

Grace Eyre Woodhead's Life and Legacy



Grace in the 1870s

Early Life

Grace was born on 24th February 1864 in Brighton, the eleventh child of Major Henry Joseph Plumridge Woodhead of the 3rd Battalion of Royal Fusiliers and Emily (nee Clements). Emily was descended from a junior branch of the gentry whose family included a number of senior clergy. The Major was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and became active in Brighton's public affairs; he was elected to the Board of Guardians of the Poor in 1875.

Grace's parents travelled early in their marriage and had their first child while travelling in Italy, and two more children were born when they lived briefly in Yorkshire. By 1851 they were living in Paddington,

London and then somewhere between 1856 and 1860 the family moved to 12 Norfolk Terrace, Brighton where their last four children were born. The youngest child, Hilda, was born in 1865 within a year of Grace, and she seem to have been a constant companion and support to Grace throughout her life.

The 1871 census shows the family still living with seven of their daughters - it was clearly a busy, comfortably upper middle-class family with five servants living in, including a governess, cook, nurse, parlour maid and housemaids. The family was also sufficiently well-off to have a country home – Heathfield House in Old Heathfield, Sussex.

Grace clearly had both a very comfortable and a fairly typical religious upbringing for their class. Grace's brother Henry took holy orders and we think some of her uncles were also in the Church of England.

Education

Unusually for a young girl from such a comfortably middle class home, Grace was not educated at home by a governess, - or at least not only - but also attended the Brighton High School (now the Brighton Girls) in Montpelier Road. This was a new school, established in 1872 to provide the kind of academic education previously only available to boys. Grace would have been one of the earliest intake of students.

The Brighton School seems to have provided a good educational start for Grace. In 1884 at the age of 19 she pursued more newly established educational opportunities, beginning a course of studies at Lady Margaret Hall (LMH), the first women's college in Oxford. The college had only opened five years earlier in 1879, so she was one of the first women in the UK to access University education.

LMH records show that Grace studied several classes in her two years in Oxford, including German, Composition, Arithmetic and Algebra, but there doesn't seem to have been a specific focus for her studies. Given her relatively short stay in Oxford it is probable that she took a pass degree, which was shorter and less demanding than those reading for honours. These were often taken at this time as many young women could not afford three years at university and so opted to taking one or two years, however they still had to take Finals at the end. At that point in any event, women were not formally awarded degrees – that did not change until the 1920s.



Grace aged 19, in 1884

At this point the college was very new and there had been a great deal of opposition to its development, so for Grace – and her sister Hilda – to attend was a definite and provocative choice. It suggests that her family were quite liberal – or at least liberal enough to let her make her own choices. And we know they were well-off enough to support the cost of two daughters attending, even for the shortened pass degree course.

The atmosphere of LMH at this time would have presumably had quite an impact on Grace. The Principal of LMH for the first 30 years was Elizabeth Wordsworth (the poet's great niece) and she was known for her energy, piety and scholarship. LMH was associated with High Church religious observance in contrast to Somerville which was founded around the same time and was non-denominational. At its founding it was described as

"an academical house... to be conducted according to the principles of the Church of England, but with full provision for the liberty of those not members of it."

Elizabeth Wordsworth certainly considered the institution as much a religious as an educational institution and presumably Grace was attracted to this. Wordsworth seems to have created a very relaxed and familial atmosphere for the small groups of students which must have been welcome in what was probably still quite a hostile environment out in the university town more widely. For the first five years there was no resident tutor at the College and female students were dependent on the willingness of male tutors to allow them entry to their lectures and classes. Perhaps by the time Grace and Hilda attended that was less difficult, but the Association for Promoting the Education of Women in Oxford (known as the AEW) still had to arrange for chaperones for example.

The Wordsworth's biographer pointed out that her 'practical initiatives for the development of women's higher education sprang from religious and in many ways conservative values, yet had radical results' and that fits rather well with what we know of Grace and her future work – she was certainly innovative but with a strong religious unpinning to her vocation.

