

This article is an output from, 'Educating Deptford: the Deptford Ragged School and its Place in the Community'.

A project run by The Deptford Ragged School Archive and The Bear Church researching the history of the Deptford Ragged School and how it impacted lives.

The project digitised the Deptford Ragged School archive and made it freely available online. It involved partnerships with Creekside Discovery Centre, IRIE! dance theatre, and The Bear Church, who used the stories of the Deptford Ragged School to develop new programmes and run events in the local community.

Educating Deptford: the Deptford Ragged School and its Place in the Community was made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to increase understanding of the history of the Deptford Ragged School, create a digitised archive, work with the local community, and utilise the research to explore how the school provided education, care, built community and enabled social mobility.

The Community Research Process

Keeping with the People's History approach of the project, it was important to ensure that the research undertaken was not only *about* the people, and *for* the people, but that, where possible, it was also undertaken *by* the people.

Consequently, the project appointed nine Community Researchers to investigate the Deptford Ragged School Archive. Candidates were selected for their skills and experience in research, having a background in history and a specific interest in London and Deptford history, and for their ability to work efficiently, to deadlines, and within a small team.

Each researcher was given the opportunity to develop an idea, story, or pattern which they had found in the archive materials into a short thematic article.

All these articles, along with a range of other resources, can be downloaded from the Deptford Ragged School Archive website: www.deptfordraggedschoolarchive.org.uk



'A Matter of Thankfulness': Food and Wellbeing through the Benevolent Fund

Dr John Price



Fig. 1: DRSA_1_1_4_1895

The first mention of the Deptford Ragged School's 'Benevolent Fund' appears in the 1888-89 Annual Report. No mention is made of it being a new initiative, and it seems to have originated from a repurposing or repositioning of an earlier Provident Fund. Whenever and however it came about, for the next 25 years, reports and financial accounts regarding its work featured prominently in the school's Annual Reports.



Fig. 2: DRSA_1_1_4_1899

It was responsible for a range of activities and initiatives directly related to sustaining and improving health and wellbeing for people in the local area, including food and medical care. The Benevolent Fund is particularly interesting, not only because it demonstrates the holistic approach to education adopted by the school, but also because it reveals the precarious nature of working-class life, and how small interventions could have a significant impact.

The outlook for the coming winter, as regards our poorer brethren, is somewhat gloomy; but we trust that our friends will be disposed rather to increase than diminish their past aid in order that we may be enabled, if not to meet every real need, yet to alleviate the sorrow and suffering of those who from extreme poverty, sickness, distress, or old age, claim and deserve our practical sympathy. It is needless to assure our kind contributors that whatever is entrusted to us will be faithfully administered.

Fig. 3: DRSA_1_1_4_1892-93

As might be deduced from its name, the primary aim of the Benevolent Fund was well-intentioned kindness, generosity, and goodwill to 'alleviate the sorrow and suffering of those who from extreme poverty, sickness, distress, or old age, claim and deserve our practical

sympathy' (Annual Report, 1892-3). This 'practical sympathy' generally fell into three areas: the provision of food tickets; trips or holidays to improve health and wellbeing; and helping people to help themselves. As with much of the pastoral work undertaken by the school, the Benevolent Fund relied on monetary donations. These averaged around £35 per annum, which was roughly equivalent to a year's income for a general labourer. Supporters also helped in other ways, such as using their position or influence to secure employment, medical treatment, or other benefits for people, or advocating on their behalf.

Much of the Ragged School's provision of day-to-day food, rather than as treats or on special occasions, appears to have been through issuing tickets that could be used to obtain goods. This was a mainstay of the Benevolent Fund's work, and in most years food tickets accounted for the bulk of expenditure. For example, in 1891-2, it issued 75 bread tickets, 87 meat tickets, 76 milk tickets, and 115 grocery tickets, at a cost of £12 17s 6d out of a total expenditure of £22 11s 5d. It is unsurprising to see these particular foods consistently represented in the accounts, as they formed much of the staple working-class diet.

