



THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S HOME, OLD ALRESFORD AND THE ONSLOW CONNECTION

By

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Take a walk through the village of Old Alresford past the Church, the village green, a few houses, old and new, the old forge, the almshouses, the little school, and you will see on the right hand side, a large building. It is the National Children's Home, "Southdowns" and was built about the year 1838| one year after Queen Victoria came to the Throne. Sometimes it is easy to describe a building, particularly if it has some architectural merit, but this is just a solid two-storied: red brick and flint structure, plainly functional, and well suited for the purpose for which it was built. Strangers passing through the village would not perhaps, give it a second glance, but nevertheless for nearly one hundred years, it has been a centre for the care and upbringing of orphaned and destitute children. The approach is through an avenue of lime trees, well over one hundred years old. On one side are the tennis courts and the playing field, and on the other: a paddock for grazing. The view from the front entrance of the Home is quite delightful, and apart from the west door of the Church, it would be hard to find anywhere else in the village where one can enjoy a more picturesque prospect of our green and pleasant county, than from this spot. The Home was built by the Onslow family on their estate as a Home and school for training girls in domestic service, and continued to be so used until the year 1886. Before proceeding further, however, I must endeavour to give you a word picture of this family, and of Upton House, in the Hamlet of Upton: where they lived. and to do this I must go back in time to the middle of the eighteenth century.

Upton House is a mansion built in the Georgian period for James Rodney, brother of the famous Admiral, Lord George Brydges Rodney, and James lived there until the early part of the nineteenth century. It was to this house that Col. Onslow who was related to the Earl of Onslow, Clandon Park, Guildford, came to live. It has not been possible to ascertain the precise date he decided to settle in the village, and reliance has had to be placed on the early editions of Debrett and Burke's Peerage for what information could be obtained. The family records in the archives of the Guildford Museum only reveal very sketchy details, and in the main, refer to Clandon Park.

It is recorded in Debrett that Col. the Hon. Cranley Onslow Second Surrey Regt., of Upton House, Old Alresford married Susannah Elisabeth, daughter of Nathaniel Hillier of Stoke Park, Guildford, Surrey, in the year 1812, and this is confirmed in

Burke's peerage and the family records. The Bishop of Winchester performed the ceremony. One can assume, therefore it was about this date they took up residence.

From the marriage there were five sons and three daughters -

George	Guildford	Arthur
Augustus	James	Edward
Thomas	Charles	Susannah
Frederick	Townshend	Arabella
Elizabeth	Harriet Charlotte Matilda	
Harriet		

Searches through old records from the beginning of the nineteenth century and for the greater part of that period, have not revealed much information about this family, but here and there one finds a reference: for instance, in the record of Land taxes for Old Alresford, the first mention of Col. Onslow is made in 1830, when Upton House was owned by Edward Fletcher Esq. and occupied by Col. Onslow. These returns showed the tax as £25.13.31//2 and were not recorded after 1832. It would appear therefore that he only leased the property and did not purchase it until after 1832. In the record of Land Ownership for 1875 Upton House was given as the residence of Miss Arabella Onslow with 217 acres, 3 rods and 10 poles, with a gross estimated rent of £578 and in White's History, Directory and Gazetteer of Hampshire for 1878, Upton House was given as the residence of the Misses Onslow.

When I lived in the village I used to talk to some of the older villagers, who no doubt were passing on information given to them by their forebears, and it does seem that the Onslow family were well respected and took a keen interest in local affairs. Their philanthropic deeds are still in evidence today, as in addition to building the Home for the training of girls in domestic service they also built the almshouses in 1843 and the village school in 1846. The school was later known as the National school, and eventually came under the control of the Church of England. According to White's Directory: it was built at a cost of £700 but no mention is made of the cost of building the almshouses.

It is also mentioned in this directory that in 1855 Matilda Onslow started an Orphanage in New Alresford at No. 50 Broad Street, for children of soldiers killed or maimed in battle, probably the Crimean War, and it was known as the Patriotic Orphan Asylum or Home. Although it was through the efforts of Miss Onslow the Orphanage was founded, its name suggests that support was received from the Patriotic fund set up by Lloyd's of London in the early part of the nineteenth century, and their minute books are preserved at the Head Office.

