

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



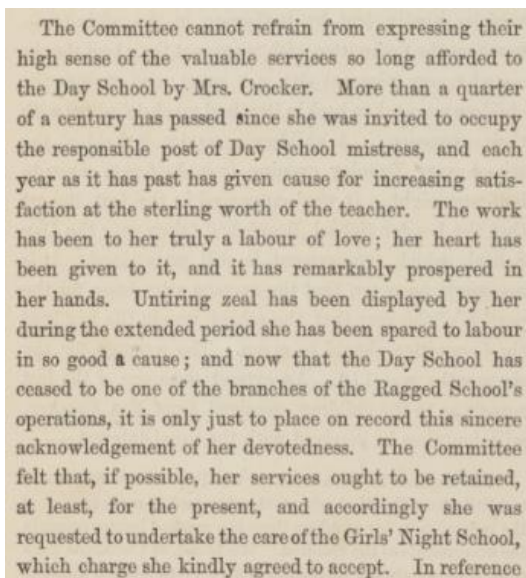
'A Labour of Love': Mrs Crocker and the Teachers of Deptford Ragged School

Dr Cheryl Deedman

Mrs Crocker was a teacher at the Deptford Ragged School for forty years. When she died in 1887 many members of the school community were clearly moved by her death. She had been a teacher in the school since 1848, only four years after its founding, and her impact was clearly significant. Mrs Crocker's experience with the school can give us a window into many of the key experiences of the teachers at the Deptford Ragged School, the work they did, the challenges they faced, and their mission and motivations.

It is likely that Mrs Crocker was paid for her service at the school. The pamphlet, *Light in a Dark Place*, a history of the school written in 1884, says the school was closed for three months in 1854 due to the retirement of 'the first paid teacher'. (Loose Papers) Mrs Crocker had joined the school some six years previously, and so this implies she was not a paid member of staff at that point. However, she did become Mistress of the Day School, which was almost certainly a paid position. The 1870 Education Act disrupted her service. The Act created School Boards to provide non-denominational education for all 5 to 12-year-olds in England and Wales. The Deptford Ragged School did not have the income needed to bring it up to the standard required to become a Board School, and instead handed the Day School over to the management of the Greenwich Division of Board Schools. (Annual Report, 1872-73) The Committee promised to carefully consider the position of the Mistress and Assistant of the Day School 'affected by the altered state of the school'. (Annual Report, 1872-73) This clearly impacted on Mrs Crocker.

The restructure created a role for a Mistress for the Girls' Night School, and this was offered to her:



The Committee cannot refrain from expressing their high sense of the valuable services so long afforded to the Day School by Mrs. Crocker. More than a quarter of a century has passed since she was invited to occupy the responsible post of Day School mistress, and each year as it has past has given cause for increasing satisfaction at the sterling worth of the teacher. The work has been to her truly a labour of love; her heart has been given to it, and it has remarkably prospered in her hands. Untiring zeal has been displayed by her during the extended period she has been spared to labour in so good a cause; and now that the Day School has ceased to be one of the branches of the Ragged School's operations, it is only just to place on record this sincere acknowledgement of her devotedness. The Committee felt that, if possible, her services ought to be retained, at least, for the present, and accordingly she was requested to undertake the care of the Girls' Night School, which charge she kindly agreed to accept. In reference

Fig. 1: DRSA_1_1_2_1873-74, p. 10

She continued in this new position until her retirement in 1884 or 85. She taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, known informally as 'the 3 Rs':

The following extract from Mrs. Crocker's Report as to the GIRL'S NIGHT SCHOOL, will be read with interest :

"In reviewing another year's labours, I have cause for gratitude to Almighty God for permitting me still to occupy a humble position among the great army of Christian workers who are seeking to serve their generation according to His will. Although I cannot boast of large numbers of scholars, I am happy to be able to state that the attendance during the last year has been more regular, and the results, as regards their improvement in the 'three R's,' much more satisfactory. I have had little reason to complain of refractory conduct, as a request to leave the schoolroom, or submit to discipline, generally has the desired effect. Through the kindness of

