

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Peter Davidson, Ups and Downs – Barnardo's Foster Children in Suffolk 1890-1950**

Peter Davidson gave a very interesting talk to the February meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall which was based upon his extensive research into children from Dr Barnardo's Homes who were fostered in Wickham Skeith and Suffolk between 1890 and 1950. He fears that this is a story which is in danger of being forgotten.

Thomas Barnardo was studying medicine at the London Hospital in Whitechapel when he became aware that there were significant numbers of boys who were destitute and living on the streets. He set up a home for boys in Stepney Causeway in 1870. The boys were expected to work, for example they chopped wood or were messenger boys. In 1876 he established a Girls' Village Home in Barkingside, Essex. The numbers of children in need grew to such an extent that a solution other than building more homes was required. From 1883 children were boarded or fostered in rural villages which were remote from factories. By 1889 there were 710 children boarded out across the south east of England and the Midlands and this number increased to about 4,500 by 1906. The school logbook for Wickham Skeith mentions a regular flow of Barnardo children into the village school from 1891. In the 1911 census there were 29 fostered children in Wickham Skeith which was about 20% of the 150 children recorded there. The fostered children stayed until the age of 13 or 14 when the boys were sent to learn a trade and the girls went into service.

Between 1893 and 1930, about 30,000 Barnardo children were sent to Canada, 30 of them came from Wickham Skeith. Most had the opportunity to start a new life but some were physically or sexually abused. This was particularly true of boys who were often sent as labourers to remote farms in Manitoba. Girls tended to be placed with families where they could learn domestic skills.

Some of the children cared for by Barnardo's were orphans, others were illegitimate or neglected but most were there as a result of their mother's death during child birth. Between 1850 and 1930 women had a one in 20 chance of dying giving birth. However, this fell rapidly in the 1940s with the use of ergometrine to stop post-natal haemorrhaging.

Fostering of children at Wickham Skeith was a financial transaction but they were not abandoned by Barnardo's once placed. In 1905 foster parents were given 5s. (25p) per week for each child at a time when agricultural labourers earned 15s. (75p) per week. Foster parents had to sign an agreement that they would bring up boarders in a loving environment, just like their own children. A woman in the village monitored the care of boarders when she paid the weekly allowance to foster parents. Sick children were given medical care and there was a six monthly check by inspectors on the weight, height and physical condition of boarders. Peter Davidson has often found evidence of considerable affection between children and their foster parents.

The need for care for children by Barnardo's diminished after 1945. The death rate of mothers giving birth fell considerably. The creation of the Welfare State helped single parent families to stay together. In addition, the Children's Act of 1948 gave the responsibility for child care to local authorities. The practice of fostering children in Wickham Skeith appears to have ended about 1950 by which time there had been about 200 children fostered in village.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 22 March at Rickinghall Village Hall when Janette Robinson will give a talk about inscriptions on tombstones. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information is available at [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy