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FORD MANOR ROAD AND PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

For over 20 years, the house known as Woods Folly in Ford Manor Road, Dormansland had seen pre-school children arrive day by day, term by term, to learn through play and have fun. Originally, the pre-school was known as “The Stable Playgroup”, later “The Stables Nursery School”.



Woods Folly

But where is it now, and where else along Ford Manor Road were the children educated?



Ford Manor Road

FORD MANOR ROAD AND PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Many of you will know of the evacuation on Friday 1st September, 1939 of the children from Kintore Way Nursery School, Bermondsey, London to what we now know as Greathed Manor, formerly Ford Manor. In total, there were some 65 boys and girls, aged 2-5 years, accompanied by staff and voluntary parent helpers. Following a long bus journey from Bermondsey, Vi Kinnibrugh, one of the parents recalled the arrival at Ford Manor.

‘At last we came to that long drive which led to what we later discovered was ‘Ford Manor’. Standing by the back entrance was Mr Nichols, the butler, his silver hair shining in the sunlight, for it was a beautiful day’

The school as it was, remained there for 15 months with, as you can imagine, very little in the way of toys and equipment originally. Mrs Spender-Clay provided a playground for the children on the golf course within the grounds. There were car tyres, sand pits and swings from the trees. Once the air raids started and the German plane was brought down at Dry Hill, the authorities said that no children were to sleep on the top floor so Mrs Spender-Clay gave up her library and the house keepers quarters, and these were used as night nurseries.



Parent helpers at Ford Manor (Left to Right: Mrs Bullock, Mrs Kinnibrugh, Mrs Tibbles)



Evacuees (Children) at Ford Manor (photos courtesy of Vi Kinnibrugh)

The date was 5th December 1940 when the children were moved out as Canadian Soldiers were to use Ford Manor. The children then moved to Reid Hall in Surrey then later to Rusholme, Crockham Hill, Kent. It was to be many years before the link of Ford Manor Road with Pre-school children was to be re-established.

It is now the national picture that is important. Pre-School provision that existed across the country was patchy, often of poor quality, provided mainly for the disadvantaged and children of working mothers. There were three particular individuals who influenced the organization of these pre-school institutions by developing educational models and introducing training for adults. These were Robert Owen, Maria Montessori and Friedrich Froebel. Furthermore, Montessori nursery schools still exist locally to this day, Blindley Heath having one of them.

In 1961, the ‘Pre-school Playgroups Association’ was created. Its principle was that parents, not professionals, were the best people to give their children a stimulating start in life. Jill Browning, who was later to become a well known district councillor, moved

to Little Bassetts, on the recreation ground, Dormansland in 1963. She was interested in this idea. She attended a (quote) ‘very basic playgroup leaders course’ and made plans to provide her own school. At the time, Dormansland was continuing to expand with the Meads and Meads Close houses having been built.

She applied to the Local Authority for a Child Minding Licence, all that was required to open a nursery school in those days. She was allowed 10 children and an assistant. Little Bassetts Nursery School opened in January 1966 and existed there for ten years.

Jill writes “This entailed dragging chairs occasional tables and fragile ornaments out into the hall each morning and hauling them back at lunch time! It all worked well until times my husband brought business clients back to lunch when children had to be dispatched and the house returned to normal in record time. How I sympathized with the Joyce Grenfell sketch: ‘Is somebody coming for you, George?’ when mothers were late turning up!

In 1975, Jill felt she needed to do some ‘real’ work; she handed over the school to Joanna Gale at Morven House, Ford Manor Road. In the spring of 1976, Sarah Harlowe registered her daughter, Fiona for what was now Morven House Playgroup. Sarah Harlowe had just completed a year’s course in pre-school education and within the first term, she was helping out. She writes ‘Outside play was always high on the days activities – horses, chickens and rabbits were some of the animals kept by the Gale family. Milk and a biscuit was always enjoyed as was watching playschool on the television. A few children didn’t have a TV in their homes even then!’

Sarah became more involved and took over the playgroup after Jo’s sad and sudden death. The playgroup stayed there until the house was sold to the current owners, the Ripley family.



