

# THE JOHNSTON MEMORIAL SCHOOL

## 1887 – 1985

### ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



Those charged with the governance of the Society in the early years became aware that, whilst they supported children to the age of 14, after which the child was eligible for employment, in rural districts there were few employment prospects. The Society therefore looked at the possibility of opening a training home to prepare girls after the school leaving age to become domestic servants, thus providing them with employment opportunities. This was a very forward looking proposal for the 1870's and 1880's and it was put forward only after great deliberation based on assessment of need.

## Foundations

When it was agreed that a home should be built the project was enthusiastically endorsed and on Saturday 2nd July 1887 a large number of 'Friends' of the project gathered to witness the laying of the memorial stone of the Training Home for Girls in Hopefield Avenue, in north Belfast. Girls were to be trained as domestic servants in this establishment and it was envisaged that "the girls would be trained to inexorable habits of early rising, of conscientious industry, and respectful, cheerful and obliging manners. They would be taught good plain cooking, the details of housework and the methods of laundry. They would be



*The original children's home, Hopefield Avenue, Belfast, 1888.*

instructed in serving, in the art of cutting out and making and mending their own clothes." With these attributes it was envisaged that they would soon find employment. The Home was opened in August 1888, free of debt, built, furnished, enclosed and the grounds laid out at a cost of £4,193. 3s. 5d. In 1888 twenty three girls entered the Home. The Annual Report of 1889 noted that 43 girls were received during that year. The rules of the Home were recorded and note that "When a girl leaves the Home for service or any other occupation approved by the committee, she is provided with a respectable outfit and a certificate."

## Early Years, Comrades Guild and Developments to the 1930's

In the autumn of 1893 a guild was founded in order to keep the girls who had been trained in the Home, in touch with the Home and one another. Mrs Johnston (Dr Johnston's wife) was elected President of the Guild. The girls called themselves the Comrades' Guild and their motto was "Serve the Lord with Gladness". The objects were – "1. To unite in doing our work in the right spirit, 2. To unite in helping one another, and 3. To unite in helping our Home." The Guild agreed to hold an annual meeting at the Home. Such details might seem quaint to modern sensibilities but today it would be viewed as an important forum for networking and a source of information on prospective employers. There was nothing quaint, however, about the early years of the Home. The health of the girls was a major preoccupation. The 1891 Annual Report notes that "some of the girls were not strong." Illness or health issues are mentioned in 1894, 1896, 1897 and 1900. In 1897 one girl died. In 1900 the Comrades Guild meeting reported on "the deaths of some

of our former girls and their touching messages to their comrades, the happy marriages of others, and the respected positions in service now held by many more." The 1901 Annual Report remarks on the improvement in health of the girls though two years later one girl died of heart failure after influenza. These were pre Welfare State times when children were vulnerable to illness and disease.

The Home was not always working at full capacity. The 1915 Annual Report notes the Governors regretted that a larger number of girls were not sent to the training Home. Capacity was 60 places., but by 1917 there were 34 girls being trained at the year end. The 1919 Report notes that the Home was subject to the flu epidemic with 15 cases among the girls and the matron becoming ill from overwork. Under capacity at the Home was raised again in 1927 and it was suggested that pupils were being deterred from entering the Home because it was only undertaking training for domestic service. It was thought that the girls should be encouraged to train for other occupations. In 1932 it was noted that the Home had considerably broadened its training programme and in 1934 the nursing profession and civil service were referred to as careers taken up by the girls.

## War Time 1939-1945

In 1940 a number of those trained were nurses in London and Liverpool and were "facing terrible danger with courage and devotion to duty." Pupil numbers dwindled due to the fear of air raids and the basement of the school was equipped as an air raid shelter. By 1941 the Annual Report recorded that the school had been taken over by the military authorities. The Governors obtained a lease on alternative premises – Corlatt House on the outskirts of Monaghan Town. In this new location by 1943 the school was almost at full capacity and in 1945 most of the children attended the Monaghan Model School. By 1945, however, the lease of Corlatt House was coming to an end, and premises at 5 Green Road, Knock were secured for a move back to Belfast.

## Green Road Years, 1945 – 1985 - Change, Decline and Closure

The transfer to Green Road took place on 17th May 1946 and the school was formally opened on 17th October that year. In 1952 it was reported that the school had to register as a voluntary home for children. In the 1950's and 1960's the Home enabled the girls to pursue a range of careers and educational pathways. In 1966 all twenty places at the Home, now called Johnston House, were filled and there was a waiting list. In 1967 twenty two children were in the Home and in 1968 there were seventeen from all over Ireland. The Annual Report of 1969 spoke of Johnston House not as a school as such but "as far as possible a home from home where girls live and learn and play together as one large family." That one large family could not see that this world would be changed forever by events of 1969, the advent of the troubles! The year 1971 saw the first intimations that the troubles were having an effect. By 1972 falling numbers were reported and by 1975 there were only 9 girls in residence. With staff turnover high and pupil numbers low Johnston House now offered places to "welfare children". By the early 1980's the situation was changing with some "welfare children" staying on a short term basis. In 1984, with demand virtually nil from the church and accommodation of "welfare children" sporadic due to an emphasis on fostering children were possible, the decision was taken to close Johnston House and it ceased operation in 1985.

Johnston Memorial Orphan Training Home, later Johnston House, adapted and changed over a period of almost 100 years. It was founded to meet a need and when that need no longer existed it ceased. But such an evaluation is too clinical to cover the long life of the institution. No doubt there were shortcomings and both successes and failures. It was also a product of its time and context. The impression left, however, is of a largely compassionate response by staff to the sometimes varied and challenging needs of the children. In 1967 one child summed up her time in the Home in a poem. The last stanza perhaps articulates the experience of many as they left.

*"Then out in the world I shall be found  
Placing my feet upon strange ground  
But Johnston School I'll never forget  
Or the time I spent there, I'll never regret".*