

## **Paper delivered to the Voluntary Action History Society**

### ***The Fellowship of St Michael's and All Angels: 1903 – 1925: Rescue work for upper and middle class unmarried mothers***

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#### **Introduction**

I was recently asked to do a centenary history of an organisation, the St Michael's Fellowship, based in south London, and currently providing support for vulnerable families in the Lambeth area: Streatham, Tulse Hill and Balham.

I was fortunate to discover that the organisation had kept many of its records and so through examining the minute books of the Council of Management, the Ladies Committee, the Patient's book, annual reports and various leaflets, I was able to piece the picture together. This was published last year. <sup>2</sup>

This paper will focus on the first 25 years of the organisation, placing it in a wider context and suggest the way this particular 'case study' adds to work on women's philanthropic activity.

The Fellowship of St Michael and All Angels began in 1903, when Agnes Parr started admitting 'patients' to a house she had bought in Pimlico, although formal records do not begin until around 1907 when the first committee of the organisation met and summarised the work since 1903.

#### **Who was Agnes Parr and why did she start the Fellowship?**

At the time she founded the Fellowship Agnes Parr lived at 8 Cadogan Place in wealthy Belgravia. She had been married to Thomas Parr, a Director of the Parr bank and also a magistrate. Thomas and Agnes had no children. He died aged 57 in 1891 and Agnes inherited his shares, making her a woman of independent means.

Agnes had started her philanthropic work earlier – founding St Monica's Orphanage in Vauxhall, an extremely poor area, in 1878. <sup>3</sup> By the turn of the century Agnes had both the time and the financial resources to pursue other philanthropic initiatives. She was particularly motivated to start an organisation to help young unmarried women of the professional and upper classes who found themselves pregnant, as she felt strongly that there was no provision for this particular group. A contemporary account states:

*Apart from what we all know of Rescue and Preventive Work, this special need was brought to her notice through the Nurseries at*

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Penn, *From the rescue of fallen women to the support of vulnerable families: the history of St Michael's Fellowship*, St Michael's Fellowship, London, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately records do not remain for this organisation. This later moved to Tooting.

*Tooting. The Nursery had been started in connection with a small Rescue Home, but as it grew, applications came from many outside cases, nurses from nursing homes applied for the children of their patients, etc., this led Mrs. PARR to investigate the Nursing Homes for herself. She was horrified at the lack of proper accommodation, their insanitary condition, etc.*<sup>4</sup>

There is another version, passed down orally, based on a story told by a former trustee, that Agnes was originally motivated by a conversation she had with a young lady at a fashionable dinner party. The girl was in a melancholy state, and when Agnes took her aside to ask what was wrong the girl confided that she was pregnant and didn't know what to do or where to go.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the original reason, Agnes Parr certainly saw the need for a refuge, discreetly situated in London, where young ladies could disappear from their family and society before and after their confinement. The existing institutions that took in pregnant girls at the beginning of the twentieth century were not suitable for 'ladies', as they had been set up to take in lower class girls and prostitutes.

### **Who were her associates?**

1. **Well connected women from Belgravia**, like Lady Pelham-Clinton, Lady Cynthia Colville, Lady Maud Hoare (later wife of Home Secretary); Adeline, Duchess of Bedford.

2. **Other women philanthropists** – the Duchess of Bedford managed her own institutions; some seem to have been active in the Pimlico Ladies Association, presumably one of the network of ladies associations for the care of friendless girls, which had a mission to promote purity and prevent prostitution. Interestingly, in the annual report of the Rochester Diocesan Association for the Care of Friendless Girls (to which Agnes appears to have given donations) 1894 there is reference to *Small Convalescent Home of Rest at Barnes, under the management of the Pimlico Ladies' Association, provide rest and change of unmarried pregnant girls.*<sup>6</sup>

3. **Influential High-Church Anglicans**, like the Bishops of Kensington, Frederick Ridgeway [1901-1911] and then John Primatt Maud [1911-1932] Ridgeway presided over a conference held by the Fellowship in 1907; Maud became President and signed appeals letters placed in The Times and the Morning Post in 1912 and 1913.

4. This included Rev Henry Montague Villiers, priest of her local Church, St Paul's in Belgravia – he was briefly Vice-President of the Fellowship until his death in 1908 – and through him a long connection with **the Villiers family**.

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<sup>4</sup> Notes of the Conference Fellowship of S. Michael and All Angels, On December 20th, 1907, At 8, Cadogan Place, S.W. St Michael's Fellowship (SMF) Archives

<sup>5</sup> This story was told to the current Director, Sue Pettigrew, by Mrs Steel, a former trustee, who had been involved with the Fellowship for many years.

<sup>6</sup> Rochester Diocesan ACFG records at London Metropolitan Archives

a) His sister Evelyn Villiers joined in 1909 and continued to her death in 1943. She was active in the National Union of Women Workers, an organisation of welfare workers, and she spoke at their conference in 1912 about the Fellowship's work.

b) His son, John Russell Villiers joined the first Council in 1912 and soon after became Chairman, continuing up to 1950, and a trustee to his death in 1958.

5) It also included **the Talbot Family**. Edward Stuart Talbot, Bishop of Rochester, 1895-1905, Southwark, 1905-1911, and later Winchester. He was President of the Rochester Diocesan Association for the Care of Friendless Girls. His niece, Evelyn Talbot, joined the Fellowship in the 1920s, and was involved until her death in 1962.

### **Religious Influences**

Agnes and her associates were definitely in the tradition of High Church Anglicanism. Edward Talbot had been 1<sup>st</sup> warden at Keble College and was linked to the Oxford movement.<sup>7</sup> St Paul's, an elaborate and highly decorated building, consecrated in 1843, was the first church in London to champion the ideals of this 'Movement'. These were Anglicans who had sought to return the Church of England to its catholic rituals – with emphasis on rituals, vestments, the sacraments, the saints and Christian imagery and symbolism.

