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Department of Historical Studies

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2009

**Michael Mantin**

**‘A Great Army of Suffering Ones’:  
The Guild of the Brave Poor Things and Disability in the Late  
19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**



In June 2009, the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Bristol voted to begin to publish the best of the annual dissertations produced by the department's 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduates (deemed to be those receiving a mark of 75 or above) in recognition of the excellent research work being undertaken by our students. As a department, we are committed to the advancement of historical knowledge and understanding, and to research of the highest order. We believe that our undergraduates are part of that endeavour.

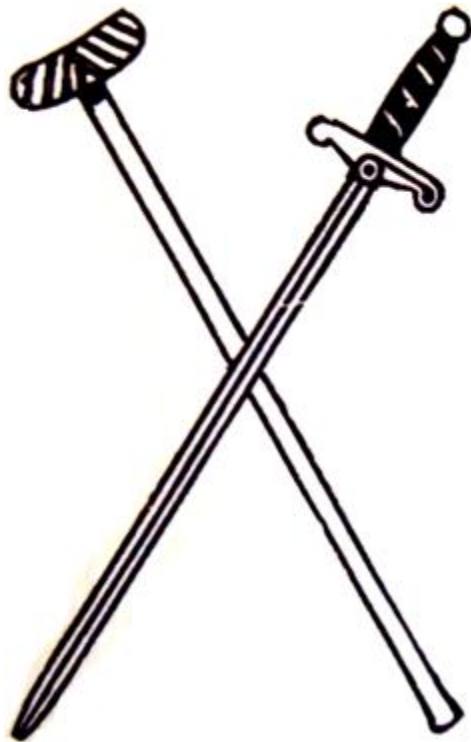
This was one of the best of this year's 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate dissertations.

Please note: this dissertation is published in the state it was submitted for examination. Thus the author has not been able to correct errors and/or departures from departmental guidelines for the presentation of dissertations (e.g. in the formatting of its footnotes and bibliography).

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**“A Great Army of Suffering Ones”**



**The Guild of the Brave Poor Things and Disability  
in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth  
Centuries**

## Introduction

Physical disability has only recently become an area of historical enquiry. The few historians who do write about it frequently point out the lack of research carried out about attitudes towards, and especially the experience of, disabled people throughout history.<sup>1</sup> Yet the category of disability history is fast developing, often by disabled scholars. Michael Oliver, for example, compares its emergence to the rise of black and feminist history, arguing that, as a marginalised group, disabled people ‘have discovered that they must write their own histories.’<sup>2</sup> Though some key works have consequently been produced, much disability history is oversimplified. It either relies too heavily on overly abstract conceptual frameworks or does not pay enough attention to disabled people’s voices, instead seeing them solely as objects of medical attention or institutional oppression. This dissertation aims to address this with regards to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by focusing on the Guild of the Brave Poor Things. This was an organisation which brought people with physical impairments together to socialise and, in some cases, work or be educated. Focusing on the Bristol branch of the Guild (led by Ada Vachell, who herself had scarlet fever which left her deaf in both ears<sup>3</sup>) and the Heritage Craft Schools in Chailey, Sussex (a school for disabled children founded under the banner of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things), it will be argued that this extraordinary organisation – rarely mentioned in historical work – provides important new insights into our understanding of attitudes towards disability at this time. The history of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things arguably challenges some of the assumptions found in disability history, which is sometimes inadequate or depersonalised.

Few historians have written specifically about disability in this period, though some attempts have been made in general histories of disability and sociological works which stress the importance of historical awareness. Since the earliest works which address disability, there has been a tendency for historians to write and use sources from the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (Basingstoke, 2005), 197; B. Gleeson, ‘Disability Studies: A Historical Materialist View’, *Disability & Society*, 12:2 (1997), 185; E. Bredberg, ‘Writing Disability History: Problems, Perspectives and Sources’, *Disability & Society*, 14:2 (1999), 189. Gleeson and Bredberg’s articles do not contain much historical study, so will not appear in this literature review, however they are excellent critiques of the current historiography of disability, outlining the faults of previous attempts and what is required from future historians of disability.

<sup>2</sup> M. Oliver, ‘The Politics of Disablement Chapter 1’. <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Oliver/p%20of%20d%20Oliver%20contents.pdf>> 15 December 2008. All of the articles by Michael Oliver used here first appeared in his book *The Politics of Disablement*, mentioned as a key work in this introduction.

<sup>3</sup> F. W. Unwin, *Ada Vachell of Bristol* (Bristol, 1928), 13

perspective of institutions. As Bredberg comments, early histories of disability were largely written from a medical viewpoint, and tend to present a linear narrative of progress to improved standards of medicine and care.<sup>4</sup> While the medical developments presented in these histories are important, by using an institutional, top-down perspective, this type of account ignores the social experience of disability. The lives of disabled people are rarely visible when they are presented solely as recipients of medicine and care.

Some more recent histories of disability have also taken an institutionalised approach, though one which challenges the idea that the evolution of state attitudes to disability was part of a linear progress ending in success. Deborah Stone, for example, traces disability through the history of English Poor Law policy, beginning with laws regulating vagrancy in the fourteenth century, and culminating in the categories of ‘deserving poor’ expressed in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act – the ‘sick’, ‘insane’, ‘defectives’ and the ‘aged and infirm’. She believes these inform part of our contemporary concept of disability.<sup>5</sup> This approach acknowledges the social factors which inform disability: Stone finds that physically impaired people become ‘disabled’ by their environment, a view which is shared by many disability scholars and which also forms part of contemporary definitions of disability.<sup>6</sup> Yet by concentrating solely on social policy and using institutional sources such as the Poor Laws, Stone does not explore what it was like to be disabled. Gleeson refers to Stone’s model as a ‘beggared’ history of disability, the result of focusing mostly on state attitudes which present only a picture of disabled people as vagrants or people dependent on relief.<sup>7</sup> This minimises their role as historical actors and, regarding the nineteenth century, can lead to a generalisation of disabled people as helpless workhouse inhabitants which, as we shall see, is far from justified.<sup>8</sup>

Stone’s work also provided part of the framework for the materialist historical school which has developed within disability studies. Stone argues that societies see disability as a ‘distributive dilemma’ – a need to balance the principles of work and need – which was

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<sup>4</sup> Bredberg, ‘Writing Disability History’, 190

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Stone, *The Disabled State* (Basingstoke, 1985), 40

<sup>6</sup> C. Barnes, ‘Foreword’ in Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*; J. Scheer and N. Groce, ‘Impairment as a Human Constant: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Variation’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 44:1 (1988), 24

<sup>7</sup> Gleeson, ‘Disability Studies’, 191

<sup>8</sup> The dissertation will keep in mind Oliver’s point that the historical significance of institutions should be stressed but has led historians to ignore the home life of disabled people. M. Oliver, ‘Disability and the Rise of Capitalism’ <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Oliver/p%20of%20d%20Oliver3.pdf>> 15 December 2008.

‘solved’ by the workhouses which allowed for both. This concept was developed by sociologists who use a social model of disability which sees industrialisation as an ideological turning point which validated the practice of segregation which continues into the present day. Vic Finkelstein sets out a theory of attitudes towards disability based on this structure, dividing the modern era into three phases. Phase 1 spans from the beginning of the modern era (though no date is given) to industrialisation, and saw disabled people oppressed by society (their impairments were seen as a result of sin or misfortune) but not segregated. Phase 2 was initiated by new technology, which created institutions for segregating disabled people (for example, asylums and workhouses), which leads to ‘phase 2 attitudes’ of dependence and discrimination. Phase 3 will see the independence of disabled people.<sup>9</sup> Finkelstein’s model is useful for uncovering some of the factors behind discrimination of disabled people: disability is created partly by oppression, rather than a ‘personal tragedy’ which can be cured by medicine or care. Yet it is too rigid, and does not account for variation in the lengthy period it covers. Moreover, both phase 1 and phase 3 are not fully explored and have been criticised as idealised and over-optimistic.<sup>10</sup> Though his insights into the creation of prejudice through institutionalisation are highly relevant, Finkelstein’s work places too much emphasis on industrialisation, which is seen as almost the sole creator of negative attitudes towards disabled people.

Other historians have criticised this materialist view, and focus instead on culture. Tom Shakespeare, for example, argues that materialist histories of disability overstress the economic factors behind attitudes towards disability, and place insufficient emphasis on meaning.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare’s study emphasises negative portrayals of disability in culture, which create traditions of prejudice. He uses literary sources, including portrayals of disability in *Leviticus* and *Richard III* as well as Victorian and contemporary literature, to argue that cultural representations traditionally reinforce fear of impairment, which is seen as ‘Other’, or a challenge to human society.<sup>12</sup> Colin Barnes presents a similarly ambitious narrative, attempting to relate modern discrimination to the mythology and practice of infanticide on deformed children in ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>13</sup> These kinds of interpretation again

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<sup>9</sup> V. Finkelstein, ‘Attitudes and Disabled People: Issues for Discussion’ <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/finkelstein/attitudes.pdf>> 3 November 2008, 6-8

<sup>10</sup> Oliver, ‘Disability’

<sup>11</sup> T. Shakespeare, ‘Cultural Representation and Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?’, *Disability & Society*, 9:3 (1994), 289

<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare, ‘Cultural Representation’, 284

<sup>13</sup> C. Barnes, ‘A Legacy of Oppression: A History of Disability in Western culture’ <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Barnes/chap1.pdf>> 3 November 2008; C. Barnes, ‘A Brief

challenge the idea that disability is solely an individual concern, as it sees attitudes towards disability as part of a long tradition of prejudice and discrimination. Yet this approach contains some weaknesses. The histories in this category are frequently short and do not focus on a particular period. This often results in a lack of detail and evidence for their arguments, as well as some historical errors, such as Barnes using the ideas of Augustine of Hippo and Augustine of Canterbury, but attributing them to the same person.<sup>14</sup> By seeing disability history as a constant narrative, these accounts also run the risk of ignoring the historical context of specific periods, therefore providing a consistent, somewhat ahistorical picture of disability.

