

## The Abbey Home 1900-1956

By Joe Scott, January 2004

In 1890 Edward Johnson, JP, of Staveley died, and so did his wife Sarah, leaving their elegant house, the Abbey, and extensive local lands to their sons and daughters. But Staveley village was a place of busy bobbin mills and crowded terraced housing and the next generation of Johnsons preferred not to live in the middle of it, so they put the Abbey up for sale. In 1899 the Poor Law Guardians bought it and until 1956 it was the Abbey Children's Home.

In the 1890's the Kendal Board of Guardians looked after poor people in an area stretching from Grasmere to Kirkby Lonsdale and from Kentmere to Milnthorpe. They paid a few shillings a week to those who were too old or too sick to work, but able-bodied poor people had to go into the workhouse, where they did unpleasant jobs. The accepted wisdom was that paying benefit to people who could work was bound to encourage idleness. There were three workhouses, on Windermere Rd in Kendal, at Milnthorpe and at Kirkby Lonsdale. Conditions in them were kept harsh enough to encourage the inmates to leave as soon as they could and get an honest job. Women paupers were normally sent to Milnthorpe where there was a lying-in ward, but these "fallen women" would obviously be a bad influence on their growing children. In 1896 the Guardians resolved that "pauper children ought to be kept in a different establishment from the adult paupers"<sup>1</sup> If the Board was to take these children away from their mothers they would have to build or buy an orphanage, so they bought the Abbey for the "small sum" of £1500<sup>2</sup>.

They appointed a staff of five; a superintendent, Mr Caton, a matron, Mrs Caton and three servants, and in May 1900 the children moved in. In 1907 there were 37 of them - 31 boys and six girls, the youngest aged three and the oldest fourteen.

Conditions in the Abbey were good by the standards of the time. We have a very full report from the 1909<sup>2</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws. All but the youngest six children had beds of their own; there were baths, one for the boys, one for the girls, with hot and cold water; there were water closets, modern conveniences not to be found in average working class houses of the time. There was no mains water supply in Staveley till 1926, but in the

Abbey the boys pumped water up into a tank on the roof. The food was largely bread and butter, but there was meat or stew for dinner, a lot of milk, and jam for tea on Saturdays. The inspector's most serious criticism of conditions in the Abbey is that no toothbrushes were provided and there was only one hairbrush for the boys and one for the girls. Mr Caton instructed the boys in gardening, joinery and painting.

*When they leave the institution they get employment as gardeners, farm servants, plasterers etc... The home feeling which attaches to the institution is indicated by many of the children who go out to work coming back to visit on holidays.*

The inspector's harshest comments were about the children themselves.

*I saw all the children. I received the general impression that too many of them belonged to a bad stock and had been badly brought up... Some are nail-biters, others keep their nails very dirty and some boys use their jacket cuffs in substitution for handkerchiefs. I interviewed the teacher at the day school where they all attend... On the whole they are dull and rather backward, and certain of them are mischievous and unreliable. They tend to untruthfulness and stone throwing. In willpower they are defective. ... While four fifths of the children are below the physical and mental standard of the school, yet they include the smartest boy in it.*

Abbey children tend to appear in the logbook of Staveley School<sup>3</sup> only when they caused trouble.

*18<sup>th</sup> Jan 1926. John King, class II, a boy from the Abbey was punished (two strokes on the hand) for careless work. On returning to his seat he was insolent to the teacher, Miss Barnes, who sent him back for further punishment (5 strokes on the seat) at 11.55. At 1.15 that day he had not turned up and it was understood that he had come part of the way to school and then left his companions, proceeding in the direction of Kentmere. The Headmaster set out to look for him, but seeing nothing at 1.30 informed the Master of the Abbey of the suspected truancy.*

*19<sup>th</sup> Jan. King found by the police in Kendal. Back to school in the afternoon.*

*4<sup>th</sup> Oct 1926 All Abbey girls were found to have unclean heads.*

The memories of local people told much the same story: **Eric Ivinson**, who was born in 1904 recorded in 1983, <sup>4</sup>

*They had a crowd of kids at school from the Abbey and if you sat next to one of those for long you had to have your hair combed at night – the nits! It was a dirty place. It got better as it went on. They used to have some real wild tartars at the Abbey.*

Most of our other evidence for conditions in the Abbey Home during the half century of its existence comes from the memories of former inmates.

