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FARNINGHAM HOMES FOR LITTLE BOYS

The hilltop above South Darenth was chosen in the late 19th Century for a pioneering and innovative idea for the care of destitute boys and was known for nearly a 100 years as the Farningham Homes for Little Boys. Later it became North Downs Community Homes and finally Southdowns Retirement Homes Association.

In 1863 three London philanthropists and men of vision, W H Willans, Robert Culling Hanbury MP and A O Charles decided to found the “Homes for Little Boys” as an alternative to the large orphanages and institutions existing at the time.

The first Home opened in 1864 in a disused poorhouse in “the picturesque suburban village of Tottenham”. Within two years 90 boys were living there and it was obvious the Tottenham Home could not cope with the numbers in need. The three men resolved to build a “real Home”, a “little boys’ colony” where groups of 30 could live in family houses, each with its own house-father and house-mother. A common school would

be set up, together with workshops and a chapel. From the outset their intention was to “feed, clothe, educate and train to industrial work, homeless and destitute little boys”. The Homes were set up on the basis that they should be “scriptural, though unsectarian”.



*Princess Alexandra laying the foundation stone 1866
Woodcut taken from the Illustrated London News*

The site chosen for this pioneering experiment was the “lovely breezy hill near Farningham in Kent” and no less a personage than Alexandra, Princess of Wales, laid the foundation stone. The Princess accompanied the Prince of Wales, the Lord-Lieutenant of Kent and the Archbishop. The laying of the stone itself was the first public act by the young Princess after her arrival in England for her marriage to the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII. It was also the occasion of the Prince’s first public speech.

The laying of this foundation stone on 7th July 1866 was a momentous occasion for the village. A contemporary account recorded that Farningham Road Station was “most tastefully decorated with flowers and evergreen; for this we are indebted to the skill and energy of Mr Robert Palmer, our indefatigable station master”. The viaduct was also decorated with evergreen, flags and festoons.



*Opening ceremony for the new cottages 1867
Woodcut taken from the Illustrated London News*

By 1867 the first of the cottages was ready for use and on 15th June the Earl of Shaftesbury performed the opening ceremony. The actual migration of the first boys from Tottenham took place on 5th June 1867, marching from Farningham Road Station to their new home, with a country wagon for the little ones and a drum and fife band heading the procession.

When the first boys arrived five cottages, together with the chapel and the central building, were completed. Each was named after a patron or donor. Eventually there were 11 houses. Later an Old Boys' Lodge was built to provide accommodation for boys visiting their old home which still stands at the entrance to the site.

Numerous members of the Royal Family were Patrons of the Farningham Homes over the years and the Duke of York, later George VI, was President for 16 years. Queen Alexandra was followed by George V, Queen Mary, Princess Christian and Queen Elizabeth II. King George V, in 1920, said: "These Homes are not only a great charity, they are also a national and imperial asset".



A bird's eye view of the Homes



*The Tailors' Shop
HLB postcard courtesy of Kay Maggs*

To save visitors from London the trouble of finding their way from Farningham Road Station, a special platform was built next to the Homes on the down side, with steps leading from East Hill (the entrance can still be seen at the right hand side of the railway bridge). Open days were held every year with as many as 1,000-2,000 visitors taking the special train from London laid on for the occasion.

An annual Festival Banquet was provided for the Royal Patrons. In 1881 it was Princess Frederica, daughter of the King of Hanover, who presented the prizes at the Fete. In 1926 the then Duke of York (later George VI) was accompanied by Prince Chichibu of Japan. On this occasion it is recorded that the Royal car was pulled up the drive by the Homes' Scout Troop.

The aim of the Homes was to provide the boys with an education and a trade for when they went out into the world. Each boy was given complete freedom to choose between agriculture, baking, bootmaking, carpentry, printing, tailoring, engineering, gardening and laundry work for their apprenticeship. In 1883 a second Home was opened in Swanley which gave nautical training to fit the boys, mostly the sons of seamen, for careers in the Royal Navy or Merchant Navy.

One of the most famous aspects of the Homes was its school band, which played all over the country in the early years of this century, only ending its tours in 1914 with the start of the First World War.

