

The Duchess of Sutherland and her Cripples' Guild: an Enterprise of Education, Hope, and Comfort.



Figure 1: *The Duchess of Sutherland*

The Duchess of Sutherland was the first owner of ‘St Serf’s House’ the current Main House of Ibstock Place School, built in the early 1900s. She purchased this house in 1913, as an ‘out of town residence’. It is undeniable that she had exquisite taste – as noted by catalogues and articles which detail the furnishings which decorated the building. What is more interesting, and perhaps little known to pupils and staff at Ibstock Place School, is the passionate commitment to education and philanthropic work – especially for children – which characterised the Duchess of Sutherland in the years before she procured this house. To get a taste for her passion, we go back to 1900, and the initiation of the Cripples’ Guild.

1900: The initiation of the Cripples Guild

On 10th March 1900 the Hanley Town Hall was busy with anticipation of an upcoming meeting. Attendees entered the Town Hall, which had formerly been ‘Queen’s Hotel’ – a magnificent red-brick design, with some neo-classical features; it was converted in 1884. Through the main entryway they would have entered, flanked by two rustic columns, passing underneath the crest created by John Ridgeway in 1869 – a kneeling dromedary (an Arabic camel) atop the Hanley Coat of Arms.ⁱ As they were led through the ornate corridors and towards the meeting room, they may have noticed a room filled with children, a gathering of the ‘Cinderella Club’; the children would have been delightfully consuming the cake, bread, and oranges which were made available to them. Millicent, the Duchess of Sutherland, chatted with the children, and then moved into the meeting room to address the group.

“I have asked you to come here this afternoon because I am very anxious to carry out the desire I have had for several years to take some definite action on behalf of the crippled children of the Potteries. You have seen some of them for yourselves but it is difficult to realise their suffering. I have seen over 250 of them brought for a holiday to Trentham Gardens and the sight is heart rending...we have begun in Hanley because it was considered the most convenient centre. But our effort must not end with Hanley.”ⁱⁱ

The Duchess prevailed upon the attendees of this event to assist her with improving the lives of crippled children. Three years before, in 1897, she had set-up a holiday home for poor children in Trentham Estate. She turned her interests soon thereafter specifically to crippled children, seeking to improve their circumstances. While the particular causes of the crippling are not mentioned, some deductions can be made according to the general experience of this period.

Causes of Crippling

An 1886 edition of *Popular Science Magazine* suggests the crippling of children can be attributed to poor parenting. In families with working mothers, it suggests, the children were locked up in a room on their own or left with an ambivalent neighbour who would not properly care for the child. Children of well-off families were also at risk due to ‘bumbling nurse-maids’ whose neglect resulted in chronic injuries. The

article suggests that often, it was “as much an act of abandonment as that of the heathen mother, who throws her babe into the jaws of the crocodile of the sacred river.”ⁱⁱⁱ Difficult home life was one renowned cause of developmental issues. Perhaps even more widely detrimental, however were effects of child labour.

Although a wide range of ‘Education Acts’ had passed in Britain which required children to be educated up to their teen years and to restrict childhood employment, these laws presented difficulties for working-class families who counted on the labour of their children to survive. Indeed, Potteries in the early 20th century were replete with child-workers, holding a variety of positions. Poor working conditions were still common, even in the late 19th century; one of which, significantly, was the presence of lead within pottery glazes.

While today it is widely accepted that exposure to lead can cause chronic illness and developmental issues, it was less recognised in the 19th century. The Duchess of Sutherland researched extensively on the subject, and became convinced of its harmful effects. She wrote a chapter ‘On the dangerous process in the potting industry’ which elucidated various concerns. In July 1898 she held a ‘lead-poisoning party’ to spread awareness of this detrimental issue. Due to her, and the work of other activists, the government issued new regulations regarding uses of lead in 1903, which resulted in a 40% drop in lead poisoning incidents.^{iv}

While documents which describe the Cripples’ Guild do not specifically note what caused the incumbent children’s deformities – there is good reason to presume that many issues would have been caused by the poor working conditions to which they were exposed. The Duchess, however, was not only concerned with preventative measures (to ensure further children were not exposed to the detrimental effects of these conditions) she also involved herself in their treatment and improvement. This, she believed, was best dealt with through education and training.