This might explain the choice of title of the organisation. At first it was thought that the name was linked to a particular church, St Michael's, and there is one in Ebury Square. It is believed there was a St Michael's Mission House nearby and there is reference to a St Michael's Rectory in the Fellowship's records. But no direct link could be established.<sup>8</sup> It is quite likely it was chosen because of its religious association.

In Milton's *Paradise Lost* Michael leads the angelic forces against Lucifer and followers when they rebel against God in Heaven. Lucifer is cast down out of Heaven by the Son of God (Messiah) and becomes Satan. After the fall of Adam and Eve Michael stands guard at the Gate of Heaven and shows Adam a vision of mankind's future. Michael then escorts the woeful Adam and Eve out of paradise.

Choosing St Michael's name then may have been because of his association with the Fall and with the fighting of evil. Certainly those involved in the founding and early development of the Fellowship saw themselves as fighting evil, in particular the immorality of sex outside marriage. Those who came to St Michael's in a "fallen" state were in need of redemption as well as practical help.

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<sup>7</sup> One of the concerns of the Oxford movement had been with the conditions of the industrial working class and many followers were engaged in philanthropic missions.

<sup>8</sup> The Patients' Case Book, kept from 1903, provides the first records of the work of the Fellowship. The title page bears the address "79 Gloucester Street" but makes no mention of "St Michael's".

The Feast of St Michael and All Angels, otherwise known as Michaelmas, at the end of September, was always important in the Fellowship's calendar. In 1908 the minutes refer to the Octave of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, with a special corporate communion at St John's Church, Wilton Road, Victoria. St John's Church was the one which the young women of the Fellowship attended, had their children baptised at, and were either confirmed and/or restored to communion. They did not attend St Paul's, Belgravia.

Saints names were used for the various homes. **St Michaels'** was the name of the 1<sup>st</sup> home in Gloucester St, Pimlico. St Marcella was used as the name for maternity home. **St Marcella**, a rich Roman widow, formed a monastic order of noblewomen who lived a life of asceticism and austerity.

**St Monica**, mother of Saint Augustine and patron saint mothers (but also wives and abuse victims), was used for the orphanage/nursery, and St Clare was also used to name a home. **St Clare** was an Italian noblewoman who founded an order of nuns which became known as the 'Poor Clares', having heard St Francis of Assisi preach.

The Fellowship used these religious references in their publicity material, for example, in one of their booklets for the Companions in Prayer, in particular the quote from Revelations xii, 7-8: "Michael and his Angels fought against the Dragon; and the Dragon fought and his Angels, and prevailed not." This is preceded by the words: "The battle is not yours, but God's". (The dragon represented the devil or evil).

The Fellowship use an excerpt from Oxford movement's Cardinal Newman's poem Gerontius at the beginning of one of their appeals. This poem is sung by the choir of angelicals:

*'To us his elder race he gave  
To battle and to win  
Without the chastisement of pain  
Without the stain of sin'*<sup>9</sup>

### **The influence of the rise of Anglican sisterhoods.**

It is possible that Agnes, and certainly colleagues like Evelyn Villiers, were influenced by one of the outcomes of the Oxford movement, namely the increase in Anglican sisterhoods. The first Anglican nun for 300 years was created by Pusey in around 1845<sup>10</sup>, and these sisterhoods grew rapidly. Many of these established Penitentiaries, aimed at reforming prostitutes, and these were called Houses of Mercy and the nuns called Sisters of Mercy. The Penitents were sometimes called Magdalens (after Mary Magdalene the prostitute). These grew rapidly and by 1903 there were 238 penitentiaries. And of the 90 sisterhoods in existence in 1900, about 50 worked directly with

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<sup>9</sup> St Michael's Appeal, 1934, SMF Archives

<sup>10</sup> Marian Hughes formed the Society for the Holy and Undivided Trinity, which served the poor, sick and the needy and set up an orphanage.

prostitutes and fallen women. The Community of St Mary Virgin, Wantage,<sup>11</sup> and the Community of St John the Baptist, Clewer, were formed specifically for this.

This is particularly interesting as St Michael's Fellowship had definite links with these two Communities – there are references to young women being passed on to them, and visits made by members of the Ladies Committee. Evelyn Villiers had one time been a Sister of Mercy at an Anglican sisterhood the Community of the Resurrection of Our Lord, in Grahamstown, South Africa. One of its activities was a school, the other an orphanage. There were links between this institution and both Clewer and St Peter's Church, Belgravia<sup>12</sup> as well as another Sisterhood, the Bussage House of Mercy, which is also referred to in the Fellowship's records.<sup>13</sup> (St Peter's was connected to the aforementioned St Johns's, which was a Chapel of Ease for this church).

These sisterhoods were an association of religious women who offered themselves in service to the Church. They had Associates and Friends, who were like supporters groups and were connected through prayer and good works.<sup>14</sup> We can see echoes of this approach in the structure Agnes envisaged early on for the Fellowship:

*Priest associates* – “our 3 chaplains and others”

*Working associates* – presumably the volunteer ladies

*Companions in Prayer* – “those friends unable to take an active part in the work, can by their interest and prayers, strengthen the hands of those who are face to face with so much that is sad and difficult”

*Associates* – “to consist of a guild to bind together in some way some of the old girls who have passed through the homes”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Community of St Mary the Virgin was founded in 1848 by William John Butler, then Vicar of Wantage and friend of Keble. Harriet Day in 1849 went to assist William Butler, the vicar of Wantage who had gathered a small group of women to help in the parish. They developed into a Sisterhood and in 1854, the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce installed Harriet as Reverend Mother and the first episcopally installed Anglican Religious Superior since the Reformation.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop Allan Webb had preached at St Peter's Church, Eaton Square, Belgravia and called for volunteers to start an order of sisters, in Grahamstown, South Africa. Cecile Isherwood heard the sermon, responded and was clothed as a novice in 1884. She set up a school and board house for poor children and an orphanage.