Recent histories of disability have emerged which do not limit themselves to a specific framework. Michael Oliver's *The Politics of Disablement* covers both contemporary and historical issues of disability, and challenges the individual and medical model of previous disability history.<sup>15</sup> Oliver's study is heavily influenced by materialism, but does not call for a rigid social theory like Finkelstein. This allows him to use elements of the cultural approach, including a discussion of disability as a New Social Movement.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Anne Borsay has written a comprehensive history of social policy relating to disability. Her study takes an institutionalised approach focusing mainly on government and institutional policy. Yet she argues that disability has a 'history of exploitation', and uses her approach to question the attitudes of the leaders of these institutions.<sup>17</sup> For example, her section on special education illuminates the important issue of 'economic rationality' (focusing special education on industrial training rather than intellectual education) which, as we will see, will be a key question here.<sup>18</sup>

Institutionalised, materialist and cultural histories of disability have all provided some insights into the lives of disabled people, however many of them rely on frameworks which are too limiting or overly abstract, and only recently have histories emerged which do not limit themselves to these. It is therefore necessary not to rely on one specific framework here, but to use ideas from all these studies of disability. A study of Guild of the Brave Poor

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History of Discrimination and Disabled People' <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Barnes/disabled%20people%20and%20discrim%20ch2.pdf>> 15 December 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Bredberg, 'Writing Disability History', 192

<sup>15</sup> Oliver, 'Politics of Disablement Chapter 1'

<sup>16</sup> M. Oliver, 'The Politics of Disablement – New Social Movements'. <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Oliver/p%20of%20d%20Oliver8.pdf>> 15 December 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 207

<sup>18</sup> Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 107-9

Things offers new insights into disability in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Guild is relatively absent from history: it has only been mentioned briefly in historical works, and there has been no attempt to fully explore it in the context of disability history.<sup>19</sup> Yet the Guild's activities address key issues in the history of disability and contradict some of the generalisations that have been made. It must be kept in mind that the Guild could be a relatively uncommon case and should not be used to represent the entire actions of disabled people in this era. Yet, if we exercise caution, it provides a valuable case study of a range of key questions.

Firstly, a study of the Guild enables us to address the issue of disabled identity, which is an important aspect rarely found in historical accounts. Rose Galvin stresses the importance of disabled identity in history, arguing that it has partly been created by how disabled people are judged by others, but, as a marginalised group, their prescribed identity can change if it challenges the 'status quo' of discrimination and prejudice.<sup>20</sup> The Guild is an excellent case study for the historian who is interested in how disabled people viewed themselves in this era. The group met to socialise every week, and have described their group solidarity and everyday experiences. The identity created by the Guild through these meetings shows a remarkable intertwining with the militarism and patriotism that was prevalent at this time, and it can usefully be compared to other movements which exhibited these qualities, for example youth organisations such as the Boy Scouts. The records of the Guild offer a new perspective which challenges generalisations about disabled people as beggars or helpless objects permanently dependent on medicine and care.

A study of the Guild also contributes to our understanding of education and economic rationality. This is particularly visible in its apprenticeship scheme (in which disabled children were found 'suitable' work in light trades) and the methods of the Heritage Craft Schools for disabled children, which were associated with the Guild.<sup>21</sup> Read and Walmsley's recent study of the history of special education makes the important point that the curriculum of special education focused mainly on gender-defined manual training more than the 3 'R's.<sup>22</sup> The Guild and its school in Chailey allow the historian to explore this point from a

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<sup>19</sup> K. J. Brehony, 'A "Socially Civilising Influence"? Play and the Urban "Degenerate"', *Paedagogica Historica*, 39:1/2 (2003), 97-8

<sup>20</sup> R. Galvin, 'A Genealogy of the Disabled Identity in relation to Work and Sexuality', *Disability & Society*, 21:5 (2006), 509

<sup>21</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 80

<sup>22</sup> J. Read and J. Walmsley, 'Historical Perspectives on Special Education, 1890-1970', *Disability & Society*, 21:5 (2006), 460



new angle, as they both enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy and involvement by disabled people than most state special schools. The historian should address Borsay's issue of 'economic rationality': one can ask whether the Guild set out to provide opportunities for its members to achieve economic independence.<sup>23</sup> We can also look for the responses of its members and pupils, asking whether its focus on vocational training was received positively, or was regarded as limiting by its members.

Overall, by placing the Guild in a social and economic context, it is possible to see how disabled people socialised and reacted to their everyday problems, challenging the aforementioned 'ahistorical' nature of some accounts of disability. Of course, the limits to the Guild's historical significance must be taken in account. Although the Guild was relatively large – according to its London founder Grace Kimmins, by 1901 it had 12 branches across the United Kingdom and 1000 members – it did not represent the entire experience of disabled people in Britain in the 19th and early 20th centuries, despite its broad membership in terms of class and age.<sup>24</sup> Its location in cities, for example, would suggest it does not offer much evidence about the lives of disabled people in rural areas. One should also not assume that, because of the Guild's existence, a large amount of disabled people had access to similar groups. Yet for the historian studying attitudes towards disability, the Guild is a valuable case study. This is made possible by the wealth of sources related to it.

Much disability history has restricted itself to using sources from institutions which give only a top-down perspective. Bredberg argues that the use of these sources do not allow for an account of the 'lived experience of disabled people' unlike contemporary disability studies, which frequently draw on personal narratives.<sup>25</sup> So far there have been few attempts to find the voices of disabled people in sources, as Stephen Humphries and Pamela Gordon point out in the introduction to their book *Out of Sight*, which is (so far) the only collection of oral sources from this era.<sup>26</sup> The records of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things and Heritage Craft Schools which will be used here similarly help to redress the balance.

The sources give a clear picture of the Guild's activities and structure. The Guild's Annual Reports and pamphlets, written by its deaf founder Ada Vachell, include pieces about the suffering and inadequacy felt by their members and how the Guild attempted to address

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<sup>23</sup> Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 197

<sup>24</sup> 'Guild of the Brave Poor Things, pamphlet by founder and organising secretary Mrs C. W. Kimmins (Sister Grace)' (1901), Bristol Record Office, 39842/PM/4, 7

<sup>25</sup> Bredberg, 'Writing Disability History', 191

<sup>26</sup> S. Humphries and P. Gordon, *Out of Sight: The Experience of Disability 1900-1950* (Plymouth, 1992), 9

this.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the Heritage Craft Schools released pamphlets which set out clearly their intended aims and educational practices.<sup>28</sup> The sources can certainly help the historian achieve a good understanding of the motivations of the Guild's leadership. One must, of course, exercise a degree of caution before taking them to be a reflection of their entire membership's opinions. The sources still come from the staff of the organisation, even if they do perhaps show more solidarity and insight into the experience of disability than other institutional sources due to the Guild's founder, Vachell, being disabled herself. They are also overwhelmingly positive about the activities of the Guild and their reception by its members. We should therefore be careful when using these sources, and keep in mind that they tend only to represent one perspective – the heads of the organisation – which may leave out many problems faced by the Guild and Craft Schools, or unsatisfactory feedback from members. A series of photographs included with the Chailey reports help us envisage how the school was run, however these have been selected, and possibly show only the most appealing elements of the school. Despite this, these sources still contain valuable information about how its members reacted to their disabilities.

The records available also include a collection of letters. Many of these were written by the committee to local newspapers asking their readers for financial assistance. These give a good idea of how the organisation sought to project itself to the public. The records for Chailey Heritage Craft Schools include letters to key figures such as the Chief Medical Officer of the Board of Education, therefore situating the school directly in the debate about special education and the wider themes which are attached to this, such as economic rationality.<sup>29</sup> The letters allow for an alternative view of the Craft Schools, as they are not aimed at a public readership and, in the replies, they also enable the historian to access external opinions about the organisation. Again, one should treat these carefully, as they have been selected for inclusion in the archives, and may represent only positive responses to their organisation. Few sources are available which originate directly from Guild members, though Thea Thompson's study *Edwardian Childhoods* includes an illuminating interview with Thomas Morgan, a pupil at Chailey. His opinions cannot account for all the pupils, but can be used here as a case study.

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<sup>27</sup> 'The Story of 1897' in 'Annual Reports 1897-1923', Bristol Record Office 39842/A/2(a)

<sup>28</sup> 'The Heritage Craft Schools, The Guild of the Brave Poor Things, The Guild of Play: Pamphlet of notes, reproduced documents, photographs, accounts etc' (1914), East Sussex Record Office HB/130/2

<sup>29</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools'

Because of this lack of multiple perspectives, it is necessary to use the method suggested by Read and Walmsley in their history of special education (though it can apply to all sources used here). They argue that the historian must look for ‘received’ as well as ‘intended’ messages in the sources.<sup>30</sup> This will involve asking further questions about their meaning, and using other sources to create a clearer picture of the lives and motivations of their members and pupils. We should situate the sources firmly in their social context, asking how public attitudes towards disability informed what is written in them. This will be done by drawing on the secondary literature discussed above, as well as consulting other contemporary sources. An example of these are Humphries and Gordon’s oral history project, and articles which appeared in local newspapers both about the Guild of the Brave Poor Things and Victorian philanthropy in general. These are also not representative of the entire spectrum of attitudes towards disabled people, however by using a broad range of comparative sources, it is possible to read further into our main sources’ intended meaning.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the sources and the possibility that the Guild of the Brave Poor Things was not entirely typical of the experience of disabled people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it will nevertheless be argued that it is an important aspect of disability history which is yet to be studied. The dissertation will explore a number of aspects of the Guild in relation to the themes and issues we have identified here. Chapter One will introduce the Guild of the Brave Poor Things, focusing on the Bristol branch and its weekly social meetings. It will ask what ‘Guild afternoons’ meant to their attendants, and how they formed a collective, positive disabled identity which is rarely mentioned in historical accounts of disability. The material published by the Guild will be analysed in a social context, examining how Vachell’s actions related to the wider picture of Victorian philanthropy and how she incorporated themes of militarism and patriotism into Guild meetings. Chapter Two will then consider the organisation against the backdrop of contemporary debates about disabled work and education. By focusing on the Guild’s apprenticeship scheme and their related Craft Schools at Chailey, the chapter will ask whether disabled people were seen by even these organisations as suitable only for manual labour. Ideas from historians of disability will be used to question the factors which informed education, care and the search for work for disabled children. Yet rather than solely adopt a top-down, institutional perspective (despite the sources being written mostly by and to the staff), it will also attempt to find the reactions of the Guild’s apprentices and pupils. It is

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<sup>30</sup> Read and Walmsley, ‘Historical Perspectives’, 457

hoped that, by placing this rarely studied organisation in a clear social and historical context, a new perspective on the experience of disability in history will become visible.

