

Sisters of St Vincent - Eastbrook

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The Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul first came to Dover in 1883 and bought cottages on Dieu Stone Lane. Originally known as 'D' Stone Lane, Dieu Stone Lane is an ancient right of way originally running from the Biggin Street side of St Mary's Church to Maison Dieu Road, then known as Back O' Charlton. Dieu Stone Lane marked the boundary between the Maison Dieu lands and the town. A large wool factory was established in the 18th century and the raw wool came from the surrounding area and the Romney Marsh. Continental wool combers had settled nearby giving the name to Woolcomber Street. Between Back O' Charlton and what became Woolcomber Street, was a narrow lane with cottages and a Seaman's' mission called Castle Place. Later the lane was widened and became the seaward end of Maison Dieu Road.

For centuries there was a foot bridge crossing of the Dour on Dieu Stone Lane and this, at the time the Sisters' arrived, was a favourite haunt of young boys who played, what we now call 'Pooh sticks'. There was a wicker gate on what became the Maison Dieu Road side of the river and nearby a large mill stone marked 'D Stone'. It was said that the stone had a 'magical quality' and during the day, local storytellers would sit there, tell the legends of old Dover and collect around them large audiences. In the evening lovers would meet there. Between 1830 and 1835, Castle Street was formed, running from Ashen Tree Lane to Market Square, and Back O' Charlton became of interest to building speculators.

Where Castle Street crossed Back O'



St Vincent Sisters c 1900

Charlton, there was a narrow lane called Maison Dieu Place. The Castle Street promoters widened this and Eastbrook Place was built on the west side between Castle Street and along Dieu Stone Lane. At the time, Eastbrook Place was promoted as being 'open to country breezes.' Back O' Charlton was laid in 1860 and renamed Maison Dieu Road up to Eastbrook Place on the west side. On the east side, it was Maison Dieu Road up to Castle Street. It was not until post World War II (1939-1945) that Maison Dieu Road was extended to the junction of Woolcomber Street but even then, Eastbrook Place retained its name. At about the time the magnificent St James' new Church opened in 1860, across the road from Eastbrook Place, John Jeken lived at Eastbrook House on Dieu Stone Lane. Captain Yates lived next door at 8 Eastbrook Place and by 1881, the villas along Maison Dieu Road that we see today had been built.

The history of the Sisters of St Vincent began with St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660). He was a French priest who dedicated his life to serving the poor and was canonized 1737. The story goes that in 1605, Vincent was on

a Marseilles ship in the Mediterranean that was captured by Barbary pirates following which he was sold into slavery. One of his masters was a famous alchemist and Vincent became knowledgeable in science and medicine. On the death of his master, Vincent was sold to a former Christian, who had converted to Islam in order to gain his freedom from slavery. Eventually, master and slave escaped back to France and by 1609, Vincent was in Rome. That year he returned to France as a chaplain and in 1612 was the confessor and spiritual director to the wealthy Madame de Gondy. She persuaded her husband to endow and support a group of able and zealous missionaries to work among poor tenant farmers and country people in general. In 1617, Vincent founded La Dames de la Charité - the Ladies of Charity - whose role it was to collect funds, for the missionaries.

One of these women was Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), an illegitimate daughter of a wealthy family. Louise had wanted to become a nun but was refused admission into the convents she applied to, probably on the grounds of continuing ill health. Her illegitimacy prevented Louise marrying well but an arranged marriage was made to Antoine Le Gras, a lowly secretary to the Queen Mother and Regent of France, Marie de Medici (1575-1642). The couple seemed to be happy but in 1625, Antoine died leaving Louise and their young son with very little financial means such that she was forced move to a cheaper area of Paris. Her new home was in Vincent de Paul's parish and she joined the Ladies of Charity.

Although the Ladies of Charity were doing good work, there was a need for an organiser - someone who was enthusiastic and educated but who could communicate, organise and teach the poor and sick. Vincent de Paul approached Louise and in 1629, she became that organiser and proved

to be very successful. In 1633, Vincent de Paul and Louise jointly founded the 'Daughters of Charity' (Filles de la Charité) - young, energetic servant women with the right attitude. Most had come from the country to Paris in seek of work and their role, as a 'Daughter', was that of nursing the poor in their own homes and caring for neglected children.