There may be some other clues to Grace's interest in philanthropic activities. Lady Margaret Hall established charitable activities very early on, and a group called the Guild of Christian Work was set up in the mid-1880s, sending students to work in poor communities in London, including in Lambeth and Notting Hill. It's not entirely



*Grace at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford in 1884
(Grace third row, third from left, Hilda second row far right)*

clear what useful skills these young students would have been able to bring to these communities but it must have been a very significant part of their education. We don't know if Grace did participate in the Guild but given that Hilda definitely did, and given Grace's interest in charitable work later on, it's seems a reasonable assumption.

The Beginning of a Vocation

We know that after leaving Oxford Grace returned to Brighton, but at some point visited some of the London Mental Asylums and Special Schools and became interested in the conditions there, feeling particularly strongly that institutional care of this kind was completely inappropriate and harsh and that these children could thrive and *be happy* if supported to live in the community.

Unfortunately we don't know why Grace developed this interest as there's nothing in her Oxford studies to point her in this direction. The active Christian commitment would make charitable activities quite likely but does not explain the specific interest and sympathy in the conditions of people with learning disabilities. We can speculate that there was someone in her family or close to her who had a disability? We don't know as yet and records of these institutions are fragmentary for this period.

We also don't know which institutions she visited, but it's reasonable to think that one of the institutions was the 'Caterham Lunatic Asylum for Safe Lunatics and Imbeciles' which provided accommodation for many patients referred from South London in particular. The Asylum was intended to accommodate 1560 patients in six 3-storey blocks for 860 women and five blocks for 700 men but by the end of the 19th century – when Grace may have visited - it was severely overcrowded. She might also have been familiar with the Sussex County Lunatic Asylum, in Haywards Heath.

Whatever prompted her, she began organising country holidays in 1898 for under-privileged and disabled children from London. She started by using the Woodhead family's second home in Heathfield - the house no longer exists but was apparently a beautiful Queen Anne house with easy access to open countryside. This area was the perfect location for these holidays and Grace seems to have been hugely energetic in setting up what quickly became a very active scheme, drawing in family and friends in the Heathfield area in particular, persuading them to open their homes to these children to provide a brief respite from the hospitals or institutions where they were mostly confined. For these children it would have been an incredible opportunity to spend some time in the countryside with clean air, sunshine, visits to the seaside and to enjoy some fun and exercise.



Grace in her late 20s, in early 1830s

While the Guardianship went on to provide very real practical help for the people in its care, it's interesting that this is its beginnings – going beyond the kind of charity that ensures that just the physical needs of these children are met. Grace intended to provide for their *happiness* too, and given the wider context of debates around disability at the time, that's a great deal.

It's not clear from the records how long the holidays continued at Heathfield and it is possible that the house was sold after the death of Grace's parents. Her father, Major Woodhead died in 1903 aged 82 and her mother Emily in 1912, aged 86.

From offering short holidays for these children – which was only a brief respite from institutional care – Grace and her friends started to organise more permanent boarding arrangements in response to increasing demand. These activities were still organised on an entirely voluntary basis and by 1900, Grace had established a headquarters and was pioneering a model of community based 'guardianship' in the Brighton community. Referrals were coming from various kinds of individuals and organisations – including private requests for assistance, from church communities and clergy, various children's charities and from the Board of Guardians, the authorities in charge of the Poor Law.

From the beginning, when it was agreed that children could be placed permanently within families, there evolved the need for regulated placements and supervision by visiting officers. Amongst the volunteers actively involved were

medical doctors (mostly men) who were asked to visit to assess the needs of those for whom support was requested, and female nurses and other volunteers were recruited by Grace to make regular visits to those placed in families to ensure their continued well-being. It was in support of these placements that the need for some educational provision, day care, occupational training, work placements etc. was identified.

The Guardianship

The impetus for the formal establishment of the Guardianship Society – later to be the Grace Eyre Foundation charity in recognition of her life's work – was the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act in 1913.

