

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*I just want to say that, whilst going through the Griffins Society, I didn't think it would help me, but it has. I've really achieved a lot since going through and leaving. I'd just like to thank any of the people that are still (there), like who you ever come across within the Griffins Society, I'd just like to thank them. And that's it. (Former resident)*

What would persuade a small group of wealthy, upper middle-class women voluntarily to set up an after-care hostel for discharged female prisoners? And what, given the trials and tribulations of their experience of accommodating those unruly women, would motivate them to spend the following thirty years pioneering another four hostels for the most challenging female offenders? Could such an unlikely enterprise, bringing together opposing extremes of class, privilege and stability, possibly benefit the rehabilitation of serious, recidivist and disturbed offenders? If so, how can we explain the positive outcomes of a venture embarked upon by unpaid 'amateurs', when, almost ten years after their withdrawal from hostel provision, academic and professional disputes about the necessary components of effective offender rehabilitation rage ever more fiercely?

This book attempts to answer these questions. It comprises a retrospective evaluation of the contribution to female offender rehabilitation of the Griffins Society, a voluntary organisation established in the wake of and, partly, in protest against the professionalisation of prison welfare and after-care during the mid-1960s. Over three decades, the Griffins Society developed a range of hostel provision that broke new ground in accommodating women offenders who were very often excluded from alternative

services. The Griffins Society was most notably characterised by its idiosyncratic governing Council, constituted by wealthy, upper middle-class women, whose philanthropic activity commonly earned them the soubriquet 'Lady Bountiful'. This epithet, with its derogatory associations of superficiality, patronisation and class-consciousness, encapsulates for most of us the only available account of the motivations of such volunteers in the contemporary landscape of penal and social welfare, since they are not commonly personally encountered, either by the recipients of state or philanthropic aid or by the professionals who generally dispense it.

The invitation to study the Griffins Society's contribution to the rehabilitation of women offenders presented a unique opportunity to confront this social stereotype. The initially modest request to evaluate its hostel provision in order to assess whether it had 'all been worthwhile', overlooked the fact that the practical enterprise of accommodating difficult, damaged, and disadvantaged women could not be adequately understood independently of the context of the philanthropic outlook of its Council members and its increasingly anachronistic organisational style. Consequently, this research takes a very different approach from the conventional method of studying the impact of a discrete and specific programme of rehabilitative treatment, largely in isolation from its broader social, organisational and environmental context. Instead, this project is a holistic evaluation of an organisation's unique contribution to the provision and practice of rehabilitation of women offenders. Framed in this way, the study reveals a powerful initiative on the part of women in the voluntary sector to influence the penal system's traditional disregard of female offenders. Moreover, this endeavour pre-dates most contemporary efforts to raise awareness of the plight of females in the predominantly masculine world of deviance and punishment: feminism was only just beginning to inspire academic criminological interest in gender disparities in crime and its treatment (Heidensohn 1968); and it would be thirty years before 'gender-specific programming' became a catch-phrase for professional rehabilitative practice with women (Bloom and Covington 1998).

The Council, however, was only one of three groups of women whose distinctive characteristics turned the Griffins Society into an extraordinary organisation. A second group was comprised of strong-minded project staff whose enthusiasm, initiative and determination enabled the

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Council to turn ambition into reality. Lastly, the residents were women who were candid and colourful during participant observation. Their personal stories speak poignantly from the pages of normally dry archival records. They were vividly remembered, sometimes years later, with emotions ranging from sorrow, through humour to admiration by professionals whose powers of recall might reasonably be expected to have become blunted through daily saturation with individual need. It is a matter of regret that, despite numerous efforts, it was not possible to trace more of them for interview.

This study draws on rich archival, interview and observational sources to explore the Griffins Society's significance and achievements. The data, collected over an extended period of two years, succeeded in accumulating a wealth of information yielding diverse perspectives from which to view the organisation's character and achievements: 87 interviews with Griffins Society Council members, project staff, allied professionals and residents; a survey of 79 case files of former residents of the hostels; 67 observation days at the three projects that survived the organisation's withdrawal from service provision; and collation of its archives.

The extensive time period required for data collection derived from a number of causes, of which three deserve particular mention. First, while the principle of entry to the hostels as participant observers and for file surveying was initially readily accepted, in practice it was difficult to achieve. Concerns raised by staff about confidentiality had to be negotiated not only in terms of general principles at the outset, but again separately at the point of entering each project. While this issue is an entirely appropriate concern, its constant re-emergence seemed to reflect staff ambivalence about the research: on the one hand they wanted recognition for pioneering projects; on the other, they feared negative exposure from evaluation. Notably, however, once access was achieved, staff rapidly became helpful, open and generous in their assistance, displaying not only their pride in their projects but also a capacity for abrasive self-critique that greatly enriched the qualitative findings. Thus, despite delays prior to entry, time spent in intensive involvement in the life of each project in turn was richly rewarded. Second, much effort was applied to tracing former Council members, staff and allied professionals who played key roles in the organisation's development for interview. Interviewing thus extended over a

substantial period, yielding multi-faceted perspectives on the Society's history, its rehabilitative practice and its impact on provision for female offenders. Unfortunately, equal effort applied to tracing former residents was less successful. The difficulties of establishing personal contact with active offenders and retired offenders are well documented (see, for example, Farrall 2002; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997) and that exercise alone could have comprised a research study in itself: ultimately, a choice was forced between the further expenditure of time and resources with potentially little result and the deeper exploitation of more readily available material. Third, although the Griffins Society retained many of the relevant records, archival data was gathered in a partly piecemeal fashion, as contacts established with former Council members, staff and other professionals led to the contribution of additional materials. The consequent task of trawling these records and analysing them for their insights into the organisation's history and character was formidable.

