



The Magdalene Sisters in East Finchley

By Alison Roberts

Last month saw the Phoenix Cinema's screening of Peter Mullan's award winning *The Magdalene Sisters*—a shocking portrayal of life in one of Ireland's Magdalene Asylums.

The Magdalene Asylums were set up in the 19th century as a refuge for so-called fallen women. Operated by orders of nuns, the asylums financed their operations by functioning as commercial laundries providing service to schools, prisons and other institutions.

The women had to labour in silence 52 weeks a year, symbolically washing away their sins. They were forced to bind their breasts, had their heads shaved and were regularly humiliated and beaten.

On our doorstep

The last Magdalene convent, in Waterford, closed in 1996. Of course not all the asylums were in Ireland; there were plenty in Britain too. But who would have guessed that one of England's last remaining Magdalene laundries was right here in East Finchley?

Founded around 1873, East Finchley's Magdalene Asylum was situated on East End Road, opposite the St Marylebone Cemetery. It occupied the area bordered by the railway, Hamilton Road and what is now the North Circular Road. It was run by a Catholic order—the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

Over the years, thousands of women and girls were imprisoned in these establishments, some for decades, to scrub away the sin of being pregnant or unwanted. The victims of abuse were deemed to be guilty too and, by extension, those in danger of corruption by their fathers, brothers, or just men in general.

Census returns from the period show that many of those locked away in East Finchley's Magdalene asylum were little more than young girls, some as young as 13-years-old. These girls became an early example of the "disappeared", nearly always with the connivance of their own families.

Technically, everyone who entered one of the laundries did so voluntarily, following the example of Mary Magdalene, the prostitute who became the "13th apostle" of Christ, after whom the convents were named. But there was nothing voluntary about the grinding work, the forced fasting or the weekly mortification sessions, when the women were stripped and laughed at for their vanity.

Washed up

The demise of the Magdalene laundries appears to have been driven more by economics than concern for the women's welfare. By the 1960s, the wide availability of automatic washing machines reduced the requirement for the laundries to the extent that they were no longer viable.

Most of the original East Finchley convent burned down in the 1970s, though the Good Shepherd Sisters still occupy a small convent there today. The rest of the site is now home to Bishop Douglass RC School and Thomas More estate. Only the road names (Clare, Helen, Juliana and Cecilia Close) provide a clue to the unsettling history of this corner of East Finchley.

Pension or Charity?

By Mal Jacobs

You must remember the expression 'Charity Begins at Home'. Well, for a vast number of seniors it does!

Have you ever wondered why we seem to have more charity shops than anywhere else in Europe? One very good reason could be, of course, that as we have two million people who are living below the poverty line in the UK then these are probably the only items they can afford to use!

A fairly good judgement of a country and its people must surely be how they treat their most vulnerable citizens. In the case of the UK it usually means seniors. You may ask, "How can a country reputed to be the world's fourth richest not allow the very people who helped make it so, a share in its prosperity?"

An end to poverty?

Firstly, a very good reason for that may be that the UK is committed to spending only 5% of GDP on pensions and benefits, now and in the future, for Senior Citizens, whereas France, Germany and Italy, for

example, will spend between 10 and 20%. Secondly, there are serious shortcomings in the 'we know best for you' mentality that still prevails in the UK in this, the 21st century. Thirdly is the persistent apathy that surrounds a person once past the dreaded usability date deadline in our society.

One of the first things to learn about a computer is that everything is important! Well the same applies to seniors – and everything is important to them too! This Spring, Help The Aged launch the *Stop the Pensioner Poverty Now* campaign, showing that a quarter of our seniors live below the poverty line and one sixth live in persistent poverty. And that's in the world's



Punk Chick: A baby pigeon gets ready to face the world. Photo by Erini Rodis

Pot Roost

By Erini Rodis

How many people have ever seen a baby pigeon?

Nature has a wonderful way of using resources where we least expect it, and none are more surprised than the fourth floor residents of Norfolk Close.

It's not unknown for urban birds to use a block of flats as a substitute for a cliff face, and the parents of these babies have made their nest in a terracotta pot on one of the balconies.

The Joyce family first discovered the eggs a month ago, just before they hatched. Mum Lizzie remembered seeing some foliage in a plant pot in the corner of the balcony, but

says it took her a while to twig. The chicks have since been growing fast, currently filling a pot 8 inches across.

"It's been a pleasure to have them," says Ms Joyce, "They were yellow and fluffy when they first hatched, a bit like ducklings. The only drawback is the mess. We do tend to eat out here in the summer, so for as long as the parents bring all

their mates to feed them, this balcony is going to need constant cleaning!"

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Choices for Children Directory

Barnet's Children's Information Service is replacing its *Under Fives Booklet* with a new, free booklet called *Choices for Children*.

This provides information on schools, childcare, holiday clubs and breakfast schemes, tax credits and benefits, health services (including dentists, pharmacies and emergency care), family centres, youth services, libraries, leisure and recreational facilities, and other advice and support groups.

Published on 21 April, it will be available from libraries,

Council Action Points, health clinics and health visitors, and from Barnet's Children's Information Service via free phone 0800 389 8312.



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