Fig. 2: DRSA_1_1_2_1879, p. 8

She describes in 1880 a 19-year-old girl who attended her night school who was unable to read any words at all and was now reading 'with the first class, write [sic] in a small copy book and work the first four simple rules in arithmetic.' (Annual Report, 1880) By 1881 the numbers attending her night school for girls had fallen to 9 due to Board Schools and 'other entertainments' being available, something she found 'painful'. The sewing class remained popular with up to 40 girls attending. This enabled them to mend or purchase clothing, and the teachers expressed their interest in getting these girls out to 'respectable service'. (Annual Report, 1882) Mrs Crocker's view of the children she taught and their need for 'instruction' can clearly be seen in the report she made to the Committee in 1878:

"They are with very few exceptions of the lowest and roughest class in Deptford, calling for the exercise of much patience and firmness on my part, either to govern them or to induce them to attend to instruction, but of late there has been a very decided improvement in some of the most lawless, and I am pleased with their attempts to acquire a little knowledge."

Fig 3: DRSA_1_1_2_1878, p. 9

The Committee of the Deptford Ragged School was concerned that the new Board Schools could not provide the religious instruction they saw as central to their mission:

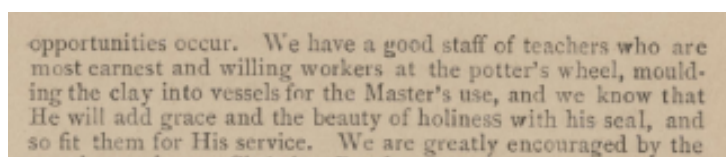
The Board Schools have certainly relieved us of nearly all the more secular teaching, but the mere modicum of religious teaching given by them renders our work in this special matter all the more necessary. What they do indifferently we must do thoroughly and well.

Moreover, it must be remembered that these lads and girls, and their parents too, are generally unconnected with any of the Christian churches, and but for the Ragged School would have no religious instruction. Lastly, the Board Schools leave these young people at the age of thirteen to use or misuse their knowledge. We endeavour to supply the deficiencies of the Board School by providing for them at this dangerous age, and in the evenings—the most dangerous time—with a place of refuge, where, away from filthy homes or evil associations, they may find wholesome reading or instruction, or healthful amusement, and means of grace for their souls.

Fig. 4: DRSA_5_3_8, 1884, p. 14

The Rules of the Deptford Ragged School, published at the front of all post-1872 Annual Reports, stated that the object of the school was to, 'impart spiritual instruction to destitute children of both sexes on the Sabbath, and secular combined with religious during the week.' Both evangelical churchmen and protestants worked together at the school. Its founding rules stated it to be un-sectarian, but also that all paid officers be members of

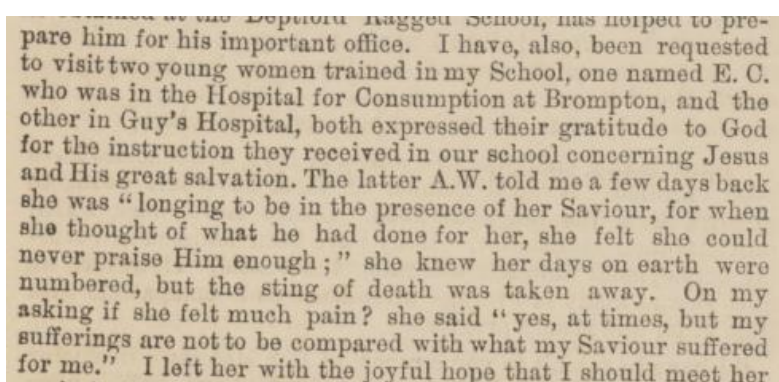
some Christian church. A metaphor in the 1888-89 Annual Report describes teachers as moulding children like a potter moulds clay in order to become 'vessels for the Master's use':



opportunities occur. We have a good staff of teachers who are most earnest and willing workers at the potter's wheel, moulding the clay into vessels for the Master's use, and we know that He will add grace and the beauty of holiness with his seal, and so fit them for His service. We are greatly encouraged by the

