

# Birmingham Children's Homes Project

In 2009, a small team based in Central Library was established to develop a history of Birmingham's children's homes. Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and supported by Birmingham City Council, the one-year project finished in October 2010.

Many people who had spent time in children's homes in Birmingham were having difficulty finding any details about the homes they were in or their time in care. Many case files (dating before the 1980s) no longer exist, few other useful materials remain and it was very difficult to find out any information at all about the many Council-run children's homes.



In the stacks at Birmingham Archives & Heritage.

**“I could find nothing about it. It was like my children's home never existed.”**

Over the past 12 months of this ground-breaking project, we have talked to people who spent time in the children's homes and former staff about their memories. We have trawled through Children's Committee and Social Services minutes and sought out other documents and photographs.



Mark, one of the participants in the project, pictured outside Brooklands Children's Home, 1979.

A huge *thank you* is due to all the people who came forward with their memories and photographs. The quotations used in this display are taken from their interviews.



## Birmingham's Child Care Service

WHAT IT IS - HOW IT WORKS

Leaflet on Child Care, 1967. [LE/Social Welfare / 74]

**“Everybody's looking for answers. I don't know anything about myself. Why was I in there? What happened to me? Everybody's looking for information about themselves.”**

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# Erdington Cottage Homes



The Erdington Cottage Homes complex was built in 1900. Originally called Aston Union Cottage Homes, there were 16 homes each of which could accommodate around 24 children.



Children at Paxhall in the 1950s. [MS 2838/3/8]

Initially the regime was strict. A uniform was given to each child when they arrived and their own clothes were taken away. Boys were trained in a skill, such as tailoring or carpentry, and girls were taught domestic duties. Siblings were often split apart from each other, and parents and other relatives could only visit a few fixed days each year.



M at a Birthday party in Home 7. [BCC10/BCH/3/7/9]



Aerial view from the south east, c.1950. [From [www.workhouses.org.uk](http://www.workhouses.org.uk), courtesy of Peter Higginbotham]

In the 1950s, the regime relaxed and children went out to school (generally the National School on Erdington High Street) and mixed with other children.

In the 1960s, the Cottage Homes were renamed 'The Gardens'. All the homes in the gardens were treated as separate children's homes. The number of children in each home were gradually reduced to 10 or 12.



Erdington Cottage Homes, 2010. [MS 2838/4/1/17/1/6225]

The memories in this project of people who were at Erdington Cottage Homes have been mixed. Some, like M below, very much enjoyed their time there. Others have less happy memories.

## M's memories of Erdington Cottage Homes, 1950s:

“Lovely place, really good and the people really caring. We may well have just been lucky in the house that we went into, Home 7, because Miss Mills who ran it was a lovely woman and cared about the children. I remember when we first got there, I spent quite a lot of time by myself and I know that they gave me sit-on horses to play with and things like that and I played around the house. After a while I started going to the nursery school in the cottage homes.”



# Shenley Fields Cottage Homes

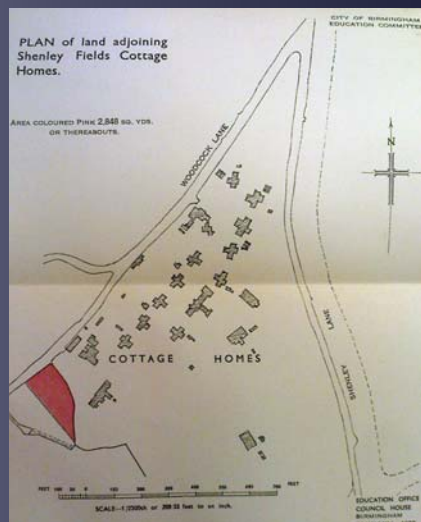
The Victorians, no longer wanting to keep children in the workhouses, built cottage homes - cul de sacs of large cottages each of which could house around 30 orphaned or destitute children.

In Birmingham, the first cottage homes were built at Marston Green. On site, they had an infirmary, a school and an assembly hall so that children never had to leave the Cottage Homes complex. They closed in 1933.



Shenley Fields Cottage Homes, around 1890.

