



The Haven in Yateley

by Valerie Kerslake

Since the Children Act of 1975, which allowed adult adopted children access to their original birth certificates, enabling them to try to find their birth mothers if they wished, there has been a small but steady flow of enquiries to Yateley from people who have learnt that they were born there. Enquiries are usually addressed to the Town Council, but some people actually come to the town with the intention of tracing their roots or seeing the house in which they were born, or even finding old photographs of it. Often they ask at the police station but sometimes they just walk around Yateley hoping to find the right house. One man was discovered asking for directions to The Haven in the hope of finding information about a sibling born there, but nobody had even heard of it. Eventually he struck lucky, only to learn that the Home no longer existed and the building had long been demolished.

It is hoped that this short account of The Haven will prevent a small slice of Yateley's history from altogether vanishing from memory, and that it may also be of help and interest to those with more personal associations with the Home.

(The Haven in Yateley should not be confused with a mother and baby home with the same name in Sutton, Surrey. That was run by the organisation called Wel-care which was supported by churches of all denominations.)

The house that was to become The Haven was bought by the Baptist Union in January 1945, and then rented to the Baptist Women's League. They had been increasingly concerned at the lack of help available for the many unmarried young women who were finding themselves pregnant, often as a result of separation and family break up during the war years. The idea of opening a home for mothers and babies had been under discussion with the Baptist Union since early 1943. Such an undertaking was new to the Women's League and the many problems were only slowly overcome; wartime shortages and rationing made it no easier. There were consultations with the Ministry of Health which took many months, and advice was sought from matrons of similar homes. The President of the Baptist Women's League spent her year of office visiting Baptist churches to explain the great need for such a Home to the women members. Their sympathy and prayers were enlisted and the money began to come in.

The final and apparently insuperable difficulty was discovering a suitable property, but at last a large

house in Vigo Lane on the edge of Yateley was found which seemed ideal, and its situation out in the countryside would help bring tranquillity to distressed and anxious girls. The term 'countryside' may seem odd today when Yateley's population is around 22,000 and housing estates line each side of Vigo Lane as far as the Anchor pub. But in 1945 the road was a real country lane winding up the hill between fields. At the bottom were two small cottages on the Yateley Hall estate, half-way up a single wooden bungalow, and at the top were a few cottages clustered beside the Anchor. Beyond it Yateley Common began. Otherwise there was only Kerala - about to become The Haven - on the right near the top of the road. Monteagle Lane ran along its south-west boundary, and to the north-west was West End Farm on whose land Yateley School and Westfields School have been built.

The war had ended in 1945 and Yateley was gradually returning to normal after its wartime invasion by several thousand service men stationed at the fighter/bomber station RAF Hartford Bridge - renamed Blackbushe Airport after the war. The huts that had been erected on almost every vacant space as quarters for officers and airmen were being demolished. Only a few dozen Nissen huts opposite The Cricketers on Cricket Hill remained and they were at once occupied by squatters. Hartley Wintney Rural District Council quickly bought the huts and let them as council houses until the Manor Park estate had been built some three years later. At the time of the 1951 census the population of Yateley with Darby Green was still only just over 3000.

The Haven, as it was now to be known, had been built in the early years of the twentieth century as a substantial family house, with gables, verandah, balconies and very extensive grounds, as well as staff cottages and additional land. It was first named Eleven Acres, then, briefly, The Mount. In 1912 the property was sold to Colonel A.W. Macrae, CIE, who renamed it Kerala after the province in India where he served in the Indian Army. The whole estate was broken up and sold in 1935 after the deaths of both Colonel and Mrs Macrae, with the main house and eleven acres of grounds going as one lot, and the cottages for chauffeur and gardener sold separately. During part of the Second World War the house was used as a convalescent home for RAF Officers, and the outstandingly beautiful gardens became neglected and overgrown, as happened with many fine gardens during the war. By the time it was acquired by the Baptist Union the grounds had dwindled to three acres of unkempt field, over which Pastor Stockbridge, minister of the Baptist Church on Cricket Hill, battled to reclaim a degree of order, while for the next six months the Committee of the Home had the house adapted, decorated, equipped and furnished for its new use. Volunteers joined the team, and individual Baptist churches were invited to supply particular needs.

