**EXTRACT FROM BOOKLET “WISEMAN HOUSE (SAWBRIDGEWORTH) A BRIEF HISTORY**

In 1923 the Church of England Trust Corporation bought Sawbridgeworth for the Mission of St. James and St. John. Sawbridgeworth was renamed St. Agnes Girls’ Home. For a short time it also housed young boys until, in 1925, the Mission bought another home, a two-storey house (now demolished) in Melbourne Avenue. This house, called “Hilton” became St. Nicholas Boys’ Home. For 40 years Sawbridgeworth was known as St. Agnes Girls’ Home.

In 1941 another building was constructed adjacent to St. Agnes Girls Home that was called “Lamble Cottage”. It was named after Archdeacon George Lamble from the Mission of St James and St John and it provided a smaller, more intimate setting for senior girls and marked a major turning point away from congregate care.

**A letter from a little girl at St Agnes to her mother (1 Sept 1927)**

The location of St Agnes meant that if families wanted to visit, it was some distance from the city and the surrounding suburbs. The letter does not tell us of the frequency of visits, it tells us only that the children missed their immediate and extended families and is a poignant comment that is consistent with children in care.

*Dear Mother,*

*I am just writing this letter to let you know we are all well and I hope you are well and happy also. I hope Ruby and Jessie got home allright on Sunday.*

*The days seem to be flying so it would be long before you come out again. I like this little writing pad, don’t you? If you see Ruby tell her I send my love to her. Tell Jessie I might write to her next week. I have a pretty yellow pansy coming out in my garden.*

*It is very wet and muddy out here. If you see Auntie Gert and Laley tell them I send my love, won’t you tell them all I send my love. I will try and send you the yellow pansy in this letter. I have still got the clip Jessie gave me on Sunday.*

*If you see Auntie Violet or Auntie Myrtle tell them I would like to see them again. I hope Grandma is well, tell her I send my love to her also. Millie went to the hospital on Monday about her eyes. It will soon be show week won’t it, will you be going?*

*There are 54 children in our home now. I meant to give you my doll to get fixed up if you could, but I forgot so I will give it to you next time. Tell Keith we send him our love and thanks for the cards he gave us.*

*Albie is only going to wear his watch on Sundays. It had been a very nice day out although we had some rain a few days ago. I will have to be going to say good-bye now. I will close now with fondness and love and kisses from your ever loving daughter Maggie.*

*Millie and Albie send their love to all at home. Sophie sends her love to you. Xxxxxx*

**Living at St Agnes Girls’ Home in 1954-1955 : A personal recollection by Judith Aljian**

*Living at St Agnes children’s home in 1953-54 was very different for me, being an only child who had never been away from her mother, to living with many other girls of all ages. This was also just after doctors had told my mother that she would die in three months. I had no contact with family or anyone outside the home, except for school. There would have been about 50 to 60 residents.*

*The buildings were incredible, with the main house, where most of the girls were accommodated, and the cottage, which was to the south of the main building. To the east were stables, at the north of this was the housekeeper’s residence and to the south were the laundries, over the top was storage and the shoemaker’s repair rooms. These stables were built with bluestone blocks, solid and beautiful.*

*The main area was the dining room, which had a surrounding gallery on the upper floor. Personal lockers for the children were up against the east wall. Doorways on the north were entrances to the scullery, storage rooms and bathroom/infirmary. To the south, were kitchens, back stairs, also a back entrance to the library.*

*Sleeping was accommodated in the upstairs bedrooms, the sleep out which could be entered from either end of the gallery, also the cottage which was new at that time. Each room had a head girls and younger children. The nursery accommodated very young girls, with a much older girl in charge.*

*The food provided was unchanging, of good quality and abundant.*

*A matron controlled the home with the assistance of a younger matron and limited various staff. There was no communication between the staff and children except for supervision of cleaning duties and discipline.*

*Cleaning was performed by the residents, each girl had responsibilities for cleaning an assigned area. This was policed continuously and failure to comply brought physical punishment. Laundry was performed by the older girls, before and after school.*

*Each resident had three sets of clothes, one for church, one for school and one for home. If any of these clothes needed repair, the dressmaker was in her room after school and she would instruct the child on repairing the garment. I learnt to darn my two pairs of socks very well.*

*Though the Mission to Streets and Lanes ran this home, the girls were taken to church most Sundays and grace was said before and after each meal. The only real religion that was taught came with the visits of deaconesses. In my time at the home, about a year, I saw them twice.*

*Judith Aljian*

**In the *Story of the Mission of St James and St John 1919 to 1954* the following note appears:**

*One of the biggest problems faced in the early years was overcrowding. St. Agnes Girls Home by the 1940s could recall times when its sides have almost bulged and the verandahs have been weighted down by an overflow of beds.*

**More recollections of living at St Agnes**

Marie Graham (nee Smith) born in 1926, was placed in foster care with the Children’s Welfare Department from an early age and in 1935 a letter of request was sent from the Superintendent of that Department to the Matron of St Agnes requesting a placement for her. She was recovering from having taken caustic soda that had burnt her mouth. Marie has many memories of her life at St. Agnes which have been supplied by her daughter Sue Graham. Following are some of these letters.

**The St. Agnes Marching Band**

*After washing up each evening, the scullery girls were given a tray with a brush to remove all the crumbs from the table tops. “Thought it would be fun to form a marching band, and suggested to the other girls that we bang our brushes on the trays and march around the tables. This went over very well with the girls but I have very clear memories of Mrs.50 Rock (the Matron) standing on the balcony and saying with a very stern look on her face “Just because we have an inane person, do you all have to follow her?” Our band was short lived and the crumbs removed very quickly.*

**“Have a banana dearies”**

Fond memories of Annie Wiseman who lived in her own home nearby.

*Each week two or three girls would have the job of walking to Annie Wiseman’s home and collecting the keys to the church. This was a treat we all looked forward to. Annie was kind and generous to us girls and I will always remember Annie saying to us each time we went to get the key “have a banana dearies”. She seemed to have a never ending supply on hand. To this day I love bananas.*

**Garden Plots**

*Many of the girls at the home were given garden plots of their own. Each year there was a competition to see who had the best plot. I knew without doubt that my plot was the best! I had befriended the gardener who gave me plants and showed me how to set the plants out in order of height. Imagine my horror when I didn’t win the competition.*

**Closure of St. Agnes**

In 1963 it was decided to move the girls to more modern accommodation and subdivide the St Agnes land into building blocks. The people of St Matthews felt that the property should not pass out of the hands of the church, and bought the part of it (approx. 12 acres) that included the old Wiseman home, the Lamble cottage and the old two storey stable, a brick building at the rear. The stables later burnt down.

Note: more recollections, photos and information is included in the printed booklet (item 0004).