



# The history of TACT

**TACT**  
THE ACTORS' CHARITABLE TRUST

# The Actors' Charitable Trust

*formerly The Actors' Orphanage Fund*

## A sketch of our history

Mrs Kittie Carson, wife of the editor of the Stage newspaper, became increasingly concerned about the welfare of actors and others connected with the theatre, particularly women and children. She felt that provision by other charities and friendly societies was inadequate; she disliked the requirement of several for one to be a member in order to benefit, that many had age restrictions, and that all were run by men.

Mrs Carson's first move in November 1891 was to found the Theatrical Ladies' Guild (today named the Theatrical Guild). Its purpose was quite simply to provide clothing, whether committee members' cast-offs, donations from supporters, or items sewn and tailored by the Guild's members themselves. Mrs Carson's reasoning was that actresses who constantly travelled and who struggled to make ends meet, had no time to sew, and unemployed actresses certainly could not afford new clothes. Her new charity became closely linked with the Ladies' Needlework Guild, and committee meetings seemed intertwined with 'sewing bees'.

Mrs Carson's husband, Charles, alerted readers of the Stage to the need for help. The response from readers made Mrs Carson realise the urgent help needed by the profession's children. Care of the young "would add solidity and prestige to the drama and its exponents". Although the Actors' Benevolent Fund had been asked to take on responsibility for the children, it had been unwilling, already having so many incapacitated adult actors to support. The ABF did, however, continue to pay £35 each year to the London Orphan Asylum.

Mrs Carson spread the idea of a new charity among her contacts in the profession. Sir Henry Irving (then touring in Shakespeare's Henry VIII) was immediately moved to show his support, and readily agreed to become honorary President of a charity. All organisation took place from Mrs Carson's home at 48 Great Russell Street, later at 90 Great Russell Street (by chance, TACT's present office is only yards away), and then in an office at 16 York Street, Covent Garden by 1908 (destroyed in the building of Kingsway).

Thus the Actors' Orphanage Fund was established in 1896, initially aiming to raise a fund to buy and run a children's home. Such was Sir Henry Irving's standing as our first President that, after 1901, he recruited Queen Alexandra, the Princess of Wales and the Princess Royal as Patrons.

Fundraising continued successfully, including through the Actors' Cricket Match (established by Irving in 1899). Initially the charity paid for children to be housed at other orphanages or with foster families. In 1902 the Fund encouraged all British theatres each to hold a benefit matinee performance during

October, jointly to benefit the Orphanage and the Actors' Benevolent Fund. Sir Henry Irving wrote to all theatre owners to encourage participation and to urge them to make this an annual appeal.

The constitution of the Actors' Orphanage Fund is as follows:-

NAME. – The Name of this Institution shall be THE ACTORS' ORPHANAGE FUND.

DESIGN. – To board, clothe and educate destitute children of actors and actresses, and to fit them for useful positions in after life.

DEFINITION OF DESTITUTE CHILDREN. – By destitute children is meant:

- (a) A fatherless and motherless child.
- (b) A child, of whom one parent is dead, or incapacitated; the other living, but unable to support it.
- (c) A child whose father is permanently and entirely unable by reason of mental or physical affliction to contribute to the support of the child, the mother living but unable to support it.

Our dynamic chairman was for many years Mrs Cecil [Saha] Raleigh, an actress who also wrote more than 250 sixpenny novels under the name Effie Adelaide Rowlands ('The Woman Who Came Between', 'The Kingdom of a Heart' and 'Her Heart's Longing' proving particularly successful; 1900's 'A Charity Girl' was inspired by a letter read to the Fund's committee – many titles continued in print from Ward Lock until the Second World War). After divorce and remarriage, she wrote as Madame Albanesi.

There were 51 children helped by the Fund in 1901, and 60 by 1903. The cost per child was £18 3s per year, including clothing and holidays, as well as board, lodgings and education. A few "delicate" children remained with their mothers, whom the Fund then paid. Some of the youngest children were sent to seaside foster carers, "Mrs Shayler's Home, Brighton" appearing in the records often – a special boarding house for 'invalid and convalescent children'. Some children were successfully adopted at the Fund's instigation.

## The first Orphanage

In 1906, the Fund finally leased its own orphanage, run by Mr Ansell, at 32 and 34 Morland Road, Croydon. These large Victorian semi-detached houses were recalled by Christina Leopold (who reached the age of 105) as being used to separate girls from boys – she was not allowed to see her brothers, even though they were in the adjoining house – but sometimes they could call out to each other or throw notes over the dividing wall. This wall was finally demolished in the Spring of 1911, to make way for a proper covered playground. Children came from all over Britain and attended the local County Council schools while living at Morland Road.

With its theatrical links, our home had rather better entertainment than most, with trips to the music hall and theatre, and visitors such as the top-billing clown, Whimsical Walker (then aged about 55).

In keeping with legal advice rather different from that of today, parents were asked to sign an agreement: “I desire to hand over [child’s name] to the sole and entire care of the Committee of the Fund and I undertake to agree with and conform to such regulations and conditions the Committee see fit to arrange for the care of this child. I also undertake not to remove or arrange to remove the said child from the care of the Committee without reasonable cause and due notice in writing of at least 15 days. I also fully understand that in entrusting the care and education of this child to the Committee I do so with the distinct understanding that I will not ever make any claim against the Committee for anything whatever connected with the care, health or education of the said child.”

Southport, April 12, 1903

Dear Mrs Carson,

Thank you very much for my nice boots, they are so nice and strong and keep my ankles up lovely. Of course the steel springs hurt me at bit, but Dr Allfrey says I shall soon get used to them. He says I am to go and see him every fortnight. You are kind and good to me dear Mrs Carson to give me the boots and I love you very much and do hope I shall see you some day and be able to thank you.

Your little girl, Tina Cullen.

*[Valentine Iddia Cullen in the official record.]*

One mother wrote to Mrs Carson in 1904, “I feel I must at last tell you that I have made an untrue statement concerning my little daughter whom you have been so kind to. I have long intended to confess but somehow I have not managed to gain sufficient courage but am now determined to lay the story bare at whatever cost and implore your tender mercy. My husband as represented to you when I sort your help had been dead nearly three years. About twelve months after his death I had the great misfortune to become acquainted with a bad man who got me into trouble and then refused his support for his child unless I would allow him to get her adopted without my knowing were or what was to become of her. I could not bring myself to abandon her under these circumstances and with her sad affliction, I could not do it and in despair I yielded to the temptation to what I did and altered the date of my husband’s death. Believe me dear Mrs Carson I was demented with grief and my eldest daughter my husband’s child is a very delicate child and I have her a good deal under the doctor during the year. I can never really convince you how wretched and worried the acknowledgement of it has caused me and your great kindness has made it harder for me. Words are poor for what I feel for your great kindness and I trust you will forgive my falsehood.”

The Committee agreed to support this girl for one more year, but sent Mrs Carson to visit “and put everything before” the mother.

When a boy was adopted by the owners of “Rodda’s American Shoe Stores” of Streatham, he wrote to thank Mrs Carson, “I am sure that in the future I shall feel the beneficial

influence of your benevolence. I feel quite happy here and will endeavour to appreciate my new home.”

Sir Henry Irving wrote to express his apologies for not attending meetings, “I must, I am told, avoid working by day for a few weeks so as to save myself for my work at night As I have been so recently in the doctors’ hands I feel bound to obey their instructions – for a time at any rate.” Shortly after, he had died. The AGM paid tribute to his work: “There was not a man living who loved little children better than he did and nothing was ever too much trouble for him when he was asked to exercise his influence in helping us carry on the work of the Fund to the best advantage.”

### Cyril Maude takes the helm



The new President, Cyril Maude, set up the “penny a week” subscription scheme, operated in many West End theatres and provincial touring companies. He also inaugurated the annual Garden Party, the first being held at the Botanic Gardens (now Queen Mary’s Gardens) in Regent’s Park on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1906, bringing an astonishing profit of £903 14s 10d.

At the 1906 AGM Mr Maude said, “The influence of the Fund is increasing year by year. Ever since its inception it seems to have got a fair hold of the profession, members of which are all ready to vouch for the genuine good it does for those left behind by our brothers and sisters who have passed away. Ladies and Gentlemen, the boys and girls do not suffer through being associated with the Orphanage. No stigma is cast on them. They take a good position in school. I have asked whether they are looked down on. As a matter of fact it is just the other way.”

