Louise House, SE23

A girls’ industrial home in Forest Hill, London

What is Louise House?

Louise House is a handsome red brick building in the Domestic Revival style. It is to be found between Forest Hill Pools and Forest Hill Library on Dartmouth Road, Forest Hill, Lewisham, London SE23.

Its original use (from 1890 until about 1935) was as a Girls’ Industrial Home. Run by a local charity, the home was intended to house orphan or destitute girls, many coming from families in the East End of London. The idea was that the home would provide a safe and comfortable environment in a (then) country setting. The girls lived in the home and went to local schools. Part of the work of the home was to train the girls in a suitable trade to ensure their economic survival in adult life. To this end, the building contains a detached block to the rear which housed laundry equipment. The girls learned, among other things, the trade of laundering and domestic service. The laundry activity also provided funds for the home and created a service for local people. The foundation stone for the building was laid in 1890 by Queen Victoria’s daughter, Louise, the Marchioness of Lorne (hence the name). The home, with its twin Boys’ Home (in Perry Rise and demolished around 2000), was perceived as a model of good practice in the late Victorian and Edwardian period.

It was famously visited by the leading Polish paediatrician, teacher and children’s rights exponent Janusz Korczak in 1911. He later said that it was the impact of this visit which made him decide not to have children of his own, but to devote his life to the rights of the child. On his return to his native Poland, Korczak started a number of children’s homes in Warsaw and elsewhere, where he developed his own unique views of the rights of the child. Korczak subsequently perished under the Nazis in Treblinka concentration camp, staying with his children to the end, despite opportunities to escape. Little known in this country, he is very well known in Poland and Israel. As well as many books on education and children’s welfare, he wrote plays and children’s stories and is regarded as one of the inspirations for the Universal Declaration on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in the postwar period.

In 1930 the decision was taken to call Louise House a ‘girls home’ and the “Industrial” part of the name was dropped (and partially removed from the cut brick frieze on the facade). The home closed around 1935. Its use from then until 1939 is unknown, but the building was used as the local Air Raid Protection headquarters during the Second World War. In the postwar period it took on a variety of public and health uses such as family planning and offices for health visitors. Its last use was as Lewisham Social Services offices up until 2005. Since that time it has been disused. In August 2008 Louise House was Listed Grade II by English Heritage.

Famous benefactors

FJ Horniman was the most generous individual benefactor of the industrial homes, and was closely involved with them throughout his time in Forest Hill. He also gave an annual donation sufficient to keep one child at the school for a year. It is understood that his will stipulated that this donation should continue after his death. He also arranged regular visits to his museum for the girls at Louise House, even before it was generally open to the public. Other benefactors included several members of the Tetley Family, also residents of Forest Hill.

Princess Louise yesterday afternoon laid the foundation stone of a home for girls at Forest Hill. Her Royal Highness travelled to London by train from Victoria, accompanied by Lord Lorne, Colonel Collings, and Lord and Lady Lewisham. A detachment of the West Kent Yeomanry supplied a mounted escort, and the Croydon Volunteers formed a guard of honour. Some of the streets were gaily decorated, and the Princess was loudly cheered along the route.

A cutting from The Times of the 18th June 1890 reporting the visit of Princess Louise to Louise House

A drawing of Louise House from around 1890 describing how the first stone was laid by HRH Princess Louise in June 1890 and the home was opened in 1891

A postcard of Dartmouth Road from the late 1890s looking north, showing the Library on the left, then Louise House.

A photograph of Forest Hill Pools from the early 1900’s with Louise House to the left.
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Life in an industrial home

Case Study: Florence Daisy Druce, Ivy Druce and Wilfred Druce

Florence and Ivy are both listed as living at Louise House in the 1901 Census, aged 11 and 8. Wilfred was a resident at Shaftesbury House. They were part of a large family with 13 children living in West Oxfordshire when their mother died in 1899. The records give us the following information of their lives at Louise House:

Minutes (3 Apr 1900): F D Druce To be admitted
Minutes (1 May 1900): D Druce This girl had entered the Home
Minutes (18 Sep 1900): I L Druce To be admitted subject to investigation
Minutes (16 Oct 1900): Ivy Druce This girl had entered the Home Censuses (1901): Daisy Druce, aged 10, born Easham, Oxon, Ivy Druce, aged 8, born Easham, Oxon
Minutes (7 May 1901): W Druce [This case] to stand over
Minutes (2 July 1901): W Druce To be admitted
Minutes (3 Sep 1901): W Druce This boy had entered the home
Minutes (6 May 1902): Health at Girls’ Home The Secretary reported that there had been two cases of Scarletina at the Girls’ Home. Decided to acquaint the Laundry customers of the fact, but that the manner of doing so should be left to the discretion of Miss Sack.