Fig. 5: DRSA_1_1_3_1888-89, p. 11

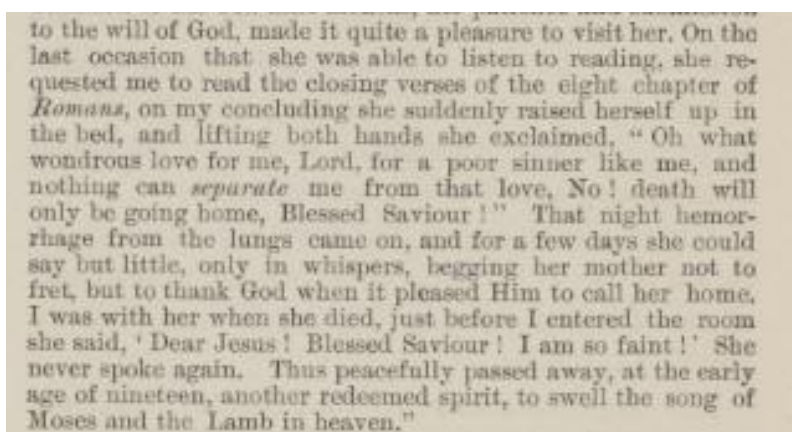
Mrs Crocker's reports to the Committee, summarised in the Annual Reports, made it very clear she saw this as central to her role as a teacher in the school. This can be seen in her account of a visit in 1878 to an ex-pupil who was dying of consumption:



prepare him for his important office. I have, also, been requested to visit two young women trained in my School, one named E. C. who was in the Hospital for Consumption at Brompton, and the other in Guy's Hospital, both expressed their gratitude to God for the instruction they received in our school concerning Jesus and His great salvation. The latter A.W. told me a few days back she was "longing to be in the presence of her Saviour, for when she thought of what he had done for her, she felt she could never praise Him enough;" she knew her days on earth were numbered, but the sting of death was taken away. On my asking if she felt much pain? she said "yes, at times, but my sufferings are not to be compared with what my Saviour suffered for me." I left her with the joyful hope that I should meet her

Fig. 6: DRSA_1_1_2_1878, p. 10

She reported on the death of the same pupil a year later:



to the will of God, made it quite a pleasure to visit her. On the last occasion that she was able to listen to reading, she requested me to read the closing verses of the eight chapter of *Romans*, on my concluding she suddenly raised herself up in the bed, and lifting both hands she exclaimed, "Oh what wondrous love for me, Lord, for a poor sinner like me, and nothing can separate me from that love, No! death will only be going home, Blessed Saviour!" That night hemorrhage from the lungs came on, and for a few days she could say but little, only in whispers, begging her mother not to fret, but to thank God when it pleased Him to call her home. I was with her when she died, just before I entered the room she said, 'Dear Jesus! Blessed Saviour! I am so faint!' She never spoke again. Thus peacefully passed away, at the early age of nineteen, another redeemed spirit, to swell the song of Moses and the Lamb in heaven."

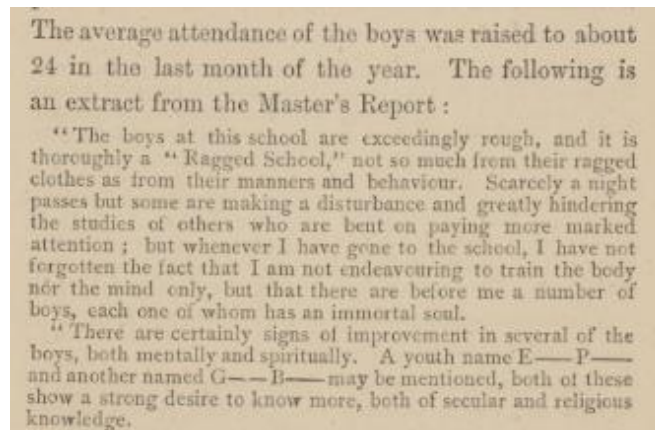
Fig. 7: DRSA_1_1_2_1879, p. 9

This child had been moulded into someone not afraid of death, but to see it as passing into the hands of God.

The spiritual development of the residents of Deptford was evidently seen as a central part of the school's mission, but they also recognised the corporeal needs of the attendees of the school. Mrs Crocker ran the Dinner Fund to provide sustenance for the children. (Annual Report, 1872-73) She reported in 1878 how she had managed to give a piece of clothing to every girl who had attended the night school. (Annual Report, 1879) The warmth, food,

clothing, and practical help must have been a big draw for the pupils who attended the night schools.

