

St Thomas' Diocesan Home for the Friendless and Fallen, Basingstoke¹

- 1874** site of 3 acres accepted in Basingstoke with option to buy 2 more acres @ £250 per acre
- 1878** 2 new cottages begun and completed – whole site 5 acres
- 1878** gardener's cottage – now the Lodge
- 1879** foundation stone
- 1884** July 22nd “foundation of chapel for 100 persons designed by the well-known Church Architect, Mr Woodyer, was laid by Mrs Harold Browne”
- 1885** 60 penitents in the home plus servants workers and sisters
- “ the whole site of five acres, admirably placed upon the crown of a hill, eight minutes walk from Basingstoke Station, (with all its railway facilities,) well supplied with water for garden and Laundry purposes, with a view extending from 5 to 25 miles in every direction, was surrounded partly by a wall, (given by Sir E Hulse) partly by a high fence of oak and fir. Moreover by an additional loan of £375 from Admiral Ryder, a suitable Gardener's Cottage or Lodge was built at the entrance gate of the “Home” grounds.” “600 or 700 trees and shrubs” were planted.
- 1907** fire damaged building (there is a Terry Hunt photo of this)
- 1951** St Thomas' School for the Deaf established
- 1993** site developed for housing. Chapel saved. In between was used as a night shelter for the homeless.

Rumours of haunting, Lynden Jones (head of deaf school) said thought to be a 'grey lady' believed to have died in the 1907 fire, but no-one was killed. Perhaps Sister Harriet – the first sister in charge.

¹ HRO, *History of the Foundation and of the chief incidents in the gradual Establishment of St Thomas' Home, Basingstoke, the Winchester Diocesan penitentiary for Friendless and Fallen Women, with a chapter concerning the penitents.* Printed and Published by Jacob, C J , Winchester Street, Basingstoke and Simpkin, Marshall and Co., Stationers' Hall Court, London.

St Thomas', Darlington Road

It was Admiral Ryder who had the idea for establishing a home for women from the diocese of Portsmouth. It was to be a place where women whose lives were ruined by prostitution or abuse could come, live and work. In January 1863 the Bishop of Winchester gave his approval to the project. In 1874 a site of 3 acres was accepted in Basingstoke with option to buy 2 more acres @ £250 per acre. The seller was John Burgess Soper who had acquired the land from the May Brothers in 1867. It was to offer to women

“the chance of recovering the character they have lost before God and society”

The home offered the women accommodation and the chance to work as laundresses, taking in laundry from the town. They were not allowed to go home, or, if they did, they would not be re-admitted to St Thomas's. Often their mothers would plead for them to go home and help with the care of their younger siblings, but it was known that if they did, the cycle of abuse and the income from prostitution would lead them into their former lives. The history of the home, written by its second warden, the Rev Reginald Bigg-Wither contains heart-rending letters written by the women whose lives had been changed by their stay in St Thomas's. By 1885 there were 60 penitents in the home plus servants, workers and sisters. The site was described thus:

“ the whole site of five acres, admirably placed upon the crown of a hill, eight minutes walk from Basingstoke Station, (with all its railway facilities,) well supplied with water for garden and Laundry purposes, with a view extending from 5 to 25 miles in every direction, was surrounded partly by a wall, (given by Sir E Hulse) partly by a high fence of oak and fir. Moreover by an additional loan of £375 from Admiral Ryder, a suitable Gardener's Cottage or Lodge was built at the entrance gate of the “Home” grounds.” “600 or 700 trees and shrubs” were planted.

In July 1884, work began on a new chapel designed by Henry Woodyer who was a well-known architect and a follower of Pugin (he designed St Thomas of Canterbury at Worting). The chapel was dedicated by the Bishop of Winchester on July 21 1885, the eve of St Mary Magdalen's feast day² (she is, of course, the patron saint of 'fallen' women). Women who were taken in at St Thomas's had to stay for two years and would be trained in laundry and dairy work , cooking and needlework as well as some basic studying. The women, many of whom were very young lived in cottages with a house mother. Two of the sisters who worked at St Thomas's, Sister Rachel and Sister Harriet worked there until their deaths from overwork and it is reputed to be the ghost of Sister Harriet, a lady in grey, who is believed to haunt the present day nursing home.³

² Fisher, John *Hampshire Magazine* Aug. 1988, p.55.

³ *Ibid* p.57.

The 1930 OS map calls St Thomas's the Mount Tabor Certified Institution which was a different kind of home, sheltering people under the terms of the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, but precisely when the diocesan home closed and Mt Tabor opened I don't know. It's interesting that Terry Hunt's photos of the chapel are labelled by him as the Chapel at Mt Tabor and although his photos are sadly undated they will probably not be later than the mid-1930s as his obituary noted that he had been ill for 8 or 9 years before his death in 1949. The Hampshire Record Office has references to Mount Tabor as being the home of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Transfiguration (an Anglican order) run under the auspices of the Winchester Diocesan Union for Preventive and Rescue Work.⁴ In 1951 St Thomas's got its old name back as the School for the Deaf which occupied the site until it was closed in the mid-1980s. After that the premises were used as a night-shelter for the homeless but suffered some vandalism and fires.

When the complex of buildings was threatened with demolition for re-development in 1989 a group of local people led by the redoubtable Jean Miller, who lived opposite the home, fought a huge battle to save it and achieved statutory Grade II* listing for the chapel and were eventually able to resist Hampshire County Council's intention to demolish the rest of the complex of buildings. Now, as St Thomas's Care Home, run by Barchester Healthcare, it has a new and useful life.

The history of St Thomas' Diocesan Home for the Friendless and Fallen, Basingstoke⁵ was written by the warden, the Rev Reginald Fitzhugh Bigg-Wither, who lived in Darlington Road in the warden's house from at least 1880 to 1895⁶. The Bigg-Wither family had provided vicars for Worting and lived at Manydown and it was Reginald's grandfather, Harris Bigg-Wither (1781-1833) who had proposed to and been accepted by Jane Austen, the whole matter having to be sorted out the next day.

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⁴ HRO,100M97/C1/1.

⁵ HRO, *History of the Foundation and of the chief incidents in the gradual Establishment of St Thomas' Home, Basingstoke, the Winchester Diocesan penitentiary for Friendless and Fallen Women, with a chapter concerning the penitents.* Printed and Published by Jacob, C J, Winchester Street, Basingstoke and Simpkin, Marshall and Co., Stationers' Hall Court, London. No date.

⁶ Basingstoke Directory Entries 1784-1935