

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 Light in a Dark Place': Metaphors of Light and Dark in the Ragged School Archive

Hannah Stovin, with contributing text and research by Flavia Cahn

In 1884, a worker at the Deptford Ragged School penned a tract retelling the history of the institution. Entitled *A Light In A Dark Place*, the pamphlet recounted the restorative and healing effects of the school, portraying it as the beacon of moral and physical light within a troubled and dark community. This evocative image was far from incidental.

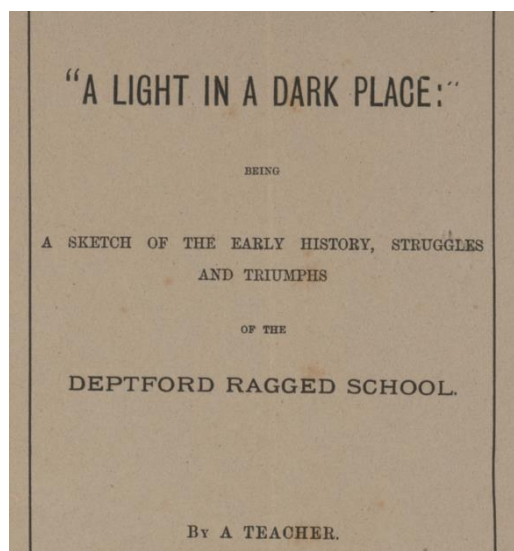


Fig. 1: DRSA_5_3_8, p. 1

The metaphor of light and dark held powerful sway over the Victorian imagination, serving as a central framework through which people interpreted moral, social, and psychological distinctions. Far from being a mere literary device, this binary was deeply woven into the fabric of Victorian culture, religion, and ideology. It shaped not only the way individuals understood the world around them, but also how they justified action, reform, and control, both at home and abroad.

Rooted in Christian symbolism and Enlightenment ideals, 'light' came to represent purity, knowledge, progress, and divine truth, while 'darkness' evoked ignorance, poverty, sin, and moral danger. These associations were especially prevalent in imperial and colonial rhetoric, where the notion of 'bringing light to dark places' was used to legitimize the expansion of empire. However, the same language was also deployed domestically by social reformers who saw themselves as illuminating, and thus cleansing, the neglected or degraded spaces of Britain's rapidly industrialising cities.

The metaphor tellingly appears with great recurrence in the Deptford Ragged School archive. In particular, the metaphor was deployed in two distinct yet interconnected ways. The figurative restorative 'light', referring varyingly to both the effect of the school, and the effect of the natural world. This case study, structured in two parts, explores this dual usage, first through portrayals of the school as a beacon, and second, through the continued references to the redemptive effects of nature.

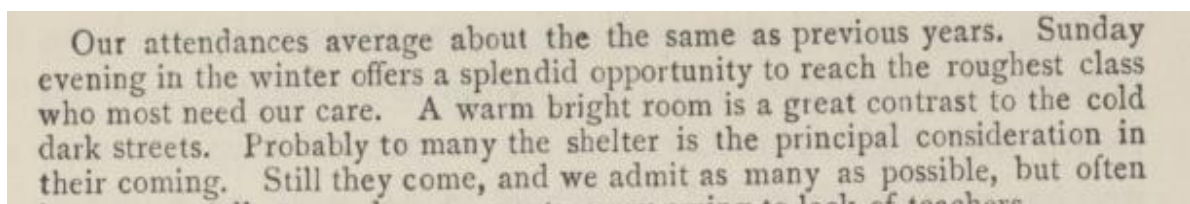
Together, these recurring metaphors illuminate the belief system of the Ragged School and the somewhat binary way in which they viewed the world. Of most contemporary relevance,

these metaphors also highlight the institution's belief in the entanglement of environment, health, and well-being.

The School as a Beacon: Moral and Physical Light in a 'Dark' Place'

As the 1884 pamphlet conveys, the primary utilization of the metaphor was in the context of the school as a source of light within the community. The school is frequently described as a beacon in the darkness, offering refuge in the morally and physically 'dark' neighbourhood of Deptford. This darkness was understood to be twofold, denoting both the physical darkness of the area, such as its pollution and filthiness, as well as its supposedly twisted morality. Vices such as excessive alcohol consumption, swearing, and petty crime were perceived by reformers to be ubiquitous. As well as being physically dark, the area was thus, in their eyes, also morally 'black', a reflection of the deeply moralising and binary framework through which they understood poverty.