The teachers faced many challenges, not least the behaviour of the pupils. The behaviour of the boys was described in 1880 as disruptive:



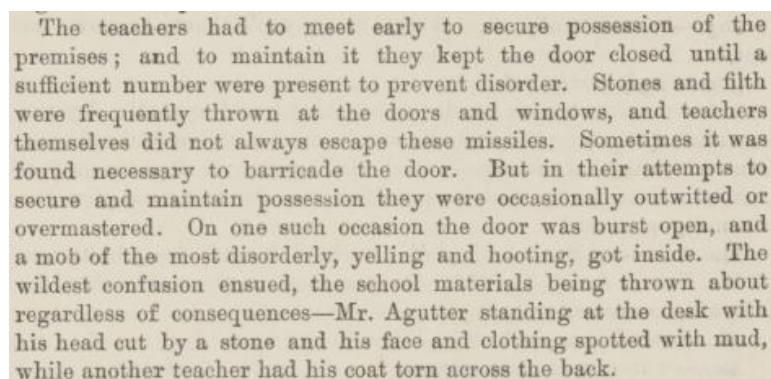
The average attendance of the boys was raised to about 24 in the last month of the year. The following is an extract from the Master's Report :

"The boys at this school are exceedingly rough, and it is thoroughly a "Ragged School," not so much from their ragged clothes as from their manners and behaviour. Scarcely a night passes but some are making a disturbance and greatly hindering the studies of others who are bent on paying more marked attention ; but whenever I have gone to the school, I have not forgotten the fact that I am not endeavouring to train the body nor the mind only, but that there are before me a number of boys, each one of whom has an immortal soul.

"There are certainly signs of improvement in several of the boys, both mentally and spiritually. A youth name E—P— and another named G—B— may be mentioned, both of these show a strong desire to know more, both of secular and religious knowledge.

Fig. 8: DRSA_1_1_3_1880, p. 9

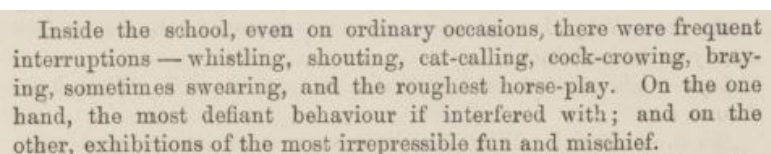
And the pamphlet, *Light in a Dark Place*, published in 1884 described how, from the start, the teachers had to battle 'physically and morally' with their pupils, being forced to resort to 'physical force when violent conduct manifested itself.' (Loose Papers). An extract from the pamphlet reads:



The teachers had to meet early to secure possession of the premises; and to maintain it they kept the door closed until a sufficient number were present to prevent disorder. Stones and filth were frequently thrown at the doors and windows, and teachers themselves did not always escape these missiles. Sometimes it was found necessary to barricade the door. But in their attempts to secure and maintain possession they were occasionally outwitted or overmastered. On one such occasion the door was burst open, and a mob of the most disorderly, yelling and hooting, got inside. The wildest confusion ensued, the school materials being thrown about regardless of consequences—Mr. Agutter standing at the desk with his head cut by a stone and his face and clothing spotted with mud, while another teacher had his coat torn across the back.

Fig. 9: DRSA_5_3_8, 1884, p. 7

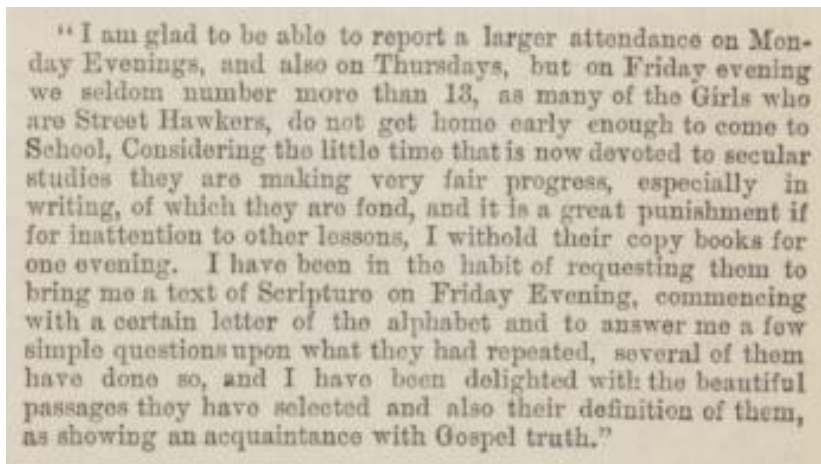
Mrs Crocker was acknowledged at the front of this pamphlet as one of its sources. It continued with a description of student behaviour:



Inside the school, even on ordinary occasions, there were frequent interruptions — whistling, shouting, cat-calling, cock-crowing, braying, sometimes swearing, and the roughest horse-play. On the one hand, the most defiant behaviour if interfered with; and on the other, exhibitions of the most irrepressible fun and mischief.

