

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



'One day, I had such a nice piece of chicken': Food and the Unwell at the Deptford Ragged School, 1905 – 1913
Daniel Cunningham

This case study focuses on an apparently short-lived program within the wide range of services and organisations associated with the Deptford Ragged School: 'sick dinners'. The program appears in the Annual Reports of the school between 1905 and 1913, normally without a lot of supplementary information. However, as this case study aims to show, it was representative of the overall aims and values of the school in its interaction with the area of Deptford.

Sick dinners were introduced in the school in 1905, in association with the Albany Institute. Like the Ragged School, the Albany Institute was a Deptford charitable institution. It had been established in 1894 to 'draw attention to the dire poverty of Deptford people', as historian Jess Steele writes, and was patronised by the Duchess of Albany, Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law, from 1895 to 1922. (Steele, 1993) It is still in operation as a charity in Deptford and South-East London.

Details on the program are scant in the Deptford Ragged School's Annual Reports. At their introduction it is unclear the extent to which they are a project of the school or of the Albany Institute (referred to in the below extract as the Duchess of Albany Soup Kitchen). It is also not made explicitly clear what form the dinners took, although the language of the reports suggests they were delivered to recipients in their own homes rather than at an outside location, and that access to the program was granted via a token:

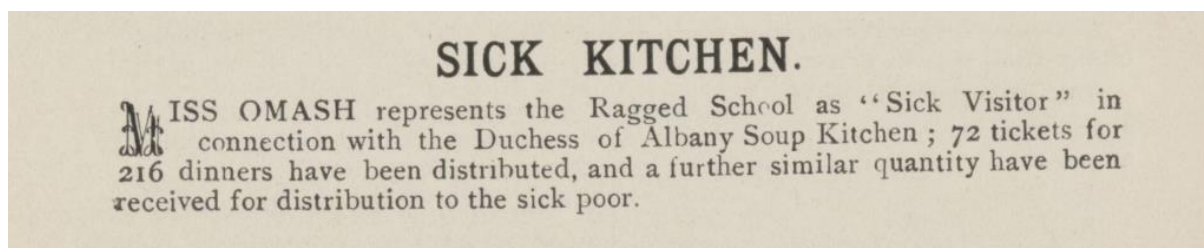


Fig. 1: DRSA_1_1_5_1905

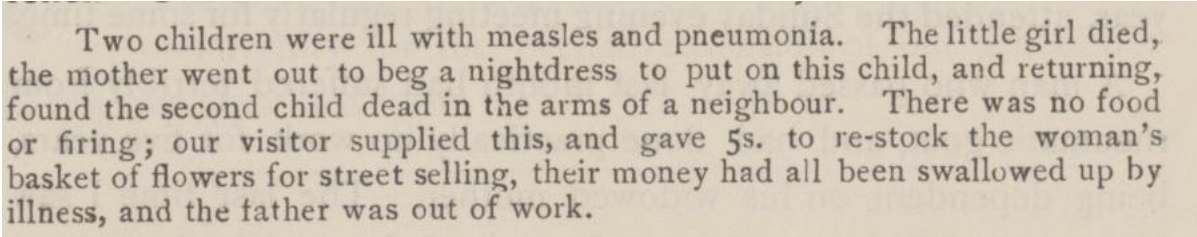
Within the program, the ragged school is represented as an organisation by Miss Omash, whose name is found repeatedly in the reports from 1892 onwards in several different roles: teacher, collector of donations, member of the school committee, secretary of the Mothers' Meeting and of the Ladies' Provident Clothing Club. (Annual Reports, 1910, 1892, 1902, 1904 and 1907) One would struggle to find a member of staff more committed to the Deptford Ragged School project in these reports.

Sick Dinners would have been viewed as vital by those who organised them, due to the prevalence and profound effect of sickness on the lives of the UK's urban poor in the early 20th century. As an area, Deptford would have provided fertile ground for the spread of disease due to overcrowding and poor sanitation. The effect of living conditions on public health has been noted by the historian Carl Chinn, who wrote: '[the urban poor] were driven into slums because they had no bargaining power. They could afford to rent only the worst built dwellings in the most overcrowded and unsanitary districts... lacking drains, sewers,

clean air and fresh water, the slums bred diseases and fostered illnesses.' (Chinn, 1995, p. 153)

Overcrowding was exacerbated in areas, like Deptford, where neighbourhoods had been rearranged to accommodate newly built railway lines. (Steele, 1993, p. 75)

The annual reports of the school show, in often highly emotive and affecting terms, the impact on individuals of this mass exposure to illness and disease. Reports abound of the deaths of Deptford Ragged School attendees, such as the below:



Two children were ill with measles and pneumonia. The little girl died, the mother went out to beg a nightdress to put on this child, and returning, found the second child dead in the arms of a neighbour. There was no food or firing; our visitor supplied this, and gave 5s. to re-stock the woman's basket of flowers for street selling, their money had all been swallowed up by illness, and the father was out of work.

