

HILLCROFT COLLEGE- A WOMAN'S PLACE

Museum Volunteer Brenda Harrison has taught at Hillcroft College and has been researching its history. The results of her research can be seen in a display in our community showcase at the museum from the end of July.

Hillcroft College has occupied a unique place in the education of women since the 1920s. However, its history dates back to the late nineteenth century. At that time, reformers were becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of further education opportunities for working women

A series of campaigns were launched and in 1919 a letter appeared in *The Times* asking for support to raise funds to establish a residential college for working women. Although this was a radical idea, the response was encouraging and on the 12th February 1920, there was just enough money to lease a property and establish the first and only residential college for working women in the United Kingdom, based in Beckenham, Kent. Eleven students were enrolled and three of them were supported by their employers (Debenhams Ltd and Robertson's, the jam manufacturer). The students included a jam tester, a lace mender, a dressmaker, two clerks, a shop assistant, a domestic servant, and two were unemployed. In 1926, the college was moved to a large Victorian mansion in Surbiton, Surrey. The property was bought for £10,000 and was named Hillcroft. A larger property meant a greater intake of students and numbers steadily grew, the majority coming from factories, shops and offices.

Although staff and students were housed in a beautiful building, college life could be spartan, especially in the winter. Nevertheless, most of the students developed at both a social and academic level. Over the following decades it became possible for Hillcroft leavers to go on to Higher National Diploma courses in Business Studies and take degrees in various other subjects, enabling them to pursue a broad range of careers. An Annual Report column on old students lists a variety of jobs including a Race Relations Advisor, a Computer Analyst Advisor and a manager of a major petroleum company.

There have been substantial improvements to student accommodation and courses have changed over the years because of evolving needs and interests. However, the commitment to providing a high standard of education for women of varying ages and cultures remains at the heart of Hillcroft's mission.