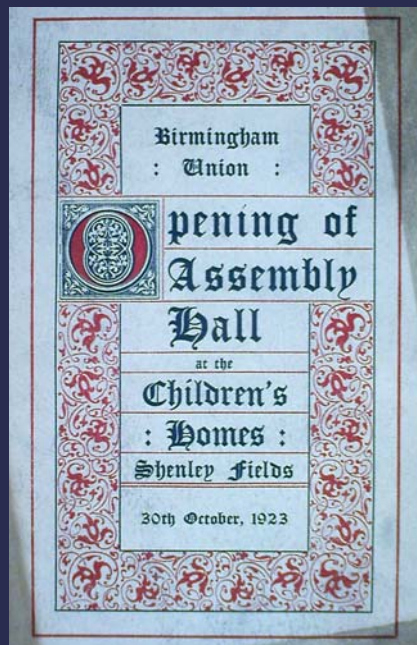
Annual Reports, 1898-99, [L 90.4]



A plan of Shenley Fields Cottage Homes, January 1938.

BCC Agendas, 1937-38, [L 34.3]

The second set of cottage homes were built in 1887 at Shenley Fields, Kings Norton. They consisted of 11 cottages with 20 to 28 children in each. Although the homes were originally single-sex, in the 1940s several became mixed.



Celebrating the opening of the Assembly Hall in 1923.

[LE/Suburbs/Selly Oak/3]



The Assembly Hall, ready for demolition in the late 1980s.

[MS 2838/3/1/32/1]

Initially, each home was run by a foster mother or housemother. After the 1940s, the houseparents tended to be a married couple who lived in the home themselves. If they had children of their own, they would also live there.

**J's memories of Shenley Fields, 1960s:**

“ I was only short-stay at Erdington Cottage Homes for around three weeks. I do have memories of being there but they were mainly sad as I cried most of the time. I was sent to Shenley Fields (by the courts for not attending school) around 1966 or 1967. I was there for three weeks first and then taken back to court to be told I was to stay there until I was 18! I remember the housemother and the housefather were Mr and Mrs Rewhorn and there was Aunty Margaret. I think of them now and again. I went to Ilmington Road School - we called it Ilmington Cow Shed as it was made of wood. I think the boys' school was next door. ”

# R's Story

In 1958, R was five years old and her mother was seriously ill with cancer. She came from a large family and her father was struggling to cope. R was taken into care because of absenteeism from school.



[MS 2838/3/4]

*Southview, part of Erdington Cottage Homes. While most of the buildings of the Homes are still standing, Southview was demolished in around 2002.*

Her mother died shortly afterwards. After her death, her father remarried and tried to get his children out of care. He was not able to do so.

**The first children's home R was taken to was Pebble Mill House on Pershore Road. R tells the rest of her time in care:**

**“ Then I went to Shenley Fields. I don't remember much about that except I came down a slide and cut my finger open. ”**

**“ And then I went into Erdington Cottage Homes, into Southview. ”**

**“ I remember it being strict. You were told to do something you never questioned it. We did have loads of choices. You had a choice of cereals for breakfast or jam or peanut butter. In the evening you had a choice of Ovaltine or hot chocolate or whatever. But you had no choice about what you were wearing or where you were going – that was all very regimented. ”**

**“ We stayed in Southview 'til I was 13. Then I went to what they called a Family Home in Edgbaston. ”**

**“ They made it as normal as they could in the respect that we still went out to school but when you came home from school you didn't go out to play with the local children, you still came home to the home. ”**

**“ When I finished school, I was still in care and I went to a hostel for working children on the Bromford Bridge Estate - there were eight girls in there. I went to work as a nursery nurse... ”**

R left care when she was 18.



