

# House of hope

THE FOUNDING of the Dundee orphanage in 1815, now known as Carolina House, was innovative for its time — it was the first charity dedicated to helping children in Scotland.

Despite the fluctuating fortunes of the City of Discovery, the charity has remained committed to offering thousands of children the sort of stable environment that every young person deserves.

**Lisa Trainer** spoke to Brenda McGilliard and Nicola Will from Carolina House and looks at the stories of some of those who spent their childhood in a Dundee orphanage.



**S**PARKED BY a catastrophe at sea that saw the death of 17 men, a meeting was held at a Dundee church to discuss what could be done to help the widows and children of the victims.

The goodwill of the local people and some very generous individuals, including James Keiller and James Chalmers of marmalade and adhesive stamp fame respectively, culminated in the creation of the Dundee Orphan Society.

Nothing like it had been in existence in Scotland before and it led the way in terms of offering children a protective home away from the inevitable squalor and neglect they would have faced otherwise.

"The boat was called the Nelson and it was one of the ferries that went back and forth between Tayport and Dundee," explains Brenda McGilliard, senior practitioner for foster care at Carolina House. "It sank in May, 1815, and 17 of the men on the boat died which left children fatherless, and in those days they didn't have widows benefit.

"They were relying on public donations and when the orphanage first opened there were nine boys and 12 girls — presumably most were the children of these 17 men who died.

"One of the girls was the daughter of a soldier who died at Waterloo. They didn't have things like war widows benefits in those days either so her mum would have become destitute."

The generosity of the local people seems incredible and just 10 days after the boat sank the meeting held in a church raised £500 — which is the equivalent of £18,000 today.

At first the orphans were placed in smaller homes until a big orphanage was built around 1860 on Ferry Road, which cost £6000 at the time.

"Most of the children were not thoroughbred orphans," states Brenda, concerning those who lived at the orphanage. "They usually had a mum or a dad alive.

"At that time you had to be sponsored to go into an orphanage and had to be nominated by some big wig, like a Church of Scotland minister or a GP or business person. So, although you were an orphan or in need of help, you weren't guaranteed a place.

"In the beginning, they only took kids from the age of seven to 16 and I would love to do a study to see what happened to any kids under seven — were they taken in by grannies or what happened to them? My guess is that quite a lot of them perhaps died in infancy or childhood because in those days a lot of children did."

Brenda has been compiling a living history of members of the orphanage from the 1930s onwards. The stories offer a unique insight into their institutionalised world and there are some

quite humorous anecdotes which show how the children lived day to day.

"In the 1930s and later on, the boys were gathered together on a Sunday afternoon, told to kneel on benches in the dining room, take their socks off and each boy had a girl designated to be his sock damer for the whole duration of his stay in the orphanage. One of the men I interviewed said his sock damer was the sister of one of the other men I've interviewed and she darned his socks for him for all the years he was in the Dundee orphanage.

"Those who had been in the orphanage from a young age, that's what we would call being institutionalised, and they tend to have glowing memories of this place. Those that maybe had a life before they went into the orphanage and could remember their families; they found it a really difficult experience because they weren't so institutionalised."

It must have been a harsh emotional environment to have been brought up in, though, despite the practical benefits and getting three square meals a day?

"Absolutely," agrees Brenda. "No one gave them hugs and, in fact, some of them remember being belted or whacked with slippers or something. But then you need to put that into context of what was happening at the time — children were being hit in schools and at home.

"People have different ways of disciplining children now but some of the people I spoke to recently also recalled some punishments, which were very forward thinking for their time. For example being made to chop thousands of sticks for the chimneys at the orphanage rather than get any physical punishment. That was quite an innovative way of punishing a child without any kind of physical element.

"They certainly had a lot of religious education, too. One girl was actually chucked out of the orphanage when they found out she was Catholic. They weren't allowed to go out and play on a Sunday, they had to study the bible on Sunday afternoons."



Above: Doug Thomson (right) with his brother Ron.

Below: Children play in the gardens of the house.



"Boys were kept at the east end of the building and girls at the west end, and never the twain would meet," says Brenda about the old orphanage. "Even for meals they sat at opposite ends of the dining room."

The life of an orphan in Dundee from years ago is made more poignant by looking at accounts from those that lived at the orphanage.

"My father was a marine engineer whose ship was torpedoed in May 1942," says Doug Thomson who lived in the orphanage during the 1940s. "At that time if his ship was sunk, a merchant seaman's pay stopped there and then. My mother, who lived in the family flat in Dundee, was therefore left with four boisterous children whose ages ranged from eight years to two years and no money coming in. Consequently her health suffered.