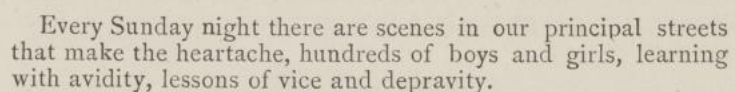
This role of the school, as a beacon of light, had multiple meanings. In one sense it was intended quite literally. The school was understood to be a physical refuge for Deptford's residents, providing a place of warmth, light, and shelter. Indeed, the school proudly acknowledged that they saw their attendance rise in the colder months due to these attractions:



Our attendances average about the the same as previous years. Sunday evening in the winter offers a splendid opportunity to reach the roughest class who most need our care. A warm bright room is a great contrast to the cold dark streets. Probably to many the shelter is the principal consideration in their coming. Still they come, and we admit as many as possible, but often

Fig. 2: DRSA_1_1_4_1902, p. 10

Further, and interconnected to this idea of physical sanctuary, the school was also imagined as a moral refuge. The school building kept individuals away from, what were perceived to be, dangerous streets, and thus away from the 'vice and depravity' said to exist in such spaces:



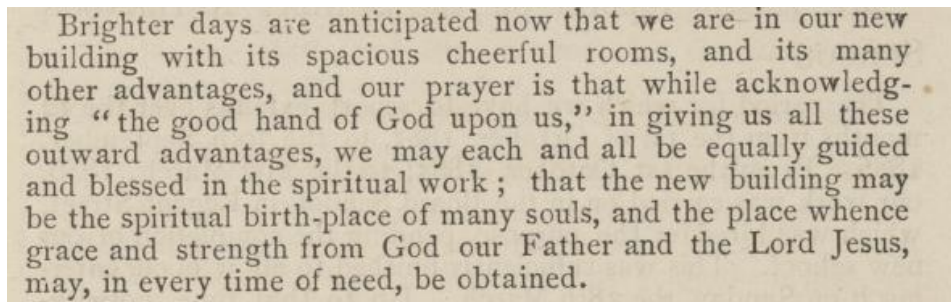
Every Sunday night there are scenes in our principal streets that make the heartache, hundreds of boys and girls, learning with avidity, lessons of vice and depravity.

Many of these could be brought in if sought by Christlike endeavour. There is room for them in our commodious, well warmed, and well lighted building.

Fig. 3: DRSA_1_1_3_1887-88, p. 13

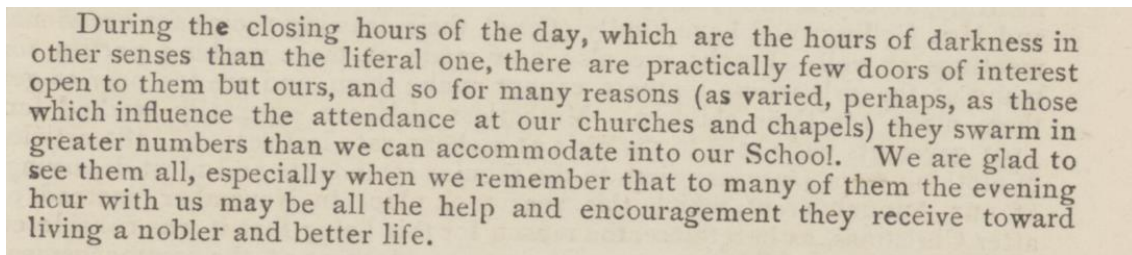
Within such considerations, much importance was placed on the physical properties of the school building itself, with specific importance given to how bright, airy, and clean the school was. This, once again, was about evoking the light/dark contrast, but it also speaks to larger nineteenth-century ideas about the effect of the built environment on health, well-being, and, indeed, morality. If one inhabited a space perceived to be dark, grimy, and black, then they would be similarly tarnished. However, if one inhabited a bright and clean space, then they would become similarly bright, clean and pure.

This logic often intersected with religious narratives, particularly those associated with spiritual renewal or conversion:



Brighter days are anticipated now that we are in our new building with its spacious cheerful rooms, and its many other advantages, and our prayer is that while acknowledging "the good hand of God upon us," in giving us all these outward advantages, we may each and all be equally guided and blessed in the spiritual work; that the new building may be the spiritual birth-place of many souls, and the place whence grace and strength from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, may, in every time of need, be obtained.

Fig. 4: DRSA_1_1_1885-1886, p. 12



During the closing hours of the day, which are the hours of darkness in other senses than the literal one, there are practically few doors of interest open to them but ours, and so for many reasons (as varied, perhaps, as those which influence the attendance at our churches and chapels) they swarm in greater numbers than we can accommodate into our School. We are glad to see them all, especially when we remember that to many of them the evening hour with us may be all the help and encouragement they receive toward living a nobler and better life.