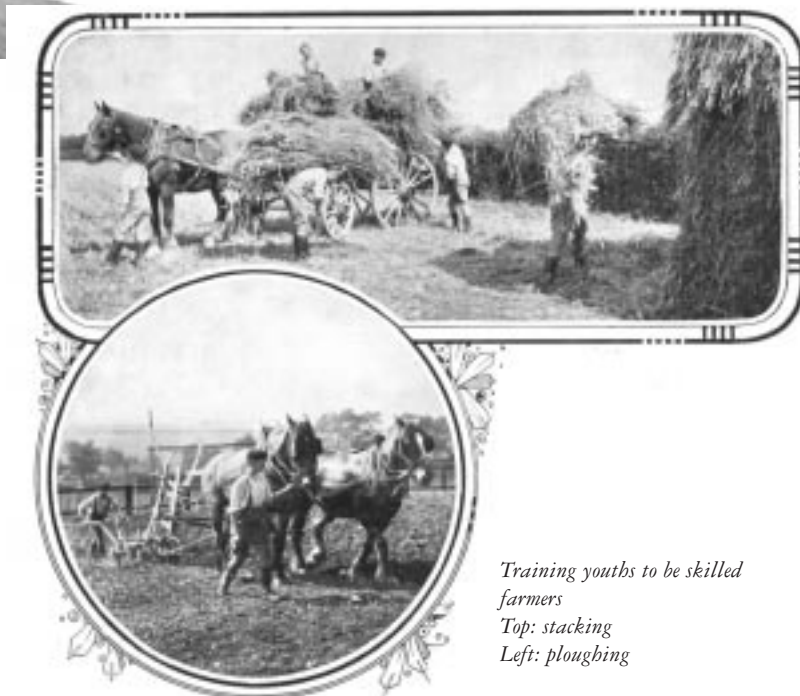
Some of the boys' carpentry work found its way into Royal homes as well as St Mary's Church in Horton Kirby. Under the guidance of Mr E W Clinch, Woodwork and Craft Master at the school for 30 years, the boys made pews for the Church and panelling at the east wall of the Chancel. The boys also made a card index cabinet for the Duke



The Little Boys' Press
HLB Postcard courtesy of Kay Maggs



Preparing a meal for 300 hungry boys
HLB postcard courtesy of Kay Maggs



Training youths to be skilled farmers
Top: stacking
Left: ploughing



Printers at Church Congress Exhibition Albert Hall 1900

of York in 1921. An inlaid mahogany table was made by one of the boys named Hatter as a wedding present for the Duke of York to Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, now the Queen Mother. As a result Hatter was invited to the wedding! This is how it was reported in the Homes' Journal:

"Hatter arrived in London nearly 4 hours before the Ceremony was due to begin. But he could not get through the crowds. He told a man near him that he wanted to

*The Homes Military Band
1899
Photograph courtesy of
W Kidd, South Darent*



get to the Abbey. The man said "So do I". Hatter said, "But I'm a guest". The man replied sarcastically "So am I". Hatter produced his invitation card. The man called a policeman and Hatter was conducted to the front of the crowd and handed from policeman to policeman and finally escorted to his seat in the Abbey."



HRH The Duke of York inspecting the Homes' Scouts in 1921

There is a great deal of information about the boys' daily life and the overriding impression that comes through all this is the caring and happiness that pervaded the Homes. There are many old boys, some still living locally but many others spread around the world, who can testify to this and who meet every September for a reunion. Frank Bignold, Secretary of the Old Boys'

Association described the Homes as having “benign discipline” and Edward Fitness commented that the boys were a credit to the Homes and greatly admired in and around the parish.

Eventually around 500 boys were housed at the Homes for Little Boys or HLB as it was always known. Most of these were orphans, the remainder had fathers serving overseas in the Services. Bob Ward, who was at the Homes from 1930-1937, recalled that the houses at that time held 30 boys apiece, one house was for under 7s, one for boys 14-18, one 18 and up and the rest for 7-14 year-olds. One house was used as a hospital. The Principal at that time was the Rev J A Bell and the headmaster Mr Oddy and Bob Ward remembered two teachers in particular, Mr Reynolds and Mr Matthews.

He also recalled that the school shut down for two days each October when all the boys went “spud-picking” and at the end of the day’s work they lined up at the boilerhouse to receive their pay - one large baked spud!