Weeks through the Charity Organi-				
sation Society				
Meat Tickets,	87	3	10	6
Bread	75	2	18	0
Milk	76	1	14	2½
Grocery	115	4	8	8
Coals	62	3	16	8
		1	16	2

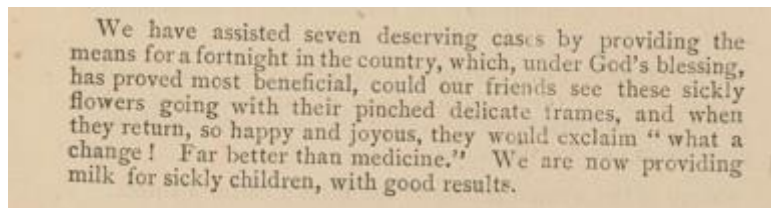
Fig. 4: DRSA_1_1_4_1891-92

Bread was probably the most common food for working-class families and children. It had many advantages for those in poverty: it was cheap, filling, relatively palatable, and ready-made; it could be eaten cold and required no cooking; it was portable and did not require a plate or utensils; and, if funds allowed, it could be easily 'enhanced' with a range of tasty toppings, such as jam, treacle, margarine, or dripping. (Davin, 1996) That said, new milling techniques towards the end of the nineteenth century virtually eliminated wheatgerm from flour, leading to white bread which was nutritionally poor. Nonetheless, bread remained the staple food for breakfast and tea.

Meat would have been a nutritional and much desired addition to the working-class diet, but one which was generally expensive and could bring additional complications. Meat needed to be cooked, and poorer working-class households generally only had access to an open fire. Coal was costly and, in warmer months, an open fire was unnecessary and inconvenient. It was also not conducive to the more cost-effective cooking methods, like stewing and braising, which could make a small amount of meat go a long way. Smaller scraps or offcuts of meat could be steeped in boiling water to make a warming 'Beef Tea', but it was scant replacement for a meal. Also, many working-class women undertook paid work and would have lacked the time, and possibly the household education and skills, to prepare and cook meals. It is probable that meat tickets were only given to those who could properly utilise them, rather than giving someone an additional burden.

It might, perhaps, appear odd that the Benevolent Fund would expend money on sending children and families on trips and holidays, rather than using that money for essentials such as food, clothing, and coal. However, there was a clear wellbeing rationale behind it, as enthusiastically explained in the 1889-90 Annual Report; 'Could our friends see these sickly

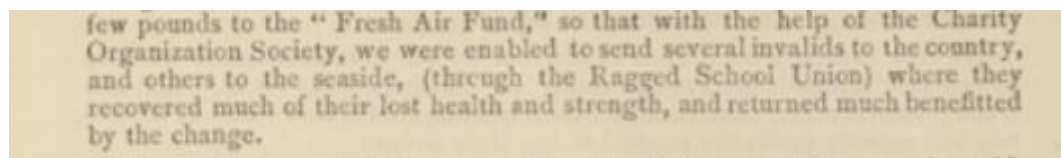
flowers going with their pinched delicate frames, and when they return, so happy and joyous, they would exclaim "What a change!" Far better than medicine'.



We have assisted seven deserving cases by providing the means for a fortnight in the country, which, under God's blessing, has proved most beneficial, could our friends see these sickly flowers going with their pinched delicate frames, and when they return, so happy and joyous, they would exclaim "what a change! Far better than medicine." We are now providing milk for sickly children, with good results.

