



FACTsheet 28

British Home Children

September 28th marks the annual commemoration of the first children sent to Canada from Britain as part of the child emigration movement. From 1869 to around 1940, over 100,000 children of all ages were emigrated with the help of churches, philanthropic organisations and workhouses, to be used as indentured servants and farm workers.

People were often led to believe these children were orphans, but research has found that only about 12% of them were – most were just poor. Many children were placed in the care of an organisation as a temporary measure due to the death of a parent or economic circumstances, with the intention of collecting them when the situation had improved.

Some parents were convinced by the organisations that their children would have a better life in Canada. Others were not even told that their children had been sent away until after they had sailed. Some never saw or heard from their children again and spent the rest of their lives looking for them.



British Home Children

There are a lot of recorded cases of children being sent to loving homes in Canada where they were welcomed into families and went on to lead healthy, happy and successful lives.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the situation for all children who were emigrated. Many experienced neglect and abuse. Records show that a number of children committed suicide and some were murdered.

The child migration scheme was borne out of the Industrial Revolution. Cities became overcrowded and families were dispersed, with men often leaving the rural areas to find work. Abandoned children were living on streets and workhouses were getting overcrowded. During the late 19th century, we see children from Penmaenmawr entering the workhouse in Conwy. In 1891 there were four children from this community living in the workhouse, aged 2 to 7.

It was thought that emigration offered a solution. Children would be sent to Canada under contract, requiring them to be housed, fed, clothed and educated. The idyllic rural life on a Canadian farm was viewed as a better alternative for the children living in slums and workhouses.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 1898.

CONWAY BOARD OF GUARDIANS.

FRIDAY.—Under the presidency of **Mr J. Allanson Picton**.—The Clerk reported the number in the house to be 103 as compared with 91 for the corresponding period last year. Tramps relieved during the month, 47.—The Clerk reported the arrears of the parishes to be £317.—Mr T. E. Parry was instructed to take the necessary proceedings to get the money in as soon as possible after the audit.—A resolution from the County Asylum Authorities approving of the scheme for the extension of the 4s grant to keep lunatics and idiots not in the Asylum was read, and its consideration deferred.—A letter was read from the Local Government Board with respect to emigration of orphans and deserted children to Canada.—The same Department wrote approving of the re-arrangements for better classification in the house.

Emigration of Children.—A letter was read from Mr R. F. Winter, of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, offering to take any of the workhouse children to Canada, as he was sailing with a party on June 23rd.—A letter was also read from Dr. Barnardo on the same subject.—The matter was deferred pending further correspondence.

Conwy Workhouse received regular correspondence from various organisations, offering children a 'new start' in Canada. We do not know how many children they agreed to send.



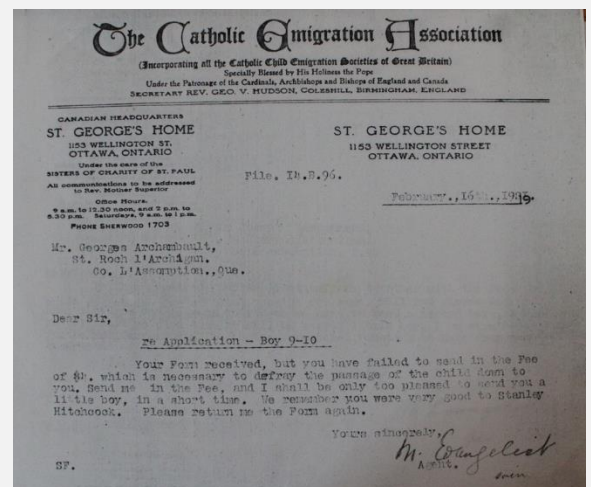
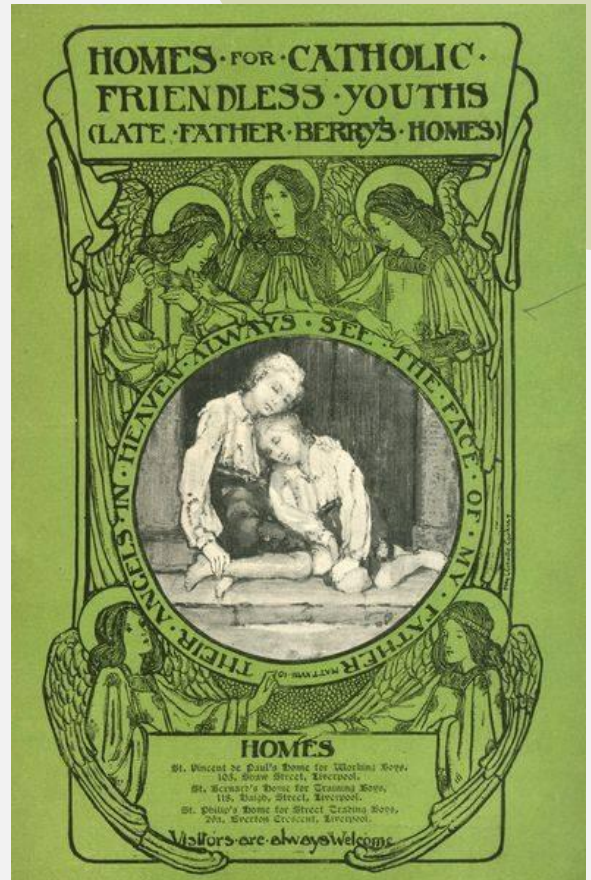
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When children arrived in Canada, they were sent to 'receiving homes'. We can only imagine how they would have felt, waiting to be sent on to their destination, wearing a cardboard sign around their necks. Some of the receiving homes were operated by charities that are familiar to us today, and some of them by church organisations.