Education as rehabilitation

In a 1904 issue of *Charity Organisation Review*, the Duchess discusses her extensive work in the potteries cripples’ guild. She asserts as her aim “not only the relief of the physical pain, but the development of the individuality of a deformed child.”

The children in the Cripples’ Guild were instructed in a variety of trades – most notably, of course their pottery and metal work which was sold commercially (by the year 1910 the Duchess had opened a store in Bond Street, London to sell some of these creations).^v Children in the Guild were involved in a variety of other successful trades too: making artificial flowers, flower-basket weaving, and book-binding to name a few. The Duchess utilised her interest in beautiful décor to assist the children in their creations; she procured inspiration for their art from Museums and Collections throughout Europe.^{vi}



Figure 2 Pieces from the Cripples Guild

The Duchess believed that opportunities for improvement were best conceived through education and training, so they might become ‘self-respecting’ members of the community. Indeed, it was believed that if the children could be trained in a trade which would allow them to be self-sufficient, it would be far more beneficial than simply curing physical pain. The Duchess notes in her article that it was undoubtedly difficult to teach these children – it required much patience, though it was indisputably worthwhile when even a few lives were changed from ‘utter hopelessness to comparative comfort and hope.’^{vii}



Figure 3 Ibstock Place School's Main House - formerly St. Serf's House

Ibstock Place School

All of the above events took place just a few years before the Duchess of Sutherland acquired ‘St Serf’s House’ in Roehampton in 1913. She immediately began to oversee significant extensions of this lovely home, originally designed by architect Frank Chesterton. One can only speculate what she might have done with this lovely home – might she have used it exclusively as a residence? Or would she have enlisted in as part of another philanthropic cause? Whatever her goals – they were truncated by the First World War, which she joined as an ambulance driver in France in 1914. At this time she was a widow (the Duke of Sutherland had died in 1913) and she

married Brigadier-General Percy Desmond Fitzgerald. France became her new home, and ‘St Serf’s House’ was to be sold to the Paget family in 1925.^{viii}

Had the Duchess of Sutherland remained in England during/after the war Serf’s House may have been used in the same vein as Trentham Estate. It is noteworthy that this building, which became a residence in the 1920s, a military post in the 1940s...was eventually to return to use in a manner which the Duchess was clearly very passionate - the education of children – when it became the home of Ibstock Place School.

ⁱ Thepotteries.org. (2019). *Hanley Town Hall*. [online] Available at: <http://www.thepotteries.org/tour/070.htm> [Accessed 8 Jan. 2019].

ⁱⁱ Adams, D. (1978). *Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland and the potteries and Newcastle Cripples' Guild*. [Newcastle-under-Lyme]: Staffordshire County Library.

ⁱⁱⁱ Crippling of Children (1886). *Popular Science*, (7), pp.685-686.

^{iv} Stuart, D. (1982). *Dear Duchess*. London: Gollancz, p 109.

^v Adams, D. (1978). *Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland and the potteries and Newcastle Cripples' Guild*. [Newcastle-under-Lyme]: Staffordshire County Library, p. 9.

^{vi} Adams, D. (1978). *Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland and the potteries and Newcastle Cripples' Guild*. [Newcastle-under-Lyme]: Staffordshire County Library, p. 10.

^{vii} Duchess of Sutherland, M. (1904). The Work of the Potteries Cripples' Guild. *Charity Organisational Review*, 16(92), pp.81-85.

^{viii} Adams, D. (1978). *Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland and the potteries and Newcastle Cripples' Guild*. [Newcastle-under-Lyme]: Staffordshire County Library. p. 11