While this was going on, two dedicated Baptists, both qualified nurses and midwives working at Plaistow Maternity Hospital in London, came to hear of the plans and thought this might be the new sphere of service they were seeking, with possibilities for missionary work at the same time. Both had been brought up in the Church of England, but during the war few Anglican churches managed to black-out their high windows for evening services, so the two nurses went to a Baptist church and remained with the Baptists. They were Katherine Finney and Ruby Burt and they were to become matron and sister respectively. Other staff were recruited, and the first three girls arrived in August 1945.

As the Home became known, applications came in from all over the country, through churches, doctors

or social workers, and, during the forties and fifties especially, through the Forces Help Society. In the early years there were a great many officers from the WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service); their parents would know nothing of the baby and just suppose their daughter had been posted somewhere else. Girls were usually in their late teens or early twenties, and they came from as far away as Scotland and Ireland, the intention being that here no friend or neighbour could recognise them and become aware of their condition. It will be hard for younger people today to have any idea of the immense and lasting shame of having a child outside marriage forty or fifty years ago. The whole family was deeply disgraced. Parents might feel they had to resign from church or other public duties, and time did not always bring forgiveness. Even in districts where illegitimacy was not uncommon the respectability of the family was tarnished.

Some of the girls were from very well-to-do families for whom the fees were no problem. Others paid what they could; a church, social services or other organisation behind them might contribute. The Baptist Union itself would finance a girl who had nothing; no one was turned away for lack of money, nor did religion or lack of it matter. One girl, however, was sent off smartly when it was discovered that she was expecting her second baby - only one mistake was allowed, especially when many were refused through lack of space.

By 1950 the question of expansion came up, and the Baptist Union eventually agreed that a staff house should be built in the grounds which would release accommodation in the main house for another five girls and bring the number who could be cared for at one time to about 23. As with the original house, very generous donations were made by committed individual Baptists to furnish and equip the new building. More nursing staff were taken on, all convinced Christians. For a while there was a girl gardener and a cook, both former residents who had kept their babies but had nowhere to go. A nurse also stayed on to work after having had a baby there.

Matron was said to have been very strict but, apart from the curriculum, The Haven sounds much like many a girls' boarding school, while the normal practices at maternity homes of the time (where matrons also tended to be strict) were followed here too. The staff nevertheless aimed for a relaxed, friendly, family atmosphere, fostered by their Christian beliefs. The girls were admitted eight weeks or more before their babies were due, by which time their expanding figures were difficult to conceal. During this period it was hoped they would become physically and mentally prepared for the birth and would have time to get to know the staff. They remained for about six weeks after the birth, allowing them time to decide about their futures. One nineteen-year-old said it was an enormous relief to be there; they no longer had to pretend, they were all in the same boat - and they had a lot of fun.

At times, though, they must all have felt far less cheerful, aware always of the anger or sorrow of their shocked parents, often of being abandoned by the boy they loved, and most of them knowing too that at the end of it all their baby would have to be given away. One fourteen-year-old girl was said to have had little idea of what was going on - children were less sophisticated then and there was almost nothing in the way of sex education. Many suffered from homesickness or simply found it extraordinarily difficult to accept the restrictions of life in a community, particularly one they had never chosen to join. Being allowed, for example, only six inches of bath water seems to have been considered quite a hardship,

while at least one girl thought it an affront that they might use the front door only on the day they arrived and the day they left.

Mornings were busy. At the end of breakfast, where they sat at two long tables in the panelled dining-room, there were family prayers. Then breakfast had to be washed up and their bedrooms - there were four or five girls to each room - tidied. After that was the housework - often a cause of lasting resentment, though it was customary at other mother and baby homes too. All the cleaning was carried out by the girls, including washing and polishing the floors on hands and knees - a valuable ante-natal exercise though not always performed with a scrubbing brush. Those who had not had experience of housework may have found it hard but it no doubt helped to keep them fit, while visitors recalled how spotless the house was. Some girls would help in the laundry or the kitchen where 'Cookie' was always a favourite. If there was time left before lunch they might be asked to pick fruit in the garden, to be eaten that day or preserved for the winter.

