

## 4: "DUNCROFT APPROVED SCHOOL"

by Dorothy Oppenheimer, B.A.

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"DUNCROFT" is an approved school for girls for which the N.A.M.H. acts as trustee for the Home Office. The name is taken from the beautiful Jacobean house in which live up to 26 girls who are 14-17 years of age on admission. This year the approved school was extended to include a contemporary specially designed hostel for a further eight girls, named Norman Lodge in honour of Lady Norman, who has been Chairman of Duncroft's Board of Managers since 1956.

### Board of management

This Board, which after advice from the psychiatrist and headmistress has the final voice of decision on whether a girl shall be accepted by the school, meets each month. It includes a psychiatrist, three magistrates, a chaplain, a psychiatric social worker, a psychologist, a senior probation officer and a youth employment officer as well as some people who live locally.

It is a pioneer school, the first in Britain to provide regular psychiatric treatment for the girls sent to it from the courts: girls who are usually of good intelligence, with offences mainly due to behaviour problems and sexual delinquency. A recent analysis of 50 girls who have been to Duncroft shows that only 8 were committed because of larceny, while 24 were beyond control and 18 in need of care or protection. Hardly any girl comes from a "normal" home, while the numbers who have lost at

least one parent through death, divorce or separation are high. Of the 50 girls quoted above, 22 had been parted from their father and 4 from their mother. Among some girls previously seen by staffs of Child Guidance Clinics there have been cases of personality difficulties in the parents which have at least partially accounted for their children's problems.

In selecting a girl for admittance, the psychiatrist, headmistress and Board of Managers endeavour to keep a balance between, for example, too many girls suffering from depression or aggression at one particular time. The responsibility for their welfare and the maintenance of discipline in the school and the hostel rests, of course, with the headmistress and her staff. This comprises a deputy head, 5 resident staff, 1 full-time teacher and 3 part-time for commercial subjects, domestic science and art, and 2 staff



A bedroom for four girls at Duncroft



*An Art Class at Duncroft*

otherwise of these home-leaves being used as one of the indications of the progress being made. Additionally 33 days' statutory overnight leave is permitted per year.

### **Treatment and schooling**

When the girls enter "Duncroft", the classifying schools provide social histories. Parents, however, often give additional details when their child has settled down at the school, and may be asked by the psychiatrist to provide specific information—about her early childhood, for example—to help with the psychiatric treatment she receives at "Duncroft".

On entry, unless considered too disturbed to do so, all new arrivals spend the first six weeks preparing for school subjects. (Those who are under 15 years of age naturally receive ordinary schooling.) When they first come to "Duncroft" the girls are very backward educationally, often needing instruction even in the 3 Rs in spite of the fact that many have a background of good schools and above-average intelligence. This is itself a measure of their disturbance of mind and/or the volume of earlier schooling many have missed through truancy.

During the first weeks each new entrant is assessed by the visiting psychologist who has three sessions each week, and by the teaching staff. The teachers decide whether she may be able to study for any examination—perhaps advising the study of one or more subjects for the General Certificate of Education, or Royal Society of Arts' or Pitman's typing examinations.

The opportunity for girls at Duncroft to take outside examinations was first given to them a few years ago, and boosted the school's morale considerably. So far in the G.C.E. examinations, passes have been achieved at "O" level in English Language, English Literature, Art, French, Physiology, and History.

Although only some of the girls receive regular schooling, all of them are given psychiatric treatment. The psychiatric team is composed of 2 visiting psychiatrists who work for 8

at the hostel. A full-time psychiatric social worker is on the staff, while a school chaplain and school medical officer are also in close touch with the school. Two secretaries, a non-resident cook and 2 gardeners are also employed, but the girls do all the other domestic work themselves.

The atmosphere of the school is friendly and tolerant. This is consciously created by such factors as the absence of a school uniform, the girls making or buying clothes which remain their own personal possessions; and permission to use make-up and choose their hair-styles. There are junior and senior sitting-rooms where record players and television are provided, or the girls can play their own music.