Fig. 5: DRSA_1_1_3_1889-90

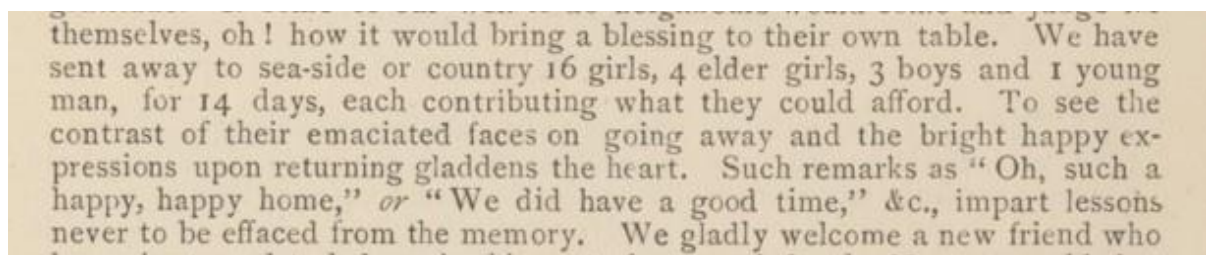
The cost of the trip, for 7 children, was £2 1s. In the same year £2 2s was spent on 107 loaves of bread, so the belief in the health benefits of the holidays must have been strong. Such benefits were extolled again in 1891, 'they recovered much of their lost health and strength, and returned much benefitted by the change', and in 1892, 'many young hearts have been gladdened, and they have been received into their homes with regained health and strength'.



few pounds to the "Fresh Air Fund," so that with the help of the Charity Organization Society, we were enabled to send several invalids to the country, and others to the seaside, (through the Ragged School Union) where they recovered much of their lost health and strength, and returned much benefitted by the change.

Fig. 6: DRSA_1_1_4_1891-92

Nevertheless, reading between the lines, it appears that there were, perhaps, concerns about the costs of these trips, and whether it was a good use of funds. In the 1893-4 report, it was highlighted that the money was, 'well spent, for it both relieves our fund, and they return wonderfully improved in health'. The argument being made was that, while the child was away, expenditure on practical relief for them locally was avoided. In 1895, the report made it clear that support from the Ragged School Union had subsidised the trips, and in 1896 it was noted, 'each contributing what they could afford', in relation to those who had gone on them.



themselves, oh! how it would bring a blessing to their own table. We have sent away to sea-side or country 16 girls, 4 elder girls, 3 boys and 1 young man, for 14 days, each contributing what they could afford. To see the contrast of their emaciated faces on going away and the bright happy expressions upon returning gladdens the heart. Such remarks as "Oh, such a happy, happy home," or "We did have a good time," &c., impart lessons never to be effaced from the memory. We gladly welcome a new friend who

Fig. 7: DRSA_1_1_4_1896

By 1899, the Ragged School Union had opened its own dedicated homes in seaside towns, and the annual report states that this is where the Deptford children had been on holiday. Presumably, this was partly intended to allay concerns over costs. However, it still cost £10 16s, a third of all Benevolent Fund spending that year, to send 5 adults and 26 children to the holiday home for 2 weeks. By 1907, mentions of the holidays in the annual reports were reduced to a line here or there, and in 1913 an appeal was made for donations of 6s to

subsidise holidays at the Ragged School Union Holiday Homes in Bognor, Bournemouth, and Margate. This suggests that the funding of these holidays remained a contentious issue.

our subscribers looking on their own children, and knowing the benefit and joy of a visit to the seaside, must often feel how much greater a boon it would be to a poor child to have a fortnight by the sea, and what joy it would afford the mother to see her sickly child thus set up. Six shillings will enable us to accomplish this, through the facilities afforded by the Ragged School Union Holiday Homes at Bognor, Bournemouth, Margate, and in the country.

Fig. 8: DRSA_1_1_5_1913

While charity and benevolence were certainly at the heart of the Benevolent Fund, it also appears to have been influenced by another idea which was popular and prominent in the nineteenth century. 'Self-Help' was a philosophy that promoted personal responsibility, industry, and perseverance as a means for individuals to improve their circumstances and achieve success. It emphasised individual character, hard work, and was underpinned by the idea that it was better to give people a 'hand up' in life, rather than a charitable 'hand out'. This thinking can be seen in the 1909 Annual Report, 'Indiscriminate giving is admittedly bad, but many cases arise where a little timely practical help and comfort are well bestowed'.

