

A brief history of the Hassockfield site

This site has a dreadful history, from the days it was first built on in 1897 to create a workhouse. As anyone acquainted with *Oliver Twist* will know, workhouses were brutal places which represented the Victorians "hostile environment" towards the vulnerable, and even then the Victorians looked to soften the name. They called it Gateshead Union Cottage Homes!

After a spell as an orphanage the buildings lay decaying until taken over to be used as a detention centre for young people too young to be sent to jail. It was, however, effectively a jail for young people who had been sentenced for their crimes, and it was intended to be seen as such.

What was not intended was that, in addition to the intended harsh conditions the young prisoners would also be subjected to the most appalling physical and sexual abuse which would remain hidden over many years. Operation Seabrook, which is ongoing, is believed to have received more than 1800 reports of these crimes, and six former prisoner officers have been sentenced for abuse.

Following the closure of the detention centre in 1998 the old buildings were eventually demolished and a new, purpose built, institution constructed for locking up young offenders. The privately run centre was opened in 1999, rebranded as Hassockfield and given a gentler title as a Secure Training Centre, but the reality was little changed. Conditions were intended to be harsh, part of the then government's "Short, sharp shock" approach to young offenders, and that aim was certainly achieved. Sadly just five years after it opened a vulnerable young man of 14 took his own life after being restrained in a way that a judge described as an "assault" and by 2015 the facility was closed. Few local residents or the wider community mourned its passing.

No-one knows what the community's real feeling is about the latest chapter in the site's history. It has never been consulted on it.

Despite this, the Government, with the vocal support of the present local MP, plan to open it as a detention centre for foreign women who do not have the paperwork required to remain in Britain. Most are simply refugees and asylum seekers, a minority of whom have committed criminal offences for which they have previously been sentenced and punished through the justice system.

The name-game, however, seems to have re-started. Not only were detention centres formally renamed "Immigration Removal Centres" some years ago, but in recent job adverts the private contractor which will run the site has described the proposed centre as "Derwentside IRC", presumably because the name Derwentside does not yet carry the horror of either Hassockfield or Medomsley.

Call it what you will, a site which has been associated with the abuse and oppression of vulnerable people for more than a century is set to continue that role unless this proposal is stopped.

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