Many actors and actresses sold autographs to benefit the Fund. In one year, Ellen Terry raised £5, Irene Vanbrugh £6 12s, Fred Terry and Julia Neilson £10 8s, and Pauline Chase £11 16s (because of her Peter Pan stardom). Gerald du Maurier, in his first encounter with the Fund, raised £3 in 1907.

As co-owner, Mr Maude allowed the Fund to use the Theatre Royal, Haymarket for its annual general meeting and its green room for committee meetings. His accountant, Messrs Clark, Battams and Co., gave their services freely, along with the aptly named solicitor, Mr Eugene Judge. New Vice Presidents included Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Edward Terry, Lady Bancroft and George Alexander.

Mrs Carson finally retired at the end of 1906, after ten years of bewildering devotion and having achieved a staggering improvement in so many children and adults’ lives. Committee member the Revd Arthur Brinkman told this story at an early AGM: “Mrs Carson had an abnormally large heart but was also extremely practical. She even tried to keep in touch with the children and offered that if they kept in touch by writing to her

once a month she would give them a shilling each month. One boy replied that under the same conditions he would be prepared to write once a week. This showed how the Orphanage turned out boys with an aptitude for getting on in the world.”

For a guest of honour at the AGM of 1910, the Committee had Richard Webster, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Alverstone, Lord Chief Justice (and judge of many celebrated trials, including Dr Crippen) who read apologies for absence from the Prince of Wales, Duke of Norfolk and Lord Balfour.

Besides keeping, on average, £2,600 on deposit at the bank, the Committee corresponded directly with Lord Rothschild to manage newly held investments (although used Spurling and Skinner as brokers) and were particularly persuaded to buy Canada 3.5% (1930/50) long term stock at the end of 1910, London County Council 3% stock in 1911, and Queensland 4% and Victoria 4% in 1913. Rothschild addressed several AGMs on the reasons for his recommendations.

The ‘visiting sub-committee’ reported on its inspection of the orphanage and it was resolved that Mr Ansell’s attention be drawn to the need for additional green vegetables and better underclothing.

In August 1911, a building and a site of 10 acres, known as Barton Cliff Cottage, Barton-on-Sea, New Milton was donated to the Fund by an anonymous lady. Initially the Committee accepted but, on investigating the cost of new sea defences, sold the property for £1,300 to Sir Harold Harmsworth. Wisdom in hindsight: by the 1930s, none of the ten acres remained.

On a scheme approved by the Central Emigration Board, two orphans, Percy Meade and Leonard Leopold, were sent to New Zealand to learn farming, at a cost of £12 each.

### **Problems at the Orphanage**

During visiting inspections in 1911 it was noted that the Public Medical Officer of Health was concerned about the outbreak of ringworm at the orphanage, but also that Dolly Allport and Lilly Davis, aged only 15, were allowed to “roam about Croydon without escort”. And when Mr Ansell was challenged about the poor quality of the children’s dinner, he claimed that the Committee had caught them on an unusual day. A special Sub-committee meeting resolved that it would be advisable to dispense with Mr and Mrs Ansell’s services as soon as possible.

The Public Medical Officer of Health for Croydon again visited and reported that 25 out of 31 children weighed were below the average, and several now suffered from bladder trouble. But Mr Ansell wrote to the Committee complaining about his treatment by the Secretary, Mr Austin – a letter that was dismissed by Cyril Maude and filed without reply.

A mother, Mrs Beesley, is reported to have “disclosed facts about Mr Ansell’s conduct with her daughter”. Mr Ansell was summoned to a meeting of the Committee on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1911, but failed either to attend or send an excuse for absence. The Committee agreed to give him “one more opportunity to offer his explanations of his neglect and mismanagement of the Home”. After this meeting, the Fund fully took over the Home

and all its liabilities, giving the Ansells from 19<sup>th</sup> December to New Year’s Day to vacate the premises. While the home was without a manager, the children were sent to relatives where possible, but “a party of 19 children without friends” was sent to stay with Miss Newley at Leighton Buzzard, with an allowance of 30/- per month per child. Sir Charles Wyndham personally funded summer holidays for “children requiring a change of air”, at Miss O’Dobbin’s cottage in Shepton Mallet.

A lease on the orphanage was signed, in the name of five Trustees of the Fund (and a new Trust deed was eventually signed for the Fund) but the landlord only allowed a short term until 1915. With the Committee in full control, the orphanage was completely remodelled, based on one at Sydenham. Its direct management was overseen by a new ladies’ committee: Ada Blanche, Lilian Braithwaite, Phyllis Broughton, Alexandra Carlisle, Sydney Fairbrother, Helen Ferrers, Constance Hyem, Cicely Richards and Mrs Mangles (ever-industrious since 1901).

### **A new start at Croydon**

The ladies resolved that there should be a Matron, who would have “supreme control”. Matron’s assistant, also to be single, must be a good needlewoman. There would be one Resident Master (again, to be single), “good at games and physical culture” who, by day, taught at a local school, and was to supervise boys in the evenings and at weekends and instruct them in “educational, athletic and technical pursuits”.

The approved text of the main advert read: “Matron (single) wanted for Actors’ Orphanage (Boys & Girls) at East Croydon. Whole time to be devoted to duties of office. Children attend ordinary day schools. Aid given by Assistant Matron and Resident Master. Salary £45 per annum, with board, residence and medical attendance. Applications stating age (not under 30), experience, where educated, and religion, with three testimonials and endorsed ‘Matron’ must be forwarded to the Hon Secretary.”

Miss Sydney Fairbrother would shortlist candidates, and interviews were held at the City of London School on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1912. 120 women applied for Matron and Kate Eady was appointed, 70 for Assistant Matron with Annie Clayton appointed (but soon resigning “for unfortunate reasons”, and replaced by Weena Pickup in October – more unfortunate reasons – and again by Daisy Craft in 1913), but “only” 19 men for Master with Willmot Close appointed (and, Miss Leopold hinted, a possible cause of un-fortune).

The domestic staff would consist of a cook (£25 per annum), two House Generals (£16 per annum), one Between Maid (£12 per annum), a Gardener and an Oddman (£1 per week in total).

The second major task of this new ladies’ committee was the selection of six wall papers, items of furniture, and of china from Messrs Selfridge & Co. All groceries and provisions (except bread, milk, meat, fish, vegetables and drugs...) were to come to Croydon from the Junior Army & Navy Stores, Regent Street, at a 5% charity discount. The Committee soon found itself having to arrange an overdraft facility for £400 with the bank. Despite repeated discussion over almost a year, they could not

reach agreement about “the advisability of keeping fowls at Croydon”.

Dr Thompson was re-engaged, and offered an honorarium of £20 per annum “in consideration of his paying at least weekly visits to the children and staff”. This he rejected as inadequate, if he was also to supervise clothing and diet. The Committee replied that he should not interfere in such matters and stick to medicine.

New prizes were introduced, including Cyril Maude’s Perseverance Challenge Cup (first won by Peter Wyes in 1912), Miss Harris’s Challenge Cup for the highest cricket average, Miss Fairbrother’s doll and workbox for the nimblest fingers, and the presentation each year by Mlle Marie de Mensiaux (who had written Henry Irving’s obituary for the France Times) of a silver medal to the best girl. A sports ground was leased for £15 a year in Davidson Road, Croydon, a gramophone was allowed alongside the piano, and children “should attend a Picture Theatre” once a fortnight. 1912 saw the first Christmas tree in the orphanage (Mr Maude paid a sovereign for it).

Such was the sudden influx of babies into the orphanage, that extra staff and extra perambulators had to be brought in, and various tactful discussions took place about morality in the profession. Rather than turn babies and toddlers away, the Committee resolved to engage an Under-Nurse – the Fund “was not justified in refusing admission to any eligible case”: exactly TACT’s policy to this day. In the end, two extra staff were engaged, as one of the Maids had been “removed to the Isolation Hospital with diphtheria” and sadly died (the Sanitary Inspector’s opinion was fortunately that the drains were sound, or the home would have been closed).

The older children were now entered for more public examinations. Most girls were eventually sent into service, often as under-nurse, but some were accepted for teacher training. Many boys became gardeners or joined manual trades. Some children, inevitably, left their placements and joined theatrical companies. But the minutes of these few years before the Great War are filled with kindness and enthusiasm, with any sensible idea for improvement being met from the reserves or fundraised for immediately.