Fig. 10: DRSA_5_3_8, 1884, p. 7

Mrs Crocker developed her own strategies to ensure that the girls who attended her night-classes maintained attention to her teaching. She withheld their copy books. They clearly enjoyed writing:



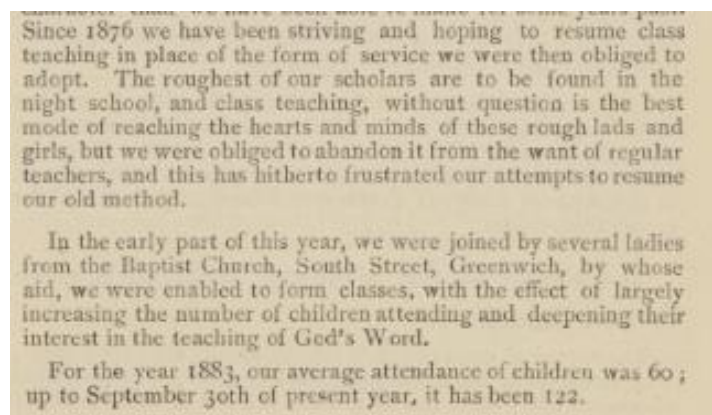
"I am glad to be able to report a larger attendance on Monday Evenings, and also on Thursdays, but on Friday evening we seldom number more than 13, as many of the Girls who are Street Hawkers, do not get home early enough to come to School, Considering the little time that is now devoted to secular studies they are making very fair progress, especially in writing, of which they are fond, and it is a great punishment if for inattention to other lessons, I withhold their copy books for one evening. I have been in the habit of requesting them to bring me a text of Scripture on Friday Evening, commencing with a certain letter of the alphabet and to answer me a few simple questions upon what they had repeated, several of them have done so, and I have been delighted with the beautiful passages they have selected and also their definition of them, as showing an acquaintance with Gospel truth."

Fig. 11: DRSA_1_1_2_1877, p. 9

This gives the impression of a very experienced and clever teacher, who understood her pupils and what they enjoyed enough to ensure they behaved for her.

Another challenge the school faced was a constant shortage of teachers. Some were absent due to illness. Mrs Crocker suffered ill-health in 1872/73 and was unable to work for a while, and the 1877 Annual Report hoped she would be spared from ill-health for her work to continue. (Annual Report, 1877) The 1879 Annual Report said school attendance was low due to 'the infectious illnesses' in Deptford and the 'ladies were afraid to venture down.' (Annual Report, 1879) This was a constant risk for the teachers who were working with the residents of Deptford.

The Sunday School teachers were volunteers. Most of the Annual Reports mention how hard it was to recruit and keep teachers. The 1864 Annual Report says they were turning away children due to lack of teachers. In 1876, more children wanted to join the school and more rooms were hired, but there was the on-going need for more teachers. This problem did not just impact on the Sunday School; the 1883-84 Annual Report mentions the need for regular Night School teachers. A solution was found in 1883-4 with the help of the Baptist Church in Greenwich:



Since 1876 we have been striving and hoping to resume class teaching in place of the form of service we were then obliged to adopt. The roughest of our scholars are to be found in the night school, and class teaching, without question is the best mode of reaching the hearts and minds of these rough lads and girls, but we were obliged to abandon it from the want of regular teachers, and this has hitherto frustrated our attempts to resume our old method.

In the early part of this year, we were joined by several ladies from the Baptist Church, South Street, Greenwich, by whose aid, we were enabled to form classes, with the effect of largely increasing the number of children attending and deepening their interest in the teaching of God's Word.

