

The Little Sisters of the Assumption in Blackheath 1921 - 1967

Novitiate House 1921 to Mycenae House in 1994

This leaflet attempts to put the story of The Little Sisters of the Assumption and their presence in Blackheath into context, in chronological order and with some sense of probability. Little is known, precious little is written or their history archived, so this task has been a patchwork quilt & a labour of love over a few years. As such it is likely less than complete and offered as a useful approximation.

The Little Sisters outside Woodlands House with Novitiate House in the background



If you'd like to add to, challenge or feedback on any of the information shared here we would be very happy to hear from you via email: info@mycenaehouse.co.uk

The Authors and a Disclaimer

Mark Johnson-Brown & Lynne Dixon are the enthusiastic researchers and authors of this information but quite rightly may be described as 'not professional' (although Lynne is damn impressive at it).

This information is provided in good faith and as accurately as possible, however the authors take no responsibility for its absolute accuracy. It has been collated from a wide selection of unverified sources and authors. *(Please note all the photographers names or dates are unknown)*

1. 1774, The Woodlands House - up until the Nuns arrive 1921

Blackheath, nobility and wealth – the area was known for its large estates owned by the rich & noble which included John Julius Angerstein (Others included John Cator/Sir Gregory Page/John Morden/Francis Hosier) who bought land to overlook the Thames from the Westcombe area and built Woodlands House which ultimately became the convent.

John Julius Angerstein – JJA built Woodlands House in 1772 as a country retreat with his wealth amassed from the Baltic, then later from Marine Insurance.

He was the founder of the giant Lloyds of London. He amassed a collection of art & paintings at Woodlands.

These were sold on his death to become the founding collection of the National Gallery.

The Garden, Farm, Orchard & Hot Houses – at its height Woodlands estate included a farm, an orchard, a 300ft Hot House, an icehouse and a private railway. His collection of exotic plants was something to behold we believe.

Sir Alfred Fernandez Yarrow bought Woodlands in the late 1890s He was the founder of the Yarrow shipbuilding & yards. He is believed to have mentored a local young man who founded Duckhams Motor oil. He sold the house to the LSoA for half of its actual value.

Hostel for Belgian refugees – little is known about it but Woodlands was believed to have served as a hostel for a number of Belgian refugees during the First World War .



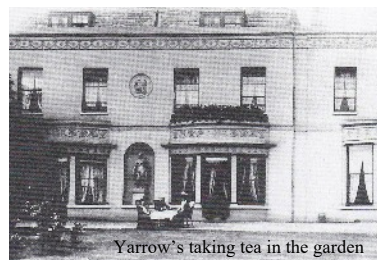
John Julius Angerstein



Indian styled hothouse



Joshua Reynolds Painting



Yarrow's taking tea in the garden

2 1921 The Little Sisters of Assumption arrive. Who are they?

This Roman Catholic Novitiate Order was founded in France in 1865 and Woodlands House was established in 1921 and became their first Postulancy outside of France (*A postulancy is foundational period of formation where a person asks to enter a religious community*)

Their work was dedicated to the poor families of every race and creed and the nursing of the sick poor in their own homes.

The Novitiate House was built to add capacity for the first year nuns in training.

Although one piece of information records that one hundred nuns and novices could be accommodated, the pre-war register of 1939 lists the names of only thirteen nuns (nursing sisters) and twenty-three postulants, 'preparing for future working as religious nursing sisters occupied in manual work and studies' a total of thirty-six women in all. Their surnames suggest that many of the women came from Ireland, but there were also some French names listed. The ages of the novices ranged from 18 to 42 and those of the nuns up to their 60s. There is no way of knowing how many women were living in the two buildings at any other time although a number of women appear on the Electoral Roll both before and after the war.