Theatres and individual actors clearly picked up this new mood and responded generously. Cyril Maude’s theatres led the way in providing free matinées for the children, quickly followed by Charles Hawtrey bringing 30 orphans to see “Where the Rainbow Ends” at the Garrick. Christmas collections were held at West End theatres, with the first seven raising more than £12 alone.

The Annual Garden Party each June was becoming too large for the Regent’s Park Botanic Gardens, and so it was moved to Olympia, where it raised more than £3,000 and became the success of 1913. The Orphanage also fundraised at race meetings, and Derby winner, Lord Howard de Walden, spoke at the AGM, alongside Sir Arthur Pinero. Phyllis Broughton “quite single-handedly” entertained all 60 children at the Zoo, her Gaiety Girl training coming to the fore.

Prince Arthur of Connaught and the Duke of Teck accepted invitations for the 1914 AGM, but the War intervened, leaving Granville Barker, Marie Tempest and Gerald du Maurier to hold the fort.

Now that Mr Carson felt The Stage was too full for free space, the Trustees thanked donors with a full listing (by descending order of amount) of donors each month in the Daily Telegraph. The average cost quoted for looking after each child was £34 7s 5d.

### **Moving to Langley Place**

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 1914, the Fund first discussed finding a freehold permanent home for the Orphanage, and received a letter from Cyril Maude about Langley Place, Langley, Bucks – a country house dating back to 1628. Carlotta Addison and Lilian Braithwaite visited swiftly and indicated that negotiations should begin. Mr Maude donated £100 to start the fund and the Trustees resolved that their offer would not exceed £4,500, and this was achieved on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1914, with full rights beginning on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1915. The timing was extraordinary as, by immediately liquidating the Rothschild-recommended stocks the Fund realised considerable growth, and avoided the inevitable market losses of the Great War. (Similar good fortune attended the Trustees in 2001, in their timing of the Denville Hall redevelopment, moving shares into cash before a major recession struck.)

In March 1914, a Mrs Warburton “sought the admission of two or more of her five children, her husband having been seized with an incurable mania while touring with the J R Benson Company in America”.

The Committee rescinded its earlier rule to accept only two children per mother, and admitted four, aged 12, 11, 7 and 5.

For two years their mother was not able to bring any of these home for holidays or allow them to see their remaining sister. Along with other orphans ‘without friends’ they were sent to the Commercial School at Margate for the four week Summer holiday.

By the summer of 1914, the older boys’ school reports had become of concern, and the Master, Willmot Close was asked to resign. Gerald du Maurier was appointed Vice President, with a view to succeeding Cyril Maude, and gave particular consideration to how education might be improved, initially recruiting Godfrey Pond of London University to become an Assistant Master (who lasted only 4 months). He also instigated an Appointments Committee to consider more carefully the after-care and future lives of orphans leaving the Fund’s care.

“Sundry private matters” regarding the management of the older boys by the Matron, Miss Eady, became the subject of sustained concern, especially as the quickly-departing new Assistant Master felt her behaviour had made his role untenable. Her resignation was achieved, attributed publicly to ill health, and things put in place to “save any form of scandal”. Mr L H

Baumeister was immediately appointed as Master, with full control over the whole home, and Daisy Craft promoted to Matron. (Miss Craft was extremely kindly remembered by surviving orphans in the 1990s, of course with the Spoonerised nickname 'Crazy Daft'.)

Mr Baumeister's first report stressed that he had ensured the "atmosphere was now wholesome" and that Daisy Craft was "indefatigable in looking after the comfort of the boys, and commands affectionate respect and obedience not only from them but from the girls and the little ones too." However, "the tone of the place leaves much to be desired" with cramped playrooms and dorms, and "roughness and bullying that has been allowed to prevail". He introduced a Prefect system, with ties as distinctive as those which "work admirably in the preparatory schools for Eton and Harrow."

### The First World War

The first impact of the Great War was that boots and winter clothing could not easily be obtained for the older boys, unless a far greater price was paid. But by January 1915, the GP, Dr Thompson had been killed in action, and the human impact was inescapable – by March 1916 it was agreed to insure Langley Place against "Hostile Aircraft &c", at a cost of £10 per annum.

After the successful move to Langley Place in the Spring of 1915, the Orphanage was teaching children on the premises, and – at least for the younger ones – became essentially a charity boarding school. The name was changed in October 1915 to simply "The Actors' Orphanage", deleting "Fund" and the Langley Place committee was named the "House Committee" – a term still used at Denville Hall today. Any concerns about ethos and behaviour were quickly dispelled, as the new Home was a tremendous success. Access to better rooms and spacious grounds transformed attitudes. Even the vegetable garden began to show a profit (once produce was sold to neighbouring institutions, to the Royal Flying Corps and to the Green Room Club, including from a new pig breeding venture). Non-teaching staff comprised a nurse, cook, three housemaids, a kitchen maid, two gardeners and a boy.

A motion was put to the 1916 AGM about the admission of illegitimate and "absolutely destitute" children to the Orphanage, "The Committee shall have a discretionary power in cases where the formalities of producing the marriage or other certificates cannot be complied with, of electing such Candidates to the Orphanage." – followed by "The President to explain what the Motion actually means."

Although the Garden Party continued to take place, now at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, fundraising in wartime relied more heavily on the Penny Collections, a voluntary 1d in every Pound from working performers, which brought as much as £600 each month. A set of colour postcards (depicting the Orphanage) was produced and sold at stage doors and box offices. The sale of hay from Langley Place was permitted after appeal to the Government, and yielded £36, which paid for much of the cost of the cards. Gerald du Maurier continued to make donations of more than £300 each year. When the cost of living increased

markedly during the War, staff salaries were increased generously (the Master's from £60 to £70, for example, and to £150 by 1920).

Besides home-grown produce, other food became more difficult to obtain. The Superintendent of Billingsgate Fish Market arranged with 14 firms "to send gratuitously a Box of Bloaters or Kippers each week". The Hon Secretary proposed that Cook be allowed to make a small quantity of marmalade from lemons, if the Authorities allowed them the necessary sugar. "Owing to the necessity of keeping the children fit, to guard against influenza, the Secretary has purchased a barrel of apples at 7d per lb."

Permission was sought from the Ministry of Munitions to build an extension, now that more children were housed at Langley Place, with Banister Fletcher FRIBA in charge. Nothing but the best: Fletcher was architect of the Gillette Factory at Osterley, called by Pevsner, "incongruous, timidly modernistic grandeur", and was son of an illustrious architect with whom he co-authored a textbook still widely used). The estimated cost of the Langley project was £2,400.

The first recorded School Captain was Oliver A Farmer who, being medically unfit for the Navy, was found a position with the British India Steam Navigation Co. The next head boy, Jack Ford, was found an appointment at the head office of Lloyds Bank.

The game of Basket Ball was introduced for the older girls in the summer of 1916, and lessons in "Swedish Drill and Dancing" were a great success in 1918, led by Miss Whiteley of Slough every Monday evening.

Terry Marsh was handed over to the authorities at Slough, then "on the Doctor's Certificate and Mr du Maurier's instructions has been sent to the Local Authorities. The two girls are extremely nice children, and are very happy. They seem to be much relieved that their brother has been removed, as his habits made them feel so very ashamed – Ruby informs us that her father was similarly afflicted."

The main organisations cooperated at this time as the "United Theatrical Charities" and a Ball was planned jointly to benefit these and the Royal Botanic Society – marking our close link from the Garden Parties' venue.

From this point until 1934, the records are either missing or hopelessly dry.

### A new era: Noël Coward

"19<sup>th</sup> October 1934: Mr Noël Coward has very generously accepted the responsibility of being President of the Actors' Orphanage in the place of the late respected Sir Gerald du Maurier." Mr Coward had visited Langley with Lorn Lorraine on 29<sup>th</sup> May, and gave a gift of £500 "to be invested in Trustee Stock and the interest applied to a Sinking Fund, with a view to building a swimming bath at some future date." Miss King was Headmistress, Mr E H Mowforth Headmaster. A Pavilion Clock was bought in memory of Sir Gerald.

Noël Coward brought many changes. Immediately, the buildings were redecorated, the railings and gates painted in red oxide, a new boys' dormitory was constructed with more windows and with single beds rather than bunk beds. Lawns and pitches were re-laid and the tennis court re-surfaced. A much more lavish Christmas took place, with Coward-negotiated free gifts of cakes, fruit, cream, poultry, crackers and sweets.