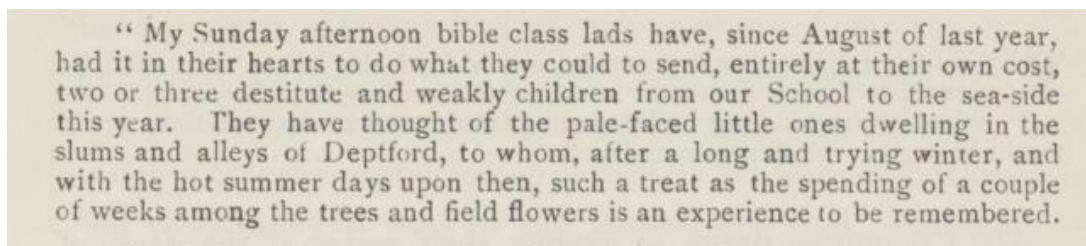
Fig. 5: DRSA_1_1_4_1897, p. 11

Nature as a Beacon: 'Their burden lightened and loves brightened by seaside holidays'

This framework of environmental transformation is mirrored in the second major use of the light and dark metaphor; nature as the light and the urban as the darkness.

Deptford was a significantly industrialised area with prominent coal and gas works as well as shipbuilding, and manure and chemical manufacturing, all occurring in the area. Such activities led to high levels of localised pollution. The streets would have been dirty, the local waterways highly polluted with waste products, and the air thick with dust, smog, and pollution. This somewhat hostile natural environment combined with the neighbourhoods' high levels of poverty and overcrowding to create an atmosphere rife for the spread of disease.

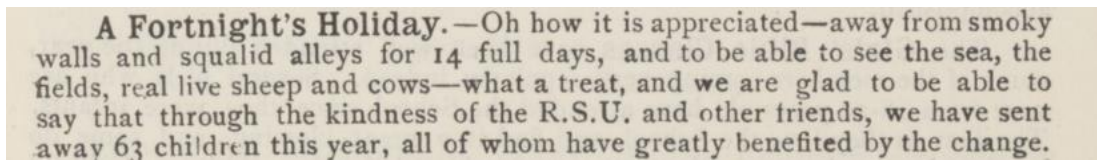
In contrast to this smog-choked 'dark' urban environment, the countryside was perceived to represent light, colour, health, and emotional rejuvenation. Through charitable efforts like the Benevolent Fund and the Fresh Air Fund, the school arranged excursions for children to go to the seaside or countryside. The mental and physical benefits of these trips is described in the Annual Reports:



"My Sunday afternoon bible class lads have, since August of last year, had it in their hearts to do what they could to send, entirely at their own cost, two or three destitute and weakly children from our School to the sea-side this year. They have thought of the pale-faced little ones dwelling in the slums and alleys of Deptford, to whom, after a long and trying winter, and with the hot summer days upon then, such a treat as the spending of a couple of weeks among the trees and field flowers is an experience to be remembered.

Fig. 6: DRSA_1_1_5_1908, p. 17

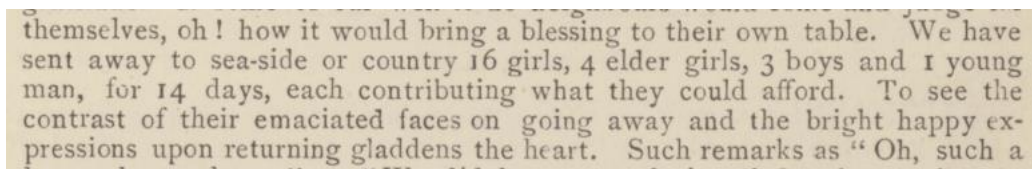
In the descriptions of these trips, Deptford is described as a dark and 'smoky' place, while the opportunity to spend time in the countryside is an image in technicolour; fresh, green, bright, and (almost in disbelief!) 'real'. The descriptions show how disconnected Deptford was from nature, live animals, the coast, and the natural landscape. By gaining interaction with these things, the children could only benefit.



A Fortnight's Holiday.—Oh how it is appreciated—away from smoky walls and squalid alleys for 14 full days, and to be able to see the sea, the fields, real live sheep and cows—what a treat, and we are glad to be able to say that through the kindness of the R.S.U. and other friends, we have sent away 63 children this year, all of whom have greatly benefited by the change.