*Morven House – home of ‘Morven House Playgroup’
(1975 - 1981)*

Social services were keen for the thriving playgroup to continue. Sarah Harlowe even knocked on doors of large houses to find accommodation until she was finally given the go ahead to use what was then the very old Baptist Church Hall in the High Street. She

writes “There was one room with rather damp walls, toilets down the drive, and the kitchen was opposite, adjacent to the Baptist Church. The Stable Playgroup continued here for two happy years though there were dramas: Burst pipes in the kitchen, frozen milk, no phone for contact and having to put the heating on at 8 a.m. every morning.”



The building adjacent to the Baptist Church, Dormansland from which Sarah Harlowe ran the ‘Stable Playgroup’ for 2 years (1981-1983)

In 1983, the Stable Playgroup moved once more. This time to Woods Folly, again in Ford Manor Road. Having bought the house in the spring of that year, Sarah Harlowe set up the playgroup in an annexe of the property.



Ready to go! The re-named ‘Stables Nursery School’ opened its doors for pupils on 30th April 1990

Another toilet had to be built near to the playroom as the children weren't allowed through the kitchen. It was ideal, self contained with a garden, a courtyard for winter days, fresh air and a much more relaxed staff. Due to demand the number of children increased and it was now operating Monday to Friday.

Sarah Harlowe ran the playgroup here for six years. One event that she mentioned was the hurricane in 1990, which left Ford Manor Road without electricity for 4 weeks. However the playgroup was back in action three days later, just like the train service. By this time, the house was on the market due to the retirement of Sarah's husband. It was at this point that my involvement with Woods Folly and the Pre-school began.

In 1990, I was deputy head teacher of Donnington Wood County Infants and Nursery School in Telford, Shropshire. My husband, Richard, was working in the headquarters at railway operations in Crewe. Following the Clapham Rail accident, he was asked to transfer to the somewhat desperate situation in the South to become head of the Signaling group in Croydon. Consequently moving house from Staffordshire was inevitable. Individually we both viewed Woods Folly. With my background in Education, I thought I could develop the pre-school room into a Nursery School. My husband thought the space would be ideal for a music room.

We arrived in Ford Manor Road late on an April evening with no furniture or bed. That was to follow in the morning. In the car with us was our 7 month old son Laurence, an ageing disagreeable long haired domestic cat called Horatio and the keyboards of my husband's three manual organ. His greatest concern was whether this much treasured item had travelled well. Mine was how would I manage to be ready in only 4 days to open?

The parents that had loyally remained with the old 'Stable Playgroup' had been invited to meet me and the staff (who I had not met) later that week. We had to gather in the lounge as all the packing cases for the house were still unopened in the nursery room. With only one day left to go, Brenda Lester and I somehow managed the sorting, cleaning and preparation of all the toys and equipment.

The newly named Stables Nursery School opened its doors with just 8 pupils on that Monday morning, 30th April 1990. The term then in 1990 was only ten weeks long. Only morning sessions were available from 9.15 to 12 noon and they cost £3.00. Children were only admitted after their third birthday. Social services were adamant that any younger was too early! How times have changed. Children remained with us until they began school which was either the term in which they were 5 or after their 5th birthday. Within weeks we were at full capacity adding first two then three afternoon sessions to satisfy demand and very soon had a waiting list stretching to two years ahead. The ratio of staff to children was 1:8 for 3 year olds and above.

An annual rigorous all day inspection from Social Services was the only government intervention at this time with minimal paperwork. The content of the curriculum with its emphasis on learning through play was very much left to the individual running each nursery school. This was soon to change.

The Children Act 1989 was the first of this legislation to have implications for our group. Local authorities were given the duty to ensure good quality care through the registration procedure. Issues such as staff training, special educational needs, equal opportunities, parental involvement and insurance were recommended and all groups had to produce policy documents in all these areas and include them with their prospectus. The local authorities Social Services Inspection concerned itself with safety measures, hygiene and toilet arrangements plus use of space. All records and group policies were examined along with child assessments and reports. If this wasn't enough to keep us busy, the Voucher system was introduced by the then Conservative Government. All eligible 4 year olds were entitled to approximately £300 of nursery education per term. Parents were well informed by post, sent the vouchers in booklet form well in advance, which they had to bring to the nursery school. We had to tear off one per day per child, sign and return the other, and keep the smaller portion for up to 5 years in case of an audit. On top of that, one requirement of the voucher system was to be OFSTED inspected.