On his first visit he arrived in the playroom with a box of Mars bars – it would have taken each child a month of pocket money to afford one. He then sat and played the battered upright piano. On later visits he was often accompanied by well known people, including Ivor Novello, Evelyn Laye, Diana Wynyard, Rex Harrison, Mary Pickford, Jack Hawkins and Hugh Williams. The most regular visitors were Edith Evans, Flora Robson and Sybil Thorndike, alongside Jill Esmond and Lorn Lorraine from the Committee. In the 1950s Coward brought Marlene Dietrich several times. For a photocall, Jon Morris recalls being hastily dressed in pyjamas over his uniform, and posed with the visitors – both smoking – in the dorm. His abiding memory is that Coward and Dietrich wore the same cologne. On another occasion, after insisting on seeing the new-born piglets housed at the end of potholed track, Miss Dietrich sprained her ankle – but insisted on turning it into a fundraising photo opportunity.



Coward put an end to cold baths and radically improved the food. He replaced disciplinarian Mr ('Moggy') Mowforth with Reverend Ruegg ('Old Ruggles') as headmaster, and Miss King as headmistress – and began to end the practice of keeping girls and boys separate at almost every hour of the day.

In his biography of Coward, Cole Lesley told of how the President and one mis-behaving boy "went for a walk in the grounds and sat on a bench. 'Now look here, nobody knows better than I what fun it is to be naughty,' said Coward. 'But surely always being the Worst Boy in the School must become boring. You are intelligent, why don't you try being the Best Boy for a change? Give it a trial. I have always believed in bribery; if you will try it for a month I will give you ten shillings.' The bargain was struck, the boy became and remained the Best, and is now a well-known film director."

Vice Presidents by 1936 included Ivor Novello and Gladys Cooper was a Trustee. The Committee comprised Adrienne Allen, Pat Anslow Austin, Jack Buchanan, Jill Esmond, Jean Forbes-Robertson, Nicholas Hannan, Lady Hardwicke, Leslie Henson, Jack Hulbert, Dorothy Hyson, Frank Lawton (who had

been at the Orphanage), Raymond Massey, Clifford Mollison, Owen Nares, Laurence Olivier, Stanley Stratton and Arthur Wontner. The charity was based at 8 Adam Street.

Coward also reinvigorated the charitable purpose, ending the post-War trend of accepting fee-paying children at Langley Place – as for any other private boarding school – and focussing once more on the most destitute families. Such was the breadth of his Presidential control, he even oversaw "a boardroom putsch" (recounted by Sheridan Morley in *A Talent to Amuse*) which in turn inspired his satirical one act play 'Star Chamber': "singularly less hilarious" on the stage than it had been in real life.

### Memories of Langley Place

Granville and Paul Bantock were taken to the Orphanage in 1930 by their mother, two years after their father had died. The boys were not to see the family home again for almost a year. Granville wrote memoirs of Langley Place and the following orphanage, Silverlands. He recalls that breakfast consisted of thin porridge and cocoa, lunch was boiled cod or stew, with greens; there was bread and margarine at teatime, with Marmite on Wednesdays and thinned down raspberry jam on Sundays. A wireless was put on at 5 p.m., with Henry Hall and his Orchestra. Pocket money was a halfpenny, to be spent at the village shop, unless the children were 'gated' because of the risk of infectious disease in the village. The favourite local place to play was the banks of the Grand Union Canal, with plenty of grass snakes.

Matron was Miss Gardiner, in a white uniform, and fondly recalled for her kindness. Visiting day, when parents were allowed to see the children, was always the last Sunday of each month, and the children waited anxiously in the courtyard as each parent came in through a small wooden door in the larger gates.

Langley Place had its own little theatre – The Bijou – which we had fitted out in the 1920s, with lighting, dressing rooms, a safety curtain depicting Windsor Castle, scenery and even an orchestra pit. The Christmas pantomime was one of the most important events of the year and was always pictured in the press. The theatre doubled up as a gym, assembly hall and cinema, as in other schools.

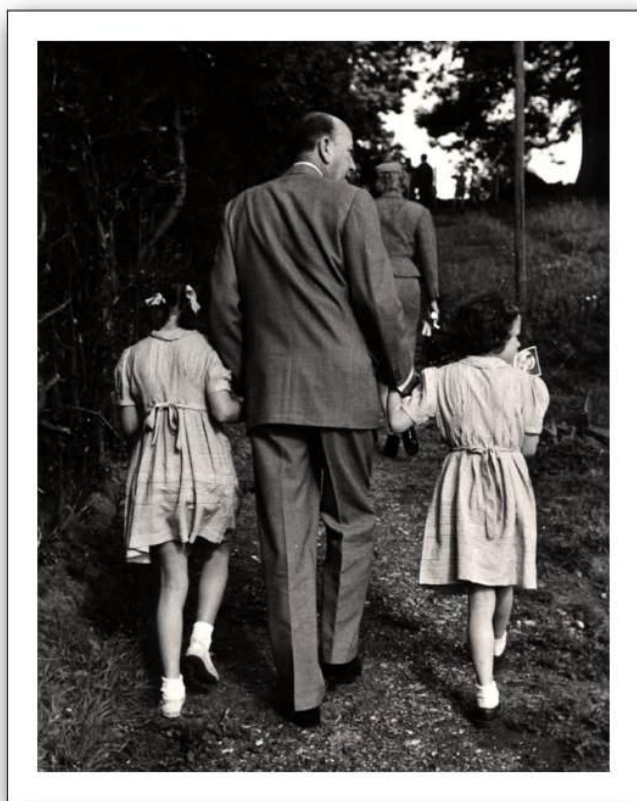
Hugo Bergström joined the Orphanage in 1935. When he arrived he was led by Matron to the large cream-coloured kitchen and given a mug of tea by a girl prefect called Yetty. When he asked about his battered suitcase of clothes, Matron replied, "You won't need that luggage anymore." The new uniform was black shoes, grey socks and shorts, a grey flannel shirt and a black and white tie (Langley's colours).

Jerry Hicks was sent to Langley Place in 1936, after the death of his father. By then Frank Lawton was the role model as a famous Old Boy, and a highlight of the year was seeing him captain the Actors' Cricket Eleven to raise funds. He recalls that there were insufficient pupils to justify a separate form for each year, so, aged 9, he was placed with boys mostly 18 months older. Lenny Mann was very much the leader of their gang (and called 'King of the Kids' by Mr Howell, who taught English with

a Welsh accent), respected for “his superior fighting skills and mechanical and electronic wizardry”. The boys built rabbit hutches in their “unauthorised zoo”, converting a derelict goat shed into a home for an abandoned litter of squirrels, before they were released into the wild when holidays came round. Lenny Mann also initiated the construction of a superior ‘den’ from timber and corrugated iron. When they smuggled bread and jam from tea to eat there, the headmaster, Mr Mowforth (now known as ‘Old Birdnest’), removed these from the menu.

### Chertsey 3368

In 1938, as part of a complete shake up of the Orphanage and the conditions for its children, Noël Coward and his Committee sold Langley Place and set up operations at Silverlands, near Chertsey in Surrey. Although the estate had been called “Silverlond” as far back as town records of 1420, the large country house was built in about 1820 by a local brewer, Robert Porter, and was first owned by Vice Admiral the Hon Sir Henry Hotham – a national hero for commanding the naval blockade in 1812, during the Napoleonic wars, and as one of the two Captains accompanying Napoleon in July 1815 when he demanded political asylum, and in command of his transport to



exile on St Helena. By the time of his death in 1833 he was rarely at Silverlands, being Commander in Chief of the English presence for the entire Mediterranean.

When sold to us, a century later, Silverlands’ third generation owner was Dermot Berdoe Wilkinson, who had received international press publicity when his wife’s jewellery was stolen in a daring raid on the house, while they were at home, and who subsequently had been urged by his wife to find their new home: Knowle Park, Cranleigh.

The Orphanage was at Silverlands from 1938 until the War, when the children were evacuated to the United States, organised by Noël Coward, and – unlike those ill-fated children aboard “The City of Benares” – miraculously got across the Atlantic safely on “The Empress”, a German-built liner of 1911, seized by the British in reparation after the Great War. Commandeered as a nurses’ home during the war, the Orphanage re-opened in 1946 and remained at Silverlands until 1958.