The Lord Bishop Armstrong of Grahamstown had links with the Rev TT Carter, local Vicar at Clewer. The widowed wife of a vicar, Harriet Monsell went to work at Clewer Penitentiary, there under the influence of Carter, set up the Community of St John the Baptist, and became 1<sup>st</sup> Mother Superior. The sisters cared for orphans, ran schools and hospitals, and opened mission houses in parishes.

<sup>13</sup> The Home was founded in 1851 by the Rev. Robert Suckling, first Vicar of Bussage, Bishop Armstrong of Grahamstown, and Mrs. Grace Anne Poole, at the latter's expense, to house 26 girls, aged 14-18 years, whose home background necessitated moral and domestic training. On the death of Mrs. Poole, who had acted as Mother Superior, in 1900, the Wantage Community of Sisters undertook management. An aisle for the use of the inmates of the Bussage House of Mercy was added in 1854 to the Church at Bisley, Gloucs

<sup>14</sup> Christina Rossetti was an Associate Sister of Mercy at Highgate Penitentiary.

<sup>15</sup> St Michael's Minute Book 1907-1910, SMF Archives

To a certain extent this vision became reality. There were many clergy supporters, and indeed some of the Fellowship homes had their own chaplains. There were Companions in Prayer who functioned as a supporters' or membership group and many of whom paid subscriptions. However, while a number of girls did remain in contact with the Fellowship after they had left, it is not clear that they comprised a separate group of Associates.

### **The Context**

There is another likely influence to Agnes's work, which comes from the ideas of Jane Ellice Hopkins and the work of the the Ladies Associations for the Care of Friendless Girls. As noted above, Agnes was very much aware of, and linked to, two of these: the Rochester Diocesan one and the Pimlico one.

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### **Their model**

Bartley's work on the Birmingham Association shows the original intention to work on 5 areas: petitioning, care of children; moral education; workhouse Magdalen; a preventive home with a training function.

In practice the work focussed on the last three:

- The Moral Educational work covered the work of the Mother's Union and Snowdrop Bands, aimed at preventing prostitution through education.
- The Magdalen was set up to help young single women in their first illegitimate confinement who were in the Birmingham's workhouses. There was a feeling that single motherhood might prove a slippery slope to prostitution. Also a feeling of the need to separate out those who were young 1<sup>st</sup> time offenders and those, usually older women, associated with a life of vice. The former were deserving, the latter not, and this led to a refusal to help women who produced more than one illegitimate child. These ideas influenced both the Fellowship and the wider rescue and moral welfare movement well into the inter-war period.
- A training home, to do preventive work. This was for young girls felt at risk from falling into prostitution. This was through the provision of education, religious guidance and the opportunity to learn skills for work, usually domestic service.

The approach of the Fellowship could be seen to follow aspects of this. There was an attempt not just to provide a maternity home, a nursery for the babies for those women actually pregnant, but efforts to work with those young women deemed 'at risk' from falling into sin – be that actual pregnancy or other morally suspect behaviour.

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<sup>16</sup> P Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1880-1914*, Routledge, 2000 p28.

### **A particular focus**

Whilst the Fellowship was formed at a time when there was a considerable amount of “rescue” work amongst women and girls from the lower classes – to prevent them from turning to prostitution or to reform them where possible, Agnes Parr had a particular focus. She had identified a need for rescue work for a different class of girl - from the middle or upper classes - and argued most strongly for the separate development of this work. However there is some ambiguity in the language regarding the beneficiaries, being variously referred to in the literature as Superior Class (leaflet); Upper and more educated classes (1907 conference); Upper, upper middle and professional classes (Bishop of Kensington, newspaper appeal); Educated classes (Evelyn Villiers).

Evelyn Villier’s talk on the *Classification of Penitentiary Work*, given to the annual conference of National Union of Women Workers, 1912, <sup>17</sup> is more specific:

*‘is the real need of organized rescue work among girls of the educated classes ... When I make such a statement as that, you will naturally ask me who do I mean by “Girls of the Educated Class,” I mean, though I confess it sadly enough, daughters of Country Gentlemen, Solicitors, Barristers, of Officers in the Army or Navy, of professional men and (perhaps saddest confession of all) daughters of Clergy’.*<sup>18</sup>

This ties in with some at least of the references in the minutes. It is unlikely that St Michael’s was ever used by the very upper echelons. As Evelyn herself notes, ‘where it can be afford’ they are sent to Paris:

*‘where there are well known arrangements made for them of which it would not be fitting that I should speak even here’.*<sup>19</sup>

The alternative appears to be Nursing Homes or Rest-cures.

Where the need was recognized at penitentiaries such as Wantage or Clewer, with a separate division for Upper Class penitents, the solution was still partial as they did not have Maternity Homes in connection with their work and also they only received cases for a lengthened stay, but that in itself caused problems:

*‘and a girl who disappears from her usual surroundings for such a period is marked – suspicion is aroused, and she is stigmatized for life’.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> E Villiers, *Classification of Penitentiary Work*, Annual Conference of National Union of Women Workers, 1912. Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the National Union of Women Workers, at the offices of the National Council of Women, London

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

Villiers argued that this class of girl have a stronger sense of shame and from this hopelessness, that they may never regain 'their position' (one presumes their respectability)

*'...they are tempted to think that having once fallen, nothing matters, they can never regain their position, so they may as well let things go their ownway.... One of the first things then that has to be done is to try and bring back some measure of self-respect, then to inculcate self-control and to encourage the saving virtue of hope'.<sup>21</sup>*

These arguments provided the rationale for the Fellowship's work and one key aspect, probably because of the perceived 'respectable' backgrounds of the girls, was discretion. The Fellowship's own leaflet summarising its Conference in 1907 states: 'The utmost care is taken to prevent the names of the girls from being known'. At the beginning of the Patient's Case book there is a note "for names refer to small book locked up with letters etc."<sup>22</sup> However this small book never survived. Around 1912 SMF affiliated with the Church Penitentiary Association 'on condition that the addresses of our Homes were not printed for publication'.<sup>23</sup>

This discretion remained an important feature – eg after the Second World War the reason the Fellowship would not accept a grant from LCC for its nursery was because of the requirement to indicate how many of the women came from London i.e. the disclosure of names and addresses which the Fellowship refused.<sup>24</sup>

It was unusual in the early days for girls to apply directly themselves. It was more common to be referred through others. These people included clergy, doctors, some mothers, people who were in contact with Mrs Parr and her fellow workers, committee members and possibly also through the network of Companions of Prayer. The applications came from all over the country.

