

# Back to the future: Archiving Residential Children's Homes in Scotland and Germany (ARCH)

## The Scottish Findings



**Phase One Report:  
Analysis of the  
archives from  
1920 - 1980**

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STIRLING**

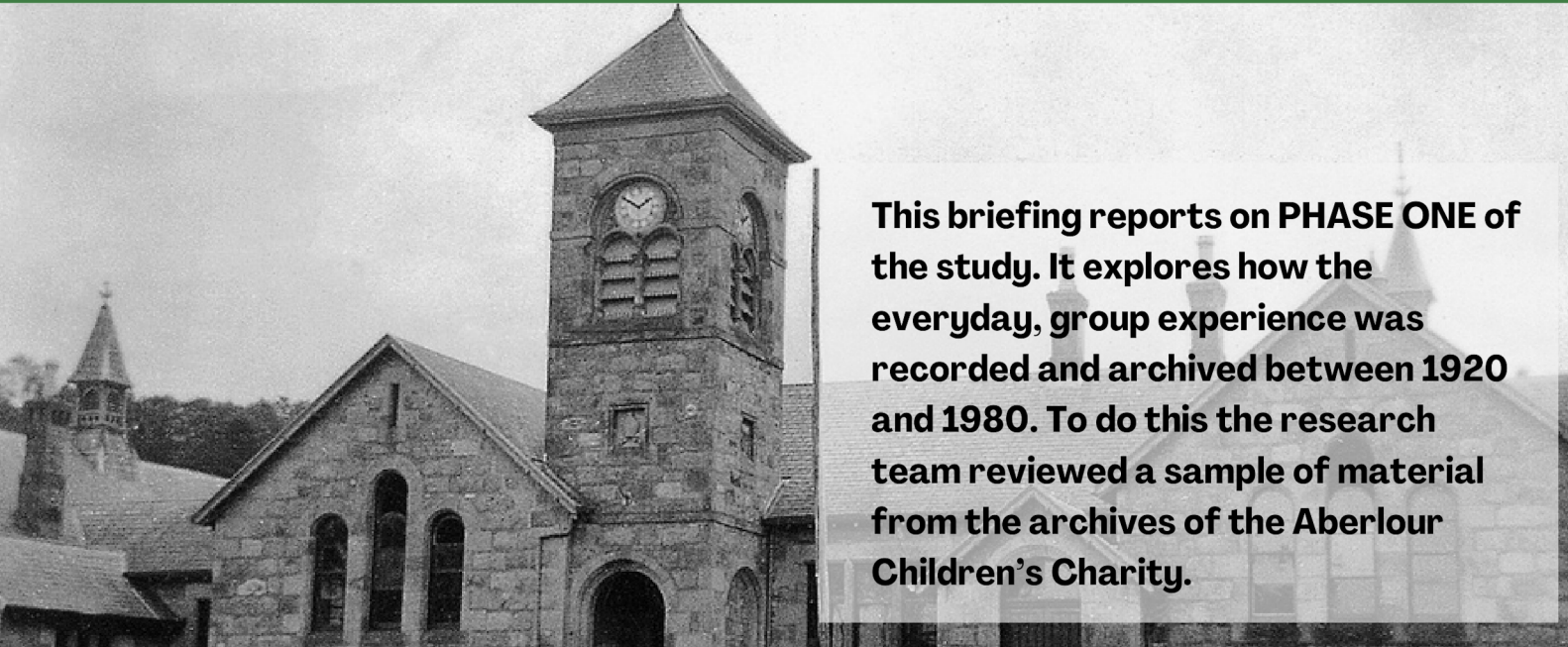


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# Introduction



**This briefing reports on PHASE ONE of the study. It explores how the everyday, group experience was recorded and archived between 1920 and 1980. To do this the research team reviewed a sample of material from the archives of the Aberlour Children's Charity.**

The ARCH project is a collaboration between the University of Stirling and the University of Osnabrück. It aims to establish a more nuanced and critical understanding of what types of information, objects, and relationships are central to supporting care experienced children, young people and adults in developing an understanding of their past. It focuses on the residential care and how living together is captured, cared for and made available.

To do this, the project extends across five main phases, each of which is shaped by a central research question. This briefing presents the findings to question one.