### Memories of Silverlands

Many of the Silverlands children still alive are in touch with TACT, and several have written vivid accounts of their time there. Ray Carroll recently wrote, “Silverlands, Holloway Hill, Chertsey, Surrey – that was the address I remembered so well (at the top of so many unanswered letters to my mother). I can recall every inch of the old place. It is not unusual for me to close my eyes and wander to any part of the building I choose. It is so real I could draw it. I remember where I carved my initials under the great oak staircase in the entrance hall, where I hid small treasures, maybe a packet of sweets or a stick of Palm Toffee in one of the many tunnels below the kitchen. I learnt to kick a football between the aid raid shelters next to the small hill where we played ‘kick the can’ – I can remember faces and still put names to them. I remember my favourite places to play – the big woods, we spent hours playing cowboys and indians or Robin Hood.

“Of all the things I remember,” continued Mr Carroll, “one day stands out. A young Richard Attenborough and his lovely wife took myself and a friend to Regents Park Zoo for a day’s outing. Before returning to Silverlands we visited the Attenboroughs’ house in Richmond. I felt that day like part of a family, as we had so much fun. That’s what I imagined families did. Every time I see Lord Attenborough in a film I recall that day when I was nine.”

Granville Bantock recalled, “We older children enjoyed every facility of the house and grounds and the countryside around in which to roam and play. We now had total enjoyment: Chertsey on the River Thames, the little village shop at Lyne, swimming at Woking and home for dinner on Sundays.”

Judy Staber (née Moore, daughter of Joan White) has written a detailed and thoughtful book, bringing to life memories such as coughing from the cigarettes made out of exercise book pages, fallen leaves and sellotape, smoked illicitly in the gatehouse when it wasn’t let out to domestic staff; or racing the brakeless green ex-Army bicycles down ‘Chestnut Avenue’; or being ordered to cut their own canes from the bamboo patch for punishments earned or unearned; or the warmth of Mrs Hazell, the gardener’s wife, who also looked after the youngest orphans at ‘The Bungalow’ until they were ready to face the big house – and their small paddock of goats in which the children could confide, as children do.

Some of the furnishings and art from Silverlands is now at Denville Hall: a portrait of William Terriss as Romeo which had hung over the main staircase (and strangely terrified one boy, who never knew until 50 years later that the sitter was his own

grandfather), the bust of Sir Gerald du Maurier, that sat on a window sill in the entrance hall, various tables, and two heavy mahogany bookcases. One case held the sweet ration, the other held a few books, notably the Dr Doolittle series, and provided the books that children had to hold or keep on their heads as part of punishments.

“At Christmastime,” recalled Judy Staber, “a huge tree was set up on the lowest landing and Father Christmas came down the stairs from above and handed us each two envelopes, before he gave out any presents. They contained postal orders for five shillings (later ten, with inflation), one from Noël Coward (later Laurence Olivier when he became President, and finally from Richard Attenborough as Chairman) and the other more generally from the Committee. A Yule log of enormous size burned in the huge fireplace. Radiators heated the rest of the house somewhat sparsely, fired up by the enormous boilers which were stoked with the coke shovelled into wheelbarrows by the older boys on Saturday mornings. There was a window seat by the fireplace where we sat to watch for the arrival of parents on Visiting Sundays.

“The house itself was a splendid place: architecturally inspiring; challenging to clean, and clean it we did, every week; and filled with wonderful hiding places and secret passages. It was my home for almost 13 years.”

### **The Aggitters and initiations**

The headmaster after the War was Commander Aggitter and the matron was Matey Irving (Friars Balsam on sugar lumps for colds; salt liberally poured on open cuts). Judy arrived, aged 3, with her sister Susannah, aged 7. Aggitter referred to naughty children as “foul hounds” and it was he and his wife who sent the children to cut their own bamboo cane to be punished with, before being left to stand outside the study for up to three hours with a box of books in their arms or on their heads. Judy recalls being made to stand outdoors at night in the courtyard, barefoot in her nightshirt, for an hour or more.

If one was caught talking after lights out, meals had to be taken at the ‘Defaulter’s Table’ – on one’s own, and eating only bread, water and salt for the next day or longer. Of course, other children managed to smuggle food out of the dining room to give to those being punished.

The head boy was also a source of discipline. Peter (‘Ken’) Collinson (later a film director) would sometimes sit on a chair placed up on a table and make the younger children kiss his smelly feet. There was also the ‘Den of Death’ used to initiate newcomers: a room under the inner courtyard with a grating for a ceiling, accessed through a secret panel in the recreation room. “Fifteen minutes in a dark, dank dungeon-like room with spiders and snakes and gobs of spit dropped in on you and ghoulish sounds echoing from the grating above or through the subterranean tunnels was enough to make most new kids watch out,” Judy Staber wrote. Susannah Moore (now Slater) recalls initiation rites in her dorm, where new girls were always rolled up in their mattress and urinated on.

### **The Savage-Baileys and lack of control**

Commander and Mrs Aggitter were replaced by Mr and Mrs Savage-Bailey who, despite the irony of their name, made corporal punishment less frequent and favoured a more psychological approach. In his diaries, Noël Coward described the new man. “He is obviously a kind man but, I fear, on the weak side. The children were in wild spirits and I was cheered to see they were not looking down-trodden and dismal. I had a talk with Savage-Bailey about sex and told him not to get too fussed because all children had sex curiosity and too much emphasis on its sinfulness would only make it more attractive, and that as long as he kept it within bounds he could close an eye discreetly every now and then. I am sure this was good advice although perhaps not strictly conventional.”

Life under the Savage-Baileys improved dramatically. The Christmas party at Silverlands was broadcast on “In Town Tonight”, with Susannah Moore in a cameo role and Brian Johnson brought down to play Father Christmas. “Paper caps and crackers and general bonhomie,” recalled Coward. What the public didn’t know was that the gaily wrapped presents shown being distributed were simple props; there was nothing inside, and they had to be handed back at the end. But, recalled Judy Staber, it was only December 7<sup>th</sup>....

Terry Mac, who had no family to visit him, and no one to stay with in holidays, remembers being told to put on his best clothes and go to the front hall on certain days for adoption parades. There, one or two committee members would be joined by strange adults and would inspect the chosen children. Terry, however, was never picked.

The full Executive Committee at this time was: Adrienne Allen, Richard Attenborough, Angela Baddeley, Leslie Banks, Joyce Barbour, Douglas Byng, Joyce Carey, Clemence Dane, Jill Esmond, Robert Flemmyng, Nicholas Hannen, Stanley Holloway, Mary Jerrold, Griffith Jones, Nora Littler, Lorn Lorraine, Rodney Millington, Eva Moore, Cathleen Nesbitt, Jessie Winter, Diana Wynyard.

In 1950, the charity also bought for £11,500 a London hostel for older children or those attending vocational classes, at 27 Rutland Gate. It was run by Mr and Mrs Duncan Rider – Mr Rider himself had been at Langley Place and Silverlands – and kept going until 1954.

But also by 1950, Coward was writing, “Long Orphanage meeting. Children behaving very badly, insulting everyone and stealing left and right. Went over their menus and school reports. Interviewed Mr Savage-Bailey, who stubbornly believes that sweet reason, kindness and long moral explanations is the right way to handle a lot of illiterate young hooligans of very mixed parentage. It is becoming distressingly clear that his theory is not practicable. He is a kind little man, but like so many idealists, he is a cracking fool. The dear children obviously share my opinion and run rings around him.” In 1951, the Savage-Baileys were thus replaced with David Victor Gordon and Miss Berry. This new matron was “a large woman, fat and flabby” dressed in grey

and dispensing grey food onto the children's outstretched plates with a serving spoon. She delegated punishment to the masters.

### **"Bully Boy" Gordon**

Mr Gordon was reportedly "a brute". Judy Staber and all others from this period remember him with fear and disgust. "His actions overpowered any good remembrances of things past," she wrote. Mr Gordon would beat the last child to get back to the buildings after games, even if they were severely asthmatic. He would throw furniture. One morning he made everyone pack their breakfasts into his Citroën car, and then to walk to Virginia Water – about four miles away – for a picnic. When the children arrived at the designated meeting point, the car park of the Wheatsheaf pub, Mr Gordon met them and said he would only return their breakfasts if they paid him with their pocket money which, understandably, most of the children didn't even have with them. He then drove off and left them all to walk back, hungry and thirsty, with some children as young as four.

Brian Terriss recalled Mr Gordon watching the boys at bathtime and picking on younger ones, forcing their heads under water before making them parade naked up and down the corridor. His bullying was at its most severe when the other staff were off duty or in Chertsey with the girls. On one occasion he held Judy Moore's foot in the embers of a bonfire: it is still scarred.