The number of Daughters of Charity quickly grew and they took on the needs of the sick and poor across Paris. From these Daughters, Louise invited four to live with her in order to gain systematic training in the care of the sick at the same time as deepening their spiritual life. These four women were the foundation of what became the Company of the Daughters of Charity or Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul (Societas Filiarum Caritatis a S. Vincentio de Paulo) as they were called when they received official approval in 1655. Unlike other religious communities, the members make annual vows throughout their life, which leaves them always free to leave without the need of ecclesiastical permission.

Known as the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, their work was highly esteemed and Louise and the Sisters were invited to Angers, then the capital of Anjou in the Loire Valley of Western France. Louise was asked to take over the management of St John the Evangelist Hospital that had been founded by Henry II (1154-1189) of England. She instituted a successful comprehensive scheme that included doctors and nurses as well as the Sisters. Louise then went on to expand the service of the Sisters of Charity to orphanages, mental and elderly institutions, prisons and even onto the battlefields. The nuns were popularly known as the 'Grey Sisters' as their habit was based on that worn by Breton peasant women - a grey wool tunic and a large starched cornette (headdress) of white linen. By the time of Louise's death in

1660, there were 40 Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Houses in France.

Prior to the French Revolution (1789-1799), Roman Catholicism was the state religion of France but on 13 February 1790, all religious orders were dissolved. In November that year the National Assembly required an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution by all those who had refused to accept the earlier legislation. A number of the Sisters refused and were guillotined as traitors. In the years that followed, Roman Catholicism partially regained its pre-revolution status and the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul were re-formed. As the 19th century progressed, there was a call for the separation of the Church and State and following the French elections of 16 May 1877. Moves were made for this separation and gradual secularisation began.

From 1880, there was a steady substitution of lay nurses for nuns in hospitals and an increasing number of Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul joined other Sisters who already had established a House in London. In 1905, the French Government instituted the separation of the Church and the State, which prohibited the official recognition, payments or subsidies of any religious organisation. In consequence, a large number of religious communities left the country and Edward VII invited them to come to Britain. Other communities settled in and around Dover, including Les Dames Augustines du Frécieux Sang who moved to Kearsney Manor, Les Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes, monks who moved to St Margaret's and Castlemount, and the Sisters of Ursulines of Jesus, who initially settled in Maison Dieu Road before moving to Castle Avenue. In 1934 Louise de Marillac was canonised by Pope Pius XI (1922-1939), her feast day is 15 March and she is the Patroness of Christian Social Workers.

The first English House of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul was founded in Sheffield in 1858 and a second in Westminster, London a year later. Having escaped the post 1877 anti-clerical laws in France, the numbers increased considerably and some were initially sent to Salford to open a convent there. At that time, there was religious hostility in south Lancashire towards Catholicism (see the story on Reverend Faithorn Green of Charlton Church on Doverhistorian.com) - so the nuns looked for an alternative place to start their work.

Under the guidance of Miss Eyston or Sister Augustine as she was called, on 15 August 1883 the Sisters who had previously been sent to Salford came to Dover. In the Dieu Stone Lane premises, they provided a holiday and convalescent home for children from the poorer parts of London. Soon they were taking in needy local women and girls from London and locally, as well as going into people's homes to provide nursing care. One of the Sisters had been with Florence Nightingale at Scutari, in the Crimea (now Üsküdar near Istanbul). Some of the Sisters also taught at St Paul's Catholic School and in 1886, Sister Cecelia Hill was appointed headmistress.

St Paul's Roman Catholic Church, Maison Dieu Road, was the first purpose built Catholic Church in the town since Henry VIII's Reformation (1529-1536). In 1835, a Methodist Chapel in Elizabeth Street was bought and refurbished by the Catholic community as a church and a school. The London, Chatham and Dover Railway Company acquired the Elizabeth Street premises in 1860 to make way for the Canterbury line and the Harbour Station. The compensation was generous from which the Catholic community purchased the site on Maison Dieu Road and St Paul's Church was built. Archbishop Manning of

Westminster and Dr Grant, Bishop of Southwark officially opened the Church on the 15 May 1868. Two years later work started on building a new school for boys at the east end of the church that opened in 1872. Ten years later a school for girls was built behind the boys' school and an infants' school in 1889. The total number of children accommodated was 170.