The screening process was used to ensure that the Fellowship did not end up accommodating girls from the "wrong" class, so there are several references to applicants being "unsuitable" or "not a lady":

*'Miss Knight applied for a girl of 20, a Plymouth Sister but she was not a lady and has since gone to St Anne's Shelter. (1907)*  
*Miss Plowsday applied for girl of 17, not quite a lady, but very clever at drawing and a great lover of all that is beautiful in art and poetry – all we hear of her is very attractive, nothing decided yet'. (1908)<sup>25</sup>*

When considering the applications or referrals a distinction had to be made between those who had fallen once and those who had fallen repeatedly (and possibly also earned their living through the sinful activity of prostitution). As

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> The Patients' Case Book, SMF Archives

<sup>23</sup> Executive Minutes 1910-1914, SMF Archives

<sup>24</sup> It did not get the grant and had to close the nursery soon after.

<sup>25</sup> Minute Book 1907-1910, SMF Archives



was common in reform work, the Fellowship sought to work with the more deserving and thus the more capable of redemption and returning to some sort of respectable life.

So whilst their use of the term “not quite a lady”, was frequently used to describe applicants, most probably referred to the woman’s social class, it might also have referred to her status as having “fallen more than once”.

### **Who were the girls in practice?**

Some of the very earliest admissions to 79 Gloucester Street seem to have been respectable poor girls who went on to work in laundries or as domestic servants. After Agnes placed an advertisement in the *Church Times* the first “lady” of a higher class was admitted in July, 1903:

*‘Florence.26. 1st answer to Advt. C. Times, 1st lady. Most difficult case. Ran away twice. At last taken home to Yorkshire by parents. Was confined to Clapham Maternity Hospital. Child died there – Thought to be a mental case. B? only’.<sup>26</sup>*

The “B” referred to Baptism. It was most important to note whether and when the girls were baptised, and when they were confirmed and communicated. BCC

In the early days many girls were taken in from other institutions:

*‘Sarah May 19. B.C.C. from Miss Bardsley Refuge, Parkhurst Road ...Left Jan, 1905. Returned March 1905. Left Jan 1906. A terrible case of restlessness is still giving anxiety May 1906. Has fallen since leaving Home’.<sup>27</sup>*

At the same time, 1906, a very young girl, Edith, aged 15, was taken in from a Belgravia address. After nine months:

*‘her father fetched her away against her will...we hoped she would return, but she is evidently under bad influence and prevented’.<sup>28</sup>*

The Fellowship wanted to rescue and protect girls like Florence and Edith, but one can immediately see the problems they faced in their mission. Florence may have fallen, but she was probably never in danger of being abandoned by her family to face the danger of life on the street. On the other hand the danger Edith faced may have been within her family and the Fellowship was evidently powerless to do anything. What is not yet clear, and needs further investigation, is whether the terms used by the Fellowship like ‘bad influence’, ‘led astray’ might be referring to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

rape or incest. Mumm's work on the Anglican sisterhoods suggests these terms did in fact mean this.<sup>29</sup>

### **Preventive**

What did the Fellowship mean by "preventive"? In reform work generally at this time "prevention" referred to preventing prostitution. The Fellowship did not see its mission as preventing prostitution, but there were young girls of the upper and middle classes who also needed to be prevented from falling into sin. Again, this needs investigating further. Perhaps it refers to the sort of girl like Edith above. It may be relatively straightforward and refer to 'living in sin', it might refer to unsuitable parents, such as alcoholics. In 1911 the Fellowship took in two young girls from Birmingham:

*'Alice was being educated by a married man who promised later on that she should live with him. . . . The other, Dorothy, a child of 14 whose mother was with us at the Vineyard for a few days. Mrs Parr has undertaken to educate and clothe her on condition that she is left under our care. . . . we are anxious to find some young teacher, to live at Balham and teach the girls there'.<sup>30</sup>*

There were several different locations for these small homes run by the Fellowship, and it is possible that these were the ones initially located in firstly Barnes and later in Balham, slightly away from central London.

Part of the process of being accepted by the Fellowship was to undergo an "interview". Given the Fellowship's determination to make the distinction between those who had fallen only once and those who had fallen repeatedly, one can only wonder what sort of questions might have been put to the applicant. Evelyn Villiers made it clear that the Fellowship was not going to help those looking for a 'quick fix':

*'I may say here that we absolutely refuse to take a case, which manifestly comes to us only to be hidden away for a month or two, and not for the purpose of definite and permanent restoration'.<sup>31</sup>*

But once screened by interview, the successful applicant would be offered accommodation for her confinement. The maternity home was fairly large,<sup>32</sup> housing around 10 girls, and with servants. However the other homes were fairly small, with 3 or 4 girls under the charge of a lady. In these homes 'one girl is held responsible for the work, and the others help in some degree, as we find this kind of employment of the greatest good for them.'

According to Mrs Parr:

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<sup>29</sup> Sisterhoods offered shelter to survivors of incest and sexual violence, as well as reforming prostitutes.

<sup>30</sup> Minute Book 1907-1910, SMF Archives

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> 1907 conference, see note 3 above

*'The tone of the house is that of a lady's house. There are no vexatious rules, no uniform. Everything is arranged on elastic lines. The management "stood easy" to meet anything special in the difficulties of parents and the girls, e.g., if the parents prefer that their daughter should go away alone with a worker instead of entering a Home, this could be arranged, though of course the parents were expected to pay this special expense'.<sup>33</sup>*

The impression given by Evelyn Villiers is slightly more austere:

*'We try to produce the atmosphere of a pure Home. Everything should be absolutely simple whether it be the furniture, or the food, or what I may call manners and customs, but while all is perfectly simple it should also be absolutely refined, we want to rekindle what has so often died out, womanly self-respec't.<sup>34</sup>*

For the unmarried mother, she would stay with her baby for a few months, after which her baby would be housed in a nursery, or put up for adoption. She would then ideally transfer to another house for "training".

