



Shameful institution in the heart of East Finchley

You may have watched the BBC's recent acclaimed drama *The Woman in the Wall* and been moved by the harrowing stories of the Magdalene laundries. Here Alison Roberts recounts the shocking history of these institutions and reveals that they weren't just Ireland's problem.

The Magdalene asylums were set up in the 19th century 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, southern Ireland, 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?

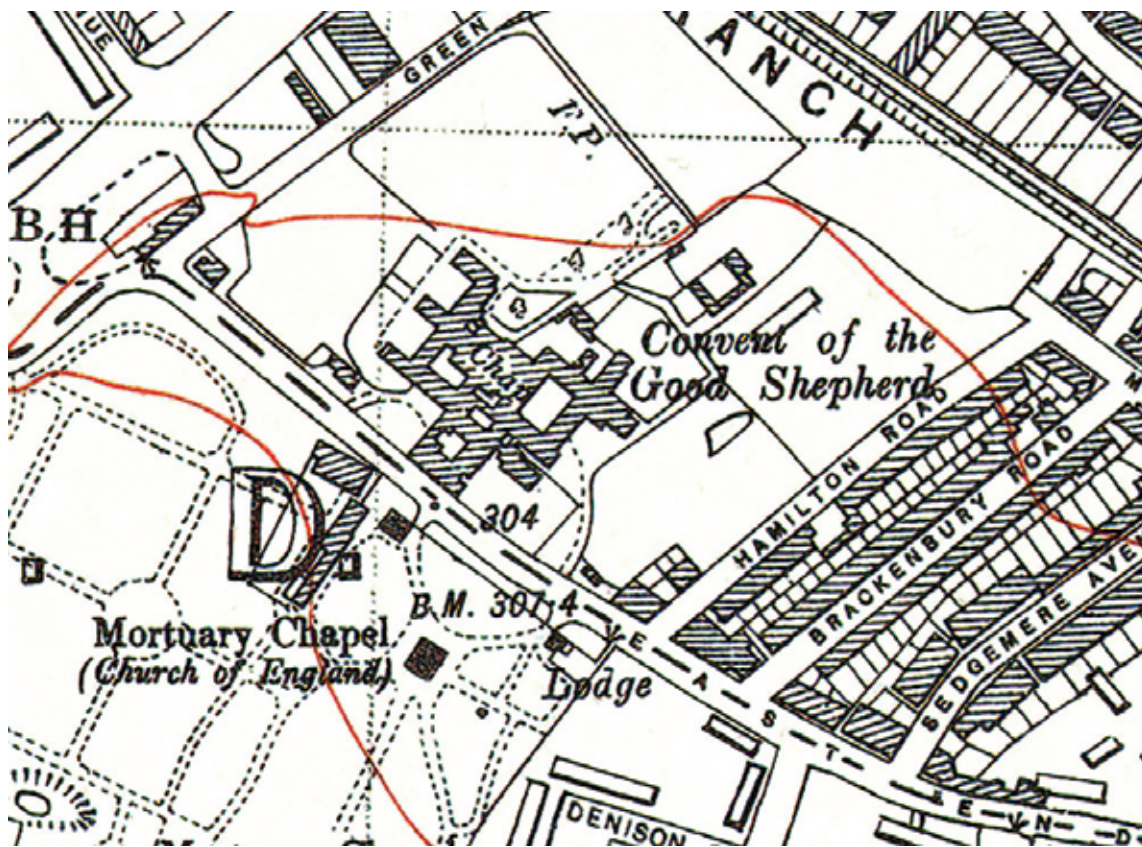
Built in 1866, East Finchley's Magdalene asylum was situated on East End Road, opposite

the St Marylebone Cemetery, occupying the area bordered by the railway, Hamilton Road and what is now the North Circular Road. Known as 'The Good Shepherd Refuge', it housed 170 women and 80 girls, and 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.



Forbidding: The convent and Good Shepherd Refuge off East End Road in a photograph taken by W Stackemann & Co c1910. Image courtesy Look and Learn.



Built over: This map from the early 1900s shows the convent's land spread over a large area now occupied by Bishop Douglass School and the Thomas More estate

Talks at the RAF Museum

Age UK is running a series of four talks at the RAF Museum in Colindale that will each focus on a different area of the museum's collections, including its new Bomber Command exhibition and its extensive archives.

Talks take place at the RAF Museum, Grahame Park Way, NW9 5LL on Thursdays 2 November, 16 November, 30 November and 14 December from 2pm to 3.30pm. Open to all Barnet residents over 55, the sessions are free. To book a place contact Helen Nicolaou on 07384 466840 or email helen.nicolaou@ageukbarnet.org.uk.

The disappeared

Although the asylum was intended as a reformatory for former female prisoners, 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 12-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 and boarding school, by then known as St Joseph's Training Home, was destroyed in a huge blaze one Sunday afternoon in October 1972. The inmates were shipped off to different parts of the country and only a handful of nuns stayed on in the surviving villa.

Some of the land was repurposed as playing fields for the adjoining Bishop Douglass RC School and the rest became the Thomas More housing estate. The site of the original villa is

now a modern housing development.

This article was originally printed in *The Archer* in May 2003. Read the full article online at www.ILoveN2.co.uk/history

BE PART OF IT Volunteers wanted

Compiled by Lynn Winton

- Helpers are welcome to contribute towards the life of **The Archer Academy** secondary school in East Finchley. There is a beautiful school garden and a lovely team of garden volunteers who are always looking for new members. If you are interested in helping in the garden, please contact Rachael Harvey at greenarrows@thearcheracademy.org.uk. There is also a team of volunteers who come into the school library during the week to read with students who need support. If you would like to volunteer in the library, please contact school librarian Allison Appelquist at aappelquist@thearcheracademy.org.uk

- Just a couple of hours a week of your time could make a big difference to an older East Finchley resident. A weekly friendly chat can be a lifeline to someone who is isolated. **Age UK Barnet** is appealing for volunteer befrienders, shoppers and walking buddies to give older people the confidence to get out and about. Or if you have a skill you'd like to share, they have lots of great activity groups you can support too. Get in touch with the charity at volunteering@ageukbarnet.org.uk. For a list of our current volunteer roles, check the website: www.ageuk.org.uk/barnet/get-involved/volunteer/

- **East Finchley Festival CIC** is seeking to expand its team on the run up to the 50th festival in Cherry Tree Wood next June. Positions include raffle coordinator, volunteer coordinator, plus various working groups to organise activities. If you'd like to find out more, the festival team is hosting an open meeting on Thursday 9 November in the Old White Lion from 7.45pm. Or you can apply online at www.eastfinchleyfestival.org/volunteer.

- The **Finchley Foodbank** turns 10 years old this year and to mark the occasion, the team there is asking for your help. They are currently regularly supporting between 550 and 650 people a week with three days of food, essential toiletries and baby goods and other household items. Can you donate your time to volunteer? Get in touch by email at finchleyfoodbank@gmail.com to find out more.

- Become a **Proms** volunteer! Could you give a few hours a month to help make next year's Proms at St Jude's Festival a success? The skills or experience needed include admin, IT, organisation and logistics, fundraising, and education. It's a great opportunity to get involved in a local community project, gain experience and meet new people. Visit www.promsatstjudes.org.uk/volunteering.

If you'd like your organisation to be included in this column please send details (max 80 words please) to news@the-archer.co.uk or complete the form at www.ILoveN2.co.uk/be-part-of-it.