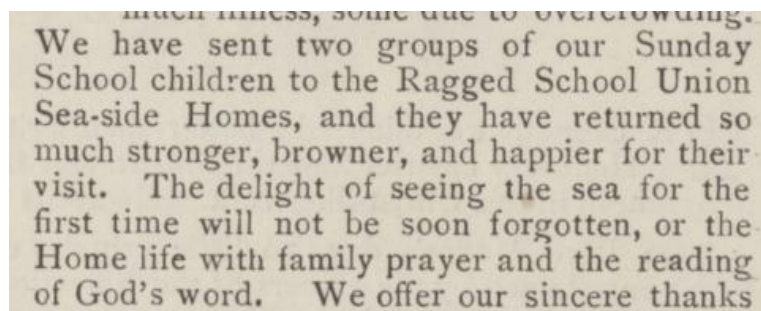
Fig. 7: DRSA_1_1_5_1910, p. 10

Indeed, the transformative effect on the children is often described as akin to a miracle. The school often sent those children they described as 'cripples' and the reports often describe how such children returned from their excursions stronger, healthier and brighter:



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

Fig. 8: DRSA_1_1_4_1896, p. 12



much illness, some due to overcrowding. We have sent two groups of our Sunday School children to the Ragged School Union Sea-side Homes, and they have returned so much stronger, browner, and happier for their visit. The delight of seeing the sea for the first time will not be soon forgotten, or the Home life with family prayer and the reading of God's word. We offer our sincere thanks

Fig. 9: DRSA_1_1_4_1899, p. 12

In an effort to bring these alleviating effects of the natural world to more than the select children chosen for trips, the school also brought the light of nature back to Deptford. This was realised through the school's annual Flower Shows. Every spring, the Ragged School distributed pots, soil, seeds, and seedlings to the children for them to care for and grow. The cultivated plants and flowers were then brought in for inspection in May, and the best plants received prizes.

Continuing the light metaphor, the Flower Show was celebrated as 'another spot of brightness in our School year'. (Annual Report, 1914) Whilst the prevailing belief was that 'Deptford is not an ideal spot for cultivation', the resilience of the colourful flowers, despite their 'squalid' surroundings, and the gentle care the children gave them was perceived to represent the hope of the school and the 'value of cultivating the growth of all that is good'. (Annual Report, 1910) The flowers were perceived as a light in the darkness, not only bringing metaphorical light to the children's life, but concurrently physically brightening the neighbourhood:

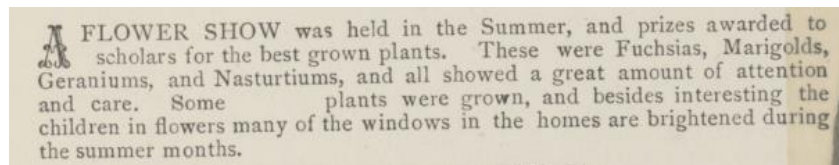


Fig. 10: DRSA_1_1_4_1898, p. 18

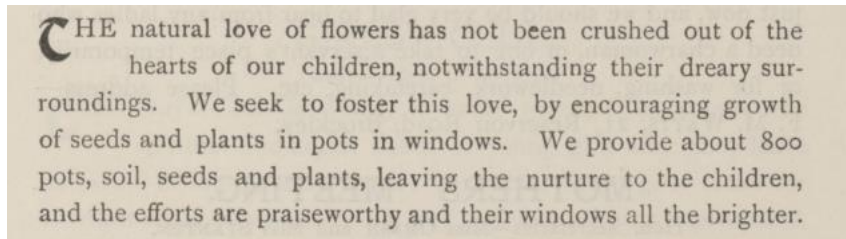


Fig. 11: DRSA_1_1_5_1911, p. 14

Ultimately, in this context the metaphor of light was used to connote the positive effect of interacting with the natural world. Deeply entwined with ideas of hope, growth, and resistance, nature was understood as a positive light in an otherwise urban and polluted area.

To conclude, the Ragged School archive offers a vivid insight into how metaphors of light and dark were used not merely as literary flourishes, but as deeply embedded frameworks through which Victorians understood morality, health, and social reform. Whether referring to the school building as a beacon of physical and moral light amidst the 'darkness' of Deptford, or to the natural world as a source of healing brightness in contrast to the urban decay, this repeated metaphor reveals a worldview in which one's environment, both built and natural, was closely tied to spiritual and moral wellbeing.

Such ideas resonate with the present-day work of Creekside Discovery Centre, which continues to emphasise the interplay between environment, community, and wellbeing. Though the language may have shifted, the belief that 'light' can transform lives, whether in the form of education, nature, or care, remains remarkably and vitally enduring.

Hannah Stovin is a PhD student at the University of Oxford. Her doctoral research examines the social, cultural and medical understandings of the 'queer child' in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. She holds a BA in History from the University of Oxford and an MPhil in Modern British History from the University of Cambridge. Before undertaking the PhD, she worked as a Trainee Archive Assistant at the National Gallery and thus also has a secret passion for art history!

Flavia Cahn is a socially engaged researcher and museum practitioner with an MA in Applied Cultural Studies. In her work, she supports communities and audiences of all backgrounds to engage with museum and archive collections and the stories they tell. Flavia has a background in decolonial museum practice and has participated in multiple National Lottery Heritage and AHRC funded projects to research British colonial history and its impact today.