That this legislation passed tells us a lot about the context in which Grace was developing her social care model. It illustrates just how remarkable Grace's initiatives were – with an emphasis on inclusion, care and support in the community. That people with disabilities have as much a right to personal dignity and independence, self-sufficiency and happiness as anyone else.

The debates in the country more widely around disability took a very different approach and were increasingly influenced by the ideas of Eugenics, a set of beliefs which advocates the improvement of human 'stock'. People holding these views approached disability from the point of view of segregation and controlling the fertility of people with disabilities. It was about separating people from mainstream society into institutions – a theme which continued well into the 20th century.

Around the time Grace and her voluntary activities were really beginning to grow, the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded was set up

"to consider the existing methods of dealing with idiots and epileptics, and with imbecile, feeble-minded, or defective persons not certified under the Lunacy Laws... to report as to the amendments in the law or other measures which should be adopted in the matter".

Its report was published in 1908 and amongst its recommendations was sterilisation and detention in 'labour colonies', where the 'feeble-minded' could be put to work.



Grace in 1915 (age 51)

While Grace and her Brighton & Hove volunteers had already been supporting people to live in families and communities for some years, in the House of Commons February 1911 Winston Churchill was speaking in support of the Royal Commission proposals. In May 1912 a Private Members' Bill entitled the "Feeble-Minded Control Bill" was introduced in the House of Commons, which called for the implementation of the Royal Commission's conclusions. It rejected sterilisation of the "feeble-minded", but had provision for registration and segregation. The bill was eventually withdrawn, but the government bill introduced on 10 June 1912 which replaced it would become the Mental Deficiency Act 1913.

The new legislation required local authorities to identify who in their areas were considered 'mental defectives', to inform the new central Board of Control, and to arrange suitable care. Local charities and organisations who might be able to provide that care now had to be registered with their local authority and the Guardianship could no longer continue on a voluntary basis.

A Committee was therefore set up which met for the first time on June 1913 to discuss a new Society for 'boarding out the mentally and physically defective under family guardianship'. Patients would be boarded out with carefully selected families, provided with training and assisted with employment opportunities. Medical support would be provided and regular reports made to the local Board of Control. It was agreed to set up a provisional committee organised by Grace Eyre Woodhead and a Mrs Campion, with powers to add to their numbers, draw up rules and to form a General Committee. Grace's younger sister Hilda was also involved, having been active in the voluntary activities. Another key figure on the committee was Dr Helen Boyle who was one of the first women doctors to practice in Brighton and was later the first Woman President of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association – she was active in the Guardianship society for many years.

The new Guardianship Society was formally launched on 1st October 1913 and was funded by regular subscription and community fundraising efforts.

As Secretary of the Society, Grace Eyre actively helped to steer the organisation through an initially difficult - occasionally confrontational - relationship with the local Board of Control.

This seems almost inevitable given the very different approaches taken. The Society was committed to non-institutional care, assisting people with disabilities to live full, more independent lives integrating people into the community in a way which – while still very limited – was diametrically opposed to the Board of Control's ethos.

There was significant and detailed correspondence between the Society and the Board of Control as they discussed committee structures, instructions for foster parents, the process whereby they were notified of boardings-out etc. These tensions flared up regularly over the next 15 years or so.

It's clear from the archival material that Grace took the lead in these negotiations and was responsible for responding to the Board of Control's demands. Grace responded firmly, identifying what restrictions were acceptable to the Guardianship and which were not.

As an example of the Board of Control's approach - and tone – as late as 1927 a special meeting was needed between the Board and the Guardianship Society as the Commissioners wanted to have more control over boarding-out decisions. The Commissioners emphasised the importance of excluding certain cases, ie.

“those with marked erotic or violent tendencies; those who were known to have depraved sexual habits; those who were addicted to arson or were inveterate thieves; those who require training of a kind that cannot be provided in a private house”.



Grace in her late 60s

It is telling that Ellen Pinsent was involved in this meeting and she was clearly in regular contact with the Society. She was a strong supporter of the Board of Control, had been on the 1904-1908 Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded, and was closely associated with the ideas of eugenics and limiting the reproductive rights of people with disabilities.

