

London County Council Children's Department

BEECHHOLME IS A VILLAGE



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As from April 1965 Beechholme was allocated to the
London Borough of Wandsworth

Beechholme is really a village. Set in a long, narrow estate of almost 40 acres it lies between Banstead and Epsom Downs in the County of Surrey. Its main feature is a beautiful beech avenue stretching over 600 yards and bordered on each side by the children's houses, and children have remarked that it has the appearance of a village street. There are playing fields and play areas at each end. Banstead Station is only 10 minutes walk with trains direct to London and the nearest shopping centres, apart from the immediate locality, are at Epsom and Sutton, both about 4 miles distant, reached by a bus service which passes the door.

The community consists of 23 children's houses together with staff houses, library, primary school, nursery play unit, sick bay, administrative building, shopping centre, swimming bath, workshops, hall and perhaps the most significant community building, the Chapel of the Good Shepherd.

Sick children are cared for by a staff of resident nurses under the direction of the L.C.C. Medical Officer of Health and Dr. Karen Parkes who visits daily. There is a weekly dental surgery and a monthly optical clinic. A speech clinic is held twice weekly and our psychiatrist visits every fortnight.

All but one of the children's houses are for mixed families. The largest have 18 children but the majority house about 15; 3 houses have fewer children.

About half the houses have married couples in charge, and in a few of these the housefather is following his own employment outside Beechholme, helping to care for the children in the evenings and at weekends. Child-care staffing is on a ratio of approximately 1 member to every 5 children. In almost all the houses the age range covers the whole field. Our youngest children are under 2 and our oldest 15, 16 and 17. Most houses are fairly well-balanced to contain a quota of under fives together with children of primary and secondary school age and an increasing number of boys and girls in employment.

Children come to Beechholme for a variety of reasons. A great many only anticipate a short period in care while their mothers are in hospital, others come as a result of family evictions, homelessness, the disappearance of one parent or the other and the general break up of the family. Only a very few are orphans.

More than a third come into care through the London Juvenile Courts. These are children who

have encountered some quite serious problem in their lives, the background of which has largely been family inadequacy in some form. The magistrates may have felt that the child was more the victim of circumstances and needed the care of some "fit person," and the Council, from the point of view of the law, becomes the "fit person." Although many children come and go very quickly and the general turnover is quite considerable, there is always a number whose stay tends to be lengthy.

Children of primary age go to a school on the premises run separately by the Education Officer. The Headmaster is Mr. H. J. Hewitt. Older children go to some 40 secondary schools, both in the locality and in London. Some of the children are educationally sub-normal or suffer some other handicap requiring their attendance at day special schools in London; other such children attend boarding special schools returning to Beechholme during school holidays. About 10 children of secondary age attend The Orchard, a remedial centre at Beechholme catering for children who by reason of serious behaviour difficulties cannot take advantage of secondary education. Here they are helped firstly to come to terms with their own problems and secondly to bring up their academic standards to

reasonable requirements. Most of them although not dull are on admission very backward in attainment and almost entirely non-readers. As soon as they are ready they return to school to undertake a normal curriculum.

The leisure time occupation of such a large number of children (over 350 altogether) requires considerable organisation. Although children are encouraged to join clubs and societies outside Beechholme and to go out as often as possible, it is still necessary to provide for a great many within the premises. In this connection there are many organisations such a youth club, pottery, woodwork group, decorators' group, piano classes, dancing classes, handicraft class, printing press, nursery club, a chapel choir, Cubs and Brownies as well as several other organisations arranged specially from time to time.

The wider needs of the staff are not forgotten and there is a great deal of interest in training. Intensive, residential introductory training courses of eight weeks' duration are provided for selected new entrants to the Residential Child Care Service. There are in addition lectures and discussion groups for more experienced staff, Ash House being organised specifically as a staff training centre. The bias

placed upon training and further study is evidence of the need to establish a team of trained and experienced staff with a professional attitude to their work.

About a quarter of the children are of the Roman Catholic faith and are visited by their own priest from the local parish. They either attend St. Anns' Church in Banstead or go to Mass which is said weekly at Beechholme. The remaining children are predominantly Church of England. The chaplain at Beechholme is the Reverend Allan Carey, Vicar of Nork, and he officiates at services in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd. He is assisted from time to time by the Reverend E. S. Allen, Congregational Minister in Banstead who is the Free Church Chaplain. Services take place both on Sunday and during the week, and the Church and the life surrounding it is lively and vital.

The history of Beechholme is a long one. It was opened in July, 1880, and child-care has been carried on without a break ever since. Until 1930 it was the responsibility of a joint Committee of the Boards of Guardians initially in the parishes of St. Mary Abbots in Kensington and St. Luke in Chelsea. From 1916 onwards St. Marylebone became involved until April, 1930, when the London County Council took over. Under the Education

Committee it was treated as a residential school until the passing of the Children Act in 1948 when it became the responsibility of the new Children's Committee of the London County Council. It is now managed by a House Committee which is a sub-committee of the Children's (Western District) Committee.

The original estate was much larger. It farmed a great deal of land to the north and was then a self-contained community even with its own railway siding. It was undoubtedly very isolated both by situation and in the manner in which it was organised. It was, nevertheless, for those days an extremely progressive establishment, for it not only broke away from the barrack system of accommodation by pioneering separate cottages but staffed its houses by means of part-time houseparents, the plumber, the carpenter, the shoe-maker all being housefathers following their own occupation within the community.

To-day the notion of a community is being tempered with a need to integrate ourselves into the life of the locality and to bring the local community into contact with us. This is being gradually achieved in a great many ways including membership of clubs and societies. Small teams of boys and

girls known as Service Groups are farmed from our own Youth Club to carry out commissions of social service among the old and infirm who live in the neighbourhood. Service to others brings its own therapy to those who need to come to terms with their own problems. We believe it results in happier children, better able to take their place in a society which has not usually treated them with conspicuous kindness.

We hold no particular brief for the value of public care. It must be the department's object initially not to receive children into care at all if other and more suitable arrangements can be made. Once a child is received, however, having selected the most suitable form of care, it is our constant endeavour to review the arrangements made for him and to satisfy ourselves that they are as good as possible and to promote everything for his future welfare, including the joining up with his parents and his early return home. For some, boarding out with foster parents will be the best chance of a satisfactory future in the setting of an ordinary home. For others, Beechholme will remain for a rather longer period - and most especially for those with particular handicaps and disturbances. Constant vigilance must go on to satisfy ourselves that we are adopting the best

methods known.

Beechholme is thus a village, a community of children. It is a place, too, where adults can gain great satisfaction and vital experience in the devoted care of those children who for some reason or other cannot live in their own homes. Research and experiment are always welcome in the hopes of a better understanding of the children in our care and an improvement in the quality of the work we do for them. That relationship of quality which ought to link each child with one constant adult is the force without which no progress can be made. In a village of children hope truly does spring eternal.



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