

Children's Homes, Street Lane.

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Central Home in 2013.

Leeds Union Board of Guardians opened the residential Leeds Moral and Industrial Training Schools for pauper children on Beckett Street in 1848. A new workhouse, including an infirmary, was erected adjacent to the schools by 1861. As the second half of the nineteenth century advanced, the Guardians saw their prime role on the Beckett Street site as providing more hospital beds for the poor, and in 1895 they passed a resolution that 'children be removed from the present schools to schools or homes as may be deemed desirable'. Eventually, this resolution led the Guardians to adopt a then new Sheffield system of placing pauper children in scattered homes but including a central home where children would be initially assessed and which also would be an administrative centre.

The Guardians' 1895 resolution had also stated that any new home was to be built in countryside that was within reasonable distance of the city. But as the Leeds Union southern boundary was the river Aire, the home had to be placed in an arc of

countryside that lay in the far west, north and east of Leeds. At that time Street Lane lay within that arc. Moreover, at what became 123 Street Lane, a site for building was available as it was part of several fields recently bought by two speculators: Harold Mark Carter and Ernest Octavius Woolen. In 1899, the Guardians chose this site for their Central Home. At £2,000 the plot of land was expensive enough, but was probably cheaper than the plots just to the east that Leeds City Council was selling for high-class homes. Street Lane had been straightened just before the Guardians bought a site there. Trams began to run on Street Lane in 1902, and it seems likely that they would have been used both by the children and staff. The Guardians believed in the children taking part in outdoor activities, including walks and games, so a further advantage of the Street Lane site could have been the ease with which Roundhay Park could be reached.

The foundation stone for the Central Home was laid on the 18th January 1901 by the children's committee chairman Fred White, and the home was completed in the summer of 1902 (Plate). The architect was Percy Robinson who also designed Armley Library, renowned for its Alan Bennett connections. The home cost about £7,500 to build.

The 1920s saw the Guardians making a number of major changes. A large plot of land adjacent to and south of the site was bought for £1,814 from Thomas Dodgshun in 1923 to provide additional outdoor playing space (Figure 1). Dodgshun was a Guardian (1898-1901), and probably bought the plot for the Guardians later purchase. In 1922, plans to build a new home in the north-western part of the grounds were submitted to Leeds City Council, and work was underway in 1923. The Central Home was designed to house both boys and girls, but the new home, called Devonshire House, was built solely to house boys. A small plot of land, including a house at 125 Street Lane, was bought just to the west of Devonshire House in 1928. Two more homes, Margaret and Rachel, built adjacent to each other and on part of the playing field by Devonshire Avenue, opened in October 1930 (Figure 1). These new homes were built to accommodate nursery

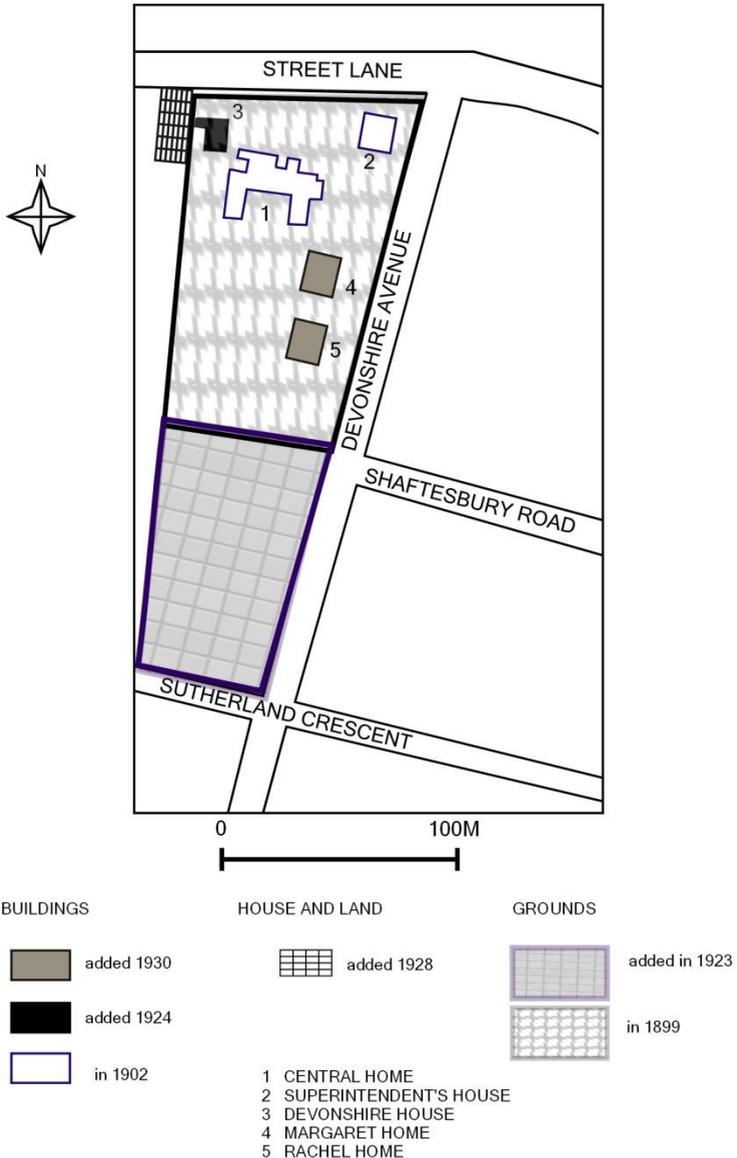


Figure 1. Development of the Children's Homes. Street Lane Site.

age children who had previously been housed at Beckett Street Institution (the workhouse).