Tension also arose in 1929/1930 with the passing of the Local Authority Act which amongst other changes, ended the funding made available directly from the Board of Control. The Guardianship approached local authorities in an effort to fill the gap in funding resulting from the end of the Board of the Control. She wrote to the Board on 1st January 1930 saying

“It seems the Board may hardly appreciate the position. This year we have received 480 unsolicited applications, and need help to organise. The situation is serious, and it seems urgent that something should be done, the present position weighs much on my mind”.

Other pressures on the Guardianship Society came in 1932 with the Brighton Borough Council complaining about the numbers of people with disabilities being fostered in Brighton which they felt was 'a grave menace to the amenities of the town as a health resort'. Grace refused to give any details of foster-families to the Council and they subsequently complained to the Board of Control

as they were 'determined to take steps to limit the practice even if this necessitated the promotion of a bill in Parliament' though in the event this doesn't seem to have been pursued.

Increasingly however, the Guardianship Society's approach attracted positive attention, with local authorities throughout the country communicating with Grace Eyre to learn more about its methodology which combined compassion, respect and practicality.

The archives also show approaches from overseas, including from the US, Vancouver in Canada and Perth, Australia, for guidance in setting up their own schemes but to date we have not been able to find evidence of direct influence of Grace's work as a result.

There followed a period of great growth through the war years and into the 1920s as the 'boarding out' scheme was extended and Grace Eyre set up an Occupational Centre in Hove to deliver training courses to children with learning disabilities. Despite the sometimes tense relationship, in 1923 the local Board of Control praised the work of the Society in its Annual Report:

"... we commend to the attention of the Local Authorities, the experimental work of the Brighton Guardianship Society. Local Authorities should organise schemes somewhat on the same lines".

Innovation

A key component of the Society's work was training and this was introduced almost immediately - an Occupational Training Centre was established, one of the first of its kind in the country. Classes were held daily at the new offices and included both vocational training and social, arts and crafts activities. A grant was received from the Borough Council and the Board of Control towards the expenses and an Annual Sale was held to raise funds.

Classes were generally segregated by sex and age, with boys learning woodwork and leather work, and girls learning knitting, sewing, and domestic work. Other activities included basket-making, raffia and painting.

A Board of Control inspection report in September 1925 was positive about the training, noting that 46 'patients' were attending over the course of the week. They noted the lack of space - this is now in the 82 Grand Parade offices - meant that music and exercise classes were more difficult to manage. More and larger Occupational Centres were opened in larger spaces in both Brighton and Hove by the 1930s and a full-time Training Centre was established in 1934.

Linked to the occupational training which Grace introduced was the purchase of farms, providing both a home and horticultural training and employment for young men. The idea was that young men would learn these skills and be able to move on, finding work on local farms and becoming more independent. The Guardianship Society purchased Dungates Farm, Waldron in 1923 and Tubwell Farm in Rotherfield in 1927, and there are references to other cottage farms purchased for foster families, including Beadle's Cottage near Cowbeach in 1925. Grace clearly felt strongly about this approach:

"It is now four years since the purchase of the first farm, and I think the proposition that ...children can become self-supporting is proven beyond contention. I tell you, if you give a boy a man-sized job, he performs it manfully. At Tubwell Farm, they have grown shoulders, all of them. But I now realise more than ever that commitment to these children must be lifelong".

These farms continued to operate for the next thirty years, including throughout the war. Residents worked on the farm growing crops, caring for livestock and selling produce. Following the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948 the financial running was taken over by the local Hospital Board, but the Guardianship Society continued to administer the Farms until March 1959 when they were formally closed.

A less well-known area of pioneering work was in response to mental health needs – or nervous disorders as they were then called. These initiatives presumably reflect the close collaboration with the Guardianship and the Lady Chichester Hospital in Hove - a psychiatric facility set up by Dr Helen Boyle in 1905. Dr Helen Boyle and Grace Eyre Woodhead worked closely together for many years – Dr Boyle was involved in the voluntary activities started by Grace initially, and once the Guardianship was formally established, was on the General Committee for many years.