**Eleanor Johnson** was born 1916 and was in the Abbey from 1921-1930. Her memories were recorded by her daughter, Marion Nekouziad, combined with those of other former Abbey children whom Mrs Nekouziad contacted.<sup>5</sup>

*The children were required to perform many tasks in the Home. The boys were responsible for filling up the kitchen water tank, using the pump that was housed in a separate building in the yard, as well as tending the garden. It was their job to mow the lawn and look after the vegetable plot etc. The girls were responsible for cleaning the kitchen range and the kitchen, and the bigger girls had to help with the washing. Windows had to be cleaned, stairs and floors had to be scrubbed and polished, shoes had to be cleaned and mending had to be done. The cleaning and sewing was done by both girls and boys and if one of the children failed to do their cleaning properly they were made to start all over again. When the work was done the children were allowed to play outside, but they were forbidden from playing with the village children and the village children were never allowed inside the Home.*

*The children often did not get enough to eat and, if they got the chance, the boys would take some potatoes from the cellar and then sneak into the kitchen to cook them when the staff weren't looking. If they were caught, however, they received beating. Apparently one day there was a fire in the Bobbin Mill and two of the boys climbed over the wall in Back Lane to get a closer look. When they got back to the Home they were punished with a*

*beating and they had to miss breakfast the next day. The children were often punished for minor wrong-doings and the officers thought nothing of boxing a child round the head for the slightest reason. Beatings, usually with a strap or cane were always carried out in the Master and Matron's office.*

*On Saturdays, after the children had completed their chores they were taken on walks, two-by-two, accompanied by one of the ladies from the village. The younger children received one penny pocket money a week and the older children two pennies a week. They all had to go together to the village shop to spend their money – needless to say this was usually spent on sweets.*

*The children had no belongings of their own. They shared hairbrushes and combs. They each had one pair of shoes, often ill-fitting. They had no books or toys to play with and they were not allowed to socialise with the village children unless it was a school or church event. The children had to conform to many unreasonable rules and regulations.*

*Needless to say there were many problem children in the Home. Captain Robinson, the Headmaster of Staveley School was very concerned about the children and their welfare.*

*Every summer the children were taken to Silecroft on a camping holiday. Records show that on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1927 they were taken to Grasmere for their annual treat. The trip concluded with races and tea. On 16<sup>th</sup> July 1927 all the children and staff went to Lake Windermere for the day. Annual treats were usually organised and paid for by the local residents.*

*Records show that Christmas Day lunch in 1921 consisted of roast beef, vegetables, potatoes and Christmas pudding. After lunch Father Christmas handed out a toy to each child together with an apple and an orange. Christmas Tea consisted of cakes, mince pies, Christmas cake and crackers. Most of the food and presents were donated by the residents of Staveley.*

*The children left the Abbey Home at the age of 14, the girls going into service and the boys usually into farm work. When my mother left the Abbey she went into service as a nannie*

*looking after Captain Robinson's three children. She was only told where she was going by the Master of the Home as she walked up the road to Captain Robinson's house. She received a weekly wage of 5/-, and she worked for the Robinson family for 3 or 4 years. My mother was treated very well by them and was looked upon as one of the family.*

**John Akister**, born 1937, was in the Abbey from 1941-1952. The following is from an account of his memories sent to the Society in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

*My first memories after leaving the nursery when I was five, and joining the rest of the boys in the mainstream of the home, was being forced to swing hand-over-hand along the top of some built-in cupboards in the day room while one of the bigger boys continuously hit me with a cane across the legs buttocks and back. Another vivid memory was associated with the cellars under the main building. After first scaring the life out of us younger children about the awful things that lived in the cellars, the older boys would wait until the cellars became flooded, which they did periodically to the depth of about a foot. I was forced into a wicker laundry basket and the lid closed and fastened and then carried to the top of the stone steps. The cellar light would have been switched off and I was informed where I was and that I was to be thrown to the creatures who lived in the cellar. The basket was then rolled down the steps. The effect on a five-year-old was terrifying!*

*It was not always like that and there were times when we were happy but never carefree. Even in the most innocent of pastimes older boys or male officers would capriciously intervene and destroy that happiness just to prove their power to do so. The few havens of peace away from the Abbey were therefore treasured. Staveley School and later Windermere Grammar School, St James's Church on a Sunday morning and Saturday afternoons watching Staveley United soccer team on the Rec.*

*The Staveley School was a real joy to attend. I think we caused the teachers a lot of heartache as the release from the restraints and pains of the Abbey Home made us less manageable than the average village child.*

*Also any punishment we received would always be fair and controlled and therefore held little fear for us. Every Sunday afternoon we spent walking in the countryside around the village. Because food rationing was still in place during my years at the Abbey our Sunday walks turned into scavenger hunts for various nuts, fruits and vegetables in season. Apple "warbling", as it was known, was very popular, with the added excitement of a chase by an outraged owner.*

*We used to swim in the River Kent just above the weir and the mill. Most of us couldn't swim but we used to run down the bank and dive in and glide across a deep hole in the river to the other side. In the winter when there was snow on the ground we used to go sledging on Taylor's field adjacent to the School.*

**Conrad Macnamara** was in the Abbey from 1941-1956 when it closed. His memories, taped in 1997, include the following.<sup>7</sup>

*Well, I didn't like it, I hated it, I thought it was horrendous. My brother and one lad called Gordon Bousfield and another one called Mickie Bresling, absconded, I think they actually went to Blackpool. They tied all the sheets together and got out of the bedroom window on the top storey, and on that occasion, they were brought into the dining room in front of everybody and spread-eagled across tables but the girls were all sent out and they had, to my recollection, I reckon they had 20 or 30 strokes each, and there was marks on their backsides like stripes, black and blue.*