“Two boys with a bucket” 1915

Plenty of sport was available, most of which was on the playing field called 40 acres. The school uniform was Eton jacket and a 2-3 inch stiff collar. They had one holiday in the year consisting of two complete months in the summer. Some boys visited friends or relatives for the holidays, while those with nowhere to go were sent to a school camp in the country. There were no half-term holidays and Christmas and Easter were only one or two day breaks.

Every Sunday the boys were led out of the grounds, house by house, crocodile fashion and taken on their weekly walk to local gardens, churchyards and woods. Bob said that the boys were never allowed out of the grounds by themselves - although Stella Stevens

remembered hearing about boys racing down East Hill on their bicycles. On one occasion a boy misjudged the bend at the bottom and ended up flying through the glass of the butcher’s shop onto his marble slab!



“Stocking mending on the front lawn” 1915



“George hanging out the stockings” 1915

Bob Ward went on: "In case you wondered who did all the housework - that was the boys of course. Two of us would be called half an hour before the others by the matron and we would prepare a huge cauldron of porridge sweetened with treacle and 30 slabs of bread spread thinly with margarine (one perk - the servers were allowed to toast theirs!)."

Some of the Homes' most dramatic moments came during the war years. During the Second World War J A Bell, Secretary and Superintendent, sent an annual newsletter to Friends of the Homes telling them all that had been happening to the boys. (It was also an opportunity to appeal for financial contributions!) The Homes played their part in the Battle of Britain and in 1940 he reported that a British Hurricane plane made a forced landing in the Homes' field and the Nurse and helpers were able to give first-aid to the pilot. A military guard was placed in charge of the plane and soldiers billeted in one of the adjoining houses of the Homes.

A few days later a formation of enemy planes dive-bombed the Homes and scattered a shower of incendiary bombs. Thirty fell round the plane and more than 150 on the buildings and in the grounds, starting several fires. The boys were shepherded into the shelters and the local fire brigade called. It took them some hours to bring the fires under control - the water main had been hit and the supply was inadequate but thanks to their work, helped by staff and senior boys, only one wing of the School was burnt out and the fire prevented from spreading. Several days later the aeroplane was removed and a number of unexploded bombs in the Homes' fields were detonated or dismantled.

In October 1940 Mr Bell reported "A very heavy bomb landed a few yards from one of the boys' houses and another about 20 feet further away. As soon as daylight came we discovered that the house was wrecked, outer walls split, chimney stacks cracked, most of the roof slates gone. Nearly all the windows were smashed, sashes and frames blown out, doors off their hinges and the clothing and personal

property of the boys and staff buried under a mass of fallen plaster, ceiling joists and other debris.

"The glass-houses nearby were shattered and levelled to the ground. The Hospital building a few yards away had suffered seriously. Much of the roof was open to the daylight, most of the windows were gone and the downstairs passages were knee deep in plaster and wreckage and the beds were smothered in dust and dirt - but most of them remained intact."

All eleven houses were damaged and the Chapel also suffered, with holes in the roof and three stained-glass windows ruined. Fortunately all the boys were in the shelters and none hurt. Later in the day the main argument among the younger boys was whose house had suffered most!

During those months air raids continued for 100 nights in succession and bombs of all sorts and sizes were dropped in or near the Homes' fields. Luckily there were no casualties, not even among the Homes' herd of cows.

Eventually the Government decided the younger boys should be evacuated and with four days to prepare, using pillowcases as kit-bags, they travelled by special train to Yeovil, Somerset.

In 1941 the Superintendent was telling the Friends that the senior boys waiting to enter the Services were helping on neighbouring farms as well as their own, on ARP duties and helping repair war damage. Nineteen of the Homes' apprentices were in the Territorial Army at the outbreak of War and most of them went to France in the Spring of 1940.

In August 1945 Field Marshall Montgomery visited the boys at the Homes. He is quoted as saying: "The future of the British Empire lies largely in the hands of our boys ... But they must be well trained for this great work; and that training is given in these Homes."



These boys are all set to emigrate to Canada in 1907

Old Boys

There has always been a strong Old Boys' Association, with a reunion each year taking the form of a service in St Mary's Church, followed by tea at the Village Hall or in Horton Kirby School. Many boys came back to their old home and stayed for a few days at The Lodge. The Old Boys' Journal was sent all over the world and letters to the Editor showed just how much the Homes meant to the boys.