"Some children, who were truly orphans, would leave and go to foster parents. I don't recall any coming back, so presumably most placings were successful. We knew that fostering did not apply to us as our mother was still around, but there were occasions when local people would take pupils like us out as a special treat. This happened to me when a couple from Wormit took me to tea and also gave me two boxes of chocolates for my birthday.

"I'm not sure what happened at Christmas time regarding time at home, as I remember being in bed in the dormitory when Christmas presents were placed on the foot of each bed. As soon as the staff left the room some of the pupils who had remained awake would leap out of bed and swap some of the presents around. This is what usually woke the others.

"There was always a Christmas party when Santa Claus came round and handed out presents. Strangely, he was dressed in a white gown and not in a red one as I expected."

A girl who lived in the orphanage during the 1950s had no pictures to mark her childhood. "It was like I didn't exist before I grew up," she said.

The girl was admitted to the

orphanage in 1951 at the age of five when her mum died. She was an only child. Her father was a lot older than her mother, and she saw him every Saturday and kept in touch with him until he died.

At his funeral several people came up to her and introduced themselves as cousins, aunts and uncles whose existence she had no idea of. She felt very angry at the time and wondered why none of them had laid claim to her as a small child. She was determined that her own children would never go through what she went through and has always been more loving and affectionate.

All this history is obviously in contrast to how the orphanage, now known as Carolina House, operates in modern times.

"When you think of an orphanage you think of the story of Oliver, but the reality is very different," says Nicola Will, PA to the director of operations at Carolina House.

Describing what we can expect today from a home for orphans or children in need of care, Nicola explains that instead of one large house that could accommodate up to 120 children, there are currently smaller, more homely bases.

"Now we've got three buildings which are split into five different units. Two of the units provide residential care, so there's more one-to-one or two-to-one support for young people.

"One of the units is support for independence, which is working with older teenagers who are not ready to live by themselves."

The idea behind these smaller units is to replicate the family home.

"You can't imagine having 60 children with about four staff now," says Nicola, comparing the old set-up with how things are run today.

"We have two-bedroomed homes that give 24-hour care from a member of staff for a young person, and they work on a rota basis with two or three others and the idea is to teach these teenagers life skills."

Teaching the adolescents how to budget their money and not fall victim to their newfound freedom is the main aim of one of the units.

"We're just about to set up a supported accommodation project where beyond the age of 16 they would move in with a supported carer," adds Nicola. "It would be several steps down from a carer and the person would be pretty independent. That's being launched next year and it's a halfway step between being in care and being in your own flat. You've got someone who's still there for you, but they don't have the responsibility that a foster carer would have."

Childhood shapes an individual and thanks to Carolina House and its long history of charity work the future is looking bright for thousands of local children this festive period.

**HEALTH SERVICES OVER NEW YEAR**

**NHS Tayside**

**GP surgeries will be closed on 1, 2, 3, 4 January, 2010**

When your GP surgery is closed, please call NHS 24 on 08454 24 24 24

If you need to be seen, either a home visit will be arranged or you will be directed to your nearest Primary Care Emergency Centre (PCEC) or nurse led Minor Injury/Illness Unit (MIU):

**Arbroath Infirmary PCEC  
Perth Royal Infirmary PCEC  
Wallacetown PCEC, Dundee  
Blairgowrie MIU**

**Crieff MIU  
Pitlochry MIU  
Brechin MIU  
Whitehills MIU, Forfar**

Additionally GPs will be available in the following MIUs for drop-in clinics between 11am and 3pm on these dates:

**Blairgowrie MIU—1, 2 January  
Whitehills MIU, Forfar—1, 2, 3 January  
Crieff MIU—1, 2, 3, 4 January  
Montrose Links MIU—1, 4 January**

If you wish to attend one of these clinics you do not need to call NHS 24, just drop in between 11am and 3pm

(If your condition is life threatening or you need an emergency ambulance call 999)

**Repeat Medication**

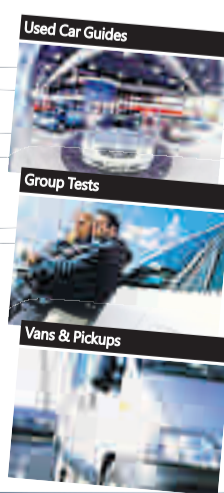
**GP surgeries are closed on 1, 2, 3, 4 January, 2010 so please ensure you order and collect your medication prior to the festive season**



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If you would like to find out more about fostering or the work of Carolina House then visit [www.carolinahoustrust.org.uk](http://www.carolinahoustrust.org.uk)