In order to be accepted by the Fellowship the girls signed an agreement to stay with the Fellowship for up to two years.<sup>35</sup> This appears to contradict the point made earlier, about the problem of a prolonged absence from home. This might explain why in practice the girl's stay was often less than two years.

During this time they agreed to have their post screened, to give up any money and to be allowed out only with a chaperone. They would be required to do work around the house including laundry work and gardening. They would be encouraged to train for an occupation and might attend, for instance, bookkeeping or typing classes. Contact was encouraged between mothers and babies, as the Fellowship was not an advocate of adoption in most cases.

They would also undergo moral and religious training, being encouraged to repent of their sinful past and to be baptised and confirmed if they were not already. Obtaining a job and supporting your child were signs of temporal success, and Confirmation and admittance to Communion were the signs of spiritual success. This was very much a Church of England regime. Roman Catholic and Jewish girls were usually referred elsewhere. According to Evelyn Villiers:

*'We believe in environment, we believe in the companionship of good, straightforward, refined, godfearing women. We believe in direct religious teaching and influence, and all these means we use'.<sup>36</sup>*

### **What happened to the girls?**

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> E Villiers, *Classification of Penitentiary Work*, NUWW Conference, 1912

<sup>35</sup> This was common in rescue homes/Anglican sisterhoods at the time.

<sup>36</sup> Villiers, *Classification*

Between 1903 and 1911 Evelyn Villiers reported that 168 cases passed through the Fellowship.

On leaving the Fellowship many girls tried to make a new life. There are several references to girls emigrating to Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. For example in October 1907 Beatrice was reported to be travelling to Canada with her parents and Alice to a post at Vancouver. The Fellowship had received letters from them both. So, apart from the appreciation of the shelter and support of the Fellowship, the opportunity to start again was also welcomed. Some even managed to get married.

*Another old girl has married and has we hope every prospect of a fair start in life*<sup>37</sup>

In December 1911 it was reported that Murial and Phyllis hope to be married and have brought their future husbands “to see us”, presumably for approval.

However, there were also many instances of girls trying to run away; there were also examples of girls flouting the rules by, say, secretly receiving letters, and others who disregarded the religious emphasis. In 1907 Jenny and Ethel confessed to having plans to run away, but on being found out were suitably “penitent”. And in 1908 it was noted that

*‘Hannah’s father is an atheist and she is inclined to scoff at any religious teaching’.*<sup>38</sup>

Families and boyfriends could be very problematic:

*‘Norah ran away back to her mother, who is a bad influence and trying to get her to marry the child’s father’. (1908)*<sup>39</sup>

This was despite the efforts of the Fellowship to get her baptised and confirmed, and also shows that the Fellowship did not necessarily approve of the men who were the fathers of the children – in some cases actively discouraging the girls from marrying.

The Fellowship would go to great lengths to pursue those who had left or to maintain contact with those who had “strayed”. In 1914

*‘Evelyn, one of the inmates at the Barnes Home ran away...to her mother’s. We have heard since that she is near York with a friend. Miss Wilson, who sent her to us, knows of her whereabouts’.*<sup>40</sup>

### **Mental Health**

The nature of the work meant the Fellowship were dealing with people who were under a huge amount of stress, for the stigma associated with being

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<sup>37</sup> Minute Book 1907-1910, SMF Archives

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

pregnant out of wedlock and “better off” was particularly acute. Not surprisingly some of the girls seemed to have suffered mental health problems. For example:

*‘Catharine came to Balham ...but had to be removed to a Nursing Home nearby, and a few days later went quite out of her mind’. (1907)*

For some at this time, that having an illegitimate child was a mental aberration and young women could be admitted to mental asylums for just that reason. In 1911 there is a report of Evelyn being certified by two doctors for admission to Hellingly Mental Hospital. The minutes of the next meeting reveal that Evelyn has written unhappy letters to the Fellowship but they were ‘powerless to help’ (ironic but sad, given their role in taking Evelyn to the doctors in the first place). Yet there is also evidence of the Fellowship working to keep girls out of this system:

Miss Villiers went to considerable lengths to help at least one girl who had been in an asylum. She took her to a physician of the Mental Aftercare Association,<sup>41</sup> then wrote to the medical officer of the girl’s infirmary to ask for a certificate of discharge from the asylum, then went back to the Aftercare Association with this.

The potentially interesting link is with Helen Boyle’s Hospital for Women and Children in Brighton. Dr Boyle pioneered new approaches to mental health which avoided incarceration and believed that the treatment of women by women.<sup>42</sup> Hers was one of the organisations to which the Fellowship referred women on.

The Fellowship was also supported by doctors such as Mary Scharlieb, one of first generation of medical women, gynaecologist, who argued for better treatment of unmarried mothers and prostitutes.

### **Moving On**

For those who submitted to the Fellowship’s regime and made progress the aim was to secure gainful employment. Girls from the upper or professional classes were not expected to do manual work. The sorts of jobs they could expect were things like administrative or clerical posts or lady’s maids.

### **Networks**

Agnes Parr was both familiar with, and known to, the Church Penitentiary Association for the Reclamation of Fallen Women (CPA),<sup>43</sup> founded by

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<sup>41</sup> The Mental Aftercare Association (MACA) was founded in 1879 by the chaplain of Colney Hatch Asylum (Rev. Henry Hawkins) to provide an alternative to the workhouse for those discharged from asylums by housing them in private homes and establishing a network of visitors. In its early days it was known as the After-care Association for Poor and Friendless Female Convalescents on Leaving Asylums for the Insane. It is still running and is the oldest community mental health charity.

<sup>42</sup> L Westwood, A Quiet Revolution in Brighton: Dr Helen Boyles’ Pioneering Approach to Mental Health Care 1899 – 1939, *The Society for the Social History of Medicine*, Vol 14, No 3, 2001.