There are numerous examples of this 'timely practical help' recorded in the reports. Getting people into, or back into, paid work was a priority. For example, individuals were supported in obtaining a license to street trade, or in buying stock to sell (such as flowers or food), or equipment such as baskets to help them sell. In one case, £1 was given to a 'J. B' towards the purchase of a pony to help him carry on in the greengrocery trade. The Fund also helped workers with other equipment; a shovel, a sweeping machine, tools, and in one notable case, the fund supported 'Blind Tom' to purchase a new melodeon (a musical instrument).

EXPENDITURE.		£	s.	d.
Cab Hire to Evelina Hospital, a Boy too ill to walk		0	5	0
Grant to J.B. towards purchase of a pony to carry on greengrocery trade	...	1	0	0
J.S. to get clothes out of pawn, in very poor circumstances	...	0	3	0
Sending a Girl (2/3) and Boy (1/6) to a Convalescent Home, rail expenses	...	0	3	9
S. for a shovel to start work, children and wife without food	...	0	2	3
I.E. to start selling salt	...	0	2	6
L. wife and family neglected by husband, no parish relief, for food (1/-) and to buy flowers at Covent Garden (6/-)	...	0	7	0
Mrs. B., age 81, sent by Mother's Meeting to country for two weeks, part paid by a friend	...	0	7	0
E.S., part rail expenses to a country home	...	0	2	6
E.D., dress and boots out of pawn	...	0	2	6
Ragged School Union for sending to Seaside 6 Adults, 26 Girls, and 5 Boys	...	13	18	0
Refunded to H.H. through bad conduct. Father prevented him from going to Seaside	...	0	3	0
Small amounts spent to tide over temporary difficulties	...	0	8	6
Relieved 298—				
45 Milk Tickets	...	2	12	6
9 Meat Tickets	...	0	6	0
82lb. Scotch Beef for Christmas Dinners	...	2	18	1
74 Leaves (40 gifts) Tickets	...	0	13	7½
112 Coal (87 gifts) Tickets, or 135 half cwts.	...	0	15	7½
127 Grocery Tickets...	...	4	4	8
Balance down ..	...	5	15	3
		£34	10	9

Fig. 9: DRSA_1_1_4_1898

Helping people obtain clothing for work was a frequent occurrence, which might be the purchase of clothing, or paying for clothing to be retrieved from a pawn broker. Men and boys were supplied with boots, shirts, and coats, while girls and women most often received help with clothing for domestic service. These initiatives by the Benevolent Fund were very much targeted at supporting people to work, and thus help them to help themselves, rather than the more charitable provision of clothing and boots by other groups and funds within the school.

Cr.		£	s.	d.
1890.	By Money in small sums to poor...	0	18	9
Oct. 7.	" S., out of prison, a start in life	0	5	0
" 19.	" Assisting Mrs. R., Convalescent Home	0	4	0
" 19.	" J.T., shirts, to start him in situation	0	2	6
1891.				
Feb. 4.	" W.D., assist in getting clothes out of pawn	0	3	0
Mar. 4.	" Miss W., to meet immediate wants in visiting the sick	1	0	0
" 12.	" Mrs. C., getting out articles pawned	0	3	0
April 9.	" Mrs. B., hawkers' license	0	5	0
May 24.	" Fred H., pair second-hand boots	0	1	6
Aug. 24.	" C., to stock basket boot laces	0	3	3
	" Holiday Homes, B.W., 12s.; E.B., 6s.	0	18	0
	" Mrs. T., Convalescent Home, 3 weeks, through Charity Organisation Society	0	10	0
	" Meat tickets, 82	2	14	8
	" Bread tickets, 305	4	8	10½
	" Milk tickets, 63½	3	14	1
	" Grocery tickets, 203	6	15	4
	" 50 cwt. Coal, 100 tickets	2	18	4
	" Balance in hand	0	7	1½
		£25	12	4½

