

CLEMENTS HALL LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

POVERTY RESEARCH PROJECT*

York waifs and strays: from workhouse to boarding-out, 1879-83

Introduction

Provision of decent care of vulnerable children is a contemporary social concern as evidence emerges of historic systemic abuse in many countries including the UK, Ireland, Australia and Canada. How then were pauper children treated in the second half of 19th century Britain - by the State and private institutions, religious bodies, charities and individuals?

Provision included workhouses, boarding-out (fostering), and that offered by a range of organisations such as the Waifs and Strays Society founded in 1881. And York Poor Law Union (PLU) made occasional use of private orphanages; for example, Emma Hanson's three children were admitted to the Orphan Homes, Headingley, Leeds, in 1881, and visited annually. There were also child emigration schemes managed by institutions, and by individuals such as Maria Rye and Annie Macpherson.

There was provision for children with special needs. e.g. Guardians agreed that Jane Oglesby, who was deaf and dumb, be sent to a home at Cobham, Surrey, under the care of Miss Blunt at a cost of 4/- per week, subject to the approval of the central authority – the Local Government Board. (LGB). And £7 4/- was approved for Rev Edward W. Dawson of St John's Institution for the Deaf and Dumb at Boston Spa to maintain and clothe Michael Hessian. A few children were sent to industrial schools, again subject to approval of the LGB. e.g. 1/- payment for the maintenance of Ellen Dickenson at York Girls' Industrial School in 1883-84. Mary Jane and Maria Louisa Dixon were sent to an industrial school in Hull. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic church sometimes paid for Catholic orphans to attend the Nazareth Orphanage at Middlesbrough. e.g. Louisa and Mary Ann Foster in 1887.

Boarding-out was preferred to institutional care in Scotland, especially after the Poor Law (Scotland) Act 1845 transferred administration of poor relief to lay parochial boards. From the 1840s a few English poor law unions boarded-out pauper children from the workhouse. By the early 1860s there were fostering initiatives proposed by clergy (and their spouses), though by 1869 only 21 unions in England and Wales fostered, involving 347 children. That year the then central authority - the Poor Law Board (PLB) - commissioned its inspector J.J. Henley to investigate the practice of boarding-out of pauper children in Scotland. There was also a more limited investigation into boarding-out in England.

Henley reported favourably on the placing of workhouse children in long-term care of foster parents who received a weekly allowance for each child. The system was viewed by the PLB and PLU Guardians as removing children from the moral contagion of the workhouse. Moreover, it was closer to a 'normal' home life, and economical. Hitherto, fear of possible neglect, cruelty or exploitation of boarded-out children had inhibited the PLB from sanctioning its use.

Informed by Henley's report the PLB issued a Boarding-out Order (1870), specifying a Boarding-out Committee be formed in each union to supervise arrangements. Only orphans and deserted children between two and ten were to be boarded-out with no more than two in the same home unless brothers and sisters. Foster parents were to sign an undertaking to 'bring up

the child as one of their own children, and provide it with proper food, lodging, and washing, and endeavour to train it in habits of truthfulness, obedience, personal cleanliness, and industry, as well as suitable domestic and outdoor work'. There was a maximum weekly maintenance fee of four shillings.

An 1877 revised Order prohibited boarding-out with foster parents in receipt of poor relief. Further Orders in 1889 provided for boarding-out beyond their own union. By the end of the 19th century around half of unions in England and Wales used boarding-out, with 8,000 orphaned or deserted children placed in private homes. Although occasional cases of ill-treatment emerged, these were far outweighed by children's fear of being taken away from their foster homes. The practice was only suitable for children in long-term care. For for the 'outs and ins', scattered homes or cottage homes were more suitable.

York Poor Law Union

York was slow to initiate change, and it was not till February 1881 that a Guardian - Henry King - gave notice that he intended to raise the issue. The Board agreed by a narrow margin of twelve votes to ten 'to set up a committee to consider the propriety of boarding-out orphan and deserted children of the Union, and to report to the Board'. This division reflected at least scepticism, if not hostility, towards change by a significant proportion of Guardians. However, King was able to cite the value of boarding-out schemes in many unions, and a fellow Guardian reported that Leeds PLU had also encouraged use of boarding-out. The following month a pilot scheme accompanied by safeguards was agreed by York Union for up to twenty orphans and deserted children. Henry King – as the scheme's leading proponent – calmed anxieties related to the need for stringent enquiries into the character of foster parents (and their homes), and for frequent inspections of the children. Prospective parents would be required to apply in writing, giving name, age, place of residence, condition of home and evidence of respectability. Formal undertakings were required, and preference given to those in rural areas.

In April 1881 advertisements for foster parents were placed in local newspapers, three shillings weekly allowed for each child, plus an outfit of clothes. A further sum of fifteen shillings was payable half-yearly for clothing and payment of school fees. The Workhouse Committee suggested that guardians of each parish, assisted by the relevant Relieving Officer and Medical Officer, visit all fostered children in their parish at least once a quarter, and report on their welfare. The PLU clerk was instructed to prepare a set of forms to facilitate the process.