After lunch they rested and were then sent out for a walk until tea at four o'clock, sometimes taking Sister Burt's dog Rex with them. They might go down to the village to do a little shopping - perhaps wool for knitting baby clothes, or cakes for the occasional secret midnight feast held as a farewell party for a girl about to leave. They would collect their allowances at the post office which was then in the wooden bungalow next to the Dog & Partridge and sold a huge assortment of goods. Matron always urged them to be careful how they behaved, for the village was all too ready to blame them for any trouble - jostling in the small shops was one complaint for they all went in together and each took up space for two. On other days they would go up to Yateley Common, having been warned to keep away from any gypsies - just as some of the village girls were told to keep away from The Haven. Tea when they returned was in their own sitting room which had a radio, piano, hair-dryer and shelves of games and books, and often the resident cat. There was also a record player in the hall and clay modelling materials used at a weekly class.

On Sundays a few girls might wish to go to the parish church but the rest were expected to walk two by two through the lanes to attend the Baptist church on Cricket Hill. They would have gone down Vigo Lane and up Handford Lane, about a mile each way, and even if they were not particularly keen on the service it was often seen as a welcome outing. Even the girl who returned home soaking wet after falling into the baptismal pool in the aisle - uncovered that morning for a baptism - changed and hurried back for the remainder of the service. They sat together at the back of the church and must have looked and felt conspicuous; some believed the pastor looked at them every time he mentioned the word 'sin'. Nevertheless at least one of the pastors and his wife welcomed them home to tea and cakes one afternoon each week.

On Sunday afternoons there was a compulsory Bible class taken by Matron, unless a visiting minister or missionary was handy. This took place in the small chapel in the grounds, previously a brick-built garden shed with two adjoining outhouses. Their conversion and furnishing were paid for by the Baptist women of Wales. The chapel was open at all times for anyone who wished for a time of quietness or prayer, and a communion service was held there several times a year. When there was a Sunday evening

service the lusty singing could be heard well beyond The Haven's boundaries.

Collectively the girls were a familiar sight when they walked down to the shops in the afternoons, but because of their transitory stay in Yateley, and living three-quarters of a mile out of the village, they made few individual contacts locally, and in any case were well aware that a good many villagers deplored their being there at all, some even crossing the road when Haven girls approached. As time passed however, greater tolerance and sympathy seem to have been shown; a girl there in the late 1960s said they never met anything but friendliness when a group of them walked down to the post office, and were never made to feel like 'scarlet women'. From the beginning too, there were plenty of people in Yateley who actively contributed to the well-being of the Home and its residents. One volunteer cooked on Saturday mornings; a former teacher gave lessons to a few of the youngest girls; mothers would pass on outgrown baby clothes; and nurses amongst the Baptist congregation would help out at the Home. Small groups of girls would be asked out to tea where their hostess might delight them with egg and chips - not on the menu at The Haven where Matron was the caterer.

There were a good many visitors. Some of the girls with families not too far away would receive regular or occasional visits, though travelling was not easy. There were buses, and bicycles covered a lot of ground, for most households in the forties and fifties did not have a car. In any case petrol was rationed until 1950. One father-to-be turned up on a borrowed scooter. Matron was particularly glad if there was a chance to meet a young father, though in this case he was in a lot of trouble when discovered to have balanced his girlfriend on the back of the scooter and taken her out to tea in Camberley. Social workers too would come to see how things were going. Sometimes an ex-resident who had kept her baby would return to show off the child to the staff who had brought it into the world, or she would bring and introduce her new husband and perhaps another baby.

Official visitors too were numerous. The Haven House Committee of the Baptist Women's League, who were always in close touch with all that went on at the Home, usually met there once a month, as did the Case Committee of the Baptist Union Adoption Society. After a few years and with the help of generous gifts for the purpose, the gardens were recovered from the wild and laid out again, and the wide lawns, rhododendrons, lily pond and many unusual trees evidently made it an attractive meeting place for various Baptist Union committees. Small parties of women from the Baptist churches also came twice a week in the summer to learn about The Haven at first hand, thus enabling them to pray more intelligently for the work they were supporting. These small groups were thought to be more worthwhile than the series of very large garden parties which had been held in the early years.