Eventually, driven too far, and after being repeatedly punched by Gordon in the night, Brian Terriss fled to Mr and Mrs Hazell's bungalow. He confessed what had been happening in the last year, and within days, 'Bully Boy' Gordon had been sacked.

Judy Staber recalls that Patrick Waddington had a creative and successful approach to discipline.

Knowing that many of the older children were now illicitly smoking (generally the half-smoked cigarette butts left by staff), Mr Waddington invited some to his room and handed out boxes of matches and several packets of cigarettes: Turf, Woodbines, Players Navy Cut. He invited everyone to light up, and they did. Soon, after a few cigarettes, everyone was running outside to cough and be sick. Most never smoked again for years.

### **Rescue**

The children's rescuer was Patrick Waddington, who had replaced Miss Winifred Rodda retired as General Secretary of the charity in 1951. He even took on the role of headmaster until 1953. These final years of Silverlands are remembered with great affection by the children. Ex-orphans immediately recall Mr Waddington's Lambretta scooter, his RADA- and Oxford-trained voice, a splendid moustache, theatrical clothes, and for buying the children two dogs, George and Malcolm.

In 1953 there was a new temporary housemaster, Wing Commander Hayward, who introduced the children to hobbies,

including painting, botany, sewing, woodwork and taking piano lessons. He was replaced by a permanent headmaster, Alistair Angus Frazer and joined by, as Matron, a second Scot, Miss Rennie (and an assistant Matron, Helen Dixon, who is still in touch with TACT). For a while, old boy Anthony Holmes was engaged as an under housemaster, before taking his father's surname and taking to acting as Anthony Ainley.

### **Happier days**

Along with these new and sympathetic staff came greater involvement of Committee members including Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sim (recruited by Coward in 1948, and serving on committees from 1949). Former orphans remember their visits fondly; "popping in" as they called it, even if it meant staying for hours and reading stories to the younger children. All the children recall going to watch the filming of "Danger Within" on Chobham Common.

Judy Staber wrote: "When Attenborough came to Silverlands, he came as an interested person, not as a famous actor with photographer in tow, but someone who conveyed to us all that he deeply cared about each and every one of us."

When 'The Baby and the Battleship' came to the Chertsey Playhouse the children were "loudly proud" about actually knowing the Attenboroughs. Five children were chosen to go to stay at their Richmond home on the eve of the Coronation. The children slept on the floor of a spare room and remember being impressed at having breakfast served to them by a maid.

### **David and Kirsten Slater**

In 1955, life at Silverlands was improved further by the radical changes brought by Mr and Mrs Slater as the new team in charge. They came from a boarding school at Welwyn Garden City and brought with them their own two daughters, Becky and Lulu.



*With the President and some of the children and staff*

Noël Coward decided to retire in 1956 when he moved to Jamaica, and he invited Richard Attenborough to succeed him. However, Attenborough believed that the charity's work would make greater strides in fundraising if the then Sir Laurence Olivier took the Presidency, while he himself became Chairman and Deputy President. The team of Attenborough and the Slaters was perfectly in tune and able to tackle innovative ways of improving the children's lives.

## **The Importance of Happiness.**

In this strange and difficult world there are, I fear, more unhappy people than happy ones. Not unhappy because of personal tragedy or loss or any specific circumstances, but unhappy in themselves, twisted, disgruntled, without confidence or hope or congenitally at odds with life. It is fairly simple as a rule to trace the first causes of this spiritual malaise directly back to early environment, in fact to childhood: for it is when we are very young children that we first learn to be afraid, and fear, of course, is the basis of much that is bad in human character.

I wonder, dear reader, how much you remember of your childhood? Possibly you seldom think of it, possibly it has become a vague memory submerged by the activities and responsibilities of adult life; but if, for a moment, you shut out the present and let your mind travel back across the years you will probably find many incidents and emotional crises, trivial enough in themselves, that have had a lasting effect on your present conduct, behaviour and attitude of mind.

Personally, I believe strongly that people who are brave, confident and successful are, nearly always, those whose early years were graced with happiness, with a sense of security and, above all, the knowledge of being loved and wanted.

The small children we take into the Actors' Orphanage have none of this security. Some of them may have loving mothers who are too poor to keep them, or affectionate fathers without the means of looking after them; some of them have neither fathers nor mothers. None of them has a home in the accepted sense of the word and it is this that we try to give them. Somewhere safe and stable where birthdays and Christmasses can be looked forward to with excitement and remembered with joy.

As President of the Actors' Orphanage I must, as part of the job, take an active interest in all sorts of things. Apart from the unending and vital task of raising money I am concerned with details of policy and of administration, with education, house repairs, estate development, the investment and re-investment of capital and many different problems.

But in my heart what I really mind about, what I have minded about since I became President in 1934, is the happiness of the children who come into the care of this Charity.

It is my greatest hope that when these children have become men and women and look back into the past as I have asked my readers to do, they will be able to say: "Whatever has happened since, those were good years that I spent at Silverlands; throughout that time I was a happy child." That is my ideal, my dearest wish, and I am deeply grateful to anybody and everybody who helps to make it come true.

**Noël Coward**

The new concept was privacy. Gone were the traditional large dormitories and shared cupboards. Cubicles were constructed with partition walls, painted white, and about six feet high, to separate each bed, with a thin curtain one could pull across the entry. Iron bedsteads became wooden; horsehair mattresses became thicker and softer. Each child had a small three drawer bureau and mirror, and no longer relied on linen closet hand-outs of shared clothes each Saturday evening. Older children had small desks too, for their homework.

The Slaters then divided the children into 'family groups': boys and girls together, of mixed ages, and assigned to house parents, to simulate a more customary childhood. These 'parents' included Mrs Parker (who brought her two sons and two Pekinese, Wan Su and Precious Amber), and older couple called Mr and Mrs Pilling, and "Mummy" Kath Dutton.

Each group area had a communal sitting room and a dining room so that they ate as a family, and the scheme was quite successful. Mr Slater acquired a minibus, and older children were taken shopping and allowed to select their own underwear and some other clothes. "Suddenly we were being treated as individuals, with likes and dislikes, problems and differing tastes," recalled Judy Staber. "Life became something to look forward to."

Saturday morning chores continued. The older boys shovelled coal for the furnaces; the older girls sorted laundry and dusted the main rooms. But they were also encouraged to listen to pop music and to engage in fads such as hula hoops. Sometimes they held Saturday night dances, to which local young people were invited, or the Silverlanders went to Lyne Hall for the Youth Club dance.

Patrick Waddington sadly had to resign in 1956, following a serious motor bike accident, and Mrs Hollands took over as General Secretary.

## **An end to the Orphanage**

The AGM at the Saville in May 1958 was chaired by Nicholas Hannan and addressed by Richard Attenborough. Silverlands needed huge capital investment, including major roof repairs, costing at least £15,000. And it was difficult to recruit high quality staff – especially housemothers – because the home was so isolated. Therefore, the Committee had taken the difficult decision to move from the countryside nearer to town.

"By cutting down on our running costs, which is the expected result of this move, and by keeping up our efforts to raise money," said Richard Attenborough, "it is hoped that we may in the future be able to subsidize some needy children in their own homes and so save families from being split up. This is surely a better way of spending money than upon roof repairs!" [And this, precisely, would become TACT's later work.]

There were only 29 children left at Silverlands, reported the Secretary, Mrs Hollands. Social trends – notably the introduction of the Welfare State, but perhaps also more work for parents – meant that many children's homes were closing. Those children whose parents could not take them back, even with a monthly maintenance grant from the charity, were rehoused in Watford in

two suburban houses: Rookwood (6 children) and Nascott Wood (8 children), with the remaining 13 funded to stay with their parents at home.

The main fundraising event was now a 'midnight cavalcade' or, as it came to be called, Night of 100 Stars – instituted by Noël Coward to replace the annual garden party, and with the full cooperation of the Palladium. "David Niven acted as usher in the foyer.... In tramp costumes, Jean Carson and Richard Attenborough gave a spirited version of 'Side by Side'... it will be a long time before the performance of John Gielgud, John Mills and Laurence Olivier is forgotten, dressed in magnificent spiv costumes, they sang Coward's 'Three Juvenile Delinquents' with vivid gusto."

There being few older children now needing the London hostel, Rutland Gate was sold to the Baha'i Spiritual Assembly, and it remains their UK base to this day. The dwindling number of children applying for the charity's help became a major problem by 1960. The Committee asked Save The Children if we might take in refugees, but realising that this still would not solve the long-term issue. The Actors' Benevolent Fund rejected the idea of merger.