Minutes (3 Jan 1902): Health at Girls’ Home Miss Sack reported that one girl Daisy Druce, had returned to the Home, convalescent, & that the other girls were all well.
Minutes (3 May 1910): Druce, Wilfred Mr Legg to find a situation.
Census (1911): Wilfred is a servant at Perrymount, house of Sophie Ayer.

In the 1901 Census Ivy, Daisy and Wilfred’s recently widowed father was living in Newland Street, Eynsham with his children Evelyn (13), Frederick (12), Wilfred (7), Hubert (6), Florence (4), Noble (3), Gilbert (1) and his sister-in-law, Ada Dore (24).

Ivy Druce, about 1915 when she was matron of St Georges Home, London

Minutes of a general meeting in the Girls’ House on March the 6th 1900
Why children ended up in Industrial Homes

As is shown on the extract below there were a range of reasons why people ended up in Louise House or Shaftesbury House, many of them tragic and related to the death or illness of one or both parents.

1911 Census (right)
Showing 31 people living at Louise House, including 2 staff (both aged 38 and single) and 29 girls. 9 Girls are aged 14 to 16 and listed as in “training for domestic service”. 20 girls are aged between 9 and 14 and are listed as at “school”. Under the heading ‘relationship’ all children are listed on the Census as ‘inmates’.

Case Study: Miss Eleanor Martha King MBE

Eleanor King was born in 1897 as one of five children and was orphaned around the age of 10 years old. She was sent to Louise House with her sister Florence and is listed on the 1911 census (right). It is likely she had a much better education at Louise House than she would have had if her parents had lived.

On leaving Louise House Eleanor went into domestic service. She then went on to study at Birmingham University, travelled extensively and became the progressive headmistress of the Rosemary Street school in Bristol. The school was unusual for its time in allowing the parents to be involved in the school, arranging camping holidays in the countryside for children and their parents. She also ran one of the first multi-cultural nurseries at a time when society was much less tolerant than today.

In 1953 Eleanor was awarded the MBE by HM the Queen in recognition of her outstanding service to the City of Bristol.

Miss King died in 1968 and in 1990 the City of Bristol erected a plaque in her honour on the Old Quaker Friars building in the city, by the site of the school where she worked.

1891 Census
Taken on the 5th April 1891 only 2 weeks after Louise House was officially opened

1901 Census
Note further children are listed on a second page
How the buildings may have been used

The layout of Louise House

Whilst we don’t know quite how Louise House was used in its time as an Industrial Home the arrangement of the rooms does give us clues. The inside of the house is surprisingly spartan and blank given the decorated exterior and includes many original details.

On the first floor it is likely that the three large rooms were dormitories, each for about 10 girls. The two overlooking Dartmouth Road may have been for younger girls as each has a small room next door with a ‘viewing’ window, where a matron would have been able to keep an eye on the girls. The larger room at the back of the house may have been for older girls who needed less supervision.

On the ground floor we know that the block at the rear was used as a laundry where the residents worked and received training. Within the main house itself it is likely that the largest room may have been used for dining and other larger rooms as sitting rooms, maybe for the matron in charge of the house and to receive visitors.

One of the rooms on the ground floor shows signs of having been the kitchen and toward the back of the house it is likely there were bathrooms or washrooms.
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**Timeline**

- **1819**: Sydenham Common enclosed, Vicar’s Field awarded to the Parish
- **1873-1884**: Boys’ Industrial Home, Rojack Road
- **26 March 1874**: Holy Trinity Schools opened
- **1881-1891**: Girls’ Industrial Home, Rojack Road
- **1884-1939**: Boys’ Industrial Home, Shaftesbury House, Perry Rise
- **2 May 1885**: Forest Hill Pools opened by the Earl of Dartmouth
- **21 March 1891**: Louise House opened by C J W Rabbits
- **6 July 1901**: Forest Hill Library opened
- **1911**: Janusz Korczak visited Louise House
- **1930**: The word “Industrial” was removed from the front of Louise House
- **1935**: Louise House closed as a Girls’ Home
- **1939-1945**: The building was used by Air Raid Precautions
- **1946-1965**: London County Council Maternity & Welfare Centre
- **1965-1967**: Borough of Lewisham Maternity & Welfare Centre
- **1968-1970**: Family Planning Clinic
- **1971-2004**: Lewisham Social Services
- **2005**: Louise House closed, windows boarded-up
- **2008**: Louise House Early Years Centre, based in the laundry block, closed

