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THE ABERLOUR

Orphanage Magazine

150 YEARS OF
RESIDENTIAL CARE



Caring for Children for 150 years

For over a century and a half Aberlour Children's Charity has been caring for Scotland's disadvantaged children and their families. Our charity started life as a small orphanage in Aberlour.

We've now become one of Scotland's biggest charities. Our priority is doing what is best for children, and whenever possible, the best thing for children is to keep families together. However, sometimes this isn't possible. 150 years after our founding, we still provide safe, loving homes for children who need them through our residential and fostering services.

Protecting children from poverty encouraged Canon Charles Jupp to open an orphanage for just four "mitherless bairns" in 1875. Today we're still fighting child poverty and striving to end it for good.

Our anniversary is a chance for us to celebrate but it's also an opportunity to commemorate our past and learn from it. Like many other organisations we must acknowledge some difficult and troubling aspects of our history.

"We're proud of our history but we must look backwards with clear eyes, take stock and look ahead to the future."

When the orphanage closed in 1967, 6,850 children had spent some of their childhood with us. We then began opening much smaller houses for children. Today we're making changes again in our commitment to Keep the Promise.

Scotland's Promise to care experienced children and young people is that they will grow up loved, safe, and respected.

Key to children's wellbeing is the ability to develop meaningful relationships with the people looking after them. If there are too many members of staff, or children have to compete with other children for time with adults that's a lot harder. We're trying to create a stable, family environment and that means our houses have become smaller and smaller as the years pass. We're moving to a model where there will be a maximum of four, more often three, children in our houses.

We know not all children are born with an equal chance. But like our founders, we will continue to care for children in need and be at the forefront to beat poverty and discrimination in Scotland.

SallyAnn Kelly

SallyAnn Kelly OBE
Aberlour CEO



The Original Mission

In 1875 Miss MacPherson Grant of Aberlour appointed Canon Charles Jupp to be her private chaplain and in return she promised that she would obtain a church, a rectory, a school and an orphanage.

Burnside Cottage was purchased and four children taken into care, looked after by Canon Charles Jupp and his wife. From here Aberlour Children's Charity was born. Stating his mission the Canon set out to provide equality for all children.

In 1882, a twenty-acre site next to St Margarets Church at Campbell's Park was purchased and the orphanage built. It included farm buildings, a school with a clock tower, built in 1880 - 1890, a laundry and a new residential block built in 1900. Further developments followed the fires of 1931 and 1937.

The orphanage provided essential care and education for up to 500 children at any one time. Some stayed until they were 15 years old, and were helped to find employment in farming, domestic service or in the armed forces.



"Every child has the ability and indeed the right to grow up and flourish in society, not withstanding the origins of their birth."

Canon Charles Jupp



Memories of the Orphanage



“Our school took its practical side seriously. The boys got an excellent course of horticultural and agricultural science and the girls got an equally good coaching in domestic subjects.”



“We were very happy kids, we were very close, very close, we’d share everything. We would fight and feud as well.”



“The Matrons were very much the Scottish type – strict, at times dour but happy and always easy to approach and converse with.”

“In 1921, the older boys and girls were given a penny per week to spend down in the village. Most of us made a bee line for Walkers the bakery shop where we bought a bag of supposedly broken biscuits in which were pies, cream buns and biscuits of all sorts – all for one penny.”



The First World War

In 1914, Britain went to war with Germany. Tens of thousands of young men signed up to do their bit for their country and the Aberlour orphanage was no exception.

At least 289 former residents played their part. 58 were wounded, 50 killed in action, 5 prisoners of war and 9 missing by the end of the war. Many of the “old boys” wrote letters throughout the war to the only home they knew, the Aberlour orphanage.



“I am back in France again; the troops had a good journey. I am sorry to tell you that my brother Alexander has died of wounds at Bethune; I miss him very much. He is gone but not forgotten. He was always looking forward to having a holiday at the dear old Aberlour home.”

Private William Rattray,
2nd Seaforth Highlanders.

“Old boys and old girls will be thinking deeply about the old home, and conjuring up pleasant memories of many happy days and bright Christmases spent there in long bygone years. I know too that the day will not be allowed to pass without your giving a thought to those of us who can only be present in spirit.”

From an Old Boy (somewhere in France) Christmas 1917.

“I am writing to you just before we go to the trenches again to hold the line. I expect to be getting my leave shortly, and when I do get it, I shall not forget to come and visit the old home.”

Private Ernest Partridge,
Cameron Highlanders.



Holidays

The annual day trip to Lossiemouth was looked forward to immensely by the orphanage boys and girls. They would all troop down to the local station to catch a special train and is well remembered by the youngsters and villagers alike.

“Our treat of the year every summer was our trip to Lossiemouth by train where we played on the beach all day and had a bag of buns and a bottle of lemonade to eat.”



Then in 1935, the orphanage purchased a house in the seaside village of Hopeman in Moray. Many boys and girls have fond memories of their summer holidays here.



“Later on the orphanage acquired a big house in Hopeman and we got a week’s holiday at a time. When we arrived they taught us fire drill from the third floor. They had an apparatus fixed to the bedroom wall. You had a belt round your waist, then you backed out of the window and abseiled down – good fun!”

“It was a great big house overlooking the sea. Every morning it was a case of getting your towel and costume for a swim in the sea via the bakers for a few pennies worth of broken biscuits. Afterwards it was ice-cream, putting, exploring the area in general or a trip over to Burghead Harbour.”