The Onslow family worshipped in Old Alresford Church and this would be during the Incumbancies of three well known Rectors, Francis North, Earl of Guildford: George Sumner, later to become Bishop of Guildford, and Sir Frederick Currie, Bart. On the north side of the church wall is a memorial to Guildford James Hillier Mainwaring Ellerker Onslow who died in 1882: and another to his two sisters, Susannah Augusta Arabella who died in 1889, and Charlotte Matilda, who died in 1885. Apart from a few

entires in the church registers, there is nothing of interest relating to this distinguished family. The date the Home finally closed is somewhat obscure, but according to information supplied by the Chief Office of the National Children's Homes, the property was conveyed to the Trustees of the Primitive Methodist Church in 1886 by Miss Arabella Onslow and in the Hampshire Chronicle for April 1887 there appeared a small item which said the Primitive Methodists had secured the premises lately carried on by Miss Onslow. The building was actually re-opened as an Orphanage in 1889, and this was due to the initiative of Joseph Peck who felt impelled to do something for orphaned and destitute children. During a recent visit to "Southdowns" I noticed in the Hall a tablet to Joseph Peck, Founder and first Secretary, 1889 - 1890, with the wording, "He went about doing good". There is also a plaque to the memory of Alice Alford Matron, and on the wall in the Superintendent's office is a dinner plate, on which is the date, 1889.

When first opened, the Orphanage consisted of one house to which was attached a room serving as a school. At that time one or two of the staff were qualified to teach, but in later years most of the children attended the village school and the room was used for recreational purposes. Intervening years witnessed the erection of new buildings and alterations in various parts of the Estate, and in the course of time it became quite large.



Originally 15 children were accommodated, but later on the number was increased to 30 boys and 30 girls from the age of five upwards, mainly from the south of England. Another branch at Harrogate took in children from the north country. As was customary in those early days there was a measure of segregation, the children only meeting together for prayers and meals. This must have been hard at first, particularly where brothers and sisters were involved, but there were, no doubt, good reasons for introducing this code of strictness, and it must be recognised that these Homes fulfilled a great need in providing not only a haven for the children, but also a sound Christian background, strengthened by the care and devotion of the staff.

There must have been some relaxation in later years, as I understand that in 1919 the boys and girls met on the playing field and in the James room, also during the

winter months when magic lantern shows were given to which the village children were always invited. This latter gesture is indicative of the friendly atmosphere which existed between the Orphanage and the village, and is worth noting that on these occasions the visitors were always regaled with a cup of cocoa and a bun for which they paid one penny.

During the years I resided in the village, I was always impressed with the happy and relaxed spirit which existed at "Southdowns" and I cannot recall any time when, if my visit was in mid-morning I was not greeted with an invitation to drink a cup of coffee, or in the afternoon, a cup of tea, a gesture which was much appreciated.

Twelve years after opening, the growth of the Orphanage and the need for more accommodation, led to the addition of a girls dormitory and dining room, and then a boys dormitory. Later came the farm buildings, and in 1932, the "Whittaker" sick wards. The farm was quite a flourishing project and the products from it provided a very useful addition to the kitchen, and of course, an added interest to the children. This development was discontinued many years ago but some of the buildings still remain. A large area at the back of the main building is devoted to growing vegetables, and on a recent walk round, I noticed it was in excellent order.

In 1932 the Primitive Methodists and the Wesleyans joined as one church and the Orphanage at Old Alresford then became one of the National Children's Homes. There are now 56 branches up and down the country, and a school in Jamaica.

When the Orphanage was first opened in 1889 the term "Master" was used, but after 1932 the title was changed and "Superintendent" substituted. As mentioned earlier, children of school age went to the village school: a short distance away, but when their primary education finished. they attended Perin's school in Alresford. As they reached the age when it was possible for them to leave "Southdowns" quite a few went into residential care for ultimate training in farming, industry: domestic service, or H.M. Forces. Some emigrated to Canada and Australia, and were fostered by families in those two countries. It must have been very rewarding to the staff at Old Alresford to receive news of their progress.

I personally know of a boy by name of Harry Horwood who with his sister Rose, was brought up at the Home, and in after life became quite a public figure in the town of Walford, Hertfordshire. When old enough to leave "Southdowns" he started work on the railways as a clerk, but later on, took employment with another firm. At the age of 22 he was elected to the Watford Borough Council and in 1938/9 became Mayor. He was made an Alderman and in 1957/8 was elected Mayor for the second time. He sat on the Watford Bench as a Magistrate for many years, and in 1959 was awarded the O.B.E. and given the freedom of the Borough. He was on the Board of Governors of the Watford Grammar school and had many other interests in the town. His sister, Rose, came back to the Home as a member of staff, but later went into domestic service. Another boy, Lawrence Norman, is now Superintendent of one of the National Children's Homes at Painswick, Glos. There must of course, be many others, and I would not for one moment lead anyone to think I was only dealing with two cases in isolation.

It would be appropriate here, to quote from an article written by J. Gilbert Powell which appeared in an issue of the National Children's Home, after a visit to Old Alresford in 1938.