## Chapter One: Guild Afternoons

The first branch of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things was formed in London in 1894 by Grace Kimmins, a Wesleyan sister who was becoming involved in philanthropy.<sup>31</sup> She named her organisation after Juliana Horatio Ewing's *The Story of a Short Life*, about Leonard, a boy who dreamt of being a soldier but was 'crippled' by an accident, yet coped with his disability by making the Book of Brave Poor Things.<sup>32</sup> Her Guild adopted the motto *Laetus Sorte Mea*, also taken from the book, which translated as 'happy in my lot', to sum up the attitude of the Guild. Members would meet to socialise, play and attend technical classes or lectures. The meetings would be decorated with flags and military imagery. These basic features of the Guild were in place throughout its existence and in all incarnations of the Guild: they were included as 'rules' in a 1901 pamphlet issued by the Guild's London headquarters and appear to have been strictly enforced: branches of the Guild 'must' meet these 'criteria'.<sup>33</sup> As we shall see, these were to form the basis of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things' unique vision of disabled identity.

Kimmins' Guild was visited by Ada Vachell, the daughter of an iron merchant who had been mayor of Cardiff, in 1895. Vachell was inspired to create a Bristol branch of the organisation which emerged in 1896.<sup>34</sup> Her version of the Guild presents us with an excellent case study of how The Guild's central message and imagery was used. Indeed, it was recognised by Headquarters in 1901 as one of the most successful branches: their report began with the praising words, 'If ever the word "success" could honestly be written over any work done...'<sup>35</sup> Vachell's vision of the Guild relied on Kimmins' basic structure, however her writings suggest she incorporated her own personal beliefs and emotions. Vachell was frail and deaf in both ears, caused by scarlet fever inherited from her family. The fact that she was herself disabled perhaps informed her version of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things. Frances Unwin's biography attests that her disability affected her 'vivid interest in all that went on; she so hated feeling stupid and shut out.'<sup>36</sup> This would suggest, therefore, that Vachell's

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<sup>31</sup> Brehony, 'A "Socially Civilising Influence"?', 97; S. Koven, 'Kimmins [*née* Hannam], Dame Grace Thyrsa (1870–1954), Child Welfare Reformer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34315>> 23 March 2009

<sup>32</sup> 'The Story of 1897', 6

<sup>33</sup> 'Guild of the Brave Poor Things', 8

<sup>34</sup> E. Baigent, 'Vachell, Ada Marian [*known as* Sister Ada] (1866–1923), Worker for Disabled People', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/59841>> 23 March 2009

<sup>35</sup> 'Guild of the Brave Poor Things', 39

<sup>36</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 21

Bristol branch of the Guild addressed her own feelings towards disability: it would be an organisation led by disabled people, for disabled people.

It is important to remember that Kimmins, who constructed the Guild's central message and imagery, was not disabled. Kimmins' involvement with the West London Mission inspired the formation of the first Guild of the Brave Poor Things.<sup>37</sup> Notably, none of Vachell's writings directly mention her own disability, therefore it should perhaps not be overstated. Vachell seems to have had a philanthropic attitude: she is described by Unwin as having a passion for beauty and repulsion to ugliness, guided by a sense of pity.<sup>38</sup> This is worth exploring: this element of 'pity' seems to cast Vachell as a typical female philanthropist and social activist of the era.

To recruit members to the Guild of the Brave Poor Things, Vachell talked to relieving officers and visited the poorest streets in Bristol. Here, concerns about disability and poverty become intertwined, as seen when Unwin refers to the process as 'slumming'.<sup>39</sup> Vachell's work resembles one of the most common methods for Victorian women to undertake philanthropic activity: most of the activists in Jane Lewis' study of women and social action in this period began by visiting the poor. Vachell's passion for beauty and dislike of ugliness would seem to contradict her 'slumming', however this attitude was not uncommon, as Lewis finds similar sentiments in her study from reformers such as Beatrice Webb.<sup>40</sup> Though it is not possible to examine the complex motives and variation found in female Victorian philanthropy here, this nevertheless suggests that Vachell was partly guided by similar principles of sympathy, or perhaps a sense of duty to help those less fortunate.

Indeed, an article from 1913 in the *Bristol Times and Mirror* places Vachell in a local philanthropic tradition. For them, Vachell was 'in keeping with the traditions of the city that claimed many philanthropists'.<sup>41</sup> This sees the Guild as an extension to philanthropic work, its achievement and credit traced to one woman. It is portrayed here as a charity, existing to 'brighten the lives of sufferers who were terribly handicapped in life by their defects.' The article is, of course, ignoring the sense of agency and identity which is so significant in the

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<sup>37</sup> Koven, 'Kimmins'

<sup>38</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 21

<sup>39</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 21

<sup>40</sup> J. Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot, 1991), 11

<sup>41</sup> 'A New "Heritage." Brave Poor Things at Fresh Home. Opened by the Countess of Carnarvon', *Bristol Times and Mirror*, Saturday 28 June 1913 in '1897-1913 and n.d. Newscuttings', Bristol Record Office 39842/PM/7

Guild's history, however this interpretation of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things still raises the question of the Guild's status as a philanthropic endeavour, or even a 'charity'.

The Annual Reports of the Bristol branch of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things, written by Vachell, contain charitable language which emphasises sympathy and pity. The first report in 1897 wrote that the members were 'wonderfully responsive to sympathy' and 'pathetically grateful for kindness'.<sup>42</sup> The Guild also enlisted able-bodied helpers who 'because of their own glad health and strength are more readily touched with the feeling of others' infirmities.'<sup>43</sup> For these helpers, work for the Guild appears to be an expression of moral duty because of their own good health, informed perhaps by a sense of guilt. This position recalls Lewis' work on Victorian female philanthropy, which argue for similar motivations.<sup>44</sup> Yet if the historian sees the Guild solely as a 'charity', its members could become objects of relief, denied any role within the organisation.

Despite these charitable overtones, the Bristol branch of the Guild does not refer to itself as a charity in its reports and material. It is important to look beyond the obvious elements of sympathy and charity in the Guild's leadership, as it had a much deeper significance for its individual members. Another article in the *Bristol Times and Mirror* fascinatingly hints at this:

It must not be assumed that the Guild has brought into existence another charity, another society for the distribution of doles which are of no permanent benefit to those who receive them... the real object is to make life sweet for the blind and crippled folk of all ages to be found in our city.<sup>45</sup>

The article detaches the Guild from the idea of 'charity' (here in a financial sense<sup>46</sup>) by highlighting arguably the Guild's primary function: socialising and creating a pleasant experience for its members. Vachell held weekly 'Guild afternoons', which involved games and singing, which added up to 'the very brightest and busiest afternoons possible.'<sup>47</sup> Yet their significance extends beyond creating temporary enjoyment for disabled people. Vachell's writings frequently stress the lasting impact of the afternoons: in her eyes, the

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<sup>42</sup> 'The Story of 1897', 15

<sup>43</sup> 'The Story of 1902' in 'Annual Reports 1897-1923', 4

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, *Women and Social Action*

<sup>45</sup> 'Guild of the Brave Poor Things: What It Has Done and What It Hopes to Do', *Bristol Times and Mirror*, Friday April 11 1913 in '1897-1913 and n.d. Newscuttings'

<sup>46</sup> As the article mentions, the Guild of the Brave Poor Things did give out financial assistance to some of its members, however this was not its main purpose. Our discussion of the Guild's apprenticeship scheme will examine the economic motivations behind the Guild in detail.

<sup>47</sup> 'The Story of 1897', 9

Guild built friendships and created an ‘inspiration’ for their members which lasted beyond their one weekly meeting.<sup>48</sup> Of course, one should not assume from Vachell’s writings that every Guild member attached quite as much significance as her about the meetings. Still, by looking carefully for the individual voices of its members, the historian can begin to attempt to find the meaning of the Guild for disabled people. By doing this, a distinct disabled identity will begin to emerge.

The Guild brought together disabled people in a way unlike any other organisation found in this period. Certainly, it shared philanthropic ideals with other charities and organisations, however it developed an identity and attitude amongst many of its members which went far beyond ‘helping’ them. We can return to the work of disability historians such as Rose Galvin, who argues that a disabled identity can function as a ‘counterpoint to the norm’ – in other words, creating a strong identity as a marginalised group.<sup>49</sup> This chapter will now look at how the Guild of the Brave Poor Things did in some ways build a ‘counterpoint to the norm’ not only by bringing together disabled people, but by occasionally emphasising the positive aspects of being disabled. This trait is exceptional in Victorian and Edwardian history.<sup>50</sup> Returning, for example, to Vic Finkelstein’s theory of ‘phases’ of attitudes towards disability, the Guild of the Brave Poor Things would fall into ‘Phase 2’, which he believes is characterised solely by oppression and discrimination. For Finkelstein, attitudes towards disabled people did not stretch further than believing they were helpless and had suffered ‘personal tragedies’.<sup>51</sup> It is undeniable that many people – both disabled and able-bodied – in Victorian and Edwardian England would share this view, however the Guild reveals a degree of self-respect in its attitudes which demands detailed discussion.

The Bristol Guild’s Annual Reports convey a message of pride and solidarity amongst its members. Almost everything written by Vachell includes an expression of satisfaction which she believed all its members received. Occasionally, this extended to seeing disability in a fully positive light. This is seen in an example cited by Vachell in the 1907 report, in which a young girl exclaims, ‘O! I am so glad to be a cripple!’ When asked in disbelief why she would be glad, the girl responded, ‘It is so beautiful to belong to the Guild, and I couldn’t

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<sup>48</sup> A. Vachell, ‘The Account of a Guild at Work’ in G. T. Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools and Hospitals, Chailey 1903-1948: Being an Account of the Pioneer Work for Crippled Children* (London, 1948), 19

<sup>49</sup> Galvin, ‘Genealogy of the Disabled Identity’, 500

<sup>50</sup> In the course of my research, I did not find any other organisations which promoted disabled identity in this way.