ORPHAN	PLU BOARD MEETING	AGE	FOSTERED TO	ADDRESS	OCCUPATION	NOTES
Mary Louisa Bevan	26/05/81	3	Samuel Moore	Whitby Terrace		
Elizabeth Bean	26/05/81	3 born 1878	Wm. & Ellen Cass	24 Lower St. Elvington	ag. lab.	On 1891 census + boarder Eliza Gildard
Annie Scott	26/05/81	5	Miriam Harper	Church Lane, Elvington	charwoman	
Mary Louisa Hartly	26/05/81	5	George Moyser	79 Gatehouse Strensall	railway gatekeeper	On 1881 census
Kate McCarty	26/05/81	3	Wm. Crosby	Flaxton		Withdrawn due to Kate being R.C.
Cecilia Simpson	02/06/81 01/09/81 to Rebecca Druce	7 born 1874	Wm. Ewebank	St Paul's Terrace Kexby	wheelwright & joiner	The Board agreed on 02/06/81 that she be fostered to Wm. Ewebank, St Paul's Terrace, a wheelwright. This arrangement was not sustained as the Board subsequently agreed on 01/09/81 she be fostered to Rebecca Druce of Kexby. Rebecca was a school mistress. Cecilia is not with Rebecca Druce in 1891 census
Ann Elizabeth Dixon	02/06/81	5 bapt. 2/76	Wm. Clarkson	125 Marygate York	shoemaker	Mother's help (1891 census)
Ina Dixon	02/06/81	7	Wm. Clarkson	125 Marygate York	shoemaker	Dressmaker 1891 census
Ann Eliza Dennis	09/06/81	8	Theophilus Goodhall	4 Carlisle Street, Leeman Road York	army pensioner; street sweeper	
Annie Richardson	09/06/81	6	Wm. Crosby	Flaxton	shoemaker	
Wm. Bew	14/07/81	5 born 1876	Charles Cooper	Strensall	ag. worker	
Agnes Martin	18/08/81	6 born 1875	Hannah Dresser	Sheriff Hutton Road Earswick	nurse	Agnes had another boarder on 1891 census
Jane Marshall	01/09/81		M. Wm. Walker	16 Palmer Lane York	shoemaker	Jane had another boarder – Mary Jane Gowland – on 1891 Census

ORPHAN	PLU BOARD MEETING	AGE	FOSTERED TO	ADDRESS	OCCUPATION	NOTES
Lily Pratt	06/10/81	5	John Brown	Strensall	ag. lab. ?	
Rose Pratt	06/10/81	4	A. Pullyn	Haxby		Later fostered to George Musgrave
John Martin	13/10/81	c. 6	John Brown	Strensall		1891 census: at 16 Elmwood St. apprenticed to Wm. Wilson, chimney sweep
Isaac Bew Henry Mooran	09/03/82	c. 2 7	Thos. Croft (35)	Haxby Crossing, Haxby Rd.	railway platelayer	
Ada Simpson	09/03/82	c. 7	Jacob Potter	Haxby railway station cottages	railway labourer	1891 census: Ada is a DS to shipowner Wm. Hutchinson in King St. Cottingham
Isabella Harrison	16/03/82	4	John Wilson (64), wife Esther (64) & d. Esther (23)	16 Portland St. off Gillygate.	retired master/ matron York W'H	great- grandparents of PM Harold Wilson

Review of pilot scheme

The scheme was reviewed in September 1882. Henry King reported that seventeen girls, and three boys, aged between two and eight had been fostered. Six of the girls had been placed in homes in the city and its neighbourhood, and eleven in the countryside. The three boys were fostered rurally. One child had been adopted. The Relieving Officers (whose main role was assessing out-relief claims) were commended for their diligence in making regular inspections. King cited the 'healthy and cheerful appearance of the children' observed on his own visits. He strongly advocated sending the children out young as they 'sooner gained the affection of those under whom they were placed, and there was greater probability of them being adopted'. The Board viewed the project a success for the children - and for ratepayers, as overcrowding in the girls' workhouse quarters would have required funds to construct an extension had fostering not been pursued. It was agreed that the Workhouse Committee henceforth recommend to the Board the case of any child for whom a suitable boarding-out place could be found (*York Herald*, 30 September 1882).

Further research questions

- why the preponderance of girls boarded-out?
- to what extent are socio-economic backgrounds of foster parents confirmed by experience elsewhere (e.g. as revealed by Henley and other studies)?
- is there evidence of NIMBYism towards the children from the communities where they were boarded-out (as found by Olwen Purdue in her study, cited below)?
- how might voices of the children be revealed (and/or details of their subsequent lives)?
- how does the York experience compare with that of other PLUs?

Primary sources

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www.workhouses.org.uk/boardingout/ acknowledgement: Peter Higginbotham

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