An 'Aftercare' committee was formed for visiting and assisting all patients once discharged from the Borough Mental Hospital in recognition that people needed follow up support and somewhere to go for advice".

A Clinic for Nervous Disorders was established at 82 Grand Parade and the Medical Superintendent of the Borough Mental Hospital attended once a week, focussing on helping those *"suffering from the early stages of nervous disorders and preventing the relapse of others who have already received treatment in Mental Hospitals"*.

There are a range of cases documented in the general committee minutes of the Society, showing the close working relationship with the Hospital and local asylums. The work expanded to support patients with mental illness, needing aftercare, special education and training.

Later Years

Grace Eyre continued to be actively involved with the Guardianship Society for the rest of her life, by all accounts energetically but quietly driving the charity forward.

There are accounts of Grace attending the regular summer outings for staff, children, families and carers, well into the 1930s. Muriel Hart, the daughter of one of the administrative staff, tells of

attending one of these events at Tubwell Farm in the early 1930s. She remembers Grace as a quiet but formidable presence, staying very much in the background, a *"rather thin lady... always in grey"*.

It's very much a child's perspective as Muriel would have been around 8 or 9 at the time. She found a photograph new to us, on that same visit, of Grace on the farm which does seem to illustrate both her formidable appearance and her quiet reserve.



*Grace on a summer outing to Tubwell Farm, early 1930s
(With kind permission of Miss Muriel Hart)*

Grace Eyre Woodhead lived at 13 Compton Avenue, Brighton in her last years, sharing the house with her sister Hilda and brother Henry. She had a heart attack in 1935 and

spent her last year in the Lees Nursing Home on Dyke Road. She died on 5th April 1936 at the age of 72.

She left £200 in her will to the Guardianship – approx. £10,000 today - and asked that her funeral

“be as plain as possible and... no one should on any account wear mourning for me after my death”.

However it doesn't sound as though her wishes were entirely honoured as her funeral was reported in the Sussex Daily News, listing the tributes and attendance. These including representatives from Brighton's Mayor and the Borough Council, from other local authorities and community groups across Sussex and beyond, as well many family, friends and colleagues from within the Guardianship Society.

Grace was buried in the family vault at Brighton Extra Mural Cemetery, Woodvale alongside her parents and several of her sisters. The then trustees of the Guardianship Society paid this tribute to her:

“Her enthusiasm, her deep sympathy with the afflicted, and her calm determination to do all that was possible for the welfare of those placed under her care, will always be remembered with gratitude by those with knowledge of the magnificent work to which Miss Woodhead so nobly devoted her strength and energy”.

Further tributes followed at the Guardianship's AGM of that year including this quite touching one which also provides some personal insight into Grace from someone who clearly knew her well:

“Miss Woodhead was a pioneer in this work, and despite opposition, difficulty and disappointment she carried on that work for twenty-two years; and the proof that she was right is evident in the fact that this society is now of such enormous proportions. It is used by the Board of Control, other Government Departments, and many local authorities.

She was the first to start an occupational centre, now common in nearly every town in the country; and she was instrumental in starting the Clinic for Nervous Disorders.

By her indefatigable energy, great ability, and marvellous devotion to this work (for she worked seven days a week until eight or nine at night), Miss Woodhead has given her life to the society, as well as a great deal of her money, and has built a lasting monument to her memory”.

Who was Grace?

Frustratingly, we don't know very much about Grace's personal life other than the bare facts of her family.

She certainly had all the advantages of a large wealthy family – her mother Emily Clement's family was mentioned in Burke's Families, ie. were minor gentry.



Grace's grave in the Woodhead family vault, Woodvale Extra Mural Cemetery

The family were clearly close – Grace and Hilda being close in age seem particularly so. And it was a relatively forward-thinking family, based on what we know of the girls' education, and the family's philanthropic activities.