"I sometimes used to wonder whether it was a good thing to bring up children in a Branch in the country, now I feel inclined to argue that nothing could be better. Provided most of the necessities for the proper upbringing are available, the country must infinitely be preferable for such work as that in which the Children's Home is engaged. Away from the distractions of city or suburban life, there is a chance for a child to grow - a chance which perhaps it has never been able to enjoy - It is not infrequently that a child who is accepted into the Home has never known what it is to be quiet, or to have a satisfying meal: or an uninterrupted night's sleep in a comfortable bed. Quite apart from these considerations there are others, equally important into which it is not necessary to enter here. Suffice to say, one thought of some of these when one read on the wall of the room in which the girls were having their tea (and where the whole Branch, staff, girls and boys, gather for prayer) these words,

THIS IS THE AGE OF SPEED BUT NOBODY HAS YET CAUGHT UP TO THE MAN WHO SAID "FOLLOW ME"

I came away from Old Alresford feeling that whilst it was good to forget the tragic circumstances from which many of the children had come - death, desertion and domestic dereliction, - it was perhaps just as good to recall them occasionally and as a comparison, so that one could rejoice the more that in spite of their unhappy beginnings, they were now responding to the love and devotion of those into whose care they had been committed".

This is only part of a graphic story of life at the Home, and I am very grateful to the Rev. Gordon Barritt, Principal of the National Children's Homes for allowing me to reproduce it. The outbreak of the second world war caused a few upheavals, one being at the Home at Alverstoke, which was in an area scheduled as "Dangerous area No.1" and the children had to be evacuated. This resulted in Old Alresford being packed to capacity with 74 children which must have presented quite a problem for the staff, but I have no doubt that all difficulties were overcome with the cheerfulness and devotion which was so much a part of "Southdowns".

In 1909 a lady by name of Mary Yolland began her work at Farnham for the care of children. After her death, the National Children's Homes took over the premises, but it soon became clear that a more modern house was required. In 1959/60 therefore, it was decided to sell it and use the money to provide an' extension at Old Alresford to be known as the "Mary Yolland" house. The building was completed in 1961 and opened by Sir Adrian Boult, a Vice President Two cottages adjacent to the main building: were erected for the use of the staff, one in the 1930's and the other in 1959.

After the second world war Mr. E.J. Alsford followed his parents as Superintendent and his wife as Matron. It was then that the decision was taken to reduce the intake to 48 children, divided into Houses, each being under the supervision of a member of staff. Thus the old arrangement of segregation was finally abandoned. The new

system seemed to have worked extremely well right up to 1978 when most of the children were dispersed due to major alterations about to be commenced. During this time however, the building was not entirely closed, about six children remaining. The work was finished in 1979, and in conversation with Mr. Pease, the Superintendent, I gathered that whilst it would still retain its title of the National Children's Home, it would also be known as the Group 2 Community Home, and could be described as a specialised Home for the care of girls and boys for whom other care had been inappropriate. The total capacity is now 28: most of the girls and boys having a separate room, and in accordance with past practice, the younger ones go to the village school and the older ones to Perin's school in Alresford. After leaving school they stay on at "Southdowns" until employment is found for them, and I understood that some success has been achieved in this direction.

One important factor, relating to the decrease in the intake of children over the years, is that whereas, years ago, the ratio of staff to children was very low it is now much higher. Children living in an N.C.H. Branch receive much more individualised care and attention than might have been the case in the old days, when one member of staff may have been looking after as many as twenty five children. They are also on average, much older, although in fact, the age spread at Old Alresford at present is very wide, being from five to seventeen years. All children are placed there by the local Authorities in the South of England, one exception being a boy from the Channel Islands. Each boy or girl is paid for by the Authority concerned, but capital developments and various items are met out of N.C.H. funds. The need is therefore as great as ever: as it is from this income that the pioneering work with children and families in the community is able to be carried out.

Finance has always been a very important consideration, and it is to the everlasting credit of the founders of the Orphanage, later the National Children's Homes: and the countless people who so generously gave their support that capital was, and still is, forthcoming. Funds have always been raised by voluntary means, such as Church collections, gifts, flag days and house to house collections, garden parties and bazaars, and is allocated by the Chief Office to each branch according to its needs.

In addition to the fund raising efforts mentioned, a fete is held each year on the playing field at Old Alresford supported by various organisations in the area. This not only gives visitors an opportunity of showing their appreciation for the work carried out at "Southdowns" but it is also a meeting place for old friends, and very often, girls and boys who have previously been at the Home.

I have endeavoured to give you a brief outline of "Southdowns" and perhaps it would be a fitting end to this article if mention were made of a group of people who have formed an association called "The Winchester and District Friends of the National Children's Home, Old Alresford. Their objective is to support the home in all areas of its work, and because it is not infrequently that social and other activities have to be curtailed due to a shortage of money, fund raising will be an important element. More vital, however, is the need for providing a local source of help to the staff, for example: visiting a sick child in Hospital, driving the mini-bus, assisting at the annual fete, career information, etc. The Association's activities will involve both the Winchester and Alresford Districts in its future drives for fund raising and

membership, and the Superintendent at Old Alresford, will willingly supply further details to anyone who is interested.

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