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**Other industrial homes**

Industrial homes developed from the Ragged School movement of the mid-19th century. These schools sought to give children a basic education and sufficient training to earn an honest living. However, it was believed that some children would only prosper if they were removed from the corrupting influence of their home environment; the industrial homes, often established in pleasant locations, provided that refuge; they were intended to be “home” for the children.

The corresponding boys’ home to Louise House was Shaftesbury House in Perry Rise and was run by the same committee. The boys home originally started in two houses on Rojack Road in 1873. By 1881 there were 25 boys in the home and the committee thought this very inefficient so looked for a site for a purpose built home and appointed the same architect, Thomas Aldwinkle to design it. The Earl of Shaftesbury as president of the home laid the foundation stone on the 18th January 1883 and the home opened the following year. It was not uncommon for brothers and sisters to live in Shaftesbury House and Louise House respectively.

The boys’ home continued as Shaftesbury House Boys’ Home until at least 1939. It was demolished in 2000.

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**Shaftesbury House Industrial Home for Boys, Perry Rise, SE23**

**Case Study: Thomas and Ellen Edgerton**

Thomas Edgerton was admitted to the Industrial School as a pupil on 30th April 1888 and on 26 March 1898 was appointed Master Shoemaker at the school after finishing his training there. He resigned in July 1899.

His sister Ellen was at Louise House and was two years older than Thomas. Records show that she was at the school from at least 1886 to 1889.

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**Drainage plan for Louise House**

Drainage plan for Louise House around the time of building showing the house and laundry block and possible building on the yard

**Record of public works for the drainage of Louise House, dated 3rd April 1890**

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The Future

The importance of Louise House

Louise House was listed Grade II by English Heritage in 2008 because it is a rare surviving example of a purpose built industrial home, made all the more important because it is largely intact, both inside and out.

The listing also notes the role of the building as part of a complex of four civic buildings, two of which are by the same architect, Thomas Aldwinckle. These front onto Dartmouth Road and comprise Holy Trinity School, Forest Hill Library, Louise House (all three listed Grade II) and the pools and were all built within 25 years of each other. They shared a common purpose - the welfare of less advantaged people in Forest Hill, Sydenham and beyond. They provided opportunities for education, religious instruction, exercise, cleanliness and training for a trade. Until fairly recently all four buildings were in use for the same, or very similar, purposes as those for which they were intended.

Thomas Aldwinckle (1845-1920) was the principal architect of both the pools and Louise House. Although he built hospitals and workhouses across the south east (including Brook Hospital and the water tower on Shooters Hill and the important Kentish Town baths) he was very much a local architect. He lived in Forest Hill for almost all his working life, firstly at 1 Church Rise, Forest Hill from the mid-1870s until the mid-1880s and then at Saratoga, 62 Dacres Road until about 1908. His house in Dacres Road survives between Hennel Close and Catling Close and was almost certainly designed by him.

What next?

Louise House is owned by Lewisham Council and they have been investigating possible new uses for the building for the last couple of years. In 2009 they commissioned a feasibility study to look at converting the building into housing to help fund replacement swimming pools on the site next door, but this work concluded that there could be little profit from the sale of Louise House. Local residents are also keen to see the site retained in some form of 'public' use if possible because of its location between the Library and the new pools complex.

Proposals for the new Forest Hill Pools now have planning approval and will be open by the end of 2012. These proposals incorporate the retained frontage of the superintendent’s house that formed part of the original pools building, designed by Thomas Aldwinckle in 1885.

In 2009 a group was set up called the ‘Friends of Louise House’ to work with the Council to help find a suitable future use. In April 2010 the Council invited expressions of interest from the local community. A number of ideas have been proposed, including serviced offices run and managed by a development trust and a community arts centre/performance space. Discussions are ongoing but the cost of conserving the building and preparing it for future use are likely to be considerable.

This exhibition has been put together by:
The Forest Hill Society www.foresthillsociety.com
Sydenham Society www.sydenhamsociety.com
Friends of Louise House www.louisehouse.notlong.com

Much of the archive material in this exhibition comes from the Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre, which is located in Lewisham Library

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