A Brief History of Grace Eyre Foundation
(formerly The Guardianship Society)
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1864 Miss Grace Eyre Woodhead was born in Brighton on 24th February.

1898 Miss Woodhead begins to arrange holiday homes in the Heathfield district for London children with special needs, and later she invites girls from special schools to have holidays at her home in Sussex.

1913 The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 is passed. This requires Local Authorities to arrange institutional care or guardianship for people considered ‘mentally deficient’.

The voluntary boarding out scheme begun by Miss Woodhead has now to be formalised in order to comply with the new legislation and the Guardianship Society is formed on 1st October 1913.

1914 The Guardianship Society begins to take on the supervision of clients on behalf of the Brighton Borough Council.

The first training courses were run for both children and adults – the first time this had happened outside of large institutions. A day centre, offering industrial training was opened in Brighton, probably the first of its kind in the country.

1914-1920 Despite the war, this period is one of significant growth for the Guardianship Society, with increasing interest from other local authorities and Boards of Control in this new model of boarding out rather than institutional care.

The Office and Centre moves to 82 Grand Parade, Brighton from St George’s Place in 1919.

A formal agreement is signed with Brighton Borough Council in 1915.

1920 The Guardianship Society has its first written constitution. Its Object are the care and supervision of the mentally and physically defective and other special cases by:

- Boarding them out in carefully chosen families.
- Assisting them to obtain training and employment suited to their capabilities.
- Visiting them and taking a friendly interest in their moral and material welfare.

1921 An Industrial Class opens daily as an Occupation Centre in Hove.
1923 Dengates Cottage Farm at Waldron in Sussex is opened in August to provide accommodation and farming training for young men.

1925 The Guardianship Society works in co-operation with the Brighton Borough Council and the Mental Hospital to provide support to patients discharged from Hospital.

1927 A second cottage farm is established Tubwell Farm, Rotherfield to provide accommodation and training in gardening, rabbit and pig farming.

1931 Two other Day Centres open in Peacehaven and Heathfield, and an Occupation Therapy class is established in Haywards Heath.

1932 Brighton Borough Council terminates its agreement with the Society as it plans to implement its own scheme.

1936 Grace Eyre Woodhead dies on 5th April 1936 aged 72.

1939-1945 During the Second World War training classes are spread out in smaller groups in different parts of Brighton and home teaching is organised due to air raids. The Society assists Brighton Borough Council in placing children evacuees.

1948 The National Health Service Act comes into effect and representatives from the local health authority start to attend Society Committee meetings.

1950 The Guardianship Society needs larger premises and purchases the Methodist Church Hall on Old Shoreham Road/Montefiore Road – Grace Eyre Foundation is still based here following many renovations.

1951 A new programme for the Centre is set up including speech training, stance and posture, singing, weaving, knitting & stitching canvas. Sports activities include football, cricket & games in the park. The Upper Hall is used for badminton.

1953 An Occupational Centre in Hastings is opened – the emphasis is on creating a social club atmosphere.
1959    The two cottage farms at Dengates and Tubwell are closed down – financial responsibility for these were handed over to the NHS in 1948/9 although the Society continued to administer them until their closure.

The Mental Health Act is passed - this places greater emphasis on community rather than hospital care. The Guardianship Society is approached by organisations such as the National Association for Mental Health, seeking advice on developing community based models of care.

The language of disability begins to change – the term ‘mentally handicapped’ into more general use.

1960    The Society participates at the Mental Health Exhibition held at the Pavilion Theatre, Brighton.

1963    A ‘Foster’ Parents (Carers) Association is formed. Day Centres classes are held in Peacehaven, Hasting, St Leonard’s, Tunbridge Wells, Steyning, Hove and Newhaven.

1974    The implementation of the Education Act meant that the responsibility for disabled children’s education and support was handed over to the local Education Department and a new system of ‘Special Schools’.

1975    The Hastings Centre moves to new premises at the Westhill Community Centre.

1979    The Society is questioning its approach to the ‘mentally handicapped’ and looks to recapture the innovation and leadership of its early years. This requires establishing a new partnership with Local Authorities and developing a different approach to the care of the mentally handicapped in the 80s and 90s.

1981    The Year of the Disabled – the Society is putting a greater emphasis on rights, human dignity and enabling greater independence for people with learning disabilities.

1983-7    The Society begins a long period of restructuring, following publication of a Research Report investigating the affairs of the Society in conjunction with Sussex University. This restructuring focused particularly on rebuilding morale and re-establishing good working relationships with carers, social services and local authorities.
1988 The Guardianship Society celebrates its 75th anniversary, and in acknowledgement of the work of its founder, the name of the organisation is changed to The Grace Eyre Foundation.

A new scheme with West Sussex is set up – the Foundation acts as the County’s agency for Adult Placement.

1990 The NHS and Community Care Act in 1990 provided increased opportunities for organisations such as Grace Eyre Foundation to provide services to people with learning disabilities in the community.