Several of the sisters were involved in social or political activities. While Hilda supported Grace's work in the Guardianship, she was also very involved in the Social Service Centre (later to become part of Money Advice Plus). There is evidence that a number of the Woodhead sisters were supportive of, or actively involved in, women's suffrage activities. Grace made financial contributions to the Brighton and Hove Women's Franchise Society and Edith Cunliffe, her older sister, chaired suffrage meetings in Heathfield.

As for what motivated Grace, we can still only make some assumptions. We don't know if anyone in her family were affected by a learning disability. We continue to look for evidence of her visits to the local institutions, or her direct involvement in the LMH Guild or Settlements in London. But she is very likely to have had a strong Christian commitment to charity work.

As to what she was like, we have a few clues... Comments made in Guardianship minutes, and certainly the many tributes made to her after her death suggest that she was well-liked. That she was kind, generous with her time and very committed. She fought hard for vulnerable people, and would not shy away from confrontation with the authorities if she thought it was necessary. We can see that in her letters to the Board of Control, when she challenged their decisions. Despite how hard she worked in running the charity, fundraising and liaising with local councils and Boards, she still had time to intervene in individual cases, such as Esther's (see Nick's Story) or in cases reported in the press where she spoke on behalf of young people who would otherwise end up in the prison system.

She worked hard, long hours without holidays – and never did retire. There's evidence that she was rather stubborn, as shortly after her death in 1936 the Guardianship reorganised its administration to be more 'business-like'. We don't know quite what that might have meant - Grace may well have been quite set in her ways, and used to being in charge. Alternatively, she may have had a better idea than some of her predecessors, given how the organisation lost its way in the post-war period.

One new thing that we learned about Grace is that she played competitive 'Stoolball', a version of cricket most often played in Sussex, and usually by women. Grace and her sisters Amy, Hilda and Edith all played for the Heathfield team in some kind of Sussex League. According to local newspapers and magazine reports, they played regularly from the early 1890s until at least 1900. It was rather wonderful to find this very humanising report in the 'Gentlewoman' magazine:

"The bowling of Miss G E Woodhead was particularly deadly, half the wickets falling to her share".

Grace's father, Major Woodhead died on 11th January 1903 aged 82 and her mother Emily passed away on 15th March 1912, aged 86. But also, sadly, two of Grace's siblings died relatively early. Her eldest sister died in 1891 aged 44 while staying on the French Riviera. Only two years later, Grace's brother Lt Thomas Wandesforde Woodhead died at sea of enteric fever, while serving on the HMS Serapis between Britain and India. His son, Grace's nephew, Capt Robert Comber Woodhead, later died in the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. Another of Grace's nephews, Brigadier-General Henry Alexander Walker joined his grandfather's regiment and had a long military career in Africa, Iraq and during the First World War. Grace nominated him as the executor of her Will.

Legacy

Grace's life's work was to realise a vision:

"to humanise by individual care, the treatment of all those mental patients is likely to respond to it, and likely moreover to derive less benefit from Institutional care. Institutions should be regarded as the last option of care. The Society endeavours to provide bright and healthy surroundings and to try to inculcate a feeling of happiness and a sense of usefulness and confidence in all clients; thus giving them a place in the sun".

Since Grace's death in 1936 the Guardianship Society has continued to develop and grow, building on her work and her vision across Sussex, and her contribution continues to be acknowledged.

Unveiling a plaque "in grateful memory" to Grace at the Guardianship's new home in Montefiore Road in 1950, Councillor Friend-James declared

"in this hurrying, scurrying world in which we live, here and there arises someone who demands and receives our unbounded admiration. Such a one is Miss Grace Eyre Woodhead... She was a sweet, gracious lady to the last. Her kindness will long be remembered".

In celebration of its 75th anniversary, the Society was renamed the Grace Eyre Foundation in 1988 in recognition of its debt to her.

Although the language has changed, Grace would recognise our current values, articulated by service users, staff and volunteers.

The way support has been provided has changed over the years, sometimes quite fundamentally - however one thread that has been maintained during these years has been the belief that people with learning disabilities can and should play a role in society. In today's words 'an equal citizen fulfilling the duties and reaping the rewards of that citizenship'.

Jacquelyn Reeve
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