

St Margaret's Orphanage, Crossway, Harpenden. Founded by a Miss Croft

History by Miss Hazel Inglefield aged 73. Since married to Col. Pryce of Brecon.

[re-typed from a carbon copy of a type-script of c. 1960s, in Local History archives. Possibly this was the transcript of an interview.]

I went there in 1919 and it seemed to my memory fairly well established. A double-fronted house – extension on one side, one floor only which I think was the chapel. The house went well back, with one side the Laundry – downstairs sorting & washing, upstairs ironing & packing. In between there was a kind of Tarmac which if ever we had any playtime, it was here. The other side of the Tarmac was the Common or Playroom – over this I think a Dormitory.

Miss Croft was a very religious woman – C of E / Catholic minded. A distorted kind of religion I feel on looking back, and when compared with the way she ran the orphanage. She had grey hair, a cap with streamers down the back; I think she must have been a bit old to start a home for children, though I suppose she meant well.

Children were taken from about 5 – 15 years when they mostly went into service. I did not. Every child under 11 was put into the care and responsibility of one over 11 to be her “mother”. They came to the home from sources such as the Courts, Police Court Missions etc.

Clothes There are people in this town who can recall these (Emily Hysom) – all I remember is the red sailor suits and cream fronts, and the pinafores and lace-up boots. One person said how the children used to “pass-out” in Church and about our string boot laces.

Food I suppose our meals were alright - I missed so many – we had bread and dripping for breakfast and cocoa. We never had a 2 course dinner in the week, it was either first or seconds, but Sundays you had 2 courses – missing the pudding if you had too many black marks! We had to do one bit of housework before breakfast, and if it was not passed as properly done we had dry bread and cocoa. At dinner time we had to drink the glass of water put for us – and when we had finished sit with our arms folded behind us and a straight back. (I drank lots of peoples' water.)

Miss Croft ran a laundry in which we all worked except the youngest. We fetched it and we took it back. There are people in Harpenden now whose laundry we did – they then were children our age. Cornelia Clutterbuck was one; she once commented in St Nicholas magazine a paragraph about how miserable a picture we presented. I wonder if it was Miss Croft's ‘family’. Some time after I left it was passed on to the Holy Family Homes when life became better.

It was truly a Jane Eyre type of place. We worked in the Laundry washing all manner of things unknown to us, all the Operation etc laundry from the Nursing Homes. We fetched it and carried it back in open wicker laundry baskets and when we went to St George's we delivered the goods so to speak, and waited. It was an entrance near the kitchen and they came back with the baskets loaded with dishes of uneaten food. We made our way over the much (present-day) disputed path across to what was then open ground – I think now Manland. That was the way we went back and fore. We could get into a hedge and sort out what was in the tins and partake of some as we were very hungry. The Summer Pudding was lovely. It was usually only one dish we attacked and it was well known between us which hedge the dish would be found in on returning same when fetching the dirty laundry. They must have wondered why there was always one unwashed dish. It was not always the same ones delivering etc. Some had to go up the Avenues, and we used to meet in Rothamsted Avenue a man who was very kind to us and gave us a coin (? what) to spend on sweets. Looking back I think he must have been a Committee member – he always had a newspaper and I think his name was Betts (*) – and it was 6 – 7 pm.

Money Some of us used to have money sent which had to be given to Sister (Miss Croft) and once a month we had a purse Sunday. The money went into the purse – we were sitting on the floor in her sitting room, downstairs left, facing the road. The money then came out to pay for any breakages even if nothing to do with us – broken windows etc. We then had to pay for cottons and wools to mend our clothes. She took the money and gave us the cotton and wool – our stockings were wool then. Miss Croft's father had been a doctor and she had a set of Apothecary Drawers - very small to very big. The youngest had the small drawers and the eldest the big. Into said drawers went the cottons and wools we had bought. Now our laundry was done on a Saturday, there was never any afternoon school, so Monday afternoon we had to mend our own and our child's clothes, and on Thursday socks. Some of us were not up to the fact that our cottons etc. would be pinched, so for 5½ years myself, patty Holyhead and a few others sat saying "Can anyone lend me a thread of cotton". We had no tea if not finished, no supper if not finished, and dry bread and cocoa for breakfast. This I fear was my lot. I was timid, not used to such places, but it was cruel. She knew we had not got the things – that we were not up to taking other people's. She must have known the situation – that's what I mean by distorted religion. It is unbelievable the food we had to go without – there were a few who never did anything wrong!! (They probably pinched our wools.) They appeared to be very much in favour.

On Sundays after we were confirmed at about 11 or 12 years of age we had to go to St Nicholas for 8 am where we passed out occasionally. Then Miss Croft on her bicycle went to St Saviours, Luton. After breakfast we were yanked off to St John's for the 11 am.

We had open boot racks and if our laces had been pinched we searched around for string to tie our boots up. Matron went on ahead and those looking for laces followed on behind. I can remember going along Milton Road. I cannot remember there being many houses in Station Road.

School All taught in one room by a Miss Clarke from Bedford (I never learned a thing) at the back of the house. In the bit of garden, after we had been to the 3 hour service on Good Friday we had to plant seeds of something called Calvary Clover – I have never seen or heard of it since, but grew and was like clover with red spots on the leaves. I don't remember any other gardening – we could not have had time anyhow.

I can't think what the people on the Gt Northern Station on which the back of the house looked out could possibly have thought. I suppose they got used to Miss Croft's shouted remarks. She would shout from the Laundry room "Shut up you little devils you", and sundry other choice things. I was only a timid child but can remember feeling worried that people would hear her.

In the chapel it was funny, she probably had shouted at us "Don't open your mouths again", so when she played the organ for a hymn, we didn't.

A very kind person to us was Captain Lydekker. He was something on the Committee – but he could not have known a thing about the goings on. I thank God that there are now such things as a Curtis Report.

I found out many years after I had left that Miss Croft had spent a time at St Peter's Convent, Norbury, whose main work was as a Penitentiary and Remand Home for girls. I don't know anything about the history of the girls prior to coming to the Orphanage, but they cannot have been too bad at that age in those days. We were, lots of us, wanting to be loved and this is something that leaves a void for the rest of one's life.

I forgot to mention that we were also responsible for keeping our own and our child's hair free from Head Lice, so were well acquainted with tooth combs and Sassafras/

Transcriber's note:

(The Mr Betts referred to was probably Mr Betts of Hardenholme, Salisbury Avenue. Hazel Inglefield was for some years Warden at the Maples's flats, Clarence Road, Harpenden. Those flats were built for Sir Blundell Maple as retirement accommodation for former employees from the Tottenham Court Road furniture store.*