### **Joining with Denville Hall**

Richard Attenborough held talks with Prince and Nora Littler, who had begun to find it extremely arduous to run Denville Hall, the actors' retirement home. He thought that one of the Watford houses, Nascott Wood, could be used as an additional old people's home totally managed by the Orphanage.

With the demise of the orphanage, a new name was clearly needed. Attenborough proposed The Actors' Children's Fund, but Olivier stipulated that the name must also celebrate the fund's history: the Actors' Orphanage and Children's Fund.

Committee approved the idea of working with Denville Hall and wrote to the Charity Commission requesting that the our objects be enlarged so that the charity was allowed to help actors themselves, as well as actors' children. But the Commission turned down the request, as they did not believe that the original objective had been fulfilled – in other words, that there were no actors' children worthy of support. After an appeal by the charity, the Commission said that it would allow explicit fundraising for elderly actors, but not any diversion of the existing fund.

Hence, after further negotiation, the agreement that, "subject to the needs of the children, the funds and assets of the Actors' Orphanage Fund can be used to aid actors and actresses, or the dependants of an actor or actress, who by reason of age, illness or infirmity find themselves in reduced circumstances." As Treasurer, Patrick Ide was to be a key person in this transformation.

Despite there being few children to support, the charity in 1961 bought a Hampstead house (1 Lisburne Road, NW3) for £3,675 solely to accommodate (with a charity-funded house-keeper) a schizophrenic boy, his brother and their mother "also of a delicate mental condition". But at the same time, the Watford properties were sold to a developer for £64,703 from

which £10,000 was immediately given to Denville Hall, contrary to the Charity Commission's ruling.

By 1962 there was a resurgence in applicants and 71 children were funded, mainly for short periods while their parents were out of work. The charity was approached by the Theatrical Ladies' Guild which sought a merger (and again a few years later), but which was not possible as the Guild was a company as well as a charity. However, for a fee, TACT took on the management of the Guild's work for some years.

In 1962 a joint Council was set up with Denville Hall led by Prince Littler, Richard Attenborough and Patrick Ide. By 1963 Denville's management had been signed over to us, and the renaming of the charity was discussed again, with formal suggestions including The Actors' Fund for Young and Old, the Actors' Relief Fund and The Seven Ages Fund – but the name chosen was TACT, The Actors' Charitable Trust "to serve actors and their dependants". Attenborough spoke of the new name, "It covers the enlarged scope of our work; it has dignity, it restores the original and sweeter meaning to the word charitable; and its capitals spell TACT, which expresses neatly, I think, the nature of our approach to the problem of offering our services to the profession."

TACT's new charitable objects were eventually approved in 1963. The plan was for Denville Hall to liquidate its assets and transfer them to TACT – and so bypass any tedious process with the Charity Commission. However, official records show that Denville Hall continued to be a separate charity, never actually united under TACT, even though this was how the accounts were maintained until 2000, despite letters of correction sent from the Commission – the authorities had insisted on a separate Scheme for Denville so that work with children and work with elderly people were equally protected from one taking over the other. The appointment of Trustees for each charity (previously Lloyds Bank, for TACT) was discussed repeatedly but not agreed with the Commission until TACT's new Rules in 1979.

The largest theatrical charities were now co-operating fully and formed an umbrella group for fundraising, the Combined Theatrical Charities Appeals Council. Members were the King George V Pension Fund, the Theatrical Ladies' Guild, the Actors' Benevolent Fund, Denville Hall and TACT. Lord Olivier was President, Lord Nugent Chairman, and Richard Attenborough Deputy Chairman.

### **Elderly people as the focus**

£11,750 was used to purchase 83 Lawn Road, Watford, to accommodate more elderly people in sheltered bedsits, in addition to running Denville Hall as a home for up to 15 actors who "needed supervision but not nursing".

TACT also bought a derelict cottage inhabited by two actress sisters in Yorkshire and funded essential improvements.

A welfare visitor was first employed in 1964, focussing on elderly people, not on the needs of actors' children. Richard Attenborough began to find it impossible to get through to the TACT office by telephone, as the elderly beneficiaries "enjoyed ringing up and settling down for a long chat".

Meanwhile, 53 children were given a maintenance grant of £4 per week, with additional clothing grants, and some awards towards holidays. The number dropped back down to 28 children the following year.

A house next door to Denville, 48 Ducks Hill Road, was purchased (having been sold off by Alfred Denville when times were hard), and the Lawn Road house sold. Number 50 Ducks Hill Road was similarly bought back in 1970 giving an estate of 3.25 acres... but was sold again for £51,750 in 1974 to pay for an extended bar and cellar (estimate £25,000, actual cost £48,000). Denville received substantial grants each year from the Combined Theatrical Charities to cover its operating deficit. The weekly fee for residents was raised from £3.45 to £6.65 with the National Assistance Board subsidising individuals in need.

### **Rebuilding Denville**

The structure of Denville Hall was in poor repair, with very serious damp and dry rot problems. A major rebuild and refurbishment was undertaken, led by Sheila Attenborough (budget £100,000 but actual cost £220,000). An appeal was launched and the first contributions were £500 each from Margaret Rawlings and Sir Robert Barlow, quickly followed by £1,000 each from Emile Littler and the Attenboroughs. Noël Coward spoke about Denville Hall before each performance of his new plays at the Queen's Theatre, and ensured a retiring collection.

While the works were in progress in 1967 and 1968, residents and core staff were accommodated at the Wellington Hotel, Tunbridge Wells for a total of 14 guineas a week – a Regency building with an “appropriate” grand central staircase. Matron, Mrs Kirby, organised an appeal for second hand suitcases to assist the move; a sherry party greeted the residents' arrival.

Mr Hewitt took over from Mrs Hollands as General Secretary (now based at 19 Charing Cross Road for £650 per year), and Mrs Mullins took over as Matron. Only a year later, Mrs Kirby unexpectedly returned to her old Matron post, and Mr Hewitt resigned, with Marianne Brisley appointed as Administrative Secretary.

Lew Grade (at ATV) became a major fundraiser for Denville Hall, bringing in £15,000 alone from his 1968 series of plays including Paul Scofield, Vanessa Redgrave, Emyln Williams, Edith Evans, Jeanne Stewart and Paul Getty Jr, and introduced by Laurence Olivier. Jeanne Stewart would go on to become the greatest single benefactor in our history. Grade gave a further £50,000 and then £100,000 more.

A Savoy party to mark Coward's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, televised on the BBC, and involving Lord Mountbatten and Olivier, raised £2,000. Audrey Hepburn made her first annual donation of \$1,000 to TACT – her first contact had been as a teenager helping out at one of the Orphanage's garden parties.

A resident of Denville, Ellen Compton, died in a fire, suspected to be a result of her smoking in bed. Jessie Winter became the first committee member (and, indeed, Vice President) to become a resident; Fay Compton was the second.

There was surprise to discover that a 54 year old regular visitor to Mrs Miriam Kittoe, 84, was not her stepson as disclosed on her form, but her husband; “adjustments were made with the Ministry of Social Security”. George Curzon's behaviour had improved and he had parted with his gun “without demur”. Residents who were drinking heavily were found to have been writing begging letters to other charities, but the pocket money allowance of £1.35 was felt to be perfectly adequate. Residents' fees rose from £21 to £26.50 per week.

A French ormolu-mounted clock was presented in 1972 in memory of Vivien Leigh, and still stands on the drawing room mantle. Dame Sybil Thorndike's memorial tribute at the Haymarket brought donations of £3,750. Dirk Bogarde presented two life size ceramic cheetahs in 1973, which still stand in the entrance hall, and Alec Guinness gave a grandfather clock which had belonged to Ernest Milton.

On Sir Noël Coward's death, Richard Attenborough said, “Many of the principles by which the orphanage was administered were instigated by Sir Noël. Much of the work of re-establishing the Fund finally was made possible events. Sir Noël felt deeply about the profession's responsibilities to the less fortunate and he welcomed greatly the opportunity that was offered to TACT to take over the responsibility for Denville Hall. I hope the best possible tribute to Sir Noël can be the maintenance of the very high standards which he like to think the Trust had maintained over the past years.”

Around this time, the charity lost other great supporters including Jack Hawkins, Hugh Beaumont, Lord Nugent, Nicholas Hannen, Gladys Cooper, Edith Evans and Prince Littler.