<sup>51</sup> Finkelstein, ‘Attitudes and Disabled People’, 7



unless I had lost my leg.’<sup>52</sup> While this is almost certainly not a typical member of the Guild (her enthusiasm may also have been exaggerated by Vachell), it is interesting that some of its members are seeing their own disabilities in a positive light because of their experience in the Guild.

The use of humour by Guild members about their own disabilities is similarly notable. According to Vachell, some Guild members share ‘many a joke over each other’s deficiencies’, for example a blind Guild members ironically greeted friends with, ‘I am so glad to ‘see’ you!’<sup>53</sup> Here, it is possible to see disabled people addressing their disabilities in a distinctive way by using humour and camaraderie. It shows a degree of confidence, suggesting the Guild contributed heavily to the development of its members’ self-esteem. There is also a sense of dignity and respect being built in many aspects of the afternoons. This is most noticeable when Vachell addresses the problem of Guild members being ‘starved intellectually as well as physically’ by holding lectures on a variety of subjects (though these were restricted to male members).<sup>54</sup>

One of the most complex and fascinating features of the Guild was its use of militarism and patriotism in its imagery. This was a prominent feature of the Guild from the beginning and is stressed heavily by Vachell. In the first Annual Report of 1897, she describes how the Guild aims to establish itself as ‘a military religious order – if such could be!’<sup>55</sup> The emphasis on militarism forces the historian to ask a number of questions about how the Guild fits into the social context of Victorian and Edwardian England. John Springhall has convincingly argued that leisure organisations aimed at able-bodied children such as Boys’ Brigade and later the Scouts were beginning to incorporate military values. For these organisations, this was partly addressing debates about ‘national efficiency’ (particularly in the light of revelations about the British Army’s poor physical state after the Boer War), and would contribute towards an image of physical strength and masculinity which could uphold the British race.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’ in ‘Annual Reports 1897-1923’, 8

<sup>53</sup> Vachell, ‘The Account of a Guild at Work’, 17; ‘The Story of 1902’, 10

<sup>54</sup> ‘The Story of 1897’, 16

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Story of 1897’, 8. This also reminds us of the Guild’s use of religion: the reports do not give great details of this, however they do mention the singing of hymns and prayer to address disability and attempt to create a collective spirit.

<sup>56</sup> J. Springhall, ‘Baden-Powell and the Scout Movement before 1920: Citizen Training or Soldiers of the Future?’, *The English Historical Review*, 102:405 (October 1987), 942; J. Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements, 1883-1940* (London, 1977), 17

It is perhaps surprising to see the Guild using these themes, as the idea of disability is seemingly incompatible with these movements' emphasis on fitness. Stephen Humphries and Pamela Gordon argue that many parents of disabled children would feel shame if they did not fit the 'stereotype' created by these youth movements. This was undoubtedly experienced by many disabled children, and indeed Humphries' and Gordon's interviews reveals the isolation of being kept 'out of sight' because of their parents' shame.<sup>57</sup> Yet the Guild's use of militaristic and patriotic symbolism suggests there is another dimension to the ways in which disabled people could think about themselves, deploying the same values which in other contexts served only to alienate them.

The Guild primarily used military imagery to create positive feeling amongst its members, who are described by Vachell as 'a great army of suffering ones'.<sup>58</sup> Yet here, the contrast between the idea of an 'army' and the fact they are 'suffering' hints at the complex meanings behind the use of military symbolism to describe disabled people in this period. Militarism was used as a spirit to unite its members, and was visible in many aspects of the Guild, yet its message is difficult to define. The Guild's logo – a crutch crossed by a sword – is a good example of how military symbolism created a collective identity. Photograph 1 shows its use on Guild membership cards, bringing together the members of the Guild through symbolism alongside a verse which reinforces the message that disabled people can be valuable, dignified members of society. Vachell reinforces this interpretation, but in turn brings up further issues: the logo proved that Guild members 'endure hardness as good soldiers, that they fight ever in the good fight where there is place in the ranks... for bent and twisted even as for straight and strong.'<sup>59</sup> In this passage, the fact that they are participating in the 'fight' of life suggests that they are arguing for their inclusion in society among the 'straight and strong'. Used in this sense, this comparison to soldiers is perhaps directly challenging the experiences of marginalisation described by Humphries and Gordon.

This is, however, only one interpretation of the Guild's militaristic imagery. Most commonly, Guild members are compared to soldiers because they saw their own lives as a fight or struggle. Vachell's Annual Report of 1902 opens with such a comparison: Guild members 'go out daily into a battle-field, where pain is the enemy to be met and overcome.'<sup>60</sup> For the children in the Guild, Vachell emphasises the 'sense of heroism' which is awakened

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<sup>57</sup> Humphries and Gordon, *Out of Sight*, 25-6

<sup>58</sup> Vachell, 'The Account of a Guild at Work', 17

<sup>59</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 47

<sup>60</sup> 'The Story of 1902', 3

by the idea of ‘bearing suffering as a soldier’.<sup>61</sup> The metaphor is taken further in a pamphlet produced by London founder Grace Kimmins, who compares disability to a soldier’s wounds, allowing members to ‘...wear in mortal agony the smile of happy triumph.’<sup>62</sup> By creating a comparison to soldiers, therefore, Guild members strengthened the bonds between each other as friends, but could also perhaps come to terms with the ‘agony’ of their own disabilities.

This interpretation could also be applied to the strong sense of patriotism which undercut many of the Guild’s activities. The prominence of the Union Jack united its members and provided a way for the ‘Brave Poor Things’ to confront their disabilities. The flag was on display at every meeting and is included in Kimmins’ list of ‘guidelines’ for all branches of the Guild.<sup>63</sup> Yet again, it could be given deeper significance by individual members. After a Guild member had died, her mother refused to remove the flag from their house because it ‘stands for Victory’.<sup>64</sup> Here we see individual Guild members projecting their own personal meanings onto patriotic symbolism. Militarism and patriotism were interrelated in this purpose, and their relationship is summed up well in a passage by Vachell:

The Union Jack had a very important place in the affections of the Guild for, strange and incongruous as it may seem, this unwarlike company considered themselves a regiment of soldiers, and they were proud of their flag as soldiers should be proud.<sup>65</sup>

Once again, the message of pride, dignity and self-esteem is strengthened by the military and patriotic imagery, yet it is contrasted with the perception of disabled people as ‘unwarlike’. Many of Vachell’s descriptions of the Guild compare the collective spirit of the Guild members with reminders of their impairment or low social status. This could be explained by the aforementioned philanthropic elements of Vachell’s attitude, however this is an important theme visible in many Guild sources, and suggests that its members had conflicting positive and negative feelings towards their own disabilities.

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<sup>61</sup> Vachell, ‘The Account of a Guild at Work’, 17

<sup>62</sup> ‘Guild of the Brave Poor Things’, 6

<sup>63</sup> ‘Guild of the Brave Poor Things’, 8

<sup>64</sup> ‘The Story of 1902’, 20

<sup>65</sup> Vachell, ‘The Account of a Guild at Work’, 17

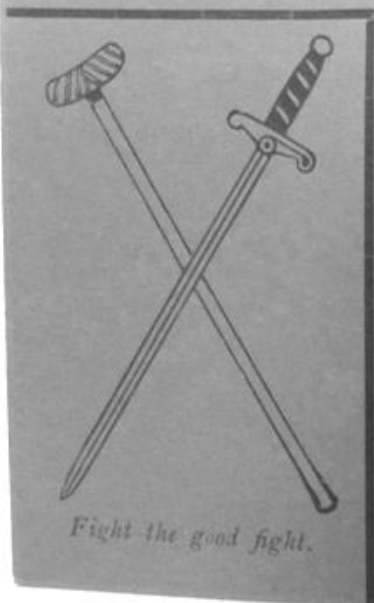
City of Bristol  
Guild of the Poor Things.



“*Lætus sorte mea.*”

*Founder* : MRS. KIMMINS  
(Sister GRACE).

*President* : MISS ADA VACHELL (Sister ADA),  
Severn House, Sneyd Park, Bristol.



“ Measure thy life by loss instead of gain :  
Not by the wine drunk, but the wine  
poured forth.  
For love's strength standeth in love's  
sacrifice,  
And whoso suffers most hath most to  
give.”

*Associate* \_\_\_\_\_

*Date* \_\_\_\_\_

Photograph 1.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> ‘Annual Reports 1897-1923’. This membership card was included as an insert alongside the Annual Reports. The date is unknown but is certainly before 1923, and contains the Guild logo and motto which was used in the period studied here. I have come across no record of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things removing ‘Brave’ from its name, this is here presumably because of space constraints.

This balance can be seen even in the name The Guild of the Brave Poor Things, which exemplifies its mixed imagery: by forming a Guild, its members are unified, however its members are still reminded of their impairments. Vachell's 1897 report reveals that 'objection is sometimes made to the curious-sounding title of the Guild', however she explains there is no 'sting' or 'reproach' intended.<sup>67</sup> Yet there is an underlying message of inferiority, seemingly assigning them a lower physical and social status to 'normal' people. This is further seen in the Guild's motto, *Laetus Sorte Mea* ('happy in my lot'), which is described in the 1907 Annual Report as '...an honest attempt to accept the handicap, and in spite of crippling keep happy of heart.'<sup>68</sup> Again, members are brought together by a spirit of happiness and friendship, however they are still limited to a role as inferiors.

The Guild's name and motto may have been imposed by the Guild's leadership, however it is likely that its members shared this attitude: they could not escape from their 'lot'. Despite having earlier seen a girl proclaiming she was 'glad to be a cripple', it is important to remember that the Guild rarely celebrated disability. The 1907 Report introduces the idea of a 'Fraternity of Pain', emphasising further the suffering of its members. Again, the contrast is made between the Guild's optimistic outlook and their physical impairment. Part of the positive attitude of the Guild seems to have been created through solidarity with others' difficulties. Vachell offers an interesting perspective on this, suggesting that, 'I think perhaps it does us all good to sometimes see others so much "worse" than oneself.'<sup>69</sup> The 'fraternity' could therefore work in complex ways: Guild members could feel better about themselves by comparing their situation to less fortunate members.