Ron Aitchison shares his memories of living at Aberlour

In 1950, Ron Aitchison arrived at the Aberlour orphanage as a ten-month old baby with his six brothers and sisters. At the time, boys and girls were separated and then divided into groups to live with children their own age.

“Although my family were in the same place, we all lived in different wings of the orphanage. I didn’t know I had brothers and sisters there until someone pointed them out to me in the playground when I was about seven years old,” says Ron.

“I have to say Aberlour was a thoroughly good experience for me. All I can say is good. I was happy there, they fed and watered me and I had clean clothes. But I knew nothing else, because I arrived there as a baby.”

Other children who arrived when they were older found it more difficult to cope.

“They were sent to the orphanage from all over Scotland, perhaps because of divorce or a death in the family. The first thing they wanted to do was run away from the orphanage and go back home. But I had no memory of a loving home and I never ran away.”

“These children would run away and a search party would be sent after them. They would be found a day or two later and returned to the orphanage after a day up the hills. They were seen as troublesome or difficult, but these children had emotional ties with the past and just wanted to go back to their own home.”

Ron has had a successful career in the automotive industry and is now a grandfather. He left the orphanage at fourteen years old and believes learning to be independent and obedient there prepared him to make his own way in the world. In his late 50s he moved back to the Aberlour area, beside the River Spey where he played as a boy, with his wife.

Ron continues to support Aberlour today by giving talks about his life and experiences in the orphanage. In 2022, he donated the large collection of photos, stories and artefacts from the orphanage he had collected over the years to our archive held by the University of Stirling.

David Divine on his childhood in Aberlour

David Divine left the Aberlour orphanage in 1964 but, he says, his years in the Highlands remain among the happiest of his life. David, now 71, who spent the first 11 years of his life at the orphanage says he found a family there.

“I literally had nothing, no one, and Aberlour gave me something and somebody.

It gave me food, shelter and affection.
It gave me a family and I was happy there.

I felt loved there, nurtured, and I'd never, ever had that before. In some ways, they were the happiest days of my life.

There is no doubt there could be sadness and bleakness but that was not my experience. That's not what I found at Aberlour.

What I found there was the only place in the first 20 years of my life where I actually felt nurtured, loved, cared for and valued.”



He left Aberlour in 1964, three years before the orphanage closed as we and policy-makers moved to make residential care homes smaller, less institutional, and, whenever possible, keep children with their families. David, who now lives in Canada after successful careers in social work and academia on both sides of the Atlantic, said:

“The change in direction improved care for many children but their fundamental needs remained unchanged. The same challenges remain and good, caring staff remain the key.”

The Orphanage Closes

In the autumn of 1967 the orphanage closed, reflecting changes in national welfare policies. Children were placed in smaller houses in the main cities of Scotland closer to relatives, fostered or adopted.

Stuart arrived at the Aberlour house in Keith when he was three years old in the early 70s.

“I remember being given a box of toy cars and thinking this place is great! The house itself was beautiful, parquet floors, under floor heating and a big piano in the corner. We probably had more in that children's house than anyone in that street. The house was big, but there were generally 8 to 10 children who lived there. These were the children I was raised with, they became my family, my brothers and sisters. It was a lovely place to be, to be brought up in and spend 10 years of your life.

Auntie Ethel and Uncle Bob looked after us. After three years of being bounced about foster homes, I was broken, but they showed me real understanding. They rarely told me they loved me, but I knew I was loved, I felt it.

After 10 years of living there, the house was closed down. I was lucky that Auntie Ethel and Uncle Bob fostered me. They quickly became mum and dad, and that's what they are to me. They were mum and dad right up until they passed in my 40s.”



Residential Care Now

Our priority is doing what is best for children, and whenever possible, the best thing for children is to keep families together. However, sometimes this isn't possible. 150 years after our founding, we still provide loving homes for children who need them through our residential and fostering services.

In 2025 we have seven residential houses and over 30 children living in foster care, in addition to disability houses and continuing care flats across Scotland. When a child can't live with their family, we believe they should feel safe, loved and that they belong. Many of the children and young people who come to stay with us have faced difficult experiences and trauma.

Together we build strong, supportive relationships where they can heal and grow. We're committed to Keep the Promise to Scotland's children, so like in the early 60s we're remodelling our residential houses. We will be moving to even smaller houses, where a maximum of four children will live for a more typical family environment.

We're incredibly proud of the children and young people who live with us...

Harry* wants to be a journalist, he's currently choosing his courses for college and going to Camp America this summer.

"I have the choice of two courses one for Media and Broadcasting level 7, or I can continue with Social Sciences. I will make my mind up soon. I keep thinking Camp America is going to happen, now I have my Police checks done. So, I am going to go for it, I don't want to miss this opportunity and later on think, why did I not go? Lots of good things are happening with college, Camp America and I have decided to live here too."



*Names changed.

Nathan* recently moved into his own flat but things got difficult, and he knew we were there for him.

"I knew I just had to get to the house, where I knew I would see the adults who love me, and I can trust them and knew there would be no ulterior motive. This is my home, and everyone here is my family. Aberlour is my safety net, I know I can always come here no matter what."

Last year Toni passed her driving test, but her achievements don't stop there, Toni has...



Moved into her own flat



Taken a flight independently to visit her sister



Secured a part-time job



Got accepted to study at college



Received an award from the local council for her outstanding progress