Some terminology should be clarified. The management of the Griffins Society included a system of sub-committees that evolved as the organisation's hostels increased and was subject to various adaptations to meet new contingencies. These fluctuating arrangements were not, however, of great significance in understanding the broader organisational ethos, since the small central core of volunteers remained relatively stable, with a number of individuals participating in several different sub-committees. However, committees also included a range of professional representatives, for example, from project staff, the probation service, police and housing associations. Although interview excerpts will show that the words 'committee' and 'committee member' were used quite loosely to allude to these various arrangements and participants, it is necessary for the purposes of the research to distinguish between the volunteer women whose philanthropic enterprise lay at the heart of the Griffins Society and those other contributors to its management. For the sake of clarity, the terms 'Council' and 'Council member' are reserved for the former group. Moreover, it was customary to refer both to the organisation generally and to Council members collectively as 'the Griffins'. The research follows this custom with regard to Council members, both for convenience and because the soubriquet is rightly suggestive of the extent to which these individuals were identified with the core ethos of the Society.

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Care has been taken to preserve confidentiality. Council members are identified throughout the text only in terms of that particular status. With only two exceptions, project staff and other professionals are identified in terms of their primary role in relation to the organisation. The identity of Joanna Kelley, who, as governor of Holloway prison, played midwife to the Society's birth, could not have been concealed from anyone with some knowledge of that penal institution's history: moreover, this book is in part a tribute to her humanitarian vision. Sir Edmond Stockdale, as Lord Mayor of the City of London, was a crucial benefactor to the Society in its early years. While these individuals are now deceased, their acknowledgment in this book appropriately testifies to their philanthropic energy and lasting influence on the Society's fortunes. The identities of hostel residents were disguised during data collection through the assignment of pseudonyms, which are reproduced here in the text. Undertakings were also given at the outset of the research to protect the identities and locations of the hostels themselves, since three surviving projects continue, under the management of another voluntary organisation, to accommodate vulnerable women. The Society's first, flagship hostel has been called here by the name given to it in recognition of the afore-mentioned benefactor, Sir Edmond Stockdale. Since that hostel has closed and the building is no longer known by that name, it has been reproduced, since it helps to convey the Griffins' preference for 'personalisation' of their projects. Pseudonyms reflecting their status have been adopted for each of the other hostels.

In the following chapters, all verbatim interview excerpts are identified in terms of the status of the respondent in relation to the Griffins Society, for example by the inclusion of 'Council member' or 'hostel manager' in parentheses after the quotation. Data from other sources are identified by reference to the methodology used in their collection. In particular, these include: 'observation notes' in parentheses after verbatim excerpts from contemporaneous records; 'case notes' denoting an extract from the file survey; and citations of specific archival documents included in the bibliography.

Chapter 2 charts the history of the Griffins Society, from its origins in the dismantling of voluntary provision of after-care services to its ultimate surrender to the pressures of professionalisation in the voluntary sector itself. It includes an analysis of the organisation's distinctive quali-

ties of maternalism, boldness, and a ‘hands on’ management style, that accounted in large part for its influence and energy as an innovator in female offender rehabilitation. Chapter 3 profiles the Griffins Society’s Council members, studying their social and personal characteristics to reveal how a small group of volunteer women from an elite sector of society became powerful contributors to the development of residential rehabilitation of female offenders. Chapter 4 studies the contribution of project staff to the pioneering practice within the hostels. It includes exploration of the mutually dependent relationship between staff and Council and the impact of breaches of that trust. Chapter 5 considers the social histories and personal characteristics of residents of Griffins Society projects, illuminating the ways in which offending was embedded in the turbulence of the women’s lives and revealing the inability or unwillingness of formal agencies of support to engage effectively with them. Chapter 6 explores the daily practice of rehabilitation within the projects, showing that the complex moral dilemmas facing female offenders obscure simple choices between right and wrong responses to their problems. It illustrates the volatility of the hostel environment, the impact of women’s deviant lifestyles on hostel safety and management and staff members’ narratives of dangerous incidents and their impact, including traumatisation and the ‘normalisation of trauma’ in the hostel environment. Chapter 7 compares professional accounts of successful and failed placements at the hostels, developing a theoretical account of successful outcomes as the product of ‘normal-smithing’ (Lofland 1969), which facilitates processes of natural desistance from crime. It illustrates the processes through which successful women established alternative, prosocial personal identities, became masters of their destinies and optimistic for their futures. Finally, Chapter 8 considers the importance of the Griffins Society’s philanthropic mission in the contemporary penal landscape.

It was not the intention behind this evaluative study to produce an enthusiastic endorsement of the Griffins Society’s enterprise. Indeed, I wondered uneasily at the outset whether such an egregious bunch of non-professional ‘ladies of leisure’ could have masterminded pioneering projects in offender rehabilitation with any real success. The study forces a reappraisal of the grounds on which such instinctive scepticism is based. This account is testimony to the powerful challenge to such reflex, preju-

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diced presumptions posed by the strength of evidence asserting the organisation's accomplishments. More broadly, and again unexpectedly, it offers persuasive evidence of the importance of philanthropic endeavour in the voluntary sector in pursuit of humanitarian values in contemporary penal treatments.