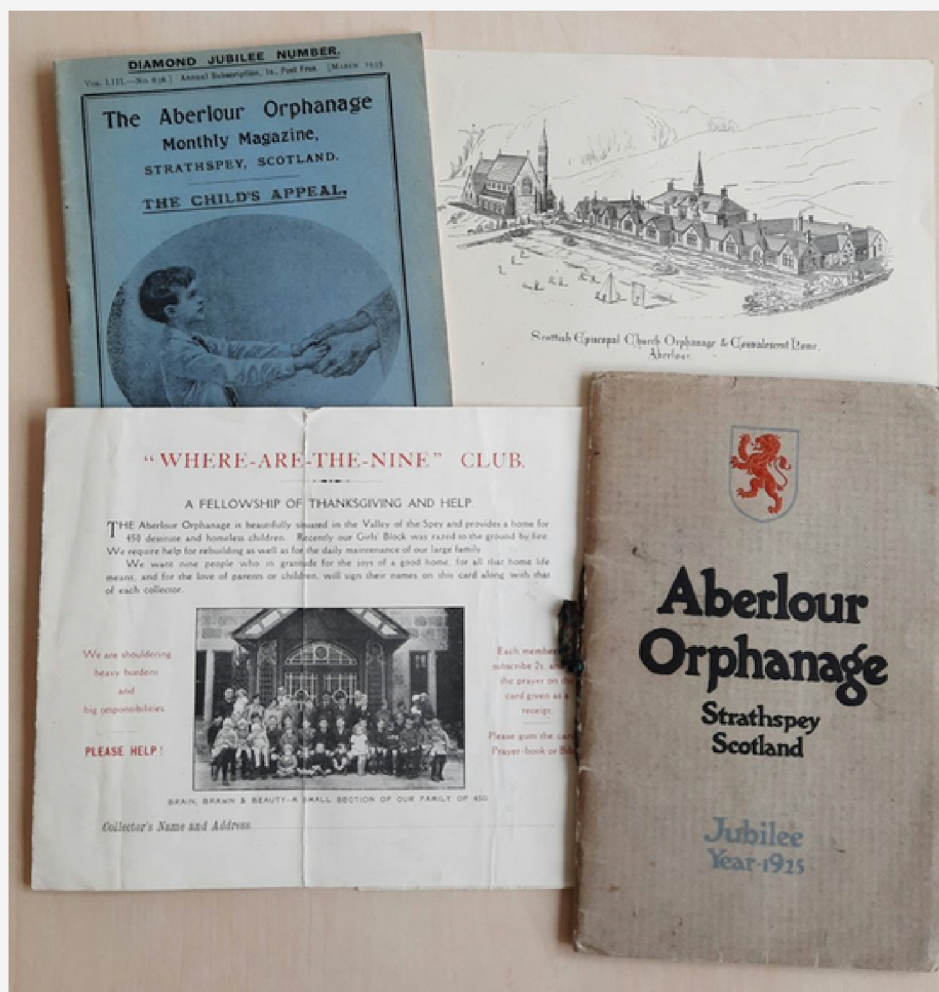
1. **Understanding:** How was the everyday, collective experience of group care recorded and archived in care settings in the past?
2. **Development:** What do contemporary young people, staff and ex residents choose to record in the archives about their lives together?
3. **Creation:** How are tensions about public and private care and the recording or not of shared lives managed by those involved? How can collective memories be safely managed, stored and made accessible?
4. **Tracking:** Who uses the archives and why?
5. **Sustaining:** Who takes ownership of the collective past in the form of the archives and how is this determined? An overarching concern of the project is the ways in which taken-for-granted legal, political, cultural and professional factors influence the practices of recording group care.

# Content of the Archives 1920-1980

The Aberlour Archive consists of detailed records relating to the organisation and administration of Aberlour Orphanage, which opened in 1875, and material relating to the establishment and operation of family group homes following the closure of the orphanage in 1967.

The research team analysed a wide range of material including:

- The Aberlour Orphanage magazine
- Selected individual case files
- Minutes of staff meetings and the Board of Trustees
- Administrative records including daily diaries and medical log books
- Financial records including ledgers and petty cash books



# Key Findings

## Whose voice is recorded?

The contents of the archive over this time period contain few places where children's voices are captured. Most often, accounts of events are written from the perspectives of the adults charged with looking after the children and managing the orphanage. However, there are some places where children's accounts are recorded first hand. This is most notable in the medical logs where children are asked to provide an account of their illness or injury in their own words. In the magazines, letters from former residents of the orphanage are presented in full. It is not clear how these particular letters were selected however such letters often include memories of their time in the orphanage and requests for information about staff and children. For example, in her letter to the magazine published in December 1940, a former resident writes how she enjoys reading letters from those who had lived at the orphanage at the same time she had:

***I often wish I knew someone near here who had been in the orphanage, as oh!  
It would be so nice to talk about it.***

DEAR SIR,  
Thank you very kindly for the two Magazines which I have received, its ever so nice to read about my old home and its progress, also its fine to read the letters of either old boys and girls who were at the Home the same time as me. I suppose Sir most of us old ones are dotted all over the globe, but I bet with all this calling up it will unite many old boys who might even have been bosom pals at the Home ; won't they have lots to talk over. I often wish I knew of somebody near here who has been in the Orphanage, as oh ! it would be so nice to talk and talk about it, whereas talking to strangers about it isn't the same, somehow or other they don't seem to grasp the fact of its greatness. Well Sir, if this war ends soon and we are all spared, "Trusting in God" I am going to do my utmost to come up and see

# How is daily life captured?

By piecing the different elements of the archive together we were able to establish a picture of some of the routine and rhythms of life in the orphanage and latterly the smaller group homes. These accounts often focus on the events which punctuate the day (meal times, bath times, school) but also include information about special events and visits. The daily logs offer examples of where routines have been disrupted or challenged with notes taken on children who have behaved 'badly' being made more frequently than where children have 'done well'. Often these records are generic and offer limited insight into how daily life was experienced by individual children or indeed by the group as a whole:

***Played games then went out walking. Had a sing song after dinner time then we went out walking, After tea time we read stories then went upstairs and had baths and nails cut  
(29th Dec 1964 Scribbling Daily Diary)***

Included in the earlier records that we reviewed were frequent references to the care provided by older children to the younger residents of the orphanage. Such care included cleaning, laundry and cooking responsibilities as well as 'keeping an eye' on the younger children. Until the 1960s staff to child ratios (as well as differing narratives of childhood) meant that young people's skills were needed to maintain the every day life of the orphanage. Again, we have no insight into how this was viewed and experienced by all parties but examples of 'strike action' by older girls suggest that there was a degree of power in the collective (albeit these are fleeting moments).

***Occasionally we get tired of routine, but in a family such as ours, routine is not only necessary, but it is not a bad thing for it is vitally important that children be taught the importance of good and useful habits  
(From Aberlour Magazine May/June 1943)***

VOL. LXII.

MAY, JUNE, 1943.

No. 716

**Our Holiday Home!!**

# Why were records kept?

The archive contains limited information as to why records were kept and who the expected readers might be. However, there are references made to the external monitoring of both financial expenditure and the care being provided. These motivations result in a somewhat bureaucratic approach to recording which focuses on the transactions of 'care' and how it was delivered. It is of note that the volume of individual case recording increased from the 1960s onwards. This shift in recording practice occurred alongside the move to smaller group homes and gradual move away from the notion of the 'orphan' to the 'troubled or troublesome' child. In the early years of the smaller group homes, reference is made in the Board minutes that Aberlour was reluctant to be a resource of 'troubled' children, and wished to focus on 'normal' children finding themselves in difficulty. Recording became more focused on behaviours (or 'symptoms') and the 'interventions' being offered turning away from generic care practice recording.

A richer narrative account of life in the orphanage is presented through the magazines. The magazines are the only area of the archive to include young people's voices consistently. Their narratives are captured in letters sent in by care leavers; memoirs by care leavers; articles written by current residents and citations of children and reporting of their responses within the Warden's writing. Whilst the magazines were primarily produced to encourage donations to fund the orphanage, they also offered a way for adults who had left care to remain connected to the staff and children as well as to the place. Whilst clearly carefully selected for publication, the letters from ex residents appear to be full of a deep sense of belonging to the orphanage and a desire to maintain the connection and indeed to donate to the ongoing existence of the orphanage itself.

***[letters from the warden] are my most treasures possessions. One day they will be given to my children and I hope their children after them, so letting them know what a perfect place Aberlour orphanage really is (Letter from former resident May/June 1948)***



The Orphanage Magazine.  
ABERLOUR, STRATHSPEY, SCOTLAND

Interestingly, in an expert interview conducted with Ron Aitchison who had lived in the Orphanage between 1950 and 1964, he explained that the children referred to the magazine as the 'blue liar':

***...to be fair it was a pretty good report of what had been going on... we used to get them as kids ... we called it the blue liar mainly because there were certain aspects of the thing that was not quite how we saw it happened. It may have been that it was just our version of the events but I would say that generally the orphanage diary was quite a truthful document.***

It is of note that there is evidence of additional records which show everyday life being captured, such as photos and films, earlier log books, daily 'black mark' or disciplinary records, items related to leisure clubs and activities like swimming, country dancing and Scouts. However these were not selected as important for long term retention and are therefore not present in the materials within the archives. This in itself offers a sense of who organisations such as Aberlour believed, at that time, they were recording and retaining materials for; namely organisational purposes rather than as a resource for children and young people.