The Journal was introduced in January 1897 by the Superintendent, Mr S J Stallworthy, who reported regularly on the many aspects of life in HLB including changes to the Homes, events such as the Annual Dinner, entertainments, the Summer sports and Christmas festivities as well as many reports from Old Boys overseas.

A visit from an old boy is recorded in April 1899. George Pile had left the Homes in 1868 to join the navy and after many adventures and changes of ship he was on an American cattle boat, the *Delta*, which foundered off Beachy Head. After being in the boat for 36 hours, the crew were picked up and taken to Southampton, where they found shelter in the Sailors' Home. From there George Pile walked to Gravesend in order to find a ship going west again and "took the opportunity of running up from there to see the Home".

One of the saddest aspects of the Journal over the years was the number of boys dying, often at a very young age, from consumption or typhoid and their burials in St Mary's Churchyard.

Final Days

In 1952 the State took over the running of the Homes and renamed them Farningham House. In 1961 300 people packed the Chapel to mark the closure of the Homes for Little Boys after 97 years. Mr A C Matthews, former Headmaster, officiated and the lesson was read by Mr C Douglas, former Deputy Superintendent. The address was by David H Lindsay, who had recently completed 50 years as a

member of the Homes' Executive Committee, 27 years as Chairman. The boys were dispersed to other Homes throughout London.

As Harry Tester, MBE (a Homes' boy from 1917 to 1932) said in his history of the Homes, "... to those who had known the Homes for any length of time, it did not seem possible that such an organisation, which had for years been second to none in performance and tradition and which had been proud of the happy understanding between staff and pupils, should be no more."

NORTH DOWNS COMMUNITY HOMES



*Demolition in progress 1965
Photograph courtesy of Kitty Wheatley*

In April 1962 the site took on a new identity, this time as an Approved School under its headmaster, Mr Ledger Skinner. It started with six boys, six staff, a carpenter, gardener, farmer and an assistant farmer. The old buildings were gradually demolished and replaced by modern houses. Six boys and a House Master lived in each house.

Boys entered the School at the age of 14 from detention centres in South East London and at one time 100 boys, aged from 14 to 19, were lodged there. At the age of 19 they were either set free, sent to

another school or to prison. The boys were equipped with a trade such as printing, decorating, woodworking and bricklaying and allowed to take CSE examinations. Some of the boys who had better educational standards were allowed to attend local technical colleges and work for City & Guilds Certificates.

In 1969 a Working Boys Hostel, Preston House, was founded for those boys working in local industry. A charge of £4 was taken from their wages for board and lodgings.

The School was financed by the Home Office but at the end of 1971 it was decided that Kent County Council should take over the organisation. At this time it ceased to be called North Downs Approved School and became North Downs Community Homes.

The boys had plenty to choose from for their leisure time - canoeing, sailing, hostelling, camping, badminton, table tennis, archery, swimming, football, rugby, cricket and a motor cycle building club. Some trained for the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards. They had their own aviary and branch of the Young Farmers Club.



Part of the North Downs farm in 1964 Photograph courtesy of Kitty Wheatley

The 105 acre farm produced eggs, milk and potatoes which were sold to local villages and the boys built their own horticultural unit. The School helped the children in the Environmental Studies Centre with their studies of rural life.

The idea of the family unit, similar to that established in HLB days, remained in the effort to give the boys security and a sense of maturity.

North Downs closed in 1976.

SOUTHDOWNS RETIREMENT HOMES

Shortly after the Approved School was closed, the site was redeveloped as a complex for retired people.

Retirement villages are an American idea and there are many in the States but Southdowns was the first to be built in Britain. It gives residents the chance to live completely independent lives in their own homes but with freedom from worry. Many facilities are available on their doorstep including a meals and laundry service and a doctor's surgery twice a week. They can take part in a range of activities including keep-fit, bingo, bridge, whist, Ladies Guild, old time dancing, art classes and drama as well as enjoying the facilities of a social club.

Many facilities available are a legacy from the North Downs days, including a huge gymnasium and a car repair workshop. Other links still remain with the HLB including the Chapel and a marble water fountain which stands near the Gorrington Memorial School building.

*Southdowns in 1994
Photograph courtesy of Ken Allart*

