

Girls' Friendly Society was a pioneer youth organisation, founded in England in 1875 and run by women, which still operates in 23 countries. Originally established to protect young working girls, the Society continues to support girls and young women, adapting to the new challenges presented by a changing world.

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The beginnings

GFS was officially established on 1st January 1875 by Mary Elizabeth Townsend, an Irish clergyman's daughter married to the wealthy Frederick Townsend.

She was concerned with the fate of many working-class country girls who left home to take up urban employment. Cut off from the support of friends and family, Mrs Townsend's idea was for 'lady' Associates to befriend and guide these girls, who would form the Society's Members. Girls could join GFS from the age of 12, but from 1882 those from the age of 8 could become Candidates, preparing for membership.

1880 to 1920: the golden years

By 1880, GFS had nearly 40,000 Members and over 13,500 Associates. During this year Queen Victoria became the Society's Patron. It was an almost exclusively female organisation, being run by and for women with the exception of male Treasurers, Trustees and some senior clergy who held ex officio positions.

GFS provided numerous facilities for the young women under its protection. Most important were the lodges offering cheap, good-quality accommodation to young women working in domestic service and as mill and factory workers.

By 1900, GFS had over 150,000 Members and nearly 33,000 Associates in 1,361 Branches. Young women working in domestic service comprised the largest single occupational group among the Members. Others were teachers, nurses, clerks, students and workers in refreshment bars, mills, factories and warehouses.

The Society communicated with Members and Associates through numerous publications beginning with The Girls' Friendly Society Reporter in 1875, quickly followed by Friendly Leaves. By 1883 Friendly Leaves had a monthly circulation of 46,000, and Friendly Work was introduced, with a focus on older Members to reflect their gradually increasing role as local workers for the Society.

The Society also produced many books and pamphlets. Among the most popular was Every Day: Thoughts on the GFS Rules of Life, first published in 1895, which encapsulated the Society's entire ethos that GFS should inform Members' whole approach to daily life.

The 1920s and 1930s: expanding its wings

The outbreak of the First World War and its aftermath resulted in a decline in Members' employment and membership numbers. In the decade following the War the Society expanded its activities in many other directions.

In 1921, the Society acquired Argyll House, a hostel originally established by the Deptford Council for Youth. It took in homeless girls and women and those escaping domestic violence.

The Society's Golden Jubilee in 1925 was celebrated, amongst other activities, with a pageant, The Quest, performed in the Albert Hall by six hundred Members and attended by Queen Mary and Princess Mary.

By 1925, the Society had 66 Homes and Hostels in England and Wales, workers gathered for Conferences, Retreats and Training Weeks and the first Correspondence Training Course was introduced. Camps were organised for younger Members, the Readers' Union introduced a Certificate of English, the Migration Department assisted hundreds of members with their travels abroad.

Further innovations followed in 1926 with the first GFS continental holiday party, which visited Brussels, and the Society's first promotional film, In Friendship's Name, which was shown around the country.

The 1930s saw some modernisation of the Society with the appointment of Correspondents for Health, promotion of the study of Citizenship among Members and the setting up of a Central Council for Recreative Physical Training.

The 1940s and 1950s: new world order

From 1939 the Society threw itself wholeheartedly into the War effort. A War Emergency Committee again raised money for clubs and hostels for women working on the Home Front, while the Branches undertook various tasks from helping with evacuees to 'adopting' a mine sweeper!

In 1942, GFS launched its War Training Scheme for girls aged 14-18 which was taken up by Youth Committees and Education Authorities. The training covered a variety of subjects from ARP Techniques to Poultry Keeping. The League of Skilled Housecraft, in conjunction with the Board of Education and London County Council, also introduced a Youth Wartime Section to provide housecraft training for 16-18 year old girls.

In 1945 it introduced in every diocese an experienced full-time organising worker, and, in 1948, a scheme to provide training for GFS voluntary leadership. In 1957 a joint scheme between the GFS, Westhill Training College and the College of the Ascension, Selly Oak, resulted in the first two G.F.S. students to train as Professional Youth Leaders.

GFS also increased its missionary work overseas with, in 1951, 25 missionaries in Africa, Japan, India, Pakistan and Iran.

World Council was formed in 1955 to promote fellowship between the members of the Society throughout the world by the exchange of information and ideas and in 1959 the first World Project was launched, helping to support a GFS worker in Mombasa. The World Council agreed to meet every 3 years and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother was asked to become the Society's World Patron.