One of those organisations, the Catholic Emigration Society, was administered by a local man. For the purpose of this factsheet, we are only going to use his first name.

The son of a vicar, Arthur was born in Dwygyfylchi. He went on to become a Barrister before leaving his practice to manage Father Berry's Homes in Liverpool. Whilst in that post, he also became Secretary of the Catholic Emigration Society. The Society, in partnership with Father Berry's Homes, opened 'receiving homes' in Canada in the 1890s.

Arthur was widely recognised for his philanthropic work. He was well-respected by his peers and when concerns were raised about the welfare of children by influential voices in Canada and the UK, he was commissioned by the Cardinal to travel to Canada with a colleague to investigate.



British Home Children

The investigation report was written for public consumption. It presented an idealised view of the benefits of child emigration, without the voices of the children experiencing it. Arthur went on to say that a child being sent to Canada would be: "one of a family, loving and loved in turn, with a consciousness, a proud confidence, that he belongs to someone and someone belongs to him: that a mutual affection binds him to others and others to him; that human beings take a deep interest in his welfare." But privately, Arthur was starting to get anxious about the protection of the children in Canada.

He was right to be concerned – placements were not adequately monitored and many children found themselves in worse situations. They were overworked, siblings were separated and children were re-assigned regularly from farm to farm.

In 1905, Arthur wrote to the Canadian Inspector of British Children to suggest that inspectors should visit all young British immigrants and not only those sent by the Boards of Guardians. This request was refused.



HAPPY CAREER IN CANADA.
The Clerk said he had received a report from Canada relative to the boy John Griffith, who had been sent out to that colony some time ago. The report, which was an excellent one, stated that the lad was getting on satisfactorily, and was at present employed by a Mr W. E. Jones, of Quebec, at eight dollars a month until April, when his wages would be increased.
Several members expressed their pleasure at the satisfactory progress made by the lad.

Arthur didn't get to see any changes in the welfare of British Home Children in Canada. He became ill with cancer and after seeking spiritual treatment in Rome, he came to Penmaenmawr where he died in 1906.

For many older 'Home Children', the First World War was an opportunity to try to get back to their families by joining the Canadian Forces. Some of them lied about their age to do this, seeing it as their only chance to escape. In the early 1920s, the aftermath of the war and the Spanish Flu epidemic had resulted in a shortage of labour, and the child emigration scheme started again in earnest. The scheme continued until 1948.



British Home Children

As historians, we will say that we cannot look at the past with 21st century eyes. However, it is difficult to use that phrase in this situation.

Many of the descendants of British Home Children are still piecing together their family histories and seeking answers about their ancestor's journey. For them, these experiences are not the past, they are living it now, and they are part of a strong British Home Children movement in Canada.

Much of the work is led by dedicated volunteers who manage the British Home Children Advocacy and Research Association. Their members have welcomed Penmaenmawr Museum in sharing our part of this story and their individual experiences.

It is estimated that over 10% of the current Canadian population are descendants of British Home Children. If you want to find out more about the history of British Home Children, please visit the British Home Children Advocacy and Research Association website. You will also find interesting documentaries on the topic on YouTube.