The first pre-inspection booklet named Self-Appraisal Schedule which had to be filled in and sent off contained some 17 pages with 93 questions requiring lengthy answers. Every area of the designated curriculum as identified by OFSTED was rigorously examined. There were 6 areas of learning: Personal and Social, Language and Literacy, Mathematics, Knowledge of the world, Physical and Creative. Goals were set within each of these known as 'Desirable Learning Outcomes.' Children were expected to achieve these by the time they entered compulsory education, i.e. the term after their 5th birthday.

Change however happened once more. In December 1999, OFSTED took over the regulation and inspection of all early year's settings. This meant that local authority Social Service departments were no longer responsible for standards in private and voluntary provision. A new arm of OFSTED had been created to bring together the current two systems of regulation.

Next, the age related 'Desirable Learning Outcomes' were replaced in September 2000 by 'The Early Learning Goals' and most children were expected to achieve these by the end of the reception year.

Sadly the biggest and most controversial impact of the voucher system and subsequent Labour government grants for 4 year olds was that all primary schools reduced the admission age of entry from 5 to 4 so that financially they may benefit and we had to fight to retain our 4 year old children.

The result was that over 800 pre-school groups closed throughout the country. For a 4 year old to change from a ratio of 1 adult to 6-8 children in a small secure nursery environment to, in some cases, a class of thirty in a 5+ infant class room sharing a playground with junior children was going against all the philosophy and best practice developed since the 1960's. In 2001 there was general concern that these 4 year olds needed to be treated differently in schools and the emphasis must return to a play based curriculum. How many of us could have told the boffins that!

Each time we were OFSTED inspected, more bizarre demands seemed to be imposed upon us. We got used to jumping through hoops. However the crunch came when one lady in particular reminded me that the plants in the garden were dangerous if the children ate them; and by the way we would need extra toilet facilities for our ever growing numbers. To extend Woods Folly to meet the criteria imposed was impossible and the removal of all the plants may have left a very barren garden scene. I either needed to close, or move the nursery school.

Was this really going to be the end of the line? Very much like Sarah Harlowe thirty years previously, I began searching for a suitable property in the vicinity, in which we could expand and develop. Not an easy task but finally Bob Haughton the then Chief Executive of National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy (NCYPE), St. Piers Lane, Lingfield offered me three buildings that were possibilities: but all would require extensive renovation.



The Chapel at NCYPE chosen as the new premises

I agreed to renting the Chapel which at the time was being used for staff training purposes. With a government grant and time rapidly running out, work began. Meanwhile, after 13 years almost to the week, the Stables Nursery School ceased to function at Woods Folly, Ford Manor Road.

Somehow we made it. The Stables Nursery School had moved and we were ready. Sixteen children, now aged between two and five, open five days a week, with two sessions each day and six members of staff. Opening hours 09.00 -14.45. The latest OFSTED report named us as 'outstanding' in every area, an accolade indeed!

To bring us right up to date, in August 2006 we learned we had been short-listed in a national competition for Nursery of the Year. We now wait for the judges to visit.

What is ironic is the fact that we are now expected to ensure the children learn and play outside for as long as possible and yes, grow their own plants and vegetables, minding those oh so dangerous leaves!

We might not have travelled far physically from Ford Manor Road, however in terms of change and stress the journey has been unbelievably difficult and long.

The overload of bureaucracy and paper-work is now out of hand. Our policy documents fill entire shelves; a curriculum now exists for each child from birth to three! Government intervention and the push towards all day care for children from 8am to 6pm with breakfast clubs, after school activities, holiday sessions and opening times of forty-eight weeks a year is a far cry from where we started and the philosophy behind pre-school education. Yet really nothing has changed in terms of what children need. They learn through play, it is what they do and how they make sense of their world.



*The Nursery School as it stands to this day.
Excellence is the main priority throughout the setting*