

GIRLS' FRIENDLY SOCIETY

The Girls' Friendly Society was founded in London by Irish woman Elizabeth Townsend. It was church-based, as so many of these sort of societies were, and was run by volunteers who were horrified at the number of girls from the workhouses of Great Britain who ended up as prostitutes very shortly after being moved out of the workhouses. Many of these girls had known no other home since early childhood - and sometimes since birth. They were initially placed in service to families of the middle and lower middle classes, but were often used as drudges and lived in appalling conditions. They were also frequently subjected to unwanted advances from the male members of the household.

Because of these circumstances, they would leave their employers, usually without a testimonial and therefore found getting another job almost impossible. This left them with the only option they knew - prostitution. In founding the G. F. Society, the volunteers provided the girls and young women with a place to live, in decent conditions, and then set about training them for jobs other than domestic cleaning, cooking or laundry work - the only jobs the workhouse trained them for.

The GFS also funded beds and cheap board for the girls at seaside venues, where they could have a short holiday at a very cheap rate. Such a place was St Mary's Home in Beach Avenue, Birchington. Since 2008 this has now become the site of St Mary's Court, retirement flats just over the railway bridge a short distance from the railway station.

St Mary's opened its doors to patients in 1888, not long after the GFS was founded. On a postcard written in about 1920, the sender wrote:

'This is the Convalescent or Holiday Home I mentioned in my last letter, situated in Beach Avenue, almost opposite this Hotel (The writer was staying in the Bungalow Hotel, built in the late 1870's, backing onto the railway station and stood on the site of the present Bierce Court flats.)

Open to all girls over 16 and women under 65 (non-sectarian), the G.F.S. (Girls' Friendly Society) has a free bed there, the Matron told me, and if one has a subscribers'

letter, one can stay there for three weeks at 10/- per week, or if one has not a letter, the charge is £1 and the Southern Railway issues return tickets at less than half price.

Thought I would let you know, in case you know of anyone needing a change of air. There are about 40 girls and women staying there now. I see them walking about on the sands and cliffs or going into Margate. They all look so happy.

It was founded in 1888 and was one of the first houses to be built in this part of Birchington. Lady Beatty is the President of the Home.

Do you know of anyone who wants a pussy? I have a half-grown pale grey striped kitten at Horton. I should be glad to hear of a good home for it - enquire at the Post Office.'

Once the GFS became well established and the girls and young women found and began to trust the Society, the birth rates of illegitimate children began to drop. The girls who did find themselves pregnant, found that the GFS was one of the societies which would help them, without making them feel totally worthless and beyond redemption.

The Society still offers help to young girls in big cities, where many are very vulnerable, especially when they first arrive.



St Mary's Home,
Beach Avenue,
Birchington - 1908