Fig. 10: DRSA_1_1_3_1890-91

The reports do, also, carry reminders that, sometimes, even work like the Benevolent Fund was not enough. In 1903, 2s 6d was given for the funeral of a child and, again, in 1906 when a 1s was given. A salient reminder of how harsh and unforgiving life could be for the poor and working classes in this period.

EXPENDITURE.		£	s.	d.
S.I.—for Plants to sell	.. .. .	0	2	0
A.—to stock Hawker's basket	.. .. .	0	3	0
L.H.—to get dresses and aprons out of pawn, to go to service	.. .. .	0	6	6
Chicken for Invalid, Christmas Day	.. .. .	0	2	9
100 lbs. Scotch Beef for Christmas Dinners	.. .. .	3	10	10
S.—paid for Life Assurance, to obtain death claim for Child's Funeral, &c.	.. .. .	0	2	6
J. and A. F.—Boys Clothes out of pawn	.. .. .	0	2	6
Mrs. F.—Flowers to sell, husband in Infirmary	.. .. .	0	2	6
B.—for Spectacles	.. .. .	0	1	0
C.W.—Clothing out of pawn	.. .. .	0	2	0
G.F.—Plants for hawking	.. .. .	0	2	0
Necessitous cases—12 children for second hand boots at 1s each, &c.	.. .. .	1	3	3
Paid John Kirk, R.S.U., for 21 children and 8 adults to seaside	.. .. .	11	11	0
Bread Tickets 114, and 63 gifts	.. .. .	2	2	6½
Grocery, 197 tickets	.. .. .	6	11	4
Milk, 81 tickets	.. .. .	4	14	6
Meat, 9 tickets	.. .. .	0	6	0
Coal, 82½ cwt. and 97 gift tickets	.. .. .	2	9	4
Balance carried forward	.. .. .	3	8	2½

Fig. 11: DRSA_1_1_4_1903

In 1906, the 'Liberal Landslide' saw the election of a Liberal Party government under Henry Campbell-Bannerman. As the historian John Burnett has highlighted, this government, 'introduced a series of reformatory measures which some have seen as the foundations of our modern welfare state' (Burnett, 1966, p. 212). These included the School Meals Act of 1906, the introduction of School Clinics in 1907, the first non-contributory old-age pensions in 1908, and limited National Insurance against sickness and unemployment in 1911.

It is, therefore, unsurprising to see the scale of the Benevolent Fund's work start to reduce around this time. This is not to say that all the problems suddenly went away, or that the Benevolent Fund was no longer needed, as evidence by this quote from the 1913 Annual Report, 'A fireless grate, a lonely widow, a sick, hungry or shivering child, or a distressed mother with an empty cupboard, appeals strongly to us all. Naturally we meet with several such cases and cannot withhold sympathy and help'. The Deptford Ragged School certainly did not withhold sympathy and help, and through the work and actions of its Benevolent Fund, it undoubtedly helped change the lives of many in the neighbourhood.



Fig. 12: DRSA_1_1_4_1901

References:

- John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the present Day* (London: 1979)
- Anna Davin, 'Loaves and Fishes: Food in Poor Households in Late Nineteenth-Century', *History Workshop Journal*, Spring, 1996, No. 41, pp. 167-192

Dr John Price is a freelance Public and Community Historian who takes a People's History approach to studying the past. He was the Project Manager and Consultant Historian for 'Educating Deptford: The Deptford Ragged School and its place in the community', a year-long National Lottery Heritage Fund project working with the Deptford Ragged School

Archive and other community organisations in Deptford. He is also the Director of the Museum of Everyday Life, and a Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London.