

Wilhelmina Brody Hall
1845-1939

Guardian at Eastbourne Workhouse, early proponent of foster care

Wilhelmina was born in Eastbourne in 1845 to Dr David Hall and Anna Brodie. She was the youngest child as they already had another daughter. Her elder sister Anna Brodie Hall was born in 1835 was 10 years older than her. In 1869 Anna married Reverend Thomas Prince Hill, at St Mary's Church, Eastbourne. Anna died on 12 January 1924 in Eastbourne aged 88.

Wilhelmina Brodie Hall was the granddaughter of a Vicar of Eastbourne and the daughter of a doctor. She soon placed every child from the workhouse into a home.

They lived at Elm Cottage, South Street, Eastbourne. Although she spent some of her childhood living with her aunt Anne Brodie at The Gore,(now Gore Park Road and Gore Park Avenue). In 1861 at 15 she was living with her parents at 24 Marine Parade, Eastbourne.

Her father died in 1866 and her mother in 1874. It is not known where she lived between 1871 and 1881 as she does not appear on any census returns for Eastbourne. She was back living at the Gore in 1891 with her aunt Lydia Brodie.

By 1901 and 1911 she appears to be a boarder at Merlins or Marlynn, 5 Devonshire Place, Eastbourne. In 1925 she had moved to 14 Ennismore Garden Mews, Knightsbridge, London, and in the early 1930s at Osborne House, Royal Parade, Eastbourne, a private hotel, then from 1936-1939 at Havenwood, Peaslake near Gomshall, Surrey.

EASTBOURNE WORKHOUSE

The Eastbourne Union Workhouse ran from 1834-1919 and was primarily housed in the old Military Barracks in Old Town, Eastbourne. These barracks and Poor House became the workhouse serving Eastbourne and surrounding areas with the formation of Union workhouses following the Act of 1834. The area of the Union stretched along the coast from Wallers Haven on the Pevensey Marshes to Seaford. . Also northwards to Whelpley Levels and south towards Hailsham, including the parishes of Alfriston, East Dean, Folkington, Friston, Jevington, Lightlington, Lullington, Pevensey, Seaford, West Dean, Westham, Willingdon and Wilmington.

Each parish in the Union supplied Guardians of the Poor, elected by the ratepayers. The first meeting of the Board of Guardians in Eastbourne were held in the Vestry Room, Grove Road, Eastbourne on Monday 31 March 1835 under the chairmanship of Mr Joseph Filder. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act defined the duties of the Workhouse Master, called Governor initially in Eastbourne – as the Poor House title.

In the first year there were three Governors, including husband and wife James Sanderson as Governor and his wife Martha was the first Matron. The Matron did not need to have any training in nursing. The Act set out regulations for the running of the Workhouses which included the provision for the separation of married men and women when admitted as inmates.

Conditions in the workhouse were strict to encourage paupers to leave and seek work. In order to provide work within the workhouse a bone mill and spinning wheel were purchased. The doctor was paid £130 a year and he had to buy all the medicines and equipment. For a few years children were sent to a workhouse in Seaford. Any children born in the workhouse stayed with their mothers.

The 1841 Census listed 131 inhabitants including staff. The 1851 census stated 114 inmates plus Master and Matron Mr and Mrs Henry Ford, the workhouse porter and his wife and a schoolmistress. Also mentioned in this census was James Gilbert, idiot and Mary Crowhurst with infant child.

Water was supplied by a well which needed winding gear to raise the bucket, a 97ft drop. A Medical Officer was on the staff of the workhouse, looking after the sick where necessary.

Financially the workhouse system was a success and by 1850 over 700 workhouses countrywide imprisoned the sick, the unemployed, the disabled, insane and elderly. In spite of the records of Guardians' Meeting we have scant knowledge of how paupers felt about their days in the workhouse. Many workhouses introduced a starvation diet for 9 days after a delivery of a child to single women as a deterrent against the workhouse as a place to be confined.

LIVING CONDITIONS FOR INMATES

Living conditions for inmates was not a life of luxury, far from it. More like starvation. The diet left a lot to be desired, as recorded in December 1883 for casuals staying for one night only the diet consisted of Supper for males over 15 years, 8 oz of bread and 1 pint of gruel. Females above 15 years – 6oz bread and 1 pint of gruel, children under 7 years 4 oz of bread and half a pint of gruel. Breakfast was the same as supper.

Dinner each day was for males over 15 years 8 oz of bread and one and a half ounces of cheese. For females above 15 years they could have 6 oz of bread and one and a half ounces of cheese. Children under 7, 4 ounces of bread and one ounce of cheese.

Children up to a certain age were given some schooling within the workhouse, and when the boys were about eight years old they were put to work around the workhouse. The boys joined the men in breaking up flint stones. Whilst the girls spent time cleaning floors, doing housework, cooking, scrubbing, mending etc for the inmates and being paid a pittance for their labours.

SERVING ON THE BOARD OF GUARDIANS

Women were added to the Board of Guardians in 1868 and Wilhelmina Brodie Hall was elected to the Board of Guardians in April 1883 when women were allowed to serve on the Board.

Within six months Miss Hall had built up a ladies committee which made child placements or fostering their especial care. Fostering out had many advantages as the children were given affection and training whereas in the workhouse the never ending chores, like scrubbing dormitories to do.

One of her concerns was as recorded on 11 May 1883 – “It was resolved that Miss Hall be asked to accompany Mrs. Ashby a nurse round the wards with a view to being better enabled hereby to judge her capability for the office.” Miss Hall subsequently informed the Board that she was not very favourably impressed with Mrs. Ashby, still she might possibly not make an unsatisfactory office.”

Whilst on 28 September 1883 – Miss Hall drew the attention of the Board to the very unsatisfactory state of the accommodation for the children in the Workhouse School, and asked whether any better provision could be temporarily made.”

Another entry in the Workhouse record states on 15 February 1884 – Miss Hall entered at some length into the circumstances attending the scheme for the Boarding out of the Union children.

She contacted the President of the Princess Mary Training Home as well as the training home in Eastbourne as dealt with by Lady Fanny Howard. She also dealt with requests for boys from the Workhouse. There was also the scheme of boarding out at Hayes Common which appears to have been private homes looking after children.

Among those fostered out were brothers of Georg Meek, the bath chair-man at Eastbourne. She also persuaded the board to send children out to Canada to be fostered.

Researchers View

This was a lady I had never heard of but she comes from a very well-known family. Her grandfather and father did a lot of good for Old Town. She was a very formidable lady and I would imagine she was more intelligent than most females of her generation. She approached things like a female lawyer. With what was in her genes from the Brody family I think she followed their lead in doing good for the town. I enjoyed researching her but half the time was finding information about the male part of the family and I think she was probably overlooked.

Margaret Copping