*R pictured at a sports day when Shenley Fields Cottage Homes competed against Erdington Cottage Homes. [MS 2838/3/7]*



# Marston Green Homes



“ I was taken into the care of Marston Green Cottage Homes probably in 1915 when I was about two. It was not until I was about five or six years old that I can recall my first memories of the Home. I was moved into one of the boys Homes. In charge was a foster mother and her assistant. ”



Plan of Marston Green Homes, c.1928. From Souvenir of the 50th Anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone, 12th July 1928. [Birmingham Misc B/4]

“ Discipline was very strict. We had to address all women as ‘Ma-am’ and all men as ‘Sir’ and when you said Ma-am or Sir it had to be spoken very clearly, not mumbled or you had to say it again. Each child had a series of duties to perform, generally before a meal and after. ”

“ Every bank holiday, visitors were invited to the Homes. They were mothers, fathers uncles and aunts. They would assemble in the main school hall. We would be told by the foster mother that they were coming. There was tremendous excitement on the day. I well remember going to my first visitors’ day, all keyed up, couldn’t stand still. The visitors arrived and, after what seemed a long time, realised there were no visitors for me. I remember bursting into tears and rushing out of the hall. This went on every holiday. As a child this was probably the most harrowing experience a child could suffer. ”



Entrance to the Cottage Homes, souvenir of 1928.

[Birmingham Misc B/4]

“ During the August holidays we went for a week’s holiday to Prestatyn in North Wales. This was a wonderful change from the everyday life of the Homes. Each Home was placed in one school. We slept on mattresses in the main hall. We would go for walks in the mornings, then it was on to the beach in the afternoons. After lunch it would be games and paddling but only the older boys who were known to be good swimmers were allowed into the sea. ”



Girls at Marston Green Homes, ‘Das Birminghamer Kinderheim zu Marston Green’, c.1911. [Birmingham Misc B/4]

# Family Group Homes

In the 1950s, while the cottage homes were still in full use, it was felt that some children might benefit from being in smaller children's homes.

While the cottage homes kept a large number of children all on the same site, the family group, or scattered, homes were designed to integrate children in residential care into the local community.



A group home in Bartley Green in the 1960s. Report on the work of the Children's Dept of the City of Birmingham, 3 years ended 31/03/1967. [L 41.31]

To this end, in the 1950s and 1960s, 25 new children's homes were built on the new housing estates.

Each house looked very much like any other house on the estate and it had beds for 8 to 12 children. A housemother and a housefather were appointed for each home. They would live-in, bringing with them any children of their own.

The idea was that it would be like a family unit. The children would go to local schools and, hopefully, make friends with local children.

In the 1970s, the number of children coming into care was rising and the cottage homes and scattered homes could not keep up with the need for beds. Many new children's homes were built, and many buildings were taken over for use as children's homes.



Tunnel Lane, a family group home in Kings Heath, 1980s. [Uncatalogued]

Children were coming into care for all sorts of reasons - while a mother was having a baby, family illness or other problems, for behavioural or emotional difficulties, or for not attending school.



In the garden of a family group home in Bartley Green in the 1950s. City of Birmingham Handbook, 1956. [L 31.1]



[MS 2838/4/129]

Milton Grange, in Handsworth Wood. Initially this was a district nurses' homes which was taken over for use as a children's home as a temporary measure in the 1960s. In the end, however, it didn't close until 2000.

Sometimes, children had no idea why they had been taken away from their families:

“ All I knew was that my brothers had told me that we wouldn't be going back to my Mom and Dad. ”



# A Change of Policy in the 1980s

By 1975, there were 113 children's homes run by Birmingham Children's Homes and nearly 1,500 children living in them.

The City Council decided that the focus in the future should be on finding children foster homes rather than beds in children's homes. As a result, many children's homes were closed in the 1980s, including all the residential nurseries and all the former cottage homes.



A former children's home in Kings Heath. [MS 2838/4/1/26]

Many children, particularly the younger ones, were moved out of their children's homes and into family homes with foster parents.

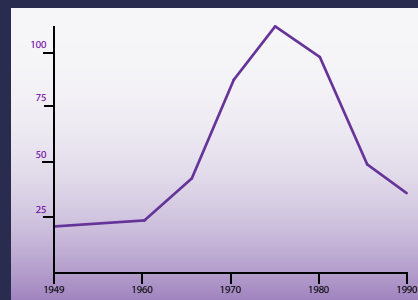
Buildings that had been previously used as children's homes were put to other uses. The one above, in Kings Heath, for example, became a home for elderly people. Others became day nurseries or offices. One became a police station, one a library and many were sold to private owners and converted into family homes or flats.