<sup>43</sup> Mrs Parr spoke at the CPA annual conferences on at least two occasions (1907 and 1912).

Gladstone in 1848, which also co-ordinated the work of other organisations that were connected with the Church of England. A number of the organisations funded by the CPA are mentioned in the Fellowship's minutes and there are many instances of girls being referred on to these places. Thus apart from screening applications for "suitability" the Fellowship also acted as a referral agency to the many other similar initiatives in London and indeed elsewhere in England. These included:

Charity Organisation Society  
Highgate Penitentiary  
Magdalen Hospital, (Streatham penitentiary)  
Kilburn Sisters  
St Barnabas Mission House  
Church Army Homes  
St James's Home, Fulham (Wantage Sisters)  
Soho Hospital for Women  
Helen Boyle Hospital for women, Brighton  
St George's Infirmary  
St Stephen's, Vincent Square  
St Anne's Shelter  
St Magdalene's, Paddington  
St Helen's Lodge, Hastings  
Stratford Refuge, St Albans

### **What happened to the babies?**

The babies born at the maternity home in Sutherland Terrace were usually baptised at St John the Evangelist Church in Wilton Road. For many years these ceremonies were performed by Reverend F.W. Drake, (who was briefly the first Chairman of Council in 1912). In the register of births the address of mother and child was given as 30 Sutherland Terrace, and there was usually a blank where the father's profession would otherwise have been entered. In the early days the note "not for magazine" appeared in the margin of the record; baptisms of these children were important, but illegitimate births were not to be announced in the parish magazine.<sup>44</sup>

Agnes Parr, speaking at the 1907 conference on the work of the Fellowship, said that "a strong stand is made to keep (mothers and babies) in touch. A bargain of some kind is made about it. Sometimes a half-yearly visit, or quarterly, or monthly, which we prefer. " At the same time she pointed out the difficulty of getting money for the girls and their babies, referring to the meanness of parents.'<sup>45</sup>

The children went, as a rule, to Agnes's nurseries at Tooting, (St Monica's, St John's and St Lucy's). According to the Patients' Case Book the babies' destinations included various foster mothers, particular homes such as Mrs Budd's in Reigate and the Sisters of St John the Beloved in Rochford, Essex.

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CPA archives, Lambeth Palace Archives.

<sup>44</sup> Parish records of St John the Evangelist, Wilton Road, Parish of St Peter's Eaton Square, Westminster Archives.

<sup>45</sup> SMF 1907 conference

Interestingly, the Fellowship did not encourage the girls automatically to seek adoption for their children. They supported both the mother and child and tried to ensure the mother could get reasonable employment either to support her child or to keep their child with her if she was “living in” - as a lady’s maid, for example. In practice this was difficult as can be seen by the number of children left in the care of the Fellowship (7 in 1907 rising to 29 in 1910) and when the choice was either the Foundling hospital or the workhouse, then adoption was seen as the lesser evil.

In the 1920s the Fellowship made it a rule that all children admitted must stay at least 8 months; and any child whose mother had decided to give him or her up for adoption must be removed from the Nursery within a fortnight of application to the Adoption Society.

It is possible that some were passed on to orphanages which were part of the Waifs and Strays Society network, as several of these are mentioned in the records.<sup>46</sup>

- St Chad’s Home, Headingley, Leeds
- St Elizabeth’s Receiving Home, Clapham Common
- Mission of Hope, Denmark Hill
- St Agatha’s Home, Princes Risborough

A few children who were still with the Fellowship when they reached school age were sent to Kellan Lodge in Streatham. This may have been a school; interestingly it was also Agnes Parr’s home at the time of her death in 1923.

### **Finance and the Homes**

There is a confusing picture of acquisition and disposal of houses – some bought, some leased. Added to which the functions of the houses were subject to frequent change. In some instances, the changes were the result of financial problems in maintaining the properties, and there were frequent discussions concerning the costs of repair and maintenance of the homes. Girls who were trying to be good were separated from those who were a bad influence, and the “preventive” cases certainly had to stay separate from the others.

In 1907 there were 7 homes: three Homes in the Southwark Diocese (ie south London) and four in London (ie Pimlico). In 1911 these appear to be

*one Maternity Home, two Homse for Mothers and babies, two Homes (under one head) for cases without children, and that which is perhaps dearer than all else to her own heart, a Preventive Home to which young girls can be sent from bad homes and surroundings.*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Although these were primarily for poor children, so am not entirely clear why they feature

<sup>47</sup> Executive Minutes, 1910-1914, SMF Archives

As far as one can tell these were as follows:

St Marcella's, Pimlico maternity home  
Guest House, Barnes home for mothers without babies  
Friends Rest, Barnes home for young girls  
Ryde Vale Road, Balham home for mothers and babies  
Cornford Grove, Balham preventive home  
Fontenoy Road, Balham, a home for young girls

The move to South London may be related to the way Agnes's nursery also moved south from Vauxhall to Tooting and then to Streatham. It may be to locate to a safer area than 'bohemian' Pimlico. It may be because the houses were cheaper. It may be connected to Agnes's own financial circumstances. Or quite possibly a combination of all of these.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, sustaining these number of homes was proving to be a huge financial burden (bearing in mind that Agnes had 2 or possible 3 nurseries in south London as well). Agnes approached the Bishop of Kensington for help and he organised two appeals in 1912 and 1913.

It is at this point that the organisational structure changes. The running of the Fellowship was changed from one committee, to two committees, Firstly a Council of Management, responsible especially for financial and legal matters and consisting mostly of men of means, such as John Russell Villiers, a bullion broker. Secondly a separate Ladies Committee or Executive Committee, responsible for the day to day running of the homes. Agnes briefly joins the Council, but prefers chairing the Ladies Committee.

The two appeals avert a financial crisis, however it was apparent just how much Agnes was supporting the work. There is reference in 1911 to an annual figure of £1,700, about £100k in today's terms, a huge sum even for someone of independent means.