Many recorded items about a young person or their group - including logs, medical logs and magazine items (even those articles authored by a young person) - are not linked to a central record that a person with care experience is likely to access, i.e. their Case File; these broader records, which convey more about group everyday experience, are not actively identified as part of the young person's central record of care. This further suggests such records were not kept for the child but primarily for administrative purposes.





# Group Identity

Up until its closure in 1967 children were encouraged to identify with (and be identified by) Aberlour orphanage. Central to this was the presentation of children as healthy, well cared for and 'honest'. Children were encouraged to consider themselves as 'just the same as other Scottish boys and girls'. Staff took on responsibility for producing 'good adults' who would be active contributors to the work force and honest and upstanding members of the community. This was closely tied to the identity of the orphanage itself which stressed its Christian, hard working and honest roots. What was promoted within the records, and in particular, the magazines, was an awareness of the stigma faced by 'orphanage children' and the need for all concerned to challenge this by their behaviour and attitudes. Publicly at least, the orphanage promoted itself as a large, extended family:

***...home is the only word which should describe the place where a child lives, and a home without affection is no home at all (Magazine March 1927)***

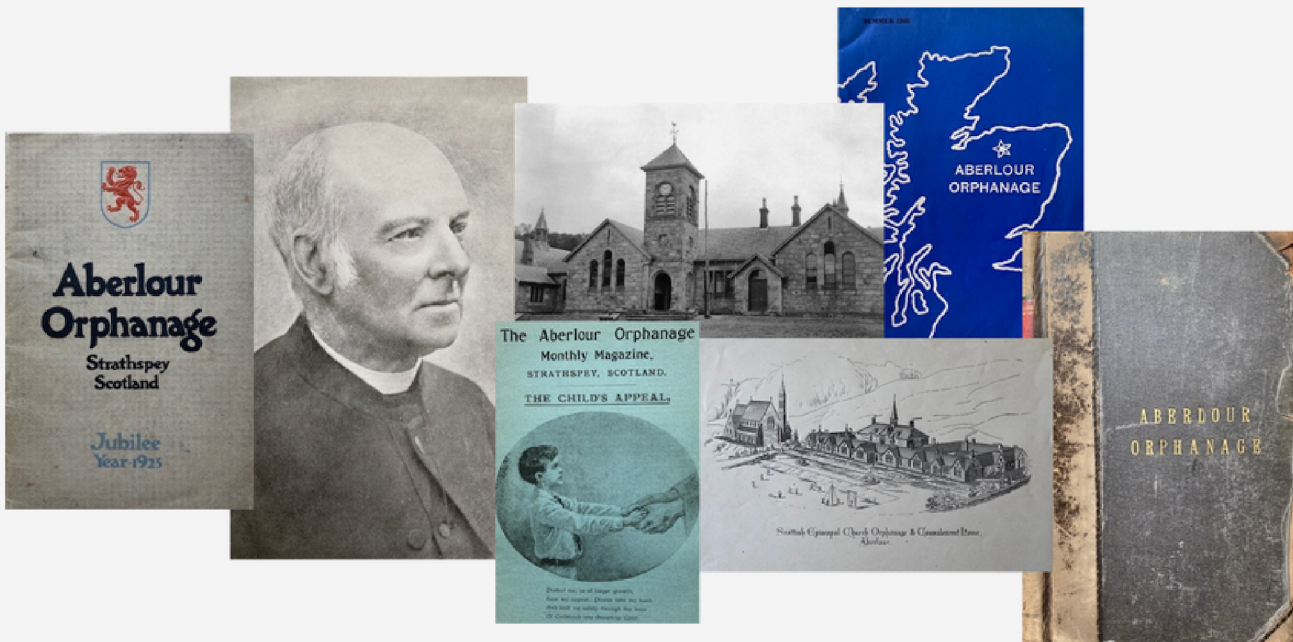
The centrality of the Aberlour identity appeared to wane following the move to smaller group homes. The small home logs give interesting evidence of this shift in identity: adults who had lived in the Aberlour Orphanage appeared at some of the small group homes once the Aberlour Orphanage and former buildings had been sold. It appeared that they were trying to reconnect with 'home' albeit that the building itself was no longer available to them.