George Robinson of Castle Place owned several properties in the area where the Sisters of St Vincent had settled. He was the uncle of Sister Clothilde Robinson who persuaded him to donate 8 Eastbrook Place to the Sisters. Once they moved in, the Sisters took over the attic and the cellar for their own use with the remainder of the building being used for nursing care headed by Sister Augustine. In 1887, and paid for by Sister Hill, the Sisters took over 9 Eastbrook Place and shortly after number 7, paid for by a bequest of Sister Byrne.

The long wing of the house in Dieu Stone Lane was added in 1903 when the Sisters opened an orphanage for boys from the Catholic Children's Rescue Society. From 1907, number 7 was also part of the orphanage when the Sisters started working in conjunction with Southwark Rescue Society and Workhouse Association. These children came from the streets and workhouses of London and many had physical disabilities. The care offered included full time education at St Paul's school and in 1908, the Sisters bought Arlington House, 11 East Cliff. This was paid for by Sister O'Hare and used as holiday homes for poor children from London.

Following the outbreak of World War I (1914-1918), the Sisters decided to remain in Dover and continue with their work. However, the frequency of air raids increased and on 9 March 1916, a German seaplane dropped a bomb that landed on the roof of the convent.

It exploded and one of the Sisters was slightly hurt. Ten days later, when Dover was again under attack from seaplanes, another bomb landed on the building. The place was crowded and Sister Vincent was injured. The decision was then taken to move and temporary accommodation was found in St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex. The Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) - the women's branch of the Royal Navy formed in 1917 - required temporary accommodation, so the convent was repaired and they moved in.

When peace returned, the Sisters returned to Dover and they quickly picked up the reins of teaching, running the orphanage and community work. In 1927, in keeping with the philosophy of the time, they created 'open-air' facilities at Eastbrook Place. At that time, the tuberculosis virus was a killer and it was known that the disease was closely linked to poverty and overcrowding. As many of the orphans came from such environments most suffered from the disease. Medical treatment was limited but the philosophy of the open-air schools was that fresh-air, good ventilation and exposure to the outside would help to allay the progress of the disease and could possibly cure it.

By 1934, the number of children being sent to Eastbrook Place was overwhelming the establishment and the Sisters decided on opening a purpose built 'Daughter House' at St Leonards-on-Sea. The Vincent de Paul School, as the new facility was called, was staffed by Sisters from Dover and was both successful for the patients and popular with the authorities. During World War II (1939-1945), the medical treatment for tuberculosis advanced and the need for open-air schools diminished. St Vincent's became a boarding school for 45 girls with special needs, most of which were sent by Local Authorities. However, due to government cutbacks by 1993 there were only 12 girls and that year,

the school was forced to close.

Back in the 1930s, following the transfer of the children from Eastbrook Place to St Leonards, the Dover buildings were refurbished as a convalescent home for women and children from the poorer parts of London. So as not to cause confusion, the Dover Mother House was renamed St Mary's.

World War II broke out on 3 September 1939 and following the Dunkirk Evacuation between 26 May and 4 June 1940, Dover was at the front line of the Battle of Britain - 10 July to 31 October 1940. St Mary's closed and the Sisters moved with the children attending St Paul's school to Wales. All of Dover's children were evacuated and the St Paul's children were sent to Ebbw Vale, Monmouthshire. On Sunday 20 October, St. Mary's Convent at Eastbrook Place took a direct hit by a shell.

Albeit, although Dover was still subject to attacks throughout 1942, the children started to drift back to the town but there were no schools for them to attend. Teachers were reluctantly given permission to re-open schools and in 1943, the Sisters returned to Dover and taught mixed denomination classes at St Paul's school. On Friday 1 September 1944, a shell demolished Whyam House, on the opposite side of Maison Dieu Road from St Mary's and the convent was badly damaged by the blast.