In 1913 she announces the need to sell the two houses in Sutherland Terrace – which the Fellowship agrees to lease from her for 7 years. She herself moves from Cadogan square, Belgravia to Warwick Square Pimlico, and then toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, down to Streatham. At the time of the financial crisis, Agnes gave the following reasons:

*'If the class of girl had come to us for which the Homes were started, they would have paid their way but this had not been the case. But certainly the work had helped many girls who otherwise would not have been helped as no suitable homes for them existed.'*<sup>48</sup>

Does she mean there are not enough upper class beneficiaries to pay – or maybe she made unrealistic assumptions about people's willingness to pay?

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid



The Council eventually decided there was insufficient income to sustain this number of homes and gradually the number were reduced, leaving only a maternity home and temporary nursery at the end of the war. There were several instances of Council or Committee members stepping in and providing either funds or guarantees to enable the work to continue, both then and later in the history.

In March 1914 Agnes Parr again remarked on the difficulty now of obtaining inmates for the Homes, *'especially for the girls of one's own class. ...It was suggested some advertisement might be sent to the Church Times again or possibly some ladies' newspapers.'*<sup>49</sup>

There were other changes during this time. By 1916 the term 'preventive' had become problematic, and there was much discussion about its use. It was felt that the word was "liable to misconception". Indeed it was feared that the word might cast "a slur on girls who lived or stayed there". They decided to use the term The Hostel – a home for girls needing rest and care. However, within a year this had closed down.

By 1917 the financial situation had improved but unfortunately the condition of the maternity home in Sutherland Terrace had deteriorated. After finding two houses in Elmbourne Road in Balham the Fellowship took these on lease from the Heaver Estate.

The Maternity home in Balham was quite different from the one in Pimlico. On the positive side it had gardens which were put in order and stocked with vegetables. In its first year the new maternity home produced 107 lb of potatoes!<sup>50</sup> The maternity home, had retained the name, St Marcella's, and operated more or less according to Agnes's original ideas. Babies were being baptised (at St John's, Bedford Hill, Balham), the girls themselves were being confirmed and communicated, and fees were being paid. Class and mental health continued to be taken into account for admission to St Marcella's. In 1923 Kathleen was considered "mentally weak" and "not the right class for our Home, advisable to make some other arrangement for her".<sup>51</sup>

On the negative side the neighbours were not as tolerant as they had been in Pimlico. During their negotiations with the Heaver Estate, the Fellowship had described their home as a "nursing home, with no mention of it being Rescue Work", presumably because of the danger of refusal from the Estate. This later caused friction with more than one complaint from the Estate about the noise of crying infants and breach of covenant. In 1919 the Heaver Estate complained that a maternity home was not a convalescent home, and the Fellowship argued back: that since a complaint had been made no baby had ever been in the garden; that the house was leased to the Fellowship as a private nursing home; and that nothing incompatible with such terms had been done in the house.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Council Minutes 1916-1924, September 1918.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, April 1923

Objections continued to be made. In 1921 there was a letter from five neighbours “complaining of annoyance caused by crying of the Babies”. Nevertheless, the maternity home continued in Elmbourne Road for many years. For a brief time the new maternity home and the temporary nursery at were in the same neighbourhood.

However the Fellowship had plans to house a permanent nursery and to continue what have previously been termed ‘preventive’ work, but which became in the inter-war years an emphasis on training and rehabilitation, for girls not eligible for the maternity home. There was a further appeal in 1920 to raise funds for this and it is clear that these three aspects of its work were central to the vision for the inter-war period.

The Council spent much of its efforts trying to raise finance for this, including sorting out the terms of a bequest. In 1921 they do succeed in setting up a training home and in 1927 opened a nursery. They were aided during this period by the advent of statutory funding from the board of health and from the probation service.

However this was not without some friction between the Council and Ladies Committee over the type of house and relaxation of admission criteria.

On 28 October, 1920 a meeting was held to discuss the opening of a new Training House. Agnes Parr was in the chair and representatives from the Marlborough Street Police Court and the Church Army attended. There was a prolonged discussion “as to the sort of girl most needing help. Finally it proved to be those on remand. The Ladies Committee didn’t think this was consistent with the Fellowship’s original intentions to help girls of the middle and upper classes. However, the Council had already decided

*‘it would be best to accept cases on their own merits without too closely defining the class’.*<sup>52</sup>

The Ladies Committee had also did not like the idea of a house taking in too many girls, and had resisted, perhaps feeling this marked too much of a change from the original purpose. They also discussed whether or not to get the girls to make a definite promise on how long they would stay – if they didn’t there was a fear that

*‘we should not succeed in keeping the class of girls who were really needing help’.*<sup>53</sup>

In the end the Ladies Committee agreed reluctantly, to the relaxation of the admission criterion and on a house for 6-8 girls and with the Council’s view that the girls did not have to make a promise about length of stay.

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<sup>52</sup> Executive Minutes, October 1920

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

It is unlikely that relaxation of the rules at the training home extended entirely to the maternity home. It was reported in September 1922 that St Marcella's wanted girls to undertake to remain for four months after confinement and considered making them sign a form. Although four months was a considerable reduction on the earlier ideas about agreeing to stay for two years.

Overall the finances of the Fellowship began to improve in the 1920s. One of the reasons for this was that local and central government, following new legislation, were allowed to fund voluntary organizations and charities, and the Fellowship was able, for the first time, to receive grants from local authorities. The Maternity and Child Welfare Act (1918) had enabled local authorities to make provision for mothers and children. In 1919 the maternity home received its first grant of £200 from the London County Council. This represented a considerable change, and an indication of the way funding would develop in the future.

It was around the time of these two major changes, that Agnes Parr passed away. At the time of her death in 1923 the Fellowship recorded:

*'But so lavish was her generosity that she beggared herself in its support, and so widely did the work extend that at length it over-taxed her energies and her powers of individual oversight, and she committed it to the Fellowship of St Michael's and All Angels'* <sup>54</sup>

Her obituary in the *Streatham News* 'Did Good by Stealth' does not mention the Fellowship, though there are references to St Monica's Orphanage, St. John Baptist's and St. Lucy's Nurseries, the Agnes Parr Nursing Home and many other benefactions.

