



## HISTORY

# Rescuing the fallen

In Victorian times attempts were made to reform the county's 'penitent' females

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*Now a fashion shop on Steep Hill at one time this was the first Lincoln and Lincolnshire Penitent Females' Home*

Lincoln in the middle of the nineteenth century was a vibrant and lively city. Forty beer retailers supplemented seventy-three inns, taverns and hotels. The development of many businesses including breweries, warehouses, mills and coal yards along the sides of the Brayford Pool and Waterside made the area one of the most congested in the city. Boarding houses and tenements crowded every available space, many of the rooms being used for prostitution.

In 1847 certain leading ladies of Lincoln who had been concerned about the life of sin in which so many girls and women of the city and neighbourhood had sunk, started communication with the clergy and Bishop of Lincoln. These gentlemen had already collected a mass of information on the subject with the

idea of forming a home for some of the unfortunate women. For some reason the clergy were unable to act on the information they had collected and so the ladies and friends who had originally taken an interest in a Home for Penitent Females decided to go ahead and form an Institution. Because of limited funds it was not thought possible to open a home to encompass the whole of the county but it would serve the city.

A meeting was held on 6th May, 1847, at the Newland Chapel, Lincoln when two committees were appointed, one of ladies and another of gentlemen, who determined it was necessary to bring to the public's attention the need to rescue unfortunate females, and return them to the paths of virtue. Acting quickly on increased public interest a public meeting was called on 11th June at the City



Assembly rooms over which the Mayor, Richard Carline presided. After many lengthy speeches in which all agreed, 'the torrent of sin that was streaming down their streets must be stopped' it was proposed that a Penitent Females Home that would serve the whole of the county would be built by public subscription.

In order that as little delay as possible might occur in offering a home for fallen women, on 21st June the ladies' committee took on a house on Steep Hill at the yearly rent of £24. Although the house was not big enough to house its inmates in any comfort or easily accommodate the industrial operations of washing and needlework taken in by the home, from hotels and private individuals, no other property had been available at that time. However, by December 1848, the number of girls received made it necessary to take another house in the neighbourhood.

It was the intent of the Committee that the girls would learn washing and needlework, enabling them to take up situations, which the Ladies would find for them. Very few local girls were found situations in Lincoln, it being thought necessary to keep girls away from those 'friends' who had had a bad influence on them. On leaving the Home for service each girl was given four chemises, two full petticoats, one pair of stays, two top petticoats, four pairs of stockings, one pair of strong shoes, four caps, six aprons, five gowns, three pairs of neckbands and one Bible.

In the first yearly report published in 1848 it was stated that the number of females admitted during the past year had been twenty-one. Two had been placed in service, one had been discharged at her own request, one removed to the Poor Law Union because of ill health and three had absconded from the Home on 13th May. This, it was reasoned, had occurred because the inmates were close to the excitement and revelry that prevailed in that area of the city through the influx of servants changing their situations or taking a holiday. If the home had been in a more secluded part of the city it was felt that the three girls would not have been led astray.

In this first report two of the original resolutions of the home were reiterated.

Resolutions 2. - "That this meeting is powerfully impressed with the conviction of its obligation to God and to Society, to adopt all practicable means to arrest the progress of open and revolting crime, and to reclaim to the paths of Virtue and Respectability the unhappy victims of its seductive and demoralising influences."

Resolution 3. - "That, in the opinion of this meeting, it is desirable forthwith to establish in this City, an Institution for the temporary residence, moral reformation and religious instruction of unfortunate Females.-----"

The girls were brought to the home by one or both parents, members of the clergy or respected church members. Many were orphans and already living in other Institutions. The youngest inmate, a girl of fourteen had been living a life of sin for three months before being brought to the home. Placed on a month's probation before being fully admitted, some were only resident a few months before they returned to their parents or family member having promised to be steady in the future. Many absconded, either disappearing when out walking or using the cover of night in which to make their escape. The police brought some back, possibly because they had originally been removed to the home from the city prison where they had stood trial for petty theft. Others, having been found positions as laundry maids, left within a matter of weeks to return to their old ways. One girl left the home because she could not face being teetotal.

As the girls objected to the heavy leather boots they were given, it was resolved they would wear them outdoors in the winter months, but leather shoes would be furnished for the summer along with straw bonnets, and lilac print dresses for Sundays. It is not hard to imagine the girls dressed in such garb walking two by two to church. It must have been obvious to all who met them that they were 'fallen women'.

The Earl of Yarborough as one of the vice presidents took a great interest in the home; this worthy gentleman offered his parkland at Brocklesby for a fete on 6th August, 1849, for the benefit of the Institution. Many thousands of people shared in the enjoyments afforded by a lovely day, magnificent woodland scenery and rustic sports. It was pointed out 'no disturbance or accident occurred to mar the harmony of the day's proceedings'. A sum in excess of £255 was raised.

A site had been bought to the south of the Poor Law Union in Lincoln and on 2nd May, 1850 the first stone of the Lincoln and Lincolnshire Penitent Females Home was laid with much ceremony by the Earl of Yarborough. To mark this auspicious occasion, the girls were treated to plum cake.

The new home was completed on 3rd December, 1850, and the inmates took up residence eleven days later.

As not all of the rooms, including the industrial areas, were entirely completed, the first year was difficult for inmates and staff alike. This, along with the city council's decision to discontinue its subscriptions to different charities including the home, had an adverse effect upon the home's income.

From the first it seems that many of the inmates were unmanageable, idleness, bad language, and a total disregard for the rules and regulations made for a constant stream of complaints to members of the committee from the matrons. From a sample 100 inmates taken from 1847 to November 1854, nineteen were placed in situations, six sent to the Union Workhouse, forty-one left of their own accord, two died, three married, eight were dismissed, and twenty-one were still in the home.

In 1856 complaints were made about the quality of the washing, and the overall state of disorder in the Institution. It was also noted that a spirit of insubordination existed in the laundry.

The bedroom windows were painted over on the outside as the blinds on the inside, which had been put up to stop the girls from being seen had been cut up and destroyed by them.

A year later the lower panes of the washroom and mangle room were replaced with fluted glass, obviously another measure to stop the girls from seeing out and being seen. In 1861 blinkers were fixed to the scullery and laundry windows.

It would be interesting to know what happened to some of the girls such as Margaret Lockett, who behaved badly and gave much trouble; she left to return to her abandoned habits. Then there was Ann Hughes, who was sent to the Union workhouse after six months for insubordination and idleness. Emma Skelton, who being neither truthful nor industrious, was placed in service with the Revd Johnson. Sarah Denham, who after four years in the home was found a situation as assistant laundress in the Derby Home.

Although open until the early part of the last century, it seems that many of the girls did not benefit from their stay in the home, perhaps finding the rules and regulations too difficult to abide with having lived too long a free, if immoral life. But there are within the minutes of the home mentions of expressions of gratitude from some of the parents for the way their daughters had been treated, and for the improvement in them that the home achieved.

*All documents consulted for this article are held at the Lincolnshire Archive Office.*