1998 Grace Eyre celebrates 100 years since Grace Eyre Woodhead began her voluntary activities supporting children in London and Sussex.

1999 Walsingham Road Centre opens to service users – this Day Centre, partly funded through the Lottery, provides a quieter environment for older and more vulnerable clients.

2000 Millennium Awards Training of Trainers programme is implemented in partnership with the University of Sussex. This six week training course aims to teach service users to run sessions themselves, including art and literacy.

2002 The ‘Active Lives Forum’ - a service user group – is established. This is the beginning of regular consultation with clients across Grace Eyre’s services.

2006 GE wins funding to set up a Travel Buddy Scheme which aims to help people stay safe when they’re out and about, on public transport or on foot.

2007 Keith Purcell, a service user supported through Grace Eyre, wins three bronze medals in the Special Olympics in China.

2008 Grace Eyre’s first ‘Our Plan 2008-2011’ was published – this emphasised User Involvement and the need to modernise and strengthen the charity’s governance. A Person-centred Charter was agreed.

2009-2010 Brighton & Hove ‘Choices’ Supported Living scheme set up to support people in their own homes and the community, promoting independence by helping with daily living skills, as well as work, college and leisure activities.

2010 Grace Eyre’s Charitable Objects are amended to include support for Mental Health issues.

2011 Grace Eyre Housing, a Community Interest Company, is established to give people with learning disabilities in Brighton & Hove choices and options about where and how they wish to live in the city.

Development of a Service User Involvement Strategy to 2014

2012 Grace Eyre wins a West Sussex contract to provide Support Living services across the county.
GE win Big Lottery Fund and Sports England grants as funding from the local Learning Disability Development Fund for Service User led projects

2013 Grace Eyre Foundation celebrates its centenary.

Grace Eyre Woodhead (1864 – 1936)

Grace Eyre Woodhead was born in Brighton on 24th February 1864, one of twelve children born to Major Henry James Plumridge Woodhead and Emily Woodhead. Grace studied History at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford from 1884-1886.

Grace Eyre believed that the 'care and supervision of the mentally and physically defective' should be within the community rather than in the large isolated institutions. In 1898 she began organising country holidays for under-privileged and disabled children from Special Schools in London, who were boarded out at Heathfield in East Sussex. By 1900, together with other supportive friends in the Brighton community, Grace Eyre had established a headquarters for these activities, and was pioneering a model of community based 'guardianship'.
These activities were organised on an entirely voluntary basis but demand still grew and applications were subsequently received to take other cases, such as patients funded privately or by other Societies or Boards of Guardians, who were then boarded out with foster mothers all over the county.

This work was formalised in response to the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act which required local authorities to ascertain which persons in their areas were ‘mental defectives’ and to arrange suitable care.

A meeting was held in June of that year to discuss a new Society for ‘boarding out the mentally and physically defective under family guardianship’. Patients would be boarded out with carefully selected families, provided with training and assisted with employment opportunities. Medical support would be provided and regular reports made to the local Board of Control. The new Guardianship Society was formally launched on 1st October 1913, and was funded by regular subscription and community fundraising efforts.

As Secretary of the Society, Grace Eyre actively helped to steer the organisation through initially difficult relationships with the local Board of Control. The 1913 Act allowed for guardianship models of care but the emphasis was still very much on control and segregation. Increasingly however, the Guardianship Society’s approach attracted positive attention, with local authorities throughout the country communicating with Grace Eyre to learn more about its methodology which combined compassion, respect and practicality.

There followed a period of great growth through the war years and into the 1920s as the ‘boarding out’ scheme was extended. The emphasis continued to be on care in the community, supervised by the Society, with the additional provision of occupational training. Training classes were established, eventually an Occupational Centre was opened in Hove, and guardianship arrangements became more long term. By 1923 the local Board of Control praised the work of the Society in its Annual Report:

“... we commend to the attention of the Local Authorities, the experimental work of the Brighton Guardianship Society. Local Authorities should organise schemes somewhat on the same lines”.

Grace Eyre continued to be actively involved with the Guardianship Society for the rest of her life helping to realise a vision:

“to humanise by individual care, the treatment of all those mental patients is likely to respond to it, and likely moreover to derive less benefit from Institutional care. Institutions should be regarded as the last option of care. The Society endeavours to provide bright and healthy surroundings and to try to inculcate a feeling of happiness and a sense of usefulness and confidence in all clients; thus giving them a place in the sun”.

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Grace Eyre Woodhead of 13 Compton Avenue, Brighton, died on 5 April 1936 at the age of 72 and she was buried in the family vault at Brighton Extra Mural Cemetery, Woodvale. The then trustees paid this tribute to her:

“Her enthusiasm, her deep sympathy with the afflicted, and her calm determination to do all that was possible for the welfare of those placed under her care, will always be remembered with gratitude by those with knowledge of the magnificent work to which Miss Woodhead so nobly devoted her strength and energy”.