Fig. 2: DRSA_1_1_5_1911, p. 19

This tragic account, from the Benevolent Fund section of the 1911 school report, shows how poverty and poor living conditions were closely linked to ill health and high mortality. Contagious diseases such as measles; environmental illnesses like pneumonia; insufficient clothing and lack of access to food; all of these were underpinned by extremely limited financial resources, which were then, in cyclical fashion, further reduced by illness.

Though illness and disease had always been huge factors in the lives of Deptford's residents, the Annual Reports suggest that the introduction of sick dinners was timely. In 1903 it was noted that sickness had 'been greater' than in the previous year, while the 1905 report references 'increased sickness among the children'. (Annual Reports, 1903 and 1905) In both instances the level of sickness is identified as a causal factor behind an increase in use of the school's milk tickets, a similar program which gave tokens for free milk to the poor and ill. While public health had gradually been improving in the late nineteenth century, according to historian Ellen Ross, food scarcity remained one of the most pressing issues for the poor; 'a matter of life and death... for starvation deaths continued to be a regular occurrence even in the kinder years after 1870.' (Ross, 1993, p. 27)

Prototypical forms of sick dinners can be found in the reports from the years building to their introduction, prior to the involvement of the Albany Institute. In 1900 a 'beautiful supply of strawberries' was received as a gift by the school's 'Cripple Parlour', and then 'carried round to the weak and sick.' (Annual Report, 1900) The 1901 report mentions '6 dinners, three times a week, to the poorest families' provided by the Deptford Fund, the philanthropic charity which established the Albany Institute. (Annual Report, 1901)

Initiatives such as these demonstrate the Deptford Ragged School's Christian, charitable aim to assist the 'least among us' in times of extreme need. Whether due to a lack of funds and staff, or as a point of policy, school charity projects generally tend towards minimal intervention in the lives of their subjects informed by the contemporary belief in the value of financial resilience and 'self-help'. In the words of one report, 'it has always been our

endeavour to instil into parents and children alike habits of self-reliance.' (Annual Report, 1901) This same principle lies behind the school's savings-based initiatives such as the Slate Club and Penny Bank, both of which encouraged their members to put away small amounts of money to support themselves during periods of potential illness or hardship. The school's Benevolent Fund was only to be used in cases of emergency, such as in the example quoted in Fig 2 above. However, the Ragged School would aim to support students and families in emergency cases, especially where lives were threatened by illness or destitution, as the sick dinner program demonstrates.

That the sick dinners were treated as an emergency measure for those in extreme need is supported by the typically low expenditure shown in the school's budget over the years in which the program was active:

BENEVOLENT FUND.												
		£	s.	d.						£	s.	d.
...	13	11	11	Miss Omash—"Sick Dinners"	...	...	...	...	...	1	0	0
...	3	3	0	S. W. Tindley—Oranges and Decorations	...	...	...	...	...	0	18	10
..	1	0	0	Boots for a Scholar (per A. Wigner)	...	...	...	...	...	0	2	0
..	2	0	0	A. Wellbeloved—23 Joints Beef for Christmas	...	...	...	...	...	3	1	5
..	1	1	0	Caroline Adams (Appendicitis) Fare to Seaside	...	...	...	...	...	0	6	0

Fig. 3: DRSA_1_1_5_1908, p. 33

BENEVOLENT FUND, 1909.											
				EXPENDITURE.							
£	s.	d.						£	s.	d.	
..	20	2	2	By Oranges (Christmas Day)	..	..	..	0	12	0	
..	1	13	2	Grant to "Treat" Fund ..	..	..	..	2	1	0	
..	1	11	9	"Sick" Dinners ..	..	..	..	1	0	0	
..	0	5	0	Grant to Cripple Fund ..	..	..	..	1	0	0	
..	0	12	0	Leather Boot, Repairs, &c.	..	..	..	0	9	6	
..	0	5	0	Lambert, 96 Bread Tickets	..	..	..	2	3	8	
..	0	6	0	Ovenell, 100 Coal Tickets	..	..	..	3	10	0	