These two homes actually opened after Leeds City Council had acquired responsibility, from 1st April 1930, for all the homes within Leeds that had been run by Union Guardians. However, Leeds City Council never built any homes on the site, though an extension was made to Devonshire House, in January 1944, to provide an isolation room for children with infectious diseases. Indeed, until the 1950s, Leeds City Council made only one other major change. Devonshire House became a receiving home where children were first admitted and given a medical inspection. Prior to this change, children had been received at Beckett Street Institution so it was an advantageous change to have the receiving home on the same site as the Central Home.

Nor does the children's way of life seem to have changed much under the Council. The Guardians had sought to provide the children in their care with a quality of life as good as in working-class households. Meals were regularly available and, from the outset, included bread, meat and milk. In 1914, about five shillings per child per week had been spent on food. An inspector reported the children's diet under Leeds City Council was good in 1936. Under the Council, the children continued to attend local elementary schools, and a few managed to attend secondary schools. Fewer still entered higher education but in 1930, one of the children previously cared for by the Guardians had entered Mount Pleasant Training College, Liverpool, and under Leeds City Council's care, one boy gained a Senior City Scholarship and entered Leeds University in 1936. As early as 1873, children had been taken on a visit to Harewood House. And it was the Guardians who introduced an annual summer holiday camp. The Council continued this practice, and children were under canvas at a variety of places including Filey and Abergele in the 1930s and, despite the war, right up to and including 1942. The Guardians sometimes reported that some children had been poorly behaved

but no such remarks were recorded under the Council. Nevertheless, Central Home boys proved their worth when they gave a concert to Beckett Street Institution inmates in 1924. Similarly, when Central Home caught fire in 1938-39, children worked with staff to control the blaze. Children from the Homes visited Roundhay Park for Children's Day when under both the Guardians' and Council's care. Theatre visits had been introduced by the Guardians and these were also made under the Council, for example, in the 1938-39 winter, the Theatre Royal was visited to see a pantomime. With the threat of war with Germany growing ever stronger in the late 1930s, air-raid shelters were erected in the Central Home grounds and bunk beds were fitted into these shelters about 1940.

Significant changes did occur in the post-war period. The Central Homes lost their administrative function. In 1949 many administrative functions were already based at Woodhouse Lane, and in 1952 it was decided all administrative functions should be transferred there.

The usage of the Street Lane homes also changed. The Home Office promoted the establishment of regional reception centres, and Leeds City Council took this on board in 1950-51. Devonshire House was too small for this purpose and, along with Margaret Home, became a short-stay home for both boys and girls. Central Home (also known later as Alverton Home) became the new reception centre.

In the nineteenth century, the Guardians had resisted pressure to admit children who had committed an offence, and admitted only pauper children. But from the 1950s, if not earlier, a much wider range was admitted including those who had been through the courts (Figure 2). Some of the children, whether admitted through the courts or not, proved to be difficult and either could not be found a home outside the site or sometimes, when they had been found such a place, their behaviour brought them back to Street Lane. What should have been short-stay homes thus became rather mixed, and the long-term presence of difficult children could adversely affect other children. As if this were not enough, there were often staff shortages and some staff did not

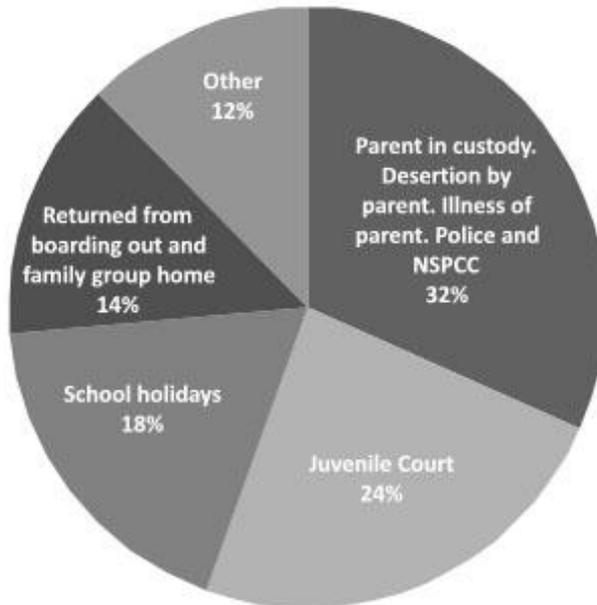


Figure 2. Reasons for the admittance of children to the Central Home, average for the years 1957-1958 to 1965-66

stay long. Excellent relations between carers and children did develop, but when these were short-term, the children could be very upset indeed when staff left. To help ensure the growth of long-term relationships, the Council developed a scheme of *aunties and uncles* who would bond with a child and take it into the community. The local community would occasionally provide activities for all the children. A case in point was the Christmas party organised by Moortown Fire Brigade. It is important to state that many children were a delight and did not present serious disciplinary problems. Many, for example, attended local Sunday schools, and became friends with local families. Most children attended a state school that was deemed to best meet the children's needs. But a few children could not be educated outside the Homes so a teacher was appointed to teach in Central Home. Outdoor activities continued,

including the annual summer holiday. But it was a sign of the times when camping was replaced by a stay in boarding houses!

By the eighties it was becoming clear that all the buildings needed up-grading. Rather than embark on major improvements the Council decided to close the homes. All the homes were closed by May 1983. Rachel and Margaret homes have been demolished. Their sites and the former playing field are now occupied by housing association homes and a doctor's surgery. However, the buildings that were once Central Home, Devonshire House and the Superintendent's house still remain as tangible evidence of the Guardian's attempt to offer pauper children a decent start in life.

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