Guild reports frequently remind members of their physical limitation and often compared them to 'normal' people. Occasionally, this was done in an optimistic way which could present disability as abnormal but not a hindrance. The 1897 Report discusses games being played at Guild meetings, suggesting that 'our cripples will often join in a game quite as gaily as those whole and strong of limb'.<sup>70</sup> Other aspects of the Annual Reports suggest, however, that its members did not feign equality to 'normal' people. This is particularly striking in a description of a female member's death which Vachell prints in the 1911 Report. She has gone to heaven, where there is 'no cripples, nor sorrow, nor death.'<sup>71</sup> This vision of

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<sup>67</sup> 'The Story of 1897', 5-7

<sup>68</sup> 'The Story of 1907', 4

<sup>69</sup> 'The Story of 1902', 15

<sup>70</sup> 'The Story of 1897', 9

<sup>71</sup> 'The Story of 1911', 16

heaven seems undercut almost by contemporary eugenic ideals which see disabled people as a lower class than able-bodied people.<sup>72</sup> Thus, while the Guild aimed to build solidarity between its members, it still sometimes portrayed disability as a negative, undesirable experience. To further examine this, it is necessary to ask how the Guild presented the everyday experience of disability.

The 1897 Annual Report – which served as an introduction to the Guild presumably for both potential members and onlookers – opened with a gloomy portrayal of disabled life in Bristol:

Poor pitiful objects with paralysed or distorted limbs sat dully as they had, year in and year out, doing nothing and having nothing done for them... The deaf lifted their impassive faces – the outcome of that silent world in which they lived. Upon the faces of the blind was written “acquainted with grief.”<sup>73</sup>

The Guild was clearly capable of presenting a negative picture of the experience of disability, which here serves to justify its very formation. When focusing on these aspects of the Guild’s material, this portrayal of disabled life seems to resemble Humphries and Gordon’s social historical study of the experience of disability in this period. They argue that family life for disabled children was characterised by ‘ignorance, fear and superstition’ among parents.<sup>74</sup> Though the Guild included disabled people of all ages, elements of this can certainly be seen in this passage, which hints at a life devoid of social contact or meaning. In addition, the 1907 report presents the Guild as an alternative to feeling ‘useless and helpless’ amongst ‘the strong and bread winning members of the family’.<sup>75</sup> By comparing disabled people to their able-bodied relatives in this way, the Guild reinforces a negative image of the experience of disability, but also acts as a medium for disabled people to confront their situations and build a meaningful alternative.

Vachell often contrasted the Guild’s activities with gloomy descriptions of its members’ home lives. She uses the Guild’s Holiday Home in Churchill, Somerset as a counterpart to members’ ‘dirty and over-crowded and wretched’ homes.<sup>76</sup> This is partly explained by Vachell’s passion for ‘beauty’, however it is also making the point that the

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<sup>72</sup> Montague Crackanthorpe’s 1907 article in the *Fortnightly Review*, for example, places the ‘mentally and physically afflicted’ as the lowest form of human existence. M. Crackanthorpe, ‘Population and Progress – II’, *Fortnightly Review*, 81:482 (February 1907), 215

<sup>73</sup> ‘The Story of 1897’, 4

<sup>74</sup> Humphries and Gordon, *Out of Sight*, 12

<sup>75</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’, 5

<sup>76</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’, 17

Guild provided an escape for members who were experiencing difficulties in everyday life. A middle-aged Guild member at a garden party, for example, explained how she had ‘never seen the world before I joined the Guild’.<sup>77</sup> The Guild’s focus on nature and the outdoors (which will later reveal itself as a key factor behind Chailey’s ideals of its pupils’ education) here becomes an escape for many of its members from lives of poverty and neglect.

The Guild could be a positive force in its members’ lives, however we should finally question how it might have been viewed by able-bodied outsiders. The name Guild of the Brave Poor Things, for example, may have unified its members, however one should consider what its impact would have been to onlookers. Humphries and Gordon’s interview with Betty Holland, who contracted polio in 1913, revealed that she faced abuse and embarrassment for going to the ‘Cripples Parlour’ [sic], a similar club for disabled children.<sup>78</sup> The Guild of the Brave Poor Things may have been seen in a similar way by outsiders. Discussing a Guild holiday to their Churchill Holiday Home, Vachell reveals that a local misinterpreted its name: ‘You live at the Home where the Little Bad Things are, don’t yer?’ Vachell’s interpretation is interesting, arguing that he ‘felt nothing but kindness we are sure, and a difficulty often experienced of understanding the quaint name of the Guild.’<sup>79</sup> Even if the man did feel ‘kindness’, this still highlights the varying reactions the Guild presumably received from onlookers, which could perhaps undermine the sense of self-respect otherwise being developed through its activities.

Vachell hints that many external reactions to the Guild were founded on pity and sympathy. Describing a Guild concert, she writes that, ‘They do not... know the appeal they themselves make by... the pathetic contrast of radiant faces and maimed and crippled bodies.’<sup>80</sup> The concert is offering members respite from the problems caused by their disabilities by bringing them together for entertainment, however they seem to have received only a response of pity from outsiders (and, in this passage, Vachell herself). The Bishop of Bristol stated in his visiting speech, for example, that ‘the greatest force that could move the minds and stir the hearts of men and women was sympathy.’<sup>81</sup> This again sees disabled people only as passive objects of sympathy, removing the voice the Guild gave to its disabled members.

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<sup>77</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 43

<sup>78</sup> Humphries and Gordon, *Out of Sight*, 44

<sup>79</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’, 17

<sup>80</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’, 15

<sup>81</sup> ‘A New “Heritage.”’

Local newspaper reports may give a good idea of how the Guild resonated with the press and the public. A *Bristol Times and Mirror* report opens with a dark description of disabled life in Bristol: ‘there are so many of these [disabled people] everywhere... Bristol is no exception. They lurk in the dark places of our cities.’<sup>82</sup> This imagery seems to further objectify disabled people, assigning them a status below ‘ordinary’ members of society. Yet it also mirrors the Guild’s own 1897 report’s opening statement which outlined the difficult life which many disabled people faced in this period. Indeed, the article goes on to praise the Guild for its ‘bond of fellowship in suffering’, which suggests that, even if outsiders had a tendency to view the Guild’s members as inferior to themselves, the Guild still functioned to raise public awareness of disability. The fact that these reports are even acknowledging the ‘bond of fellowship’ demonstrates how the Guild could in some ways overcome negative or patronising outside attitudes.

If we look beyond the language which many modern readers would find patronising, it is this ‘bond of fellowship’ which makes the Guild so outstanding in late nineteenth and early twentieth century disability history. Poverty, discrimination and prejudice could clearly be a part of disabled life, however historians have rarely looked into how disabled people addressed these problems. The Guild offered a community in which they could escape from or confront them. We have seen how the Guild began to offer its members a sense of purpose, an alternative to feeling ‘useless’ through collective identity. The question of ‘usefulness’ informed two more aspects of the Guild – its apprenticeship scheme which found work for its members, and the Chailey Heritage Craft Schools which ‘grew out’ of the Guild.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Untitled article, *Bristol Times and Mirror* (1899) in ‘1897-1913 and n.d. Newscuttings’

<sup>83</sup> Vachell, ‘The Account of a Guild at Work’, 19



## Chapter Two: Work and Education

The Guild of the Brave Poor Things did not limit itself to leisurely afternoons of games and socialising, though these clearly meant a great deal to its members. It also brought work and education to its members. The Bristol branch of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things' apprenticeship scheme was an initiative which began early in the Guild's existence.<sup>84</sup> In one sense, it was simply a means of finding work for children who could not do so otherwise. The Annual Reports give an idea of the problems which disabled people could face – the 1907 report focuses on Jesse, who was told to 'go home and grow' when he sought jobs other than a newspaper round.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the Guild seems to have faced problems itself in finding employers: 1911's report (the latest analysed here) explained how they were 'finding it increasingly difficult' to find employment for disabled children.<sup>86</sup> The Guild was particularly pessimistic in its attitude to finding work for disabled adults, lamenting that 'work is hardly obtained by handicapped people: the race seems ever to the swift, the battle to the strong.'<sup>87</sup> Clearly disabled people were facing discrimination by employers, and it is notable that the Guild was addressing this situation at all.

At the same time, the Chailey Heritage Craft Schools were undertaking a similar task. The school was formed by the Guild's founder Grace Kimmins in 1903 and educated young disabled children, beginning with seven boys from the London branch of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things. It was, as Kimmins argues in her 1948 book, the 'child' of the Guild.<sup>88</sup> Chailey was the first residential school for disabled children and offered its pupils education and opportunities for play (both of which will be discussed later in the chapter), yet arguably its main purpose was to train the children in manual labour. Kimmins writes that all its pupils become 'skilled craftsmen' through 'training and treatment'.<sup>89</sup> Yet this focus on manual training – both in the apprenticeship scheme and at Chailey – raises further questions about disability in this era. One must ask if the Guild created a better life for its members through work and education, or reinforcing the message that they were in a low position on the social hierarchy by offering them only manual work.

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<sup>84</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 81

<sup>85</sup> 'The Story of 1907', 12

<sup>86</sup> 'The Story of 1911', 9

<sup>87</sup> 'The Story of 1907', 9

<sup>88</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 25

<sup>89</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 25

The concept of working and becoming ‘useful’ ties in with the Guild’s creation of identity, dignity and the need to feel something other than ‘helpless’. Vachell argues that Guild members were grateful for the sense of purpose and usefulness given to them by the very concept of work. The 1902 Report includes a quotation from a blind man who feels guilty to be on Parish pay, ‘If I could *any* way earn enough to do so – God knows the joy I should have.’<sup>90</sup> Vachell includes many examples like this in her Annual Reports, stating that many of her members expressed an emptiness which could be filled by work. Indeed, older members of the Guild participated in voluntary handicraft classes as part of Guild afternoons. They could not find work like the Guild’s apprentices but were still ‘craving the interest and joy that work brings into life.’<sup>91</sup> This confirms, perhaps, that work formed an integral part of the Guild’s creation of disabled identity: it could help restore self-worth to its members.

Vachell often took this attitude to extreme lengths. Introducing it in the 1911 report, she writes, ‘The children’s difficulty we solve, as you know, by apprenticeships.’<sup>92</sup> It is questionable whether all of the apprentices agreed that *all* the problems associated with disability could be ‘solved’ by work. This could be interpreted as part of the Guild’s desire to confront or ignore members’ impairments. A 1913 article in the *Bristol Times and Mirror* further argued that the scheme gives its members a ‘healthy spirit of independence’, because the premium which the Guild paid to the employers was only a loan, and had to be paid back by its apprentices.<sup>93</sup> By regaining a degree of ‘independence’, members are perhaps directly challenging the image of disabled people as helpless and incapable of looking after themselves or finding employment outside a workhouse.