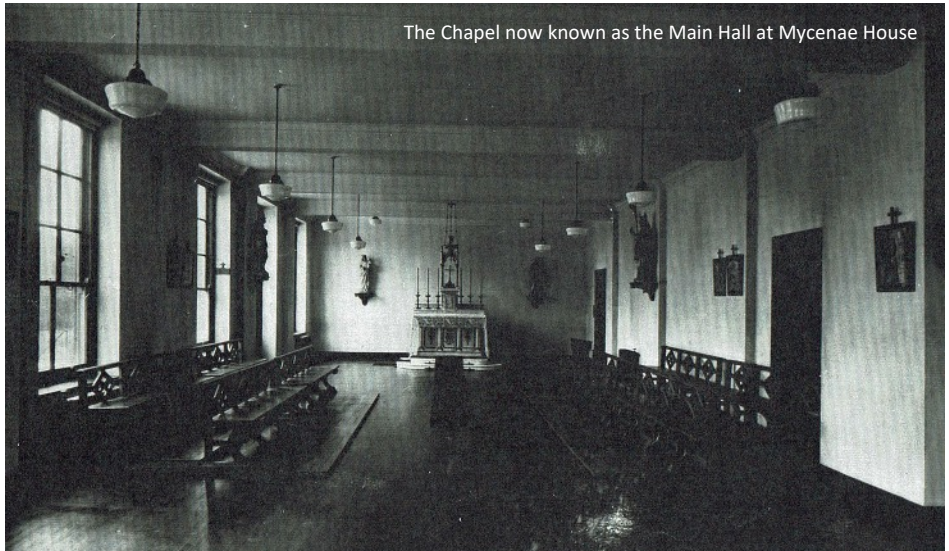
The convent operated as part of the wider Assumptionist community locally centred around Our Lady of Grace Church and Highcombe House on Charlton Road, approximately 0.6 miles east of Woodlands House. The convent chapel was used by parishioners for daily and Sunday Mass.



NAME	DATE	REMARKS
1. Mary Anne	1891	Entered Novitiate
2. Mary Anne	1892	Entered Novitiate
3. Mary Anne	1893	Entered Novitiate
4. Mary Anne	1894	Entered Novitiate
5. Mary Anne	1895	Entered Novitiate
6. Mary Anne	1896	Entered Novitiate
7. Mary Anne	1897	Entered Novitiate
8. Mary Anne	1898	Entered Novitiate
9. Mary Anne	1899	Entered Novitiate
10. Mary Anne	1900	Entered Novitiate
11. Mary Anne	1901	Entered Novitiate
12. Mary Anne	1902	Entered Novitiate
13. Mary Anne	1903	Entered Novitiate
14. Mary Anne	1904	Entered Novitiate
15. Mary Anne	1905	Entered Novitiate
16. Mary Anne	1906	Entered Novitiate
17. Mary Anne	1907	Entered Novitiate
18. Mary Anne	1908	Entered Novitiate
19. Mary Anne	1909	Entered Novitiate
20. Mary Anne	1910	Entered Novitiate
21. Mary Anne	1911	Entered Novitiate
22. Mary Anne	1912	Entered Novitiate
23. Mary Anne	1913	Entered Novitiate
24. Mary Anne	1914	Entered Novitiate
25. Mary Anne	1915	Entered Novitiate
26. Mary Anne	1916	Entered Novitiate
27. Mary Anne	1917	Entered Novitiate
28. Mary Anne	1918	Entered Novitiate
29. Mary Anne	1919	Entered Novitiate
30. Mary Anne	1920	Entered Novitiate
31. Mary Anne	1921	Entered Novitiate
32. Mary Anne	1922	Entered Novitiate
33. Mary Anne	1923	Entered Novitiate
34. Mary Anne	1924	Entered Novitiate
35. Mary Anne	1925	Entered Novitiate
36. Mary Anne	1926	Entered Novitiate
37. Mary Anne	1927	Entered Novitiate
38. Mary Anne	1928	Entered Novitiate
39. Mary Anne	1929	Entered Novitiate
40. Mary Anne	1930	Entered Novitiate
41. Mary Anne	1931	Entered Novitiate
42. Mary Anne	1932	Entered Novitiate
43. Mary Anne	1933	Entered Novitiate
44. Mary Anne	1934	Entered Novitiate
45. Mary Anne	1935	Entered Novitiate
46. Mary Anne	1936	Entered Novitiate
47. Mary Anne	1937	Entered Novitiate
48. Mary Anne	1938	Entered Novitiate
49. Mary Anne	1939	Entered Novitiate
50. Mary Anne	1940	Entered Novitiate
51. Mary Anne	1941	Entered Novitiate
52. Mary Anne	1942	Entered Novitiate
53. Mary Anne	1943	Entered Novitiate
54. Mary Anne	1944	Entered Novitiate
55. Mary Anne	1945	Entered Novitiate
56. Mary Anne	1946	Entered Novitiate
57. Mary Anne	1947	Entered Novitiate
58. Mary Anne	1948	Entered Novitiate
59. Mary Anne	1949	Entered Novitiate
60. Mary Anne	1950	Entered Novitiate