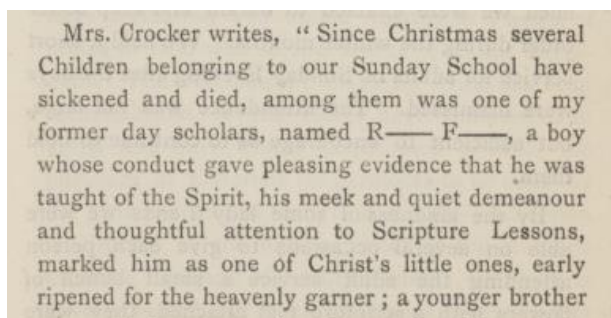
For the year 1883, our average attendance of children was 60; up to September 30th of present year, it has been 122.

Fig. 12: DRSA_1_1_3_1883-84, p. 7

But the problem persisted. The Annual Reports mentioned teachers leaving due to marriage or moving away (1868-9), some to become missionaries (1887-88 and 1890-91). Others

retired or suffered ill-health or death. The 1916 Annual Report relayed that male teachers had left to fight the war, and that this had a detrimental effect on pupils' behaviour. Other teachers, like Mrs Crocker, stayed for many years. Mrs Harris, who died in 1901, had been a teacher for 34 years, Mr John Robinson matched her, dying in 1906 after 34 years of service as the Superintendent of the Sunday School.

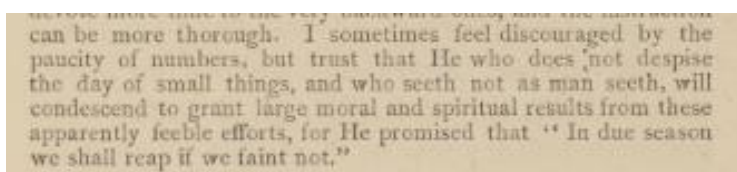
The infectious diseases and poverty suffered by the residents of Deptford inevitably resulted in the death of some of the pupils, something that must have been upsetting for the staff of the school. Mrs Crocker reported the death of several in 1874-75.



Mrs. Crocker writes, "Since Christmas several Children belonging to our Sunday School have sickened and died, among them was one of my former day scholars, named R—— F——, a boy whose conduct gave pleasing evidence that he was taught of the Spirit, his meek and quiet demeanour and thoughtful attention to Scripture Lessons, marked him as one of Christ's little ones, early ripened for the heavenly garner ; a younger brother

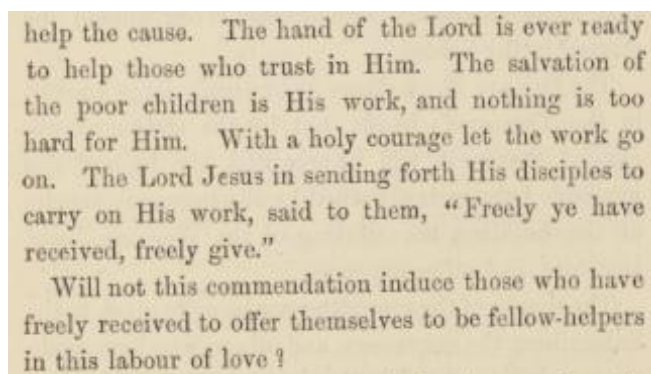
Fig. 13: DRSA_1_1_2_1874-75, p. 11

There were, however, expressions from Mrs Crocker of the great spiritual rewards she received from teaching:



can be more thorough. I sometimes feel discouraged by the paucity of numbers, but trust that He who does not despise the day of small things, and who seeth not as man seeth, will condescend to grant large moral and spiritual results from these apparently feeble efforts, for He promised that "In due season we shall reap if we faint not."

Fig. 14: Mrs Crocker DRSA_1_1_3_1880, p. 10



help the cause. The hand of the Lord is ever ready to help those who trust in Him. The salvation of the poor children is His work, and nothing is too hard for Him. With a holy courage let the work go on. The Lord Jesus in sending forth His disciples to carry on His work, said to them, "Freely ye have received, freely give."

Will not this commendation induce those who have freely received to offer themselves to be fellow-helpers in this labour of love ?

Fig. 15: Mrs Crocker DRSA_1_1_3_1881, p. 14

She truly saw herself as doing God's work and saw it as a 'labour of love'. One of her greatest rewards was to discover former pupils who had become Sunday School teachers themselves, using the 'Scripture knowledge' he had gained at Deptford to teach others:

in my day school; he is now living at West Bromwich, to which place he removed with his parents about four years back, and is a humble and devoted follower of Jesus, finding in his work as a Sunday School Teacher, that the Scripture knowledge he obtained at the Deptford Ragged School, has helped to prepare him for his important office. I have, also, been requested to visit him.