A similar attitude is visible in some descriptions of manual training at Chailey. Frederick Watson wrote in a biography of his father-in-law Sir Robert Jones, the chairman of Chailey’s Medical Board that children are taught the ‘joy and morality of work’.<sup>94</sup> This suggests that the benefits of work were seen to have almost a healing quality for the pupils of Chailey. In a pamphlet about Chailey, Kimmins reinforces this point by printing a letter from Helen Keller, one of the foremost public disabled figures of the time. Keller wrote that Chailey went beyond ‘[giving] the unfortunate a living’, it ‘[raised] them to a life worth living’. She concludes by arguing that a person ‘who makes the best of his incomplete self,

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<sup>90</sup> ‘The Story of 1902’, 12. Original italics.

<sup>91</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’, 9

<sup>92</sup> ‘The Story of 1911’, 9

<sup>93</sup> ‘Guild of the Brave Poor Things: What It Has Done and What It Hopes to Do’

<sup>94</sup> F. Watson, ‘Extract from *The Life of the Late Sir Robert Jones*, written by his son-in-law Mr. Frederick Watson’ in Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 68

risers to the highest moral stature of our race'.<sup>95</sup> Though she portrays disabled people as less than human, Keller nevertheless conveys a sense of purpose and pride for disabled people, which could be achieved through work.

The apprenticeship records for the Bristol Guild reveal that the most common placements between 1898 and 1914 were watchmaking (16 apprenticeships), tailoring (9), ticket-writing (7) and engraving (3).<sup>96</sup> Most apprenticeships fitted this template of skilled manual jobs which did not require movement. Yet it is questionable whether all of the placements gave them an equal sense of independence and agency. Many worked in private firms, however one 16-year-old boy, for example, was sent to the National Industrial Home for Crippled Boys to learn relief stamping.<sup>97</sup> Whilst these occupations provided the apprentices with useful skilled training, it is worth noting that it could be undertaken in the restricting environment of an institution.

A similar interpretation could be applied to the manual training undertaken at Chailey. Photograph 2 gives an idea of the environment in which pupils at the Boys' Craft Schools were educated: at benches, using equipment which was often made by the pupils themselves.<sup>98</sup> Their work seems to have been imposed through education, yet their employment was often continued after their time at Chailey. A pamphlet listed the occupations of all ex-scholars at the Boys' Craft Schools from 1906 to 1913: most became cabinet-makers or carpenters.<sup>99</sup> Chailey was therefore perhaps atypical in the types of employment it could offer its pupils, as most of these occupations are skilled trades. J.S. Hurt has written that career opportunities for most boys at 'special schools' were restricted to 'unskilled jobs'.<sup>100</sup> Yet here, disabled children are being taught useful crafts.

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<sup>95</sup> 'Letter from Helen Keller to Grace Kimmins' in 'The Heritage Craft Schools', 3

<sup>96</sup> 'Register of apprentices, with details of employer, trade, wages, loan from Guild and repayments, 1895-1915, 1919-1940', Bristol Record Office 39842/App/1

<sup>97</sup> 'Register of apprentices'

<sup>98</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools', 9

<sup>99</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools', 16-17

<sup>100</sup> J.S. Hurt, *Outside the Mainstream: A History of Special Education* (London, 1988), 191



Photograph 2.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools', 9



Photograph 3.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools', 9

Girls at Chailey were trained in needlework in similar workshops (as seen in Photograph 3). The Chailey pamphlet includes a similar list of ex-Chailey scholars. From 1907 to 1911, most became employed as sewing maids or were removed from the school at the request of their parents. From August 1911, however, eleven of fourteen girls listed became employed in fine needlework at a ‘West End firm’.<sup>103</sup> Hurt characterises the career prospects for female pupils at ‘special schools’ as mostly restricted to domestic service which, as this suggests, is not the full picture.<sup>104</sup> Chailey did, however, train separate ‘housewifery scholars’ who were employed as maids and cooks.<sup>105</sup> The training also operated within strict gender boundaries. Sir Cyril Burt, a professor of psychology at University College London, wrote in 1948 that it was a ‘sound psychological principle to keep the two sexes separate’.<sup>106</sup> Chailey seems to have offered girls a range of opportunities, albeit within the gender constraints of the time.

The Bristol apprenticeship scheme presents a different image of female disabled employment. The apprenticeship records show that Guild girls were found work in dressmaking and tailoring, however only four girls are included in the records.<sup>107</sup> Other Guild girls were mostly found irregular, low-paid work. Unwin’s biography of Ada Vachell offers an interesting perspective on this comparative lack of work for girls, arguing that, ‘Sometimes a daughter has learnt [her mother’s] same kind of cheerful, heroic going-without.’<sup>108</sup> Unwin’s argument suggests that the Guild considered employment for girls as sometimes unrealistic, conveying gendered assumptions about women’s self-sacrifice in society. Comparisons can be made to Ellen Ross’ study of able-bodied mothers in Victorian London: just as a mother’s ‘main charge’ was to sacrifice her own needs for her family, Unwin implies that disabled girls must accept their lack of employment.<sup>109</sup> Yet if we keep in mind these restrictions, the Guild was nevertheless notable for finding employment for girls which was not restricted to domestic labour.

A discussion of the apprenticeship scheme and the Chailey school should be framed by the historical question of ‘economic rationality’ – the ideology that disabled people must

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<sup>103</sup> ‘Heritage Craft Schools’, 18

<sup>104</sup> Hurt, *Outside the Mainstream*, 191

<sup>105</sup> ‘Heritage Craft Schools’, 19

<sup>106</sup> C. Burt, ‘Preface by Sir Cyril Burt, Professor of Psychology, University College London’, in Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 8

<sup>107</sup> ‘Register of Apprentices’

<sup>108</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 84

<sup>109</sup> E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London* (New York, 1993), 9

become rational and self-sufficient. Anne Borsay has argued that this was ‘culturally ingrained’ in many aspects of policy for the disabled: schools, workhouses and hospitals are all included in her concept.<sup>110</sup> While the Guild of the Brave Poor Things gave its apprentices and pupils more dignity and freedom than the constraints of the workhouse, Borsay’s argument is still visible: by giving them work and making them useful, the Guild was contributing to this ideology. Hurt argues that motivations behind ‘special education’ were based on both a ‘genuine concern’ for disabled people and the desire for ‘social control’, a balance which could be applied to both the apprenticeship scheme and Chailey.<sup>111</sup> ‘Social control’ is a problematic term, however the concept of ‘economic rationality’ could be interpreted as forcibly assigning disabled people a certain position in life.

The Guild was certainly not the only organisation for disabled people to focus on making its members ‘useful’ and self-sufficient. The *Western Daily Press* in 1883 printed a directory of charities, many of which adopted a similar attitude towards work for the disabled. For example, the Home Teaching and Industrial Employment for the Blind found manual work for blind people in Bristol, and stressed the ‘beneficial effect’ of work and companionship.<sup>112</sup> The Bristol Institution similarly trained its pupils in handicraft for ‘future usefulness’.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, many of the apprenticeships in the Guild of the Brave Poor Things’ early stages were found by the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.) which, as Lewis demonstrates, was one of the most prominent and influential charitable organisation of the era.<sup>114</sup> The fact that the C.O.S. shared this ideology of self-sufficiency and usefulness would suggest that it was widespread amongst many philanthropists who worked with disabled people. It is therefore unsurprising that the Guild would also take this stance.

Yet the concept of economic rationality went beyond philanthropic notions of ‘usefulness’. At Chailey, the discussions of the children’s work seem to value economic usefulness over children’s agency. Rev J. Scott Lidgett, the first Chairman of the Governors of the Heritage, wrote that the pupils at Chailey are saved from ‘uselessness’ and will ‘become a source of strength to the community, and not of weakness.’<sup>115</sup> It is notable that

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<sup>110</sup> Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 198

<sup>111</sup> Hurt, *Outside the Mainstream*, 189

<sup>112</sup> ‘Article on Home Teaching for the Blind’ in ‘Collection from the Western Daily Press, 1883’, Bristol Record Office 40556/24

<sup>113</sup> ‘Article on the Deaf and Dumb Institution’ in ‘Collection from the Western Daily Press, 1883’, Bristol Record Office 40556/14

<sup>114</sup> ‘The Story of 1907’, 9; Lewis, *Women and Social Action*, 3

<sup>115</sup> ‘Letter to Kimmins from Rev. J. Scott Lidgett (first Chairman of the Governors of the Heritage)’ in Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 24

Lidgett sees disabled people in relation to the 'community'. This seems to back up Armstrong's argument that special education was not solely based on humanitarianism; it also operated with a view of economically benefitting society.<sup>116</sup> Part of the motivation for manual training may even have been economic gain for the school itself. The minutes of a meeting in 1907, for example, reveal that the headmaster received 10% of net profits on toys made by Chailey pupils.<sup>117</sup> It is unclear if the Bristol apprentices faced a similar situation. A 1913 newspaper article about the Guild insisted that 'the whole of the proceeds [from the sale of their goods] go to the worker', however this is debatable.<sup>118</sup> The Guild's 1911 Annual Report, for example, boasts of the Guild taking 'over £100' from a handicraft exhibition.<sup>119</sup> Chailey and the apprenticeship scheme therefore possibly had motives based on economic gain both for the institutions and for society.

A passage in her 1948 book about the benefits of studying at Chailey reveals how Kimmins placed the disabled children in society as a whole:

1. [Studying at Chailey] shows [the pupils] their position in relation to others, that they may know their place in the world of people.
2. It gives them an opportunity to learn how to get along with others.
3. It gives them the best of chances to learn life's values, and thus become round pegs in round holes for the social good.
4. It makes the children free of all inferiority complex, or being left out of the scheme of life.<sup>120</sup>

This seems to go against some of the messages of pride and collective identity which were being developed through the Guild afternoons. Underlying messages of social control may be detected by the encouragement to show them 'their position in relation to others'. While the school attempts to remove an 'inferiority complex', it is with a view of making their pupils 'normal'.