3. 1931 The Novitiate House is built as Accommodation & Chapel

The Novitiate house was built to expand the accommodation for Woodlands House and specifically for the aspirants, postulants and novices. A year as a novice in Blackheath was followed by a year in Birmingham.



The Chapel now known as the Main Hall at Mycenae House

The building was paid for by selling pockets of land for development and a number of out-buildings were dismantled to make space. The building was especially designed for the nuns and was 'replete with every modern convenience for the purpose for which it is intended'

The ground floor included the Chapel, and also room for visitors and for the priest's breakfast next door to a room where confessions were heard. There was also an office for the Superior. Woodlands was blessed by the Bishop Amigo on 6 May 1922 and placed under the protection of Our Lady of Good Counsel.

The new building was blessed by the bishop in 1931 and opened in 1933. The architect is unknown.

In the gardens, they constructed an artificial stone grotto in imitation of the famous Catholic shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France. It was blessed by Bishop of Tanbes & Lourdes on the 19th June 1933



Under construction in 1931

4. Who lived & worshipped at the Novitiate House.

The new building housed first year nuns dedicated to the period of training and preparation that a Christian Novice undergoes prior to taking their vows.

They were devoted to prayer & study & were not involved in pastoral work and little engagement with the parish.

It was a 'closed' house and the nuns did not have a presence in the community. Church law demanded a strict devotion to prayer and study. We cannot know everything that happened within the grounds however they often played netball in the garden in full habits

Devoted to prayer & study – A first year of 'freshness & greenness, after six months there was a Reception to the Habit, where a novitiate is clothed as a bride and makes promises at the altar.

In the house – the chapel, dormitories, dining hall & priest's breakfast room.

The rules of the order were very strict and the day for all was equally divided into work, rest and religious exercise. The work would have included domestic tasks including cleaning, laundry and cooking because there were no lay sisters and the nuns also worked in the gardens.

No men were allowed on site apart from the priests who took Mass and heard confessions. They would also attend for special conferences and events.



5. The final years of the Nuns until 1967

During World War Two there are several accounts of the nuns taking cover from the German bombs raining down in the area. There is at least one account of a direct hit next to the laundry/kitchen garden and several 1000lbs bombs landing in other parts of the garden.

Another account is of nuns spending much of their time in the solidly constructed wine cellars in Woodland House. They were often joined by other sisters from other convents.

On one occasion a sister and priest were thrown down the stairs by a bomb blast but were unhurt.

In 1967 the convent was closed down and relocated to Paddington – **They expressed a ‘more urgent need in the poorer parts of London’** It was common at this time for convents to sell off their larger properties for funds and relocate to more isolated settings.

