

Miss Steer's Bridge of Hope & The Chingford Cottage Homes For Girls

The 'Cottage' Homes 1901-?1920



From about 1895 there was a small complex of seven privately run Children's Homes for girls in Chingford. These Homes were run by Superintendent, *Helen M Steer* who was the sister of the *Bridge Of Hope* Director, *Mary H Steer*.

The 'cottage' homes were set up in semi rural surroundings in Chingford so that they would be away from the dangers and temptations of urban East London. I also strongly suspect that one of the primary reasons for the semi rural location was to keep the children away from the influence of their mothers. As I have been unable to find many of the children listed in the 1911 census in the 1901 census, it also seems very probable that many of the children's names in the census documents have been changed.

In 1901, *Helen* was the Superintendent of The *Bridge Of Hope* at: 13,15,17,19 and 21 Ainslie Wood Road, Chingford. She had a staff of Six Matrons, three Teachers, a Dressmaker, a Laundress and four domestic servants. They were looking after 151 girls and 2 boys aged from 2-19 years. 125 of the girls were between the ages of 7-14.



Above: the Chingford Cottage Homes in Ainsley Wood Road

In 1911, there were 114 children and young women living in the houses in Ainslie Wood Road. Of these, there were: 42 children aged 1-10 years old and 72 young people aged 11-22 years old.

In addition to the five Aisley Wood Road Cottage Homes, there were two Cottage Homes in Chingford. Road. These appear on the 1901 Census as 'Miss Steer houses' named 'The Crib' and 'Woodside' but there isn't any other information about the occupants. I believe that 'The Crib' was for the unmarried mothers and their babies and that 'Woodside' was a holiday home for domestic servants. There is an uncharacteristic reticence from *Mary Steer* as to what happened to the babies from the Babies Cottage.

Miss Mary Hannah Steer (1846-1930)

Mary Hannah Steer was born in 1846 at Torpoint, Cornwall. She was the eldest child of five children born to *Joseph* and *Hannah Steer*. Her father was a Congregational Minister who had a number of different ministries, including that of the Congregational church in Tottenham. He retired in the 1890's to live in The Drive, Chingford.

Mary became a committed Christian at a very young age and helped her father in his church work. She never married and remained a deeply religious woman

The Stepney 'Refuge' and Night Shelter



In 1888 she and a number of other upper and middle class Christian women became involved with the creation of a 'night shelter' in Stepney. This was a 'Refuge' for destitute women and vulnerable girls and the team carried out 'rescue work among the so called 'fallen women' and preventative work with girls.

The refuge was very close to the sites of the Jack the Ripper murderers and at that time, panic and hysteria were rife in Stepney.

Above: the Betts Street Night Shelter in Stepney

British Home Children

Mary Steer was a friend of Annie McPhearson and Dr Barnardo. Like them she enthusiastically supported and promoted schemes to send destitute and vulnerable children to Canada where, she believed, they would be able to make a better useful Christian life than would be the case if they stayed in England.

Some of *Miss Steer's* girls became part of the over 100,000 children who



were sent to Canada from Great Britain between 1869 and 1939 during the child emigration movement (Known as British Home Children) and it is estimated that perhaps one third of all Canadians are their descendants.

Left: *British Home Children*

Unfortunately, in many cases, young girls and boys were sent to Canada without the knowledge or permission of their parents. The girls were sent to be domestic labourers on farms and in the towns. Very many of them were sexually, physically and emotionally abused and lost all knowledge of their birth families. In the early 1900's, Canada decided to close its doors to further British Home Children migrants. This wasn't because they believed that the child migrant system was wrong but because they didn't want any more working class workhouse children who they believed were lazy and morally corrupt.

In this situation, *Mary Steer's Bridge of Hope* mission and the other similar children's charitable organisations started sending children to Australia where many suffered the same fate as those who had gone to Canada. In 2011, both the Australian and British Prime Ministers publically apologised to the Australian descendants of 7000 children who were sent to Australia.

The End Of The Chingford Cottage Homes

The end of WWI created a situation where small charitable organisations like the *Bridge Of Hope* came under severe financial pressure. During the war, there were difficulties with the retention of suitable experienced staff that resulted in many children being moved to bigger state funded Children's Homes.

After the war, the large numbers of war widows and injured soldiers without any financial means of support, forced the Government to pass various benefit Acts that provided War Widows and others with pensions and also provided some financial benefits for those who could not work.