## WE URGENTLY NEED SHORT-TERM FOSTER PARENTS FOR THE UNDER-FIVES

You don't have to be - In work  
- A home owner



Number of children in Council-run children's homes in Birmingham



Number of Council-run children's homes in Birmingham

The graphs show that there was a steep increase in both the number of children's homes in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the number of children coming into care. After a peak in 1975, both the number of children in residential care and the number of children's homes fell rapidly as more children were fostered and adopted.



A poster produced in the 1980s to encourage foster families to come forward. [MS 2192/C/D/4/2/2/1]

Two other significant changes happened in the 1980s. The first change was that houseparents no longer lived in the children's homes and were no longer called 'Mom' and 'Dad'. Instead, managers were appointed for each home and staff worked shifts. The second change was that, from 1985, the cane could no longer be used in Birmingham's children's homes. A few months later, Birmingham schools followed suit.

Birmingham Education Department cane, 1973. [Courtesy of www.theirhistory.co.uk]





# Children's Homes Buildings

Many children's homes were ordinary-looking houses, others were in far more elaborate buildings, some of which are still standing.



Tennal School became the responsibility of Birmingham City Council in 1972. It now houses the Martineau Centre. [MS 2838/4/1/40]



Hawthorne House Residential Nursery in Handsworth Wood later became a public library. [MS 2838/4/1/20]



The Uplands in Blackwell was a short-stay assessment centre and then a children's home. It closed as a children's home in 2010. [MS 2838/4/1/43]



Pype Hayes Hall, in Pype Hayes Park used to be a children's home, but is now offices. [MS 2838/4/1/31]



Athelstan House on the Moseley Road was given to the city by Barrow Cadbury. It was used as a remand home, then a children's home, but is now empty. [MS 2838/4/1/7]



The buildings of Erdington Cottage Homes are still standing, but now have private residents. [MS 2838/4/1/43]



# Finding Out More

## Did you know?

Some famous people have spent time in children's homes. Did you know that Malcolm X and Marilyn Monroe both spent time in care? Others who spent time in care are closer to home, such as the DJ Goldie and Olympic athlete Kriss Akabusi.

Some have written books about their experiences which are stocked by Birmingham Libraries:

*'The Looked After Kid'* by P. Hewitt

*'Foster Kid'* by Paul Barber

*'Nine Lives'* by Goldie

## Online Directory

A brief history of each of the 150 Children's Homes which were once run by Birmingham City Council is available in Birmingham Archives & Heritage, and online:

[www.connectinghistories.org.uk/childrenshomes.asp](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/childrenshomes.asp)

## Source Guide

The Birmingham Children's Homes Project has also produced a free guide of resources available in Birmingham Archives & Heritage. Please ask a member of staff.

Please note that not all records can be looked at by members of the public as they contain personal information about individuals which has to be kept confidential.



Goldie.



Kriss Akabusi.

## Other Resources

### Father Hudson's Society

[www.fatherhudsons.org.uk](http://www.fatherhudsons.org.uk)

01675 434000

Catholic children were initially sent to orphanages and Catholic schools. Father Hudson's Society (known as the Birmingham Diocesan Rescue Society for the Protection of Homeless and Friendless Catholic Children in the early years) ran several Catholic children's homes and hostels.

### Care Leavers Association

[www.careleavers.com](http://www.careleavers.com)

0845 308 2755

The Care Leavers Association offers support for people who have left care and also runs Care Leavers Reunited, putting people in touch with each other.



### Making Connections, Barnardos

[www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)

0208 550 8822

Barnardos also ran some children's homes in Birmingham and their 'Making Connections' service helps former Barnardos children find out more about their time in care.

### Action for Children

[www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)

0300 123 2112

Known as National Children's Homes, they ran Princess Alice Orphanage, as well as some other children's homes in Birmingham.

### The Children's Society

[www.hiddenlives.org.uk](http://www.hiddenlives.org.uk)

Starting as 'Waifs and Strays', the Children's Society has run several homes in Birmingham. Information about these can be found through their Hidden Lives initiative.