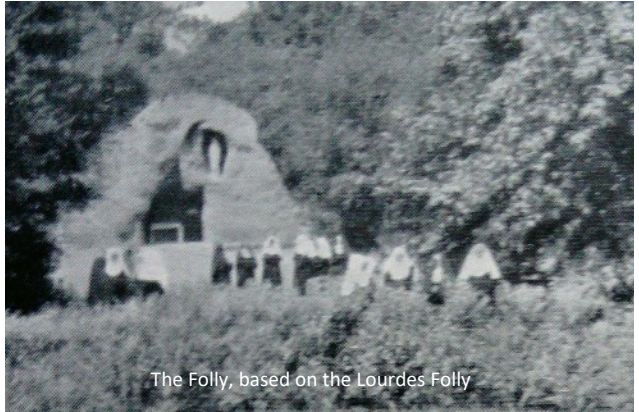
The era of the Scooter Nuns began with various sightings of nuns travelling back and forth to the Paddington convent.



6. The Gardens, Folly & Woodlands

The photos show the nuns would have spent time gardening and also spending other leisure time in the garden.

The garden at the time seems to have been fairly plain with a large area of grass, some gravel paths, some areas of mature trees and planting which included roses. The original garden of woodlands which extended further north and east included many exotic plants and trees.



The Folly, based on the Lourdes Folly

The nuns would also have processed to the grotto on a path round the edge of the garden. The grotto had been designed by Fr Gregory, an Assumptionist priest.

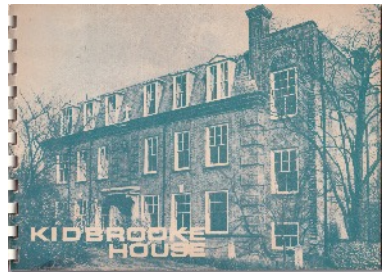


7. 1964 Onwards

Woodlands House to Steiner School(now Waldorf)
Kidbrooke House to Mycenae House.

It was local historian Cyril Fry who persuaded the Council to buy Woodlands, the Novitiate House and its grounds. The Woodlands became an Art Gallery and History library before being leased as a Steiner School in 2006. The Novitiate became Kidbrooke House Community Centre before being renamed Mycenae House in 1994.

In 2007 the council sold of a strip of land in the South west corner for housing development which created Garden House.



When Mycenae opened as Kidbrooke House

8. The Other Stuff & The Myths

Dead Nuns Hole – There is an underground room external to the building which is dark, damp and foreboding. It is mythically known as the Dead Nuns Hole where the bodies of dead nuns were initially stored. There is no evidence to support or dismiss this story but it was more likely a store for coal back in the day when the heating was fuelled by coal.

Scooter Nuns – there are various sightings of nuns on scooters in the area in the 1960s and which various photographs support but we have found no written evidence. There certainly was need for the nuns to travel around with ease to undertake their nursing work and to visit other locations.

Lion in the Garden – A local pupil recollects doing an art project at school which was based around mapping the gardens and highlighting a local myth that a lion wandered around the gardens and made its den in the grotto.

Cave entrance in the garden – it's mentioned that when the grotto was removed after the nuns left an entrance was found to an underground tunnel system. There is a conduit system in Greenwich Park supplying water and this might have had a similar function.



9. References, Sources & Thanks

Articles, Books, Websites & Letters

Wikipedia pages – inc Mycenae House, Woodlands House, Little Sisters of the Assumption & Blackheath.
Sister Mary O'Sullivan of the Little Sisters of the Assumption - emails
A Tale of Two Centuries – Woodlands. Newspaper Article
First English Novitiate - Newspaper Article
Letter from LSotA Wilsden 1995
Greenwich Pre War Register – 1939)
To Tell Our Story Is Praise to God – History of the LSotA (Carol Dorgan
A Form of Catholic Action Book (LSotA) - Elizabeth W Whitehead
Friends of Mycenae Gardens website
Westcombe Society - Research & Story board in the car park

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