*There was a hierarchy where the little lads got bullied by the big lads - things like locking you in wicker baskets and chucking you down the cellar. That happened on lots of occasions with me. And also another trick was to unscrew the electric cover off the switch and make you stand in line and the first one would hold a poker and you'd all hold hands and you touched the live terminals and that would then go right down the line and the last one would have his hand in a bowl of water, which would make it even worse.*

*In the summer months we used to go down the village and go down the beck, or the river, behind the football ground and go swimming there - that was a happy time. Oh yes, we were*



*Playing in the Abbey yard, 1954. photo by Mr Jones, Abbey Master 1949-56*

*allowed to do that and I think we had to go down there with one of the officers - I think we called them - and he'd supervise you while you were down there for maybe an hour or two hours and you'd be able to swim or paddle or whatever. Sometimes we were allowed to play football with the local kids. And we'd have an Abbey team, used to play against them.. We beat them on a number of occasions. As well as having good lads in the village there were a lot of them used to not care for us very much, used to call us "bastards" and things like that, and [say]we were no good. [But] I had a lot of friends in the village so that was OK like.*

*We used to have a song and it went something like :-*

*We are some of the Abbey lads. We are some of the boys.  
We know our manners. We claim our tanners.  
We are respected wherever we go.  
As we march up and down the old back lane,  
Doors and windows open wide.  
When you hear that copper shout,  
"Put that blinking woodbine out!  
We are the Abbey lads".*

*We used to sing that and I think when the village lads heard that it used to*

*Abbey Children dressed for Church, 1954. Photo by Mr Jones, Abbey Master 1949-56*



*put the fear of God into them. To take one of us on, they'd take the lot of us on. There was a bit of a stigma, but not that much I don't think, The village kids were good with us really. Well I thought they were anyway.*

The Master's photos<sup>8</sup> emphasise attractive aspects of the Abbey regime, just as the old people's memories emphasise the bad aspects. But there is other evidence that the system became more humane over the years. In 1929 care of the poor was taken over by County Councils from the Poor Law Guardians, and in the 1940s new systems of Family Allowances, National Insurance and

National Assistance were set up. In 1951 the Abbey was paying £3.3s.4d a term for music lessons for each of four boys, and pocket money was set at 9d. a week for children agd 5-10 and 1s.3d a week for those over 10. Summer holiday pocket money in 1952 was 10 shillings for those under 11 and 12s 6d for those over.<sup>9</sup>

Edwin Brockbank of Staveley Woodturning Company was a County Councillor and an active Chairman of the Abbey Sub-Committee. In a speech to the County Council in 1952 he showed his high opinion of the care provided there.<sup>10</sup>

*The charge is made that the Abbey Home is institutional. I contend that there is nothing institutional about it. It is a very happy home and I believe the children are happy there. There are only just over 30 of them of both sexes and all ages from 5 to 15 and to me they seem to knit together in the greatest*

*contentment. Go in and see them at 5-30 having tea together, Spend Christmas Day with them. I have done it for years – long before I was officially connected with the Home. We do not run it on institutional lines. The children meet with other children. They attend the ordinary schools – Windermere Grammar, the girls' Modern and the local school. They attend local functions and affairs.*

*I firmly believe that with their tragic backgrounds and battered lives they feel a security, confidence and happiness in numbers. When you are with and amongst these children it is fun and well worth while. No-one can spend time amongst them without getting an affection and great pity for them and a longing to help them. They get themselves into your heart.*

It was the improved welfare provision of the post-war period that led to the closure of the Abbey Home. The National Assistance Act of 1948 gave County Social Services the duty to provide care for the elderly and infirm so they badly needed an old people's home. At the same time they were helping unmarried mothers to keep their families together and so had less and less need for a children's home.

In 1949 the County Welfare Committee reported,

*The needs for another hostel for elderly women in the South Westmorland area are becoming increasingly necessary to meet the needs of those living in rooms or in their own homes and no longer able to look after themselves.*

In the same year the Abbey Sub-Committee resolved,

*Based on reports received on the Home and the experience gained by this Committee, the Abbey Home is not suitable for the purposes for which it is now used.*

It took some time to organise the change. There were still 44 children in the Abbey in 1949, 31 in 1952, 23 in 1955 and 8 in January 1956. In 1956 the County Welfare Committee agreed to spend £5,500 to adapt the Abbey as a home for 30 men and women, and after the children's summer holiday camp near Dublin the Abbey Home was finally closed and the eight remaining children moved to a house in Ambleside.<sup>11</sup>

## Sources

1. Minutes of the Kendal Poor Law Board, WSPUK/27. Kendal Record Office (KRO)
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3. Log Book in KRO
4. Tape recording in possession of the Society
5. Westmorland Gazette 15/11/1996 article by Marion Nekouzad
6. Typescript sent to the Society by Hon. John Akister of New South Wales 1993
7. Tape recording in possession of the Society
8. Photographic collection of the Society
9. County Council Minutes KRO
10. Brockbank family records
11. County Council Minutes KRO