*'By her death there has passed away a social worker and philanthropist whose unostentatious services in the cause of humanity made her name deeply venerated by all who came in contact with her. And a friend was quoted as saying: "I have never met anyone who has crowded so many noble deeds into a single lifetime"'* <sup>55</sup>

## Concluding Points

*Was Agnes Parr ahead of her time or of her time?*

According to Bartley, Hope Lodge, Birmingham, founded in 1910 was one of the first homes for single mothers in England. If that is the case, then Agnes was ahead of her time. However, it seems likely that Agnes was one of many

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<sup>54</sup> Typewritten tribute in SMF Archives, reproduced Appendix v A Penn, *From the rescue of fallen women to the support of vulnerable families: The History of St Michael's Fellowship*, 2005

<sup>55</sup> *Did Good by Stealth*, Obituary of Agnes Parr, *Streatham News*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1923

female philanthropist who set up their own, privately managed homes. And not just the more famous, such as the Duchess of Bedford and Angela Burdett Coutts. As Bartley herself notes there was:

Mrs Hampsons House in Tollington Park, London;  
Mrs Sessions' Home in Gloucester;  
Lady [Ida?] Sitwell's Home in Scarborough  
Mrs Andrew Johnson, Walthamstow  
Anna Wilkes in Poplar,

Some of these ladies set up their own homes for "fallen women" often because they were unhappy with the existing institutions many of which were run by nuns. These individual endeavours were sometimes in conflict with the Church Penitentiary Association, whose personnel preferred the church-run institutions.<sup>56</sup> Agnes herself, resisted becoming one of the CPA's own groups, even though it meant forfeiting the chance of a grant, possibly to retain the Fellowship's particular niche in this area of reform work.

And Agnes was in touch with other like-minded women, some of whom are known about but possibly many more remain unknown. One contemporary of Agnes was Mrs Janet Ransome Wallis. She started the Haven of Hope for Homeless Little Ones, in Walthamstow, because of her concern about the lack of provision for unmarried mothers and their children (she had submitted a response to the Poor Law commission on the unsuitability of the workhouse for unmarried mother).<sup>57</sup> She moved to South London, where, in 1906 she opened a children's home, followed in 1910 by a rescue maternity home in Denmark Hill, and then a maternity hospital in Streatham in 1914. This organisation became the Mission of Hope and is mentioned in the Fellowship's records as a place where some girls are referred.

One further line of enquiry is to explore the networks and linkages of these various people and organisations.

*How might the care provided by the Fellowship be understood?*

According to Mumm,<sup>58</sup> in her article on convent-based rehabilitation of fallen women in Victorian Britain:

*'sisterhoods firmly believed that the artificial family structure of the penitentiary could both protect and heal those who had fallen under such circumstances'*

Sister's interaction was a form of 'metaphysical' motherhood, they were women who would never be mothers, saw themselves as second (and better) mothers of the women who came under their care. Perhaps this could be applied to Agnes Parr or Evelyn Villiers. An alternative line of enquiry would

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<sup>56</sup> P. Bartley. *Prostitution*, 2000

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.christianfamilyconcern.org.uk/history.htm>

<sup>58</sup> S Mumm, 'Not Worse than other girls': The Convent-based rehabilitation of fallen women in Victorian Britain, *Journal of Social History*, Spring 96, Vol. 29 Issue 3

be to explore concepts such as 'social motherhood' and 'maternalism', to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of the story as presented.

Bartley's analysis of the reform work by Ladies Association showed a mix of gender and class control with humanitarianism. The work of the Fellowship does suggest there was a similar mix. Whilst those joining the Fellowship, had to agree to its terms and conditions, including conforming to a very traditional view of women's role. Those accepted were not working class in the way that those being helped by the Ladies Associations were, but they came to the Fellowship in a very unequal position. In theory they came voluntarily, but in practice they did not have much choice, given the lack of options, so had to 'submit' to a particular regime.

Having said that, the Fellowship did offer a chance and an alternative and for many women, this 'maternalistic' support, did provide help at a crucial time. Some clearly did not like it or cope with it, but the fact that many did keep in touch suggests it was not necessarily a wholly negative experience. For example, in 1922 when Sister Gates Warren retired after 17 years as Superintendent of the maternity home, the Fellowship wrote to old girls asking for donations of 1/- and received £9.9s, a pair of fur-lined gloves and a jersey, a testament to affection and gratitude.

The views of the beneficiaries are indeed absent, and have to be refracted through the views of those who ran the Fellowship, but recently a case has come to light of someone who was born at the maternity home. I would like to finish with the following example which perhaps points to this mix of support offered by the Fellowship.

#### *Born in Elmbourne Road*

Susan who was born at Elmbourne Road in early 1937. Susan's mother, Catherine, was highly educated and was studying at the Royal College of Art when she became pregnant. Her sister, who was a social worker at the time, put her in touch with the Fellowship.

Catherine was an atheist, and she did not have happy memories of the religious regime at Elmbourne Road. According to Susan, her mother "spent all her time on her knees either scrubbing floors or praying!" Susan recalls being told that she was removed at the age of four months to a residential nursery in the Tooting area which the Fellowship had found for her. The impression is that she did not go to the Fellowship's own nursery because her mother refused to have her baptized (which is in itself interesting).

Catherine's positive memory of the Fellowship was that they encouraged the young women to avoid adoption (although from mixed motives – partly to encourage the mother-child bond and partly to avoid any 'easy' way out of their situation). Catherine was unable to keep her baby, Susan, with her for practical reasons, but she always stayed in touch. She saw her regularly after she had gone to foster parents at 18 months. Later when she could not visit she wrote to her once a week, and the two spent holiday time together. Although Susan was brought up in foster homes, the help from the Fellowship

meant that her mother could keep her from being adopted, and the two later became good friends.

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