This created a situation where many private charitable donors did not now see the need to support financially the child care charitable organisations. The donations supporting the *Bridge Of Hope* became only a fraction of what needed to meet the costs of the work. Many girls who, previously, would have ended up with the *Bridge of Hope* were now cared for by their own families or were placed in state aided institutions.

Sometime after the end of WW1 Mary Steer gave up the Chingford Cottage Homes and acquired a property in Walthamstow to continue her work. (Possibly 5, St Mary Road) she had difficulty in acquiring suitable staff and her private funding sources had dried up.

Helen Maude Steer died at the age of 68 years, in Jun 1929 in Keynsham, Somerset. Her older sister, *Mary Hannah Steer* died at the age of 83 years in Feb 1930 in Brooke House, Upper Clapton, Hackney. At this time the property was used as a private mental asylum.

Postscript 1

If you wish to learn more about *Mary Steer* and the *Bridge of Hope* you can read her own account in her book entitled 'Opals From Sand' that has been republished and is available in digital form on the internet.

http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7171858M/Opals_from_sand

Mary Steer revised the book and added several chapters in a Jubilee edition. This is only available at the British Library. In this book, she expands on her reasons for sending girls to Australia instead of Canada.

Essentially, she is dismayed by the growing diversity of the Canadian population and she touches on her proposal to found a new *Bridge of Hope* Children's Home in Australia that she believes would be racially purer! I think that it is fortuitous that she died before she was able to carry out this development.

Postscript 2

For me, there are two mysteries surrounding *Mary Steer*. The first is that, although she never married, in the 1901 Census, there is a 9 year old child named *Catherine M H Steer* living in her Hackney home. In the Census, her relationship to the 'Head' of the family (*Mary Steer*) is described as 'MELL'. This is an abbreviation I have never met before in a census document and for which I have not been able to find an explanation. In 1911, she is living with *Mary Steer* at 5, St Mary Road, Walthamstow and is described as *Mary's* niece. She never married and died aged 81, in Walthamstow on 1972. I can't find any record of her birth or baptism which gives rise to a query of who were her parents?

Although, it is possible that she was the child of one of *Mary Steer's* siblings, this doesn't explain the fact that there is not a record of her birth as *Catherine Steer*. The probability seems to be that she was an abandoned or voluntarily handed over child of one of the *Bridge of Hope's* so-called 'fallen' women and *Mary Steer* simply changed her name..

The second mystery concerns *Mary Steer's* complete silence on the part that her sister, *Helen*, played in the work of *the Bridge of Hope Mission*. We know from the 1891-1901 and 1911 Censuses that *Helen Steer* was closely involved with running the *Bridge Of Hope*. Yet, in *Mary's Steer's* books she does not make any mention of her sister's work.

An Extract from 'Opals From Sand' by Mary Steer

"I will not dwell upon our methods of dealing with the children when we receive them into our Chingford Homes. We have seven cottages, and room for one hundred and twenty-five children. Several others, owing to peculiar circumstances, are boarded out. The cottages are scattered, though three are next door to one another. The children attend our own school. After various experiments, we have found, on the whole, this is the best plan. We have good schoolrooms, and the air is fresh and healthy.

The neighbours are almost all of the working class. Small shops have sprung up all around us, an advantage and a

disadvantage. We bring the children up quite simply and, as nearly as we can, as they would have been brought up in respectable working-class homes. The life of the children is fairly free; they are sent on errands, and to a certain extent go in and out among the people. The Matrons or Cottage Mothers, are good, earnest, patient Christian women, not too far removed socially from the children if they are to play the part of "mothers" this is a necessity. There is great difficulty in getting the right kind of woman to fill the post. To love and mother twenty children not her own, of different parentage, and very different dispositions, is a hard task for the most talented."

A Personal Journey

Below: some Canadian British Home Children



Although, I was aware of *British Home Children*, the scale and enormity of the forced migration did not really hit me until I attended an International Foster Care Organisation conference in Vancouver in 1997.

It was at seminars at British Columbia University that I started to learn about the numbers of children involved and of the surrounding circumstances. This set me on a learning process that hasn't stopped and led me to assist some of the descendants of the children to find their original families.

Below: the forcible removal of Canadian First Nation children in cattle trucks



It was there too, that I learnt of the similar situation affecting First Nation Canadians (Sometimes called Native Americans, Aboriginal or Indians) where 150,000 children had been removed from their homes and placed in 'Indian'

Residential Schools, an appalling practice that carried on into the 1980's. It was a system that was designed as a total immersion programme. In many of the schools, children were prohibited from (and sometimes punished for) speaking their own languages or practicing their own faiths and the children didn't have contact with their birth families and culture.

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