistant Matron and Teacher. The twenty-three pupils are aged between 9 and 16 and from a wide geographic area. Two are from Devon, - one from Chagford and one from Brixham. The others came from locations as far away as Edinburgh but many again from London and the south east.

### **Pupils**

The schools had pupils from a wide geographic area including London and the south east. This may indicate a lack of capacity for such children in workhouse or nearby schools in the rapidly expanding metropolis. However to establish further information on this it would be necessary to consult the records of the Poor Law Guardians for the initiating parishes. It is also possible that in some cases there may have been a deliberate policy of placing children away from their home parish. This

was certainly the case with the Industrial Schools that children could be sent to in cases of persistent truancy, consorting with known criminals, or neglect. In such cases the magistrates would often refer children to distant Industrial Schools in order to remove them from potentially harmful influences.

Newspaper articles also give clues about the circumstances of some of the pupils. One example comes from 1870. HMS Captain, a Royal Naval warship sank with the loss of around 480 officers and crew. The Portsmouth Ladies Committee of the Captain Relief Fund was set up to support the widows and orphans of the disaster. Many sponsored children to be sent to orphanages and schools across the country including one, a Mrs Burgoyne, who offered to pay the fees for one girl to attend the Kenton Industrial School. (The Captain of the ship was Hugh Talbot Burgoyne VC RN, who was also lost in the sinking, but it's not clear if the Mrs Burgoyne who paid the orphan's fees was a relative.)

(Source: Hampshire Telegraph 21 December 1870)

A further incidence of philanthropic sponsorship of a pupil was reported in 1887, following the disastrous fire at the Theatre Royal, Exeter. Numerous offers were made to provide for children who were orphaned by the loss of a parent in the fire, including one offer from Lady Halifax to adopt and place in the Kenton Industrial Home a destitute girl over two years of age and provide for her entirely.

(Source: Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 10 September 1887)

## **Education**

As no prospectus survives the style of education provided to the girls is not documented. There is no indication of the kind of elementary education provided. However, some themes may be deduced from other sources. Firstly, as the girls were expected to eventually take on roles as domestic servants a practical education in household skills would have been a priority. A number of sources indicate that laundry work was particularly important at Kenton. A residential laundress at the school (as in the 1871 census) would have been unnecessary for the home's own needs as the girls would have been expected to carry out this work. It is therefore likely that the laundress was teaching the pupils laundry skills and techniques. Although in later censuses there is no residential laundress, that does not indicate that no laundress was employed as an advertisement for a laundress appeared in the situations vacant column of the *Western Morning News* (3 October 1887).

The home also advertised for situations for a laundry maid for girls who were due to leave the school as in an advert for a position for "a strong clean girl of 17, who ... has been well-trained in an industrial school." (Source : Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 22 May 1869)

Another indication that laundry work was important to the school comes in 1887, when a series of advertisements were placed advertising the laundry service

provided by the home to the surrounding area. Advertisements were placed in the *Western Morning News* and the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*. The adverts stated that all kinds of washing was done and that a first class service was provided at reasonable rates. Clearly this was a way of providing some income for the home, but also a way of obtaining sufficient laundry work with which to train the pupils.

Dairy work may have been another important area of occupational training for the pupils. Dairy work was considered suitable employment for girls in farming communities. The school was almost certainly based in Southtown Farm. The nature of the farming carried out here is apparent from the sales particulars when the school was closed as not only were the household furniture and effects advertised for sale but also livestock, including cows in calf, heifers, rearing calves and a cob. Also to be auctioned were dairy utensils and a crop of apples from a two and a half acre orchard. All were described as being the property of Lady Halifax. The inclusion of an orchard at the premises suggests that some kind of garden cultivation may have been included in the training programme.

(Source: Plymouth and Exeter Gazette 23 September 1892)

### **Other Certified Schools in Devon**

Childrenshomes.org.uk lists six additional certified schools in Devon that were established prior to 1870 (the period of the research project). These are

Devonport and Western Counties Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind, Fore Street, Devonport

Royal West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Topsham Road, Exeter

West of England Institution for the Blind, St David's Hill, Exeter

Western Counties Idiot Asylum / Training School for Feeble-minded Children, Star Cross, Exeter

Totnes Institution for Orphan Girls, Paignton

Plymouth, South Devon and Cornwall Institution for the Blind, Coburg Street, Plymouth

(<http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/list/CS2.shtml>)

Many more were certified after 1870 and in all thirty-two homes are recorded in Devon on the Children's Homes website although some are clearly re-certification of homes as they changed location or were renamed.

(Source: <http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/list/CS2.shtml> )

Another small home similar to that in Kenton was set up by Lady Clinton at Merton in north Devon. This home was certificated as Lady Clinton's Industrial Home, Merton, Dolton, between 1884 and 1904.