The Chailey school and the apprenticeship scheme both developed an overarching message that work could eliminate many of the negative experiences of disability, which could extend into ideas of normalisation. This attitude appears to be confirmed in Unwin's biography of Ada Vachell, which praised its ability to let their members 'take their place and

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<sup>116</sup> F. Armstrong, 'The Historical Development of Special Education: Humanitarian Rationality or 'Wild Profusion of Entangled Events'?', *History of Education*, 31:5 (2002), 444

<sup>117</sup> 'Executive Council Meeting, held Friday 17th May, 1907 at 12:30' in 'Executive Council Minute Book March 1907-June 1919', East Sussex Record Office HB/121/1

<sup>118</sup> 'Guild of the Brave Poor Things: What It Has Done and What It Hopes to Do'

<sup>119</sup> 'The Story of 1911', 10

<sup>120</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 29



share in normal life.<sup>121</sup> Guild members could therefore have a chance to become ‘normal’. This message can be detected more discreetly elsewhere: at Chailey, a sign on the carpentry school read, ‘Men are made here.’<sup>122</sup> This is perhaps conveying the message that the only way for disabled children to escape perpetual childhood will be to find work. Both of these examples indicate that serving a useful purpose will provide a full human status to disabled people: this would be the only way to remove their inferiority.

It is important to look for the voices of disabled children to ask whether they shared the idealised view of work which is prevalent in Guild and Chailey material. The Bristol Guild’s Annual Reports, when discussing apprenticeship, are unsurprisingly positive about the children’s reactions to their placements. Vachell argues that, ‘You can scarcely bless a cripple’s life more truly than by giving work. It is their constant cry to us. “If you could only help me to *do* something!”’<sup>123</sup> It can be assumed that many Guild apprentices and scholars shared this reaction, however we should further examine these overtly positive accounts and attempt to find the voices of the apprentices and scholars – did they all appreciate their work to this extent?

The apprenticeship records reveal that some boys were given inappropriate placements. John Hutt, for example, was found an apprenticeship in ticket writing, however his record reads, ‘This boy was so very crippled that it was thought best to accept this opening. Though it does not seem a very good one.’<sup>124</sup> This would suggest that Hutt was unsuitable for work, however the need for ‘economic rationality’ seems to have forced the Guild to accept a low quality placement. The argument that the Guild was solely trying to instil the ‘joy of work’ into its members does not seem applicable in this case. Unwin’s biography confirms that some apprenticeships were, in hindsight, unsuitable. She cites a boy who was given a donkey and cart to ‘sell coal and coke in the streets’ as an example of this.<sup>125</sup> The voices of the disabled apprentices are difficult to find amongst the optimistic, idealised tone of the sources, however these examples suggest the possibility that the work given to disabled children was not always greeted with the same grateful attitude.

Thomas Morgan, who attended Chailey in 1906, was interviewed for Thea Thompson’s *Edwardian Childhoods* oral history project, and offers insights into how their

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<sup>121</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 81

<sup>122</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 7

<sup>123</sup> ‘The Story of 1911’, 11

<sup>124</sup> ‘Register of apprentices’

<sup>125</sup> Unwin, *Ada Vachell*, 84

programme of manual training worked.<sup>126</sup> He explains that he ‘asked to be a bootmaker, but when I got [to Chailey] they trained us to be cabinet makers’.<sup>127</sup> Morgan generally has fond memories of his teachers and experiences, however it is notable that his own ambition for employment seems to have been ignored. Morgan also highlights how strongly manual training was ingrained in the curriculum. He did ‘lessons’ at the school from nine until ten, then the rest of the day would be spent in the crafts workshops. Yet even the regular lessons would sometimes be based around manual work: some would be dedicated to drawing ‘ideas in our heads for a bit of furniture or something like that’.<sup>128</sup> Other pupils may have had different experiences, however Morgan highlights some important issues. By focusing so heavily on manual training (and clearly denying them a choice), Chailey categorised its pupils into this type of work, perhaps acting against their wishes.

Morgan’s account forces us to question the nature of education at Chailey, and ask if the teaching which the disabled pupils received was based solely on manual training and ‘economic rationality’. The tension between manual work and the ‘three Rs’ has been highlighted by historians of ‘special education’. Read and Walsmley’s study found that most ‘special schools’ devoted only six hours a week to this type of education. Kimmins mentions ‘the usual five hours of school’ only once in her book about Chailey, suggesting that crafts took up most of the school’s time.<sup>129</sup> It is notable also that a pamphlet about Chailey prints a letter from George Newman, the Chief Medical Officer of the Board of Education, who has been highlighted by Borsay for his recommendation that ‘special schools’ focused only on manual training rather than the standard curriculum.<sup>130</sup> Newman’s opinion is conveyed in the letter, which praises ‘the industrial disposal of ex-pupils as useful workers in the general community’.<sup>131</sup> Here, we can clearly see the economic motives behind education discussed above: disabled children should be limited to manual training only.

Yet Chailey did offer a degree of intellectual education. A pamphlet described the Boys’ Heritage, for example, as ‘The Harrow and Eton of Crippledom’.<sup>132</sup> Though it juxtaposes the respectability of these schools with ideas of inferiority associated with

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<sup>126</sup> T. Thompson (ed.), *Edwardian Childhoods* (London, 1981), 9. Morgan had a limp in his left leg and was sent to Chailey after he had been found to be working under age.

<sup>127</sup> Thompson, *Edwardian Childhoods*, 33

<sup>128</sup> Thompson, *Edwardian Childhoods*, 32

<sup>129</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 70

<sup>130</sup> Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 109

<sup>131</sup> ‘Letter from George Newman, M.D., Chief Medical Officer, Board of Education’ in ‘Heritage Craft Schools’, 4

<sup>132</sup> ‘Heritage Craft Schools’, 8

‘crippledom’, this nevertheless implies that they took pride in the quality of education they offered. It should be remembered that able-bodied children were also often receiving limited amounts of intellectual education. Most schools were slow in incorporating subjects other than the ‘three Rs’ even after the 1870 Education Act brought in compulsory elementary education. Significant progress was, however, being made by the turn of the century with the introduction of ‘block grants’ which widened the range of subjects.<sup>133</sup> This development is not detectable at Chailey. Indeed, ‘special schools’ seem to have developed their curriculum separately from schools for able-bodied children. Disabled children were not mentioned in the 1870 Education Act, further suggesting that Chailey was limited in the range of education it could offer.<sup>134</sup>

It would be unfair to characterise Chailey’s ideology of education as based solely on industrial training and very limited intellectual education. The school placed great importance on nature and play in the development of the disabled child. For Kimmins, ‘two or three years in pure air... living under healthy conditions’ was ‘the only one satisfactory solution’ to how best to help the children.<sup>135</sup> Activities at Chailey such as the Children’s Own Garden Movement – which valued the garden as a more natural alternative to the children’s city homes – demonstrate the importance of nature to Chailey’s teaching methods. It is important to note that Kimmins was also involved in the Guild of Play, an organisation which stressed the value of play for the welfare of able-bodied poor children.<sup>136</sup> Kimmins includes details of the Guild of Play in her pamphlet about Chailey, linking it to ideas of self-respect, citizenship and patriotism – whilst still reminding children of their position on the ‘social order’ – which we also saw in the Guild of the Brave Poor Things.<sup>137</sup> Chailey incorporated these themes into its ideals of education.

Physical wellbeing played an important role in many discourses of welfare and education in this era. Margaret McMillan was one of the foremost contemporaries to express this ideology. Her work in the Deptford Camp School – in which working-class children could play and sleep in the open air – demonstrates that Kimmins’ stress on nature and play

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<sup>133</sup> P. Horn, *The Victorian and Edwardian Schoolchild* (Gloucester, 1989), 49

<sup>134</sup> Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 106. Humphries and Gordon point out, however, that some state schools for disabled children did attempt to integrate disabled children, yet most teachers ignored or misinterpreted their disabilities. Humphries and Gordon, *Out of Sight*, 49

<sup>135</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 123

<sup>136</sup> Brehony has highlighted the significance of both the Guild of Play and the Guild of the Brave Poor Things in his study of play and the working-class child. Brehony, ‘A “Socially Civilising Influence”?’ , 97

<sup>137</sup> ‘Heritage Craft Schools’, 39

at Chailey was part of a wider movement in the early 20th century.<sup>138</sup> Yet Kimmins may have seen these methods as a way to bring out individuality in the children. Discussing the role of nature, she argues that it prevents the children from being ‘victims of machine teaching’.<sup>139</sup> By returning to nature and developing physical wellbeing, it could be argued that Kimmins was instilling values of individuality into Chailey’s pupils despite also restricting them mostly to manual work.

The emphasis on physical wellbeing extended into sport. The 1905 Speech and Sports day in 1905 included ‘athletic sports’ and gymnastic displays in its programme. The sports resemble a standard sports day for able-bodied children, including team, three-legged and obstacle races.<sup>140</sup> Perhaps less light-hearted was the military drill which the pupils undertook. As Photographs 4 and 5 demonstrate, this was practised in both the boys’ and girls’ schools. The overtly militaristic tone, however, was strongest in the boys’ school. Kimmins boasted that ‘an ex-army man is responsible for the drill’, and indeed a figure in military uniform is visible in the photograph.<sup>141</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, militarism was seen as an important theme to bind the Guild’s disabled members together, and here Kimmins claimed the children took ‘immense pride’ in the exercises. Many of the children presumably did enjoy the drill, however here it appears more of a required element in education.

