

<https://www.worcesternews.co.uk/news/15168095.grim-tales-from-the-orphanage-in-st-johns-worcester/#gallery0>







20th March 2017

Grim tales from the orphanage in St John's Worcester

By Mike Pryce

LAST week's news that a buyer seems to have been found at last for the slightly spooky Gothic style edifice that's the [YMCA hostel in Henwick Road](#), Worcester, sent us ferreting through the files here at [Berrow's House](#).

To emerge not only with a fistful of lovely old photographs, but also some first hand accounts of what life was like for the young residents when the building served as the [Royal Albert Orphanage](#).

Over the years our local history guru Mike Grundy interviewed many former occupants of the austere-looking hostel who cast light on a regime that would have many folk spitting feathers today.

But it was OK back then and embodied the best traditions of "Well it made a man/woman out of you, didn't it?" And to be fair everyone survived and took the smooth with the sometimes very rough.

Discipline was severe, corporal punishment frequent and the youngsters were compelled to undertake numerous hard and menial tasks.

In the late 1940s headmaster "Gaffer" Smith wielded his sawn-off billiard cue and delivered blows cross the hands of boys to leave two-inch wide welts. Boys and girls received "six of the best" after being kept waiting trembling for at least an hour in the corridor outside the head's office.

There were plenty of lashes with a stick and former pupil David Wilks well remembered receiving 23 blows and having blood seeping from the wounds for days.

His "crime" was failing to pick up stones in the playground. There was furious scrubbing every morning and evening as the boys and girls got on their hands and knees to wash their allotted section of floor throughout the orphanage.

There were also groans every month as the children were made to swallow a ghastly green-coloured liquorice powder and also more regular doses of cod liver oil.

Plus the noise of protesting stomachs as youngsters who had refused to eat their meals found them there at the next sitting and even the next day until they downed them. Brawn being a particular horror

A familiar sound was the regimented plod of shoes along the corridors as the youngsters were marched to assembly, outdoor recreation, church on Sundays, Scout and Guide groups, and to regular work in the fields and orchards of the orphanage where many crops were grown and chickens, pigs and cattle reared.

Hardly surprising, some orphans occasionally made a run for it, hopping on to passing trains at Henwick Halt. When they were eventually caught and brought back, they were put in solitary confinement for weeks.

It might make grim reading today, but it wasn't all Dickensian doom and gloom. There were happier sounds too.

The squeals of delight as the orphans plunged in the orphanage's outdoor swimming pool, which has since been filled in, and all learned to swim. There was the banging of spoons on the table as the huge annual Christmas pudding arrived in the dining room together with the Christmas presents – always the same gift each year for every boy and girl such as a table tennis bat or writing pad, and there were plenty of giggles in the “dorms” as the youngsters chatted after lights-out.

Another tradition was the fights behind closed doors as new boys were “broken in” and then there was the counting of coins on the return from Sunday services at [St Clement's Church](#), for the offertory collecting bags tended to empty rather than fill up as they were passed along the rows of youngsters.

In 1988 a group of former Royal Albert youngsters made a nostalgic return to their former home and it brought back some bitter-sweet memories.

Among them was Joan Salisbury, who observed: “Despite the physical hardships we have a lot to be thankful for. If we hadn't been here, we wouldn't be the people we are today.”

The orphanage opened in Henwick Road in 1862, but by the 1950s had outlived its purpose as the nation's economy improved and fewer children were sent there. It transferred to smaller premises across the city and became the Royal Albert Children's Home, while the building was taken over by the YMCA.



COMMENTS:

BUGSY27 20th March 2017 8:25 am

1 My grandfather along with his brothers & sisters were in there just before WW1

Last Updated: 20th March 2017 8:39 am

[Deleted] 20th March 2017 1:14 pm

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Last Updated: 20th March 2017 2:01 pm

canuck7 20th March 2017 8:43 am

0 Considering the physical brutality involved that has been described, the boys in particular in the photo's look genuinely happy.

Phisher 20th March 2017 8:44 am

3 Not condoning the particular levels of punishment described in this article, but the total lack of punishment or notable reprimand youths get these days in no way dissuades them from unwanted activities. I had the cane when I was at school, and it taught me right from wrong. Many kids these days don't give a * what they do, and who they do it to as they get away with everything but the most severe crimes.

Last Updated: 20th March 2017 4:31 pm

Booksarepropaganda 20th March 2017 8:59 am

4 I had the cane once and it hurt a lot and I vowed to not get it again. On the other hand there were boys at my school who got caned quite frequently - it didn't seem to make much difference to them

Last Updated: 20th March 2017 4:31 pm

canuck7 20th March 2017 9:03 am

2 Agreed. I was caned and slipped on hand and backside in the 70's. what was also going thru my mind when I looked at those photos was those kids had the benefit of they're growing minds not negatively affected by mind warping "skunk" cannabis that I know so many disadvantaged [and not disadvantaged too] kids regularly smoke nowadays.

Last Updated: 22nd March 2017 8:23 am

brooksider 20th March 2017 9:40 am

7 It is shame that people consider themselves better people because they were physically abused as children and worse still thinking it was the right thing for the adult to do. Nobody deserves physically attacked and no one has the right to do it.

Last Updated: 20th March 2017 4:03 pm

Phisher 20th March 2017 2:40 pm

2 There is a huge difference between being physically abused / physically attacked and getting a short sharp whack across the arse for knowingly doing something wrong.

Last Updated: 20th March 2017 4:33 pm

AngleseyKev 20th March 2017 4:09 pm

1 Knowingly being a very important word. Most of the things I was punished for were very minor infringements, which didn't strike me as being wrong. In retrospect I realise that all of these teachers had done National Service and many must have seen some horrific things in war. An obsession with 'discipline' which is another word for 'control' was the world that I grew up in. Children shouldn't be expected to just do as they're told with no right to question. They should however, know how to relate to other people and not to intentionally cause upset or harm.

Last Updated: 20th March 2017 4:34 pm

AngleseyKev 20th March 2017 1:16 pm

6I was caned at Henwick Grove primary school as it was then. (Oldbury Park now). I was also caned at the WRGS as it was then, I was hit with plimsoles, the favourite weapon of the sadistic gym master and we had a demented Welsh history teacher, who threw chalk if you were lucky, board rubbers if you weren't so lucky. Even the prefects were allowed to hit us and did it make me a better person? No, it made me fearful and confused and eventually incredibly resentful. I had many happy evenings in the YMCA playing snooker though.

Last Updated: 21st March 2017 3:38 am

glad2bhere21st March 2017 3:39 am

1Board rubbers hurt, especially when they catch kids on the ear or back of the head. Our form teacher used to chuck chalk to get his aim in, then go for the board rubbers....nasty man, and too accurate for health and safety.

Last Updated: 21st March 2017 7:52 am