Fig. 16: DRSA_1_1_2_1878, p. 10

The pupils demonstrated their fondness for their teachers, sometimes bringing them gifts:

Mrs. Crocker received a small, but to the givers, valuable gift of an electro-plated teapot, as a testimony of their gratitude towards her, she having been Secretary to their Clothing Club since its formation.

Fig. 17: DRSA_1_1_2_1872-73, p. 10

And they demonstrated a genuine sign of respect by visiting their teachers when they needed it and attending their funerals. Mrs Keating died in 1906 after 15 years as a Sunday School teacher:

This great loss was within a few days followed by another; a much beloved and valued worker being "called Home." Miss MARIANNE E. KEATING was a Teacher in the Sunday Morning School for about 15 years, and later undertook the leadership of the Women's Bible Class on Friday afternoons, until about a year ago, when pain and weakness prevented her attending the School. For some considerable time she had attended in much bodily weakness, but her influence was great. She shed a delightful fragrance round her wherever she went, and "her women" denied themselves much to "sit at her feet." The influence continued even from the bed of pain, and many poor women of Deptford will "rise up and call her blessed." The members of her class attended the funeral, and sang the hymn composed by their late Teacher, "Jesus only."

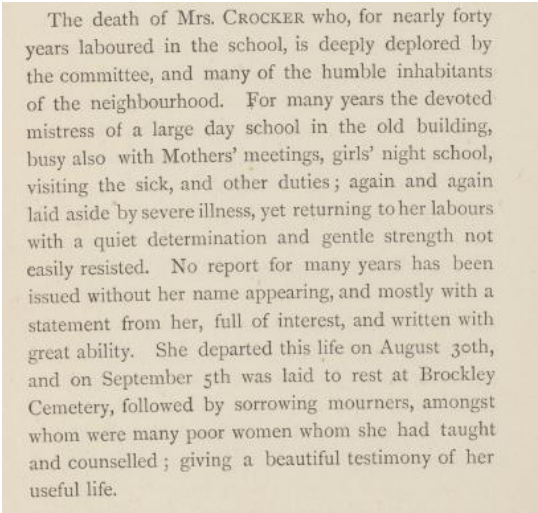
Fig. 18: DRSA_1_1_5_1906, p. 10

Mr John Robinson was superintendent of the Sunday School for 34 years. He was strict, yet charitable. He was described as showing 'fatherly solicitude' for the children in his care, but also '[n]o lazy or indolent scholar escaped his rebuke, for he was a man with a strict sense of duty.' His charity was clear however, 'no 'needy case' (as he always called them) was ever 'sent empty away'. (Annual Report, 1906) After his death in 1906 a fund was set up in his name after he left a donation to the school, and this grew from £250 to £570 in a year.



Fig. 19: Mr John Robinson, DRSA_1_1_5_1906, p. 7

Mrs Crocker was clearly a strict, determined woman who, like many other teachers, dedicated time and energy to the poor and needy residents of Deptford. It was a sometimes dangerous, often thankless task, with constant challenges. Yet the rewards for these deeply religious educators were numerous, not least the notion that they helped people find their way to spiritual and religious fulfilment. Many poor women attended Mrs Crocker's funeral 'giving a beautiful testimony of her useful life'. She was clearly loved and respected by the girls and women she had educated:



The death of Mrs. CROCKER who, for nearly forty years laboured in the school, is deeply deplored by the committee, and many of the humble inhabitants of the neighbourhood. For many years the devoted mistress of a large day school in the old building, busy also with Mothers' meetings, girls' night school, visiting the sick, and other duties; again and again laid aside by severe illness, yet returning to her labours with a quiet determination and gentle strength not easily resisted. No report for many years has been issued without her name appearing, and mostly with a statement from her, full of interest, and written with great ability. She departed this life on August 30th, and on September 5th was laid to rest at Brockley Cemetery, followed by sorrowing mourners, amongst whom were many poor women whom she had taught and counselled; giving a beautiful testimony of her useful life.

Fig. 20: DRSA_1_1_3_1887-88

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