The move to small group homes coincided with a practice shift away from large group living to a focus on care of individual children. With this recording became increasingly located in the individual case files.



These types of records initially contained information relating to children before being admitted to the orphanage, for example who was paying for the children’s care, the reasons for their admission and basic contact details and medical information. In the later case files from the 1960s and 70s there is more detail provided on how children are spending their time as well as judgements/assessments of their behaviours. In files from the 1970s there is also the beginnings of very limited child-led recordkeeping, such as self-written stories about their own lives as well as, records not directly relating to the management of a person's out of home care. These included for example correspondence to a young person about attending a conference for young people in care and a sports certificate.

It appeared from the materials contained in the archive that adults recorded for their own purposes with no sense that their records would be consulted. Residential care practice was less professionalized prior to the 1960s and this is mirrored in the ways in which adults approached their writing in some ways providing richer and more meaningful accounts (e.g., letters between the warden and concerned adults are more expansive, informal and include greater detail).



# Conclusion

## Accessing Information

Being able to access a range of materials within the archive has given insight into how accessing care records might be better contextualized. Locating individual care files within other types of records allows a fuller and richer picture of the time spent in care to be made available to people who want to remember or find out more about their childhoods. Digitising but also indexing/cataloguing materials such as the magazines would make this information on everyday life accessible.

Historically, it appears that Aberlour understood the value of recording group life. This was regularly highlighted and captured in the early versions of the magazines. Indeed, many of the warden's reports included some of the more troublesome events which occurred as well as the ones which were reported as joyful. Similarly, the magazines highlighted the ways in which young people were encouraged to remain connected to the orphanage and to one another and to consider the orphanage as 'home'. With the professionalization of care came a distancing from encouraging a sense of belonging.

What was striking from the analysis of the archive was not only what it contained but also what was absent, either because it was never captured or because it was lost or destroyed. Like many organisations operating at that time, what was valued and retained were primarily the administrative records rather than the materials that care experienced people might choose to have retained leaving them with a sense that their recorded story has been lost, undervalued or overlooked.

# Next Steps

## Phase One: The Past

Phase One examined historical records between 1920 and 1980 in order to explore how everyday group experiences were recorded within the different historical, social, and cultural context in both Germany and Scotland.

March 2021 - March 2022

## Phase Two: The Present

We are working in partnership with young people, care experienced adults, and care workers to explore what types of everyday information or records they would like to be able to access, at what point in their lives, and why. From this, we will work together to create 'living archives' that will be accessible to those who live and work, or have lived or worked, the residential children's homes.

September 2021 - March 2024

## Phase Three: The Future

Once the living archive has been developed and tested, we will monitor it to develop our understanding of how decisions are made about what to record. This stage will be important for understanding of the complex ethical and moral challenges of recording a shared past in the context of 'state' care, within the various legal and regulatory frameworks associated with it. We are also developing free guidance and training resources to aid organisations and practitioners in their approaches to memory keeping.

March 2023 - March 2024

# The Research Team

The Scottish and German research teams are led by the Principal Investigators:



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# Acknowledgements

The team would like to say **THANK YOU** to all children and young people whose records were reviewed as part of the study. We would also like to thank Aberlour and our other partners who have been supportive to ARCH throughout the research process.

We are aware that you may have personal experience of being looked after by Aberlour or have someone you care about who was. If you want to know more about accessing personal records held by Aberlour, please visit the 'contact us' page at [www.aberlour.org.uk](http://www.aberlour.org.uk).



# Contact ARCH

**You can find out more about the ARCH Project at:**

**Archiving Children's Residential Homes (ARCH)**

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FK9 4LA

**Web:** [www.archproject.stir.ac.uk](http://www.archproject.stir.ac.uk)

**Twitter:** @ARCH\_Stirling

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Visit the website here

**Please contact us if you require this briefing in an alternative format.**

## Accessing Archives

The Aberlour Children's Charity Archive is held in the University of Stirling Archives. Access to personal care records is managed by Aberlour directly.

The University of Stirling Archives is improving access to Aberlour's historical records through a programme of cataloguing and digitisation. Additional information on the history of Aberlour Orphanage has been added through the generous donation of the personal collection of Ron Aitchison, a resident of Aberlour Orphanage from 1950-1965.

For further information or to look at the materials from Ron Aitchison, please contact our Archives team at [archives@stir.ac.uk](mailto:archives@stir.ac.uk).