The day of the birth would come at last for each of the girls, and she would go upstairs to the labour room with which she was probably already familiar - if only through washing the floor and cleaning the windows. Dr John Price, who was in practice locally and made regular visits to the Home, was called in if there were complications. Afterwards, when a thanksgiving prayer had been said and the baby wrapped up in its crib in the nursery, the mother was wheeled along to the lying-in room where she remained in bed for seven days - not so much as a toe was allowed to brush the floor. She was expected to eat keenly and drink large quantities of water, and was told to write to her parents at once to tell them of the baby's birth. One wonders how this went down with those who had thrown their daughter out of

the house. Sadly there was, of course, no new father to share the pleasure of the baby's arrival, nor indeed was it likely that any member of the family was glad to know it had been born, as the young mother was all too aware. Frequent visits from her companions at The Haven, however, were comforting and entertaining.

The new babies were kept in the nursery all night so as not to disturb the mothers, and during the day they were brought out only at feeding times. This was quite usual in maternity homes. In those days nobody talked about 'bonding', and in any case here the aim was just the opposite. Even when the mother was up and about again, and the baby in a pram in the garden for most of the day, time with her baby was limited to feeding, with a bottle taking her place after three or four weeks. More contact would only encourage the mothers to grow fonder of their babies, and they neither changed nor bathed them. Photographing the child was also forbidden, though some contrived to do so.

Nearly all the babies were adopted, the proportion remaining roughly the same throughout the twenty-five year life of the Home. There was a good deal of pressure from Matron and Sister Burt for the girls to allow adoption, and it was clearly all too easy to list the many good reasons for doing so; generally the girls felt they simply had no choice. Many later complained that no one told them of the benefits they might have claimed. In the 1960s National Assistance would have been 32 shillings (£1.60) a week and 17 shillings (85 pence) for the baby, not very much even then. The most obvious pressures were from families. The parents of most of the girls insisted upon adoption. Some had told their daughter that the baby was never to enter their house, or even that the daughter herself should not, for fear of corrupting her brothers and sisters who, astonishingly, sometimes never learnt about their sister's pregnancy. A few parents were more conciliatory but simply lacked the space to take the baby and its mother into their home; if they did squeeze them in it tended to lead to rows and discord. For the few young mothers who insisted on keeping their babies the difficulties were immense. Where to live was the first problem; there was a housing shortage for many years after the war and finding accommodation for one was hard, let alone with a baby as well. The mother might have to look for a job to make ends meet which would mean finding a nursery place or paying for a child-minder. On top of everything, the stigma attached to having an illegitimate baby in those days would mean that she and her child were certain to suffer a degree of ostracism.

All this must have been pointed out but nevertheless some girls did keep their babies. It was sometimes a last minute change of mind; one girl knew from the moment she saw her little daughter that she could never let her go. Another filled in all the adoption papers but could not bring herself to write the final signature - a moment of agonising heartbreak for everyone faced with it. She succeeded in bringing up her child although with many difficulties but, like today, there will have been others who eventually put their babies into care, overwhelmed by the responsibilities and lonely struggle of caring single-handed for the child. Many of the girls who gave up their babies, however, even years later regretted that they did not keep them, and though often happily married with more children say they have never forgotten their first one. They remember them particularly on birthdays, and wonder how they have done in life, whether they have married and had children themselves, or whether they are alive at all.

When The Haven opened in 1945, adoptions were arranged through two independent adoption societies

or through Hampshire County Council, but after three years and increasing numbers of babies for adoption the Baptist Union formed their own Adoption Society, with a small Case Committee who ensured that babies went to suitable and genuinely Christian homes. Matron seems to have been the pivotal member. It was she - described as rather short, with a pleasant face and short white hair under her cap - whom adopting parents first met; she who took enormous pains in trying to match the baby with the adopters for both background and appearance; and she who told them how the pregnancy had occurred. She would also advise the adopting parents to put their name down for a second child in, say, two years' time if that was what they wanted, and she was always available if they telephoned for advice.

When the baby was three weeks old, the proposed adopters came to see it, and they returned to take it away at six weeks. Matron would put the baby in the arms of the adopting mother, saying that if she did not at once feel happy then this baby was not for her and no more would be said. This moment of joy was sometimes mixed with grief. One adopting mother wept for the natural mother whose baby she was taking, and had to be reassured by Matron that this was the very best thing for both mother and baby.