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<sup>138</sup> C. Steedman, ‘Bodies, Figures and Physiology: Margaret McMillan and the Late 19th Century Remaking of Working-Class Childhood’ in R. Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880-1940* (London, 1992), 23

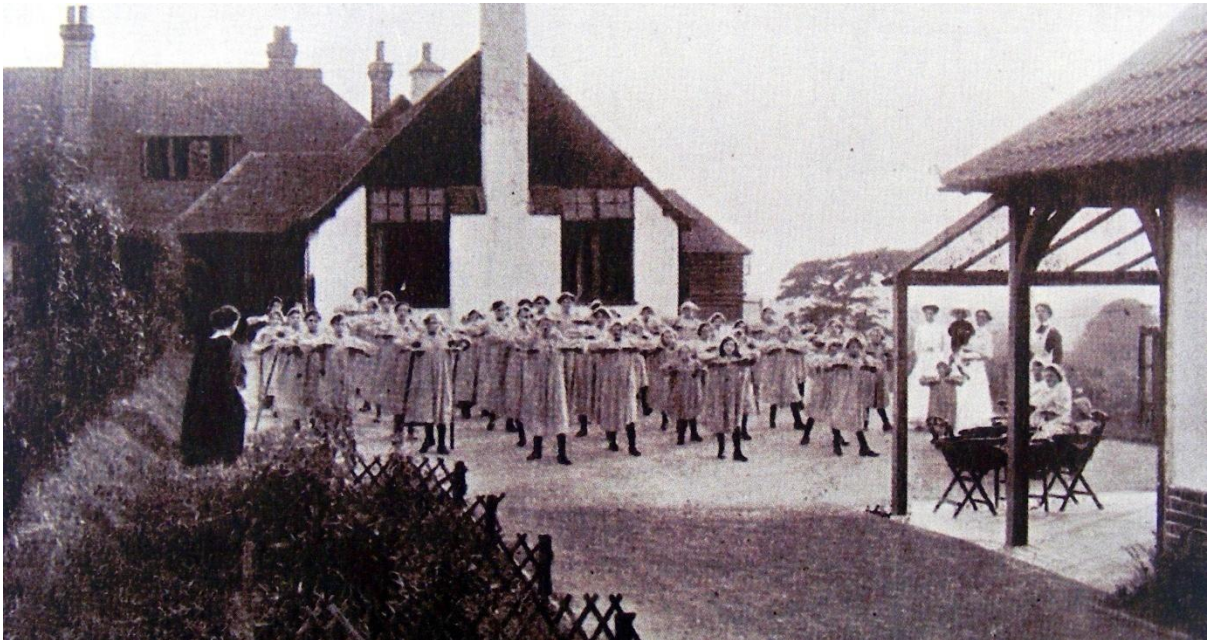
<sup>139</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 123

<sup>140</sup> ‘Programme for School Speech Day and Sports, attended by Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll’, 25 July 1905, East Sussex Record Office HB/130/1

<sup>141</sup> ‘Heritage Craft Schools’, 12



Photograph 4.<sup>142</sup>



Photograph 5.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools', 12  
<sup>143</sup> 'Heritage Craft Schools', 12

The historian must look for the voices of its pupils to ask whether Chailey upheld the positive disabled identity created by the Guild of the Brave Poor Things. In places, it appears to resemble the restrictive institutions which its methodology supposedly criticised. Humphries and Gordon's oral history project included interviews with Chailey pupils who lamented the 'dreaded uniforms' and 'dreadful' food.<sup>144</sup> Their descriptions of the school resemble the strict segregation and poor conditions at workhouses. Indeed, Armstrong argues that the combination of education, incarceration and poor relief in the 18th century workhouse provided the foundation for much 'special education' which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>145</sup> Kimmins' description of Chailey 'as we were in 1903' seems to confirm this. She reveals that Chailey was built from an old workhouse, and was originally infested with rats.<sup>146</sup> Thus, while it seemed to offer disabled children a life preferable to workhouses and poverty, some early pupils at Chailey nevertheless may have seen little difference.

Reactions to Chailey from outsiders seemed to be mostly based on pity and sympathy. Thomas Morgan recounts being given a ride in a Rolls Royce, though for 'more pity's sake than anything.'<sup>147</sup> Chailey seems to have generated the same 'appeal' to outsiders which Vachell wrote about in the Bristol Guild reports. In the school minutes, she discusses plans to adapt an old school building as 'a reception house for the accommodation of visitors'.<sup>148</sup> Chailey therefore sometimes retained the characteristics of the workhouse or the pitying charitable organisation, which in some ways contradicts its significance in offering the disabled child a freer, independent existence. Though it was connected to the Guild of the Brave Poor Things and shared its aims, it appears its pupils may not have felt the same loyalty and fondness which regular members did towards the Guild.

Yet Chailey should not be portrayed solely as institutional and authoritarian. Viewed in the context of Victorian and Edwardian education, it is unsurprising that it should have some of these characteristics. Chailey was a unique school, and its methodology 'strongly

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<sup>144</sup> Humphries and Gordon, *Out of Sight*, 73-4; 79. It should be noted these descriptions are from pupils who attended Chailey in the 1920s and 1930s. They are outside the time range of this study but still highly useful for creating a picture of life at Chailey

<sup>145</sup> Armstrong, 'Historical Development of Special Education', 439

<sup>146</sup> Kimmins (ed.), *Heritage Craft Schools*, 27

<sup>147</sup> Thompson, *Edwardian Childhoods*, 33

<sup>148</sup> 'Minutes of the Executive Council held at LCC Education Offices, Victoria Embankment on January 12th March 1912 at 10am' in 'Executive Council Minute Book'

influences' today's incarnation.<sup>149</sup> Along with the Bristol apprenticeship scheme, its main purpose was to train children for respectable, skilled manual work, though with a questionable overarching ideology of economic rationality and perhaps social control. The scheme and school represent important and influential – if complex and contradictory – branches of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things.

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<sup>149</sup> V. Hanbury, 'Chailey Heritage School: Our History' <<http://www.chs.org.uk/school-office/history>> 14 April 2009

## Conclusions

Elizabeth Bredberg, in her recent critique of disability history, has argued for ‘a broader approach to disability history, to be accomplished by a move from over-reliance on material that reflects the institutional perspective towards disability.’<sup>150</sup> A study of the Guild of the Brave Poor Things allows the historian to adopt this approach in a period where it has rarely been used. Most historians who have written about disability in this era have been restricted to top-down institutionalised accounts of care or discrimination. (which are still valuable, if often flawed). Only recently, however, have historians such as Anne Borsay and Stephen Humphries and Pamela Gordon begun to also question the experience of disability. Yet while sociologists such as Michael Oliver have undertaken excellent studies of disabled action in the later twentieth century, few have detected any form of disabled identity developing earlier than this.<sup>151</sup>

The Guild of the Brave Poor Things is notable primarily because it offered a voice and collective identity to physically disabled people in Victorian and Edwardian England. By meeting up for weekly Guild afternoons, disabled people could socialise, play, sing, attend lectures and discuss their lives. Other organisations existed elsewhere with similar functions, such as the ‘Cripples Parlour’ which was mentioned in Humphries and Gordon’s oral history project, however these do not seem to have made the lasting impact which the Guild created for some of its members. Guild members undertook activities which often belied the poverty and neglect that many members were experiencing at home. The Guild gave these people a chance to escape from or address these personal problems. Many aspects of Guild afternoons were designed specifically to create bonds of friendship and solidarity amongst people with disabilities.

The use of militaristic and patriotic imagery for this purpose is particularly notable. In most cases in late nineteenth and early twentieth society, militarism and patriotism were being used to stress physical strength, yet here they are bringing together people with physical impairments. Through the apprenticeship scheme led by Ada Vachell, and the Heritage Craft Schools at Chailey, the concept of work became interlinked with the Guild’s desire to address feelings of uselessness. In many cases, apprentices and pupils were found

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<sup>150</sup> Bredberg, ‘Writing Disability History’, 199

<sup>151</sup> M. Oliver, ‘The Structuring of Disabled Identities’ <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Oliver/p%20of%20d%20Oliver5.pdf>>



skilled work which gave them a sense of purpose and a degree of independence. It should be remembered, however, that the work possibly had a direct economic benefit for the Guild, and the unsuitable nature of some of the work suggests the Guild wanted to benefit society by ensuring disabled people could contribute to it. This ideology could sometimes obscure the specific needs of the Guild member or Chailey pupil.

The Guild must be placed firmly in its social and historical context. Vachell and Kimmins both shared attitudes with philanthropic organisations of the time. Though the Guild gave its members a much greater sense of agency, the themes of ‘sympathy’ and ‘kindness’ are as prominent as dignity and self-esteem in Vachell’s annual reports.<sup>152</sup> Likewise, the apprenticeship scheme and Chailey school could be used to illustrate Borsay’s concept of ‘economic rationality’, placing disabled people firmly in a pre-defined social position. With Chailey’s focus on manual training, this was done using an institutional framework – quite literally, as the original building was converted from an old workhouse. In this sense, the Guild could be seen to share the discriminatory perceptions of disabled people as inferior to ‘normal’ people, outlined by historians and sociologists such as Vic Finkelstein and Tom Shakespeare.<sup>153</sup> Yet the Guild’s incorporation of these attitudes should be seen as an unavoidable part of its social context: in other ways, it *challenged* prejudice and discrimination by allowing its members to build a collective identity and live dignified, meaningful lives. Disabled people were no longer victims or sufferers, even though the material used this rhetoric.

The Guild also opens up further questions about disability in this time. It represents only one side of the experience of disability and does not give an idea of the experience of rural disabled people, or those who were unable to join. Were there similar alternatives or ways of addressing poverty and ‘uselessness’ for other disabled people in Britain? More research should also be undertaken about the Guild itself – this study has concentrated mostly on the Bristol branch and the Chailey school, however a study of the London headquarters may reveal new insights into the lives of Guild members. The Guild continued until 1987, with many branches changing their names due to embarrassment or criticism in members’ workplaces.<sup>154</sup> Chailey’s scheme of ‘educative convalescence’ in World War I – in which soldiers were sent to the school to learn how to deal with their injuries from examples set by

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<sup>152</sup> ‘The Story of 1897’, 15

<sup>153</sup> Finkelstein, ‘Attitudes and Disabled People’, 6; Shakespeare, ‘Cultural Representation’, 296

<sup>154</sup> Koven, ‘Kimmins’; Baigent, ‘Vachell’

the school's disabled children – adds a fascinating dimension to the Guild's use of militarism in their language of disability.<sup>155</sup> It is hoped that this study has introduced the Guild of the Brave Poor Things as a valuable contribution to the history of disability in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, demonstrating that disabled people should not be categorised as a helpless, oppressed group with no voice or collective identity.

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<sup>155</sup> 'Educative Convalescence for the Wounded as Initiated at the Princess Louise Military Wards, Heritage Craft Schools, Chailey, Sussex' (August 1916-October 1916), East Sussex Record Office P 289/5/6

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