Following the War, the Sisters continued teaching and they reopened the convalescent home for underprivileged mothers and children from London. Gradually, they took in an increasing number of elderly ladies and in 1958, following major refurbishment of the premises, St Mary's was registered with Kent County Council (KCC) as an establishment for the care of the elderly. The Sisters stated

philosophy was to provide a service, 'to all faiths and none' and the small ecumenical chapel was available for use by all the residents.

St Edmund's Roman Catholic Secondary Modern School, Old Charlton Road, was built in 1961 to accommodate 360 children. Seven years later, in 1968, St Paul's Primary School was transferred to the former Saint Ursula's Convent, re-named St Richard's Primary School. The Sisters taught at both schools as well as looking after the elderly at St Mary's, making home visits and were on the roster of the ecumenical soup kitchen. Most of the residents at St Mary's were self-financing although a few were aided by KCC. At the time, two helpers were employed one of whom later became a resident. On 20 September 1964, all the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, including those in Dover, adopted a simple modern dress and blue veil.

A story told by the residents at this time was about an elderly lady who regularly fed bread to the birds in the nearby Pencester Gardens. The Sister Superior asked the elderly lady to stop as the seagulls recognised her and would wait in St Mary's garden or Dieu Stone Lane. The elderly lady apologised and appeared to take notice of Sister Superior but every day she would go for a walk carrying an umbrella - whatever the weather. The seagulls would gather behind her trotting along! When the lady reached the furthest end of Pencester Gardens, she would open her umbrella ... and the birds would have a feast on the food that she had been carrying in the umbrella!

In 1977, stringent health and safety regulations were introduced and the Sisters were forced to comply otherwise KCC would rescind their registration. At the time, there were twelve Sisters and at first, they looked for a more modern building to house the

residents while keeping 7 Eastbrook Place as the Mother House. They put the remainder of St Mary's buildings on the market and went house hunting, but they could not find anywhere suitable.

Finally, the Sisters' took St Mary's off the market and decided to undertake an extensive rebuilding and modernisation programme. In 1979, architects Lee Evans Partnership of Canterbury were called in and for the duration, the Sisters and seven of the residents lived at 7 Eastbrook Place. Two years later twenty-six elderly residents, some of who had returned others new, found a transformation. The St Mary's premises were attractive, adapted to their needs and there were considerably more facilities available.

On 23 July 1983, celebrations were held to mark the centenary of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul having a House in Dover. The Reverend Michael Bowen - Archbishop of Southwark, officially reopened St Mary's followed by a Mass held in St Paul's Church. Guests included Peter Rees MP 1970-1987 and the Mayor,

Councillor Marie Hart.

Some years before, the house at the end of St Mary's garden was bequeathed to the Sisters by an elderly lady and had been used for short stay residents. At about the time that the alterations took place in the main building, the house living rooms were extended and a laundry room was added. The refurbished building was subsequently used for visitors. In 1988-1989, further improvements took place at St Mary's when a TV/video room was built and a larger lift was installed in a new location. The attic, where the Sisters once lived and the basement where guest nuns stayed, were both refurbished. These alterations increased the number of rooms for residents to 30.

The Castle Street Area Society, founded in 1988, helped to realise a promise made by Dover District Council (DDC) to upgrade the area and this included Eastbrook Place. Walker Brothers Civil Engineers started Work in 1990 and about this time the whole of Eastbrook Place was listed as Grade II. In February 2005, with only five Sisters left in

Dover, they announced that they would be leaving the town. Having sold St Mary's as a residential home for the elderly and headed by Sister Sarah King-Turner, Provincial of the Daughters of Charity of St Paul, they said their official goodbye. This was marked by a special Mass at St Paul's Church, with the principal celebrant Bishop John Hine, followed by a reception in St Mary's Church (Anglican) Hall. Since coming under new ownership the care home has retained the name and there is also another reminder of the Sisters time in Dover depicted in a window in St Paul's Church.



St Mary's Convent - 8 Eastbrook Place the Chapel - LS Collection