The girls watched out for each other and always knew whose baby was being taken to Matron's office, but at no time did the natural mothers meet the adopters, though of course they longed to do so. The natural mother, feeling anguished and bereaved, usually left the Home the day before the adopting parents came. If she was still there she would indeed try to see her baby's new parents, sometimes creeping into the kitchen in the hope of getting a glimpse through the window.

The secrecy surrounding adoption stemmed from the first Adoption Act of 1926, when it was intended to protect the two parties from outside interests, not to conceal one from the other. Over the years this evolved into an absolute secrecy that was still accepted in the Adoption Act of 1958, it being thought best for all concerned that the adopted child's break with his birth family should be total. There had nevertheless been talk for several years in favour of access to birth records, but it was only after the 1975 Children Act that adopted children over eighteen in England and Wales were allowed such access. An additional clause to the Act required those adopted before 1975 to have compulsory counselling before access was permitted. The particular purpose of this was that parents and adopters before that date had every reason to believe that the adopted children would never be able to find out their original names, and unexpected enquiries could well cause alarm and distress to both the natural parents and the adopters and their families.

In 1958 the House Committee decided to extend the Staff House, making space in the main house for another two girls - twenty-five in all. After that there was no more building although there continued to be more applications than could be accepted. The girls were getting younger and younger; often more than half would be under seventeen, and during the next few years thirteen and fourteen year olds were not unusual.

The 1960s brought changes, starting with the main drainage that came to Yateley in 1962. It was warmly welcomed at The Haven, where the lack of it with so large a household was found to be one of the major problems of living in the country. Before main drainage arrived a large house like The Haven would

have had a septic tank. For small and older houses a cesspit would have been more usual, and the contents might be allowed to sink into the soil or it would be pumped out into a tanker (a rather smelly process) and spread over the fields as fertiliser. With a septic tank the sewage runs into a closed tank below ground level where it is broken up by bacteria. It is then filtered through layers of clinker, sand and perforated tiles and should emerge as a crystal clear stream that runs down to the nearest ditch or waterway. When working well a septic tank is trouble-free and extremely efficient, but all too often they do not work well and have to be pumped out like the cesspits.

Sister Burt took over from Matron Finney who retired in the early 1960s and went to Australia for some years, unaware that The Haven was not to continue very long afterwards. Towards the end of the decade the number of applications fell so rapidly that the need for the Home had almost vanished, and in 1969 it was closed, with just a few girls in the care of local authorities lingering on into 1970. It was not a sudden moral revolution that brought about this reversal, nor the legalising of abortion in 1967, but the new availability of The Pill which until 1968 could be prescribed only to married women. But the tolerant and liberal attitude to illegitimate children that was to become widespread over the next few decades had hardly begun and most babies in the late sixties were still being adopted.

Soon afterwards the property was bought by a developer and the house was demolished, like so many of Yateley's large houses. The estate called Greenhaven which replaced it includes a bungalow built for The Haven's cook a year or two before it closed, where there is still a garden seat in memory of Gwendoline Tanner who was very much involved in setting up and running the Home. Beyond that there remains only the high green hedge that was at the end of the old drive.

Former residents of The Haven remember the fine house with its oak panelling and beautiful gardens. If they can ignore the unhappy circumstances that caused them to be there at all, most say it was not such a bad place and that they were well looked after. During its twenty five years of existence just over 1760 babies were born there. Two mothers died, from causes not directly related to childbirth. One hears of homes for unmarried mothers at that time with deliberately harsh and punitive regimes, but compassion in both intention and practice seems to have prevailed at The Haven.

I have drawn freely from 'The Haven Story', the booklet written by Sister Ruby Burt in the early 1960s and published by the Baptist Union and have also had the opportunity to talk with her. Information on adoption was provided by the National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and Parents (NORCAP), 112 Church Road, Wheatley, Oxfordshire OX33 1LU. Of the many hundreds of mothers who gave birth at The Haven, I have been in touch with only a handful, and am most grateful to them for sharing some of their inevitably mixed memories.

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