Robert Flemyng became Treasurer and served until 1989 (he had been on the Committee since 1954). Sir Michael Redgrave and Sir John Gielgud continued to serve actively as Vice Presidents; Ralph and Meriel Richardson became excellent fundraisers and helped establish the “Friends of Denville Hall”. Douglas Byng offered to resign as he felt 80 was “far too old” for a Committee member, but this was not accepted by his colleagues, given that Joyce Carey, Robert Harris, Nan Munro and Edith Sharpe also felt themselves to be above retirement age – a rule was later brought in to limit full membership of the Committee to those aged under 70.

Princess Alexandra visited in May 1973 and met all the residents well enough to speak with her. ‘Down Your Way’ was broadcast from Denville.

In 1976, Simon Williams was co-opted to the Committee and went on to serve as joint Chairman, with Angela Thorne, for 15 years from 1990.

83 Lawn Road – the bedsits for elderly actors – was finally sold in 1979 for £87,500 and the charity hoped to buy 64 Ducks Hill Road, offering £105,000 – but it lost out to an outside buyer through poor negotiation and thus lost the chance to regain the main (and sunny) formal garden and grounds of the old Hall.

## **The 1980s**

By 1980, “it was no longer possible to run Denville as the pleasant, restful retirement home” which had been intended, due to increasing age and infirmity and the number of residents using wheelchairs or Zimmer frames. The Committee wanted at all costs “to halt the decline of conditions into a Nursing Home” and thus tried to revert to the original concept of a home for retired actors. However, this in turn made it more difficult to attract state funding for the poorer residents. Those who were more infirm were accommodated in a separate wing, “to relieve the fitter residents of the depressing effect of having to live at close quarters with senile or near-senile companions”.

In 1982, our beneficiaries slumped to 4 children and, at most, 29 residents. Denville therefore began a service of convalescent care (often for rather younger actors), restructured the home, with the loss of Mrs Dunning, and appointed Vera Maubach as Matron and Home Administrator. Mrs Maubach was to oversee a significant period of improvement at the home. Seeing this change for the better, the Combined Theatrical Charities gave Denville a grant of £35,000.

August 1982 saw the first (of few) Garden Parties held under the aegis of ‘The Friends of Denville Hall’ at St Paul’s Covent Garden, taking over from gatherings organised by the Actors’ Church Union for the Combined. Any income from this was outshone by a legacy of £25,000 from Harold Plumstead in memory of Dame Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson.

The 1980s continued with improvements to care of the residents, and a beefing up of TACT’s welfare work with children. Mary Searls began work as part-time Welfare Adviser, continuing for 25 years. Chairmen of TACT’s Welfare Committee since 1950 have included: Jill Esmond, Sheila Attenborough, Constance Cummings, Doreen Mantle and Isla Blair.

Chairmen of Denville Hall’s House Committee have included: Margaretta Scott, Doreen Hawkins, Sheila Attenborough, Jane Downs, Lalla Ward and Lisa Bowerman. Muriel Pavlow has been a member for 39 years (to date).

As Chairman of Capital Radio, Richard Attenborough secured TACT office space there in 1984, and we ceased to share with the Theatrical (Ladies) Guild.

Finances continued to be a problem for Denville Hall, with on and off discussion (from 1972 onwards) about selling property on the estate, or using it for other purposes. TACT was still attracting few children but, retiring after 18 years’ service in 1985, Marion Brisley was replaced as General Secretary by Althea Stewart, and numbers began to rise.

In 1987, significant works were done to a bungalow on the estate, 60 Ducks Hill Road – a property that continued to require works for subsidence several times in the ensuing 25 years, and which was at one point gutted in an electrical fire.

Also in 1987, Richard Attenborough, now knighted, expressed a wish to retire as Chairman, and sought a Co-chairman to work with him for a year until he left. The Committee flatly refused, but the principle of Joint Chairmanship

was agreed – and its value shown by 15 years’ office of Angela Thorne and Simon Williams, and 5 years’ office (to date) by Geraldine James and Lalla Ward.

The death of Lord Olivier, our President, brought profound change. Richard Attenborough became President, as Olivier had expected and demanded.

## **The 1990s**

In the 1990s, Denville Hall became jointly registered to provide nursing and residential care. The new Home Administrator (and Matron), Moira Miller managed a period of remarkable change and development, with Lalla Ward as Chairman of the House Committee.

TACT’s work with children developed further, with more input from Mary Searls, as a Welfare Adviser, and an office team involving John Dunn, Brian Batchelor and Rowena Armstrong.

## **The new Millennium**

Mrs Carson and Alfred Denville might each have been surprised to know that their charities were not only still in existence, but thriving more than ever before.

After several years’ sometimes heated debate, moderated by Richard and Sheila Attenborough, the Trustees and Council took on a huge re-development project. The old part of Denville Hall was to be refurbished, from rooftop to cellar; the 1960s wing was to be demolished, and a vast new wing was to be constructed both to house our existing residents and to provide a purpose-built safe wing for those with dementia.

The initial budget was £5.5 million. The eventual cost, including furnishings and the additional cost of retaining staff but with only a few residents, reached £8 million.

TACT gave a grant of £1,000,000. Sir Paul Getty gave £1,000,000 in instalments. Legacies from Sir John Gielgud, Peter Glenville and others, were a boost. But finances were stretched, and the economic outlook was bleak.

At exactly the point when the Attenboroughs were considering re-mortgaging their home to add to our funds, the most extraordinary gift was received: Jeanne Stewart, associated with the Orphanage and TACT since 1935, now the Baroness Jeanne de Rothschild, left her estate to TACT. This eventually comprised more than £7 million. Our new wing became “Jeanne’s Wing” in memory of this remarkable benefaction. From the Rothschild estate, TACT’s £1,000,000 grant was also repaid, and a gift given to every child in tribute to the Baroness. Tim Denham was the Treasurer who oversaw the complex finances throughout this period.

The new Denville Hall opened in 2005. In 2010, after a short period with Julie Bignell, Moira Miller’s dedicated work was taken up by Eve Talmor as General Manager.

## **TACT’s work grows apace**

In 2001, TACT helped 70 children. A new General Secretary, Robert Ashby, aimed to tell more actors about our work, and, with a new Welfare Adviser, Hayley Bartram, from 2004, focussed on a warm, welcoming and trust-based relationship with actor-parents. Number increased, with almost

200 children being helped each year – the greatest number in the charity’s history.

In 87 years, Denville Hall has changed from being a digs for older actors, to a highly regulated and complex centre for nursing and dementia care. But it is still the home of elderly actors, and many with ‘residential’ status today mirror exactly those who sought shelter there in the 1920s.

In 114 years, TACT has responded to changes in social trends and attitudes, to wars, to the arrival of the welfare state, and to the extraordinary shifts in the working lives of the profession. Its work is different in 2010, but as important as it was when Mrs Carson first asked Sir Henry Irving what one could do for actors’ children.

### **Major Benefactors**

(equivalent to £100,000 or more):

The Baroness Jeanne de Rothschild

Sir Paul Getty

Sir John Gielgud

Prince and Nora Littler

Sir Noël Coward

Lord Grade of Elstree

Dame Edith Evans

Sir Terence Rattigan

Sotheby’s

Ken Bates

Sir Ronald Millar

Sir Cameron Mackintosh

Patrick Ide OBE

Ronnie Waters

Peter Glenville

Megs Jenkins

Equity Charitable Trust

The Combined Theatrical Charities

Irene Pearce

Lord and Lady Attenborough

*The Stage* Newspaper.

### **Former Denville resident benefactors, since 2000:**

Carmen Silvera

Elizabeth Welch

Theresa Newman

Daphne Odin-Pearse

Peta Broadhurst

Frank Middlemass & Geoffrey Toone

Margot Boyd

Mary Llewellyn

# TACT

THE ACTORS’ CHARITABLE TRUST

TACT helps the children of professional actors.

The charity has been indebted to the generosity of the theatrical profession since 1896. Donations and legacies have enabled us never to have to turn away an eligible child.

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[www.tactactors.org](http://www.tactactors.org)

*Based on original documents up to 1937, where retrieved; and then on anecdotes, press cuttings, library research, diaries, meetings of ex-orphans; and on memoirs by Judy Staber (who has written a remarkable account of growing up at Silverlands), Granville Bantock, Hugo Bergström and Roy Williams.*

*Corrections and additions are most welcome.*

**Robert Ashby** TACT May 2010