In December 1883 Lady Clinton wrote a letter to the *Morning Post*, which was reproduced by the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* on 28 December 1883. In it she wrote that her own attempts to establish a small industrial home for pauper girls had been discouraging. She had approached three neighbouring Poor Law Unions but had met with no encouragement. Her plans included training in all kinds of household and domestic work, with the addition of dairy work and garden cultivation. She intended that the pauper girls admitted would associate with others by attendance at the public elementary school in the parish. The home was to be limited to twelve girls. She pointed out that as soon as the home received its certification (which it did three months later) it would be qualified to receive children from any Union in England or Wales. Lady Clinton viewed the Industrial Homes as a way of removing children from the workhouse and what she described as 'hereditary pauperism'. She reported that one third of pauper children were still subject to the influences and associations of the workhouses and thought that this was because some Boards of Guardians were unwilling to part with their children.

(Source: Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 28 December 1883)

This letter, although later than the period of the study, nevertheless provides some valuable insights into the rationale for these industrial homes. Furthermore, in the absence of any surviving records or prospectus for the Kenton home it provides some useful information about the kind of training which these homes provided for young pauper girls. In particular the indication is that children may have been receiving the same education as other non-pauper children in village schools, but that this was supplemented by an 'occupational' education intended to fit them for a life in domestic service.

### **Debates and controversies**

The Act of 1862 by which Industrial Homes were created enabled the Poor Law Guardians to pay for the children in their care to be boarded out. The sums paid out were generally equivalent to the amount of expenditure that would have been spent on each child for food and clothing had they remained in the workhouse. Later clarification from the Poor Law Board allowed Guardians to pay additional amounts to include a proportion of the expenditure in support of the home.

The homes were not unanimously supported by Boards of Guardians and by ratepayers. A motion was passed in November 1866 by the St Thomas Board of Guardians to the effect that they would adopt the powers created by the Act and increase the payment made to Industrial Institutions for workhouse children. The proposal was moved by the chairman, the Earl of Devon. The meeting was poorly

attended and the motion was carried on the casting vote of the Chairman. At the following meeting, at which there was an almost full attendance, the resolution was subsequently rescinded. On several occasions during the meeting Lord Devon pointed out that the resolution applied not only to Industrial Homes but also to homes for blind, deaf and otherwise disabled children. He offered to amend the resolution to exclude industrial homes from its provisions but was unsuccessful in preventing the rescinding and all its provisions.

On the grounds of economy, some on the St Thomas Board of Guardians argued that the Union workhouse had more than sufficient capacity for the children, and for the children to be housed and trained separately from the adult paupers within the institution itself, and that it was therefore unnecessary to send the children elsewhere, incurring additional expenses.

Another argument for rescinding the motion centred on the nature of the religious training provided in the homes. Some described the schools in pejorative terms as 'Tractarian Schools' and referred to the 'Pusey-ite' teaching. One farmer wrote to the *Western Times* suggesting that the Guardians were failing in their duty to protect the children by subjecting them to such influences. Guardians thought that 'Popery' was connected with ignorance and idleness, whilst a proper Protestant training promoted intelligence, industry, and education. It was noted that there was an increase in the Ritualist teaching in their parishes but that, whilst as grown men they were able to resist such influences, children's minds were more susceptible and would carry its traces through life. The Guardians had a moral duty to protect the children and society from its influences. It was also reported as 'a well known fact' that children were taken to church in the weekdays of Lent, when they should have been receiving the education and training paid for by the Guardians. The *Western Times*, in reporting the proceedings of the meeting, reminded its readers that 'the Kenton school, or "Home" as the Tractarians have christened it, is under the special patronage of the Countess of Devon.' (*Western Times*, 4 December 1866)

A further cause for complaint was the lengthy period during which the children were resident at the homes. Many objected to children remaining until the age of sixteen when their own children were frequently at work by the age of twelve or thirteen. They expressed the view that children could be adequately trained for domestic service in far less time. Children from workhouse schools made perfectly adequate servants to small tradesmen and farmers, whilst those from the Industrial Homes were given a superior training which fitted them as servants to the aristocracy and clergy. It was thought that it was not the business of the Guardians to carry the expense of an extended training for this purpose. A counter argument was put that many governors and chaplains of gaols, matrons of reformatories and others had remarked that the most hopeless cases were those who had been trained in union workhouses. Those who were born and bred in the workhouse were sent repeatedly to prison. Care should be taken not to send children out too soon as they should be

taught to read the bible and given a knowledge of their duty to God and to their neighbours. It was a false economy to send children out when they had little training.

One final issue was a cause of concern to the Guardians and that was what would now be described as a conflict of interests. The fact that the Kenton Industrial Home was under the patronage of the Countess of Devon was to lead to allegations that the proposal was intended to increase the number of children at the Kenton home and to increase the amount paid for each girl. It was alleged that Lord Devon was 'touting' for inmates for the home established by his Countess and an increased allowance for their maintenance. Others thought that although a small increase in the allowance in common with the others, there would be no profit from the transaction.

(Sources: Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 23 November 1866; Western Times 20 November 1866 and 4 December 1866)

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21 February 2017

Since this report was written further information has come to light and will be incorporated in a revision to this article.