Apart from special cases where parental visits are not considered advisable, the girls may have as many visits from their parents as they can be encouraged to make. They are allowed to write and receive letters, and at certain times telephone calls are permitted. If approved by the psychiatrist and the headmistress, fiancés may visit them at the school. Many girls go home for a day at weekends unescorted, the success or

sessions a week, a psychologist and a psychiatric worker (already mentioned). The majority of the girls are thus able to have a weekly psychiatric interview which, of course, takes place at the school itself. This means that the psychiatrists know not only the girls, but the whole staff of Duncroft and its routine.

Because it is vital to have the utmost co-operation between the staff and the psychiatric team a weekly case-conference is held when individual girls are discussed. This is open not only to any members of the staff and team who wish to be present, but sometimes attended also by visitors and after-care agents including probation officers, child care officers and mental welfare officers.

It is the psychiatric social worker who is the main link between the girl while at Duncroft, her home, and the after-care agencies. While the provision of full psychiatric treatment in an approved school is unique to Duncroft, the P.S.W. faces a catchment area which may stretch from the Scottish border to Land's End. (The opening of the N.A.M.H.'s second approved school for girls, "Springhead Park", to be run on similar lines to Duncroft and to cater for girls in Northern England will reduce the geographical area from which they are taken.)

### Home-making skills

When the initial six weeks' period normally set aside to settling-in has elapsed, the girls are divided into small groups—usually of two or three and broadly according to age and temperament—for work in the kitchens, laundry-room, gardens or sewing-room. An instructor helps and guides them. For the very disturbed girls particularly it has been found to be therapeutically excellent to give them this opportunity of extra attention, of establishing friendly relationships with a member of the staff, and



*John Gregson, the film actor, signing autographs for some of the girls when visiting "Duncroft" on the day of the opening of Norman Lodge.*

of asking questions and discussing problems with less formality than is possible in a larger group. Since the domestic equipment used is modern, a pride in housecraft is generally acquired quickly, and a visitor to Duncroft will find that corridor floors, furniture, and the 17th century paneling in lounge and library shine with polish. Cookery-standards are also high, and when the average stay of 16 months is over, the home-making skills learned at Duncroft doubtless account at least in part for the girls who settle down in later life to a happy marriage.

Every effort is made to lead the girls' thoughts outside their own personal problems, to see that there is an outside world to which they will go back to live again, and to help them come to terms with both spheres. Outside activities are therefore encouraged. Volunteers run classes in drama and first aid for those interested in these subjects. Some girls sing in the local church choir, others swim in the public baths, or attend health and beauty classes in the district. Camping is the choice of some, while monthly theatre outings are also arranged, and there are weekly cinema visits for senior girls and monthly ones for the juniors. Local residents who have formed the

Duncroft League of Friends invite them to visit their homes. Some girls have even helped to look after mentally handicapped children in the district so that their parents can meet.

### Abscension

In spite of all the efforts and ideals of Duncroft, however, the work with the girls is tough and demanding. Often they have feelings of guilt for difficulties that have arisen at home. Abscension can then follow, and is punished by loss of privileges. Close co-operation between the psychiatric team and the school staff is then essential to try to understand what has caused a girl to run away at that precise moment.

Often the abscension is linked directly with a family crisis, yet some girls have had so little normal social pleasure in their homes that their first birthday-cake and birthday-party may be enjoyed at Duncroft.

The overwhelming majority of girls leave Duncroft to go into paid

employment, and return to live at home or enter lodgings. Before they are released under supervision the psychiatric social worker has normally endeavoured to arrange interviews with a youth employment officer, the prospective employer, and even a landlady, and during the period of supervision the P.S.W. has to provide social histories and receive reports on the girls at three-monthly intervals.

### Norman Lodge

The eight girls in Norman Lodge are at the stage of "pre-release". They are selected from Duncroft girls who have no satisfactory homes to which to return and are not yet mature enough to settle down both in work and a new environment. They therefore go out to work but live in the hostel, regarding it as their home, and the next step in full return to the community. Perhaps this is the ideal way to introduce them slowly to the kind of problems they will meet in normal life.

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