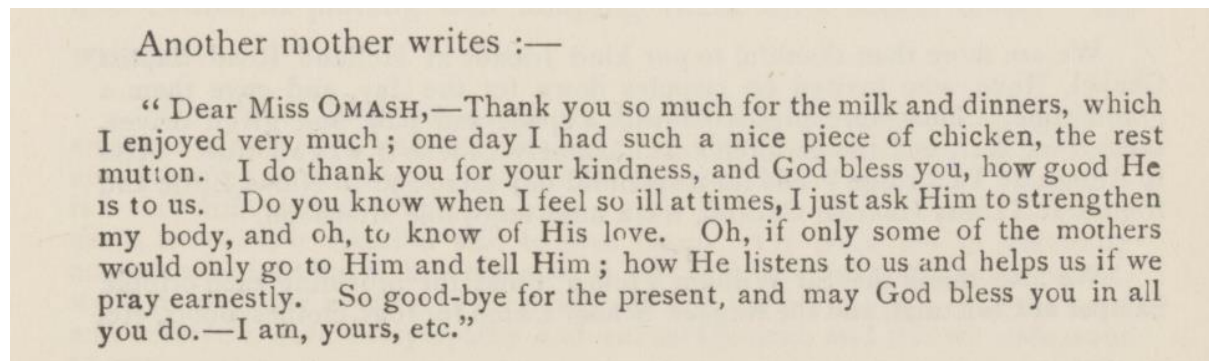
Fig. 4: DRSA_1_1_5_1909, p. 32

BENEVOLENT FUND.													
								£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
..	24	11	3	By Oranges—Christmas Day	..	..	..	..	0	13	6		
..	1	1	0	„ Wellbeloved—195-lbs. Beef	..	..	..	..	6	10	0		
..	0	10	0	„ Albany Institute—Dinners for Sick Poor	..	..	..	..	1	0	0		
Arnold..	0	10	6	„ Marshall—98 Milk Tickets	..	..	..	..	5	8	6		
..	0	2	0	„ Carr—98 Bread Tickets	..	..	..	..	2	5	2		
..	0	5	0	„ Trickett—60 Grocery Tickets	..	..	..	..	2	0	0		
..	0	2	0	„ Ovenell—42 Coal Tickets	..	..	..	..	1	8	0		
..	0	10	0	„ Ragged School Union— sending 63 to the Seaside for	..	..	..	..					
..	0	10	0	14 days	..	..	..	£19	17	0			
..	0	4	0	Less paid by Teachers and Scholars	..	..	..	£14	3	0			
..	0	12	0								5	14	0
..	0	12	6	„ Child to Country	..	..	..	..	..	..	0	9	0
..	1	0	0	„ Brading—Printing	..	..	..	..	..	..	0	5	6
..	0	4	0	„ Balance in hand	..	..	..	..	..	..	26	16	2
..	2	2	0										
..	1	1	0										
..	1	12	0										

Fig. 5: DRSA_1_1_5_1910, p. 32

The yearly expenditure remains consistently around £1 even though 1908 for example was a year of heightened sickness, evidenced by reduced attendance of the school's clubs. (Annual Report, 1908)

The type of food served is largely unreferenced, but there is one moving letter published in the 1908 annual report written to Miss Omash by a mother who received the dinners:



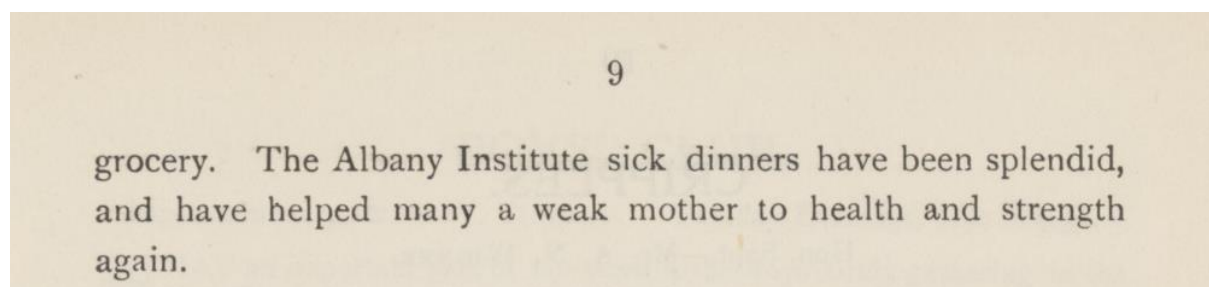
Another mother writes :—

“ Dear Miss OMASH,—Thank you so much for the milk and dinners, which I enjoyed very much ; one day I had such a nice piece of chicken, the rest mutton. I do thank you for your kindness, and God bless you, how good He is to us. Do you know when I feel so ill at times, I just ask Him to strengthen my body, and oh, to know of His love. Oh, if only some of the mothers would only go to Him and tell Him ; how He listens to us and helps us if we pray earnestly. So good-bye for the present, and may God bless you in all you do.—I am, yours, etc.”

Fig. 6: DRSA_1_1_5_1908, p. 9

Meat would not always have been available to poorer families, although it was understood to be important for proper nourishment. Similarly, milk was viewed as a source of strength and was used as such in the school's 'milk ticket' initiative but was not always readily available. It is interesting to read one of the individual stories behind the program, which otherwise largely comes to the reader of the reports in the form of statistics. One can see the strong feeling of wellbeing and care that comes to the recipient of a nutritious meal in a time of need.

Another interesting aspect of the program is, as in the above example ascribed to 'another mother', direct references to mothers as the recipients of sick dinners:



9

grocery. The Albany Institute sick dinners have been splendid, and have helped many a weak mother to health and strength again.

Fig. 7: DRSA_1_1_5_1908, p. 9

While the sick dinners program was not exclusively used by mothers, the emphasis in this passage may suggest something of the role of mothers within the family food unit. Mothers were known to be managers of the family assets, budgeters for meals, and responsible not only for the cooking but for sacrificing their own health and hunger when food was lacking: 'Their energy and self-denial were the first lines of defence when poverty advanced; their health and vitality were often the first casualties... If food was short it was not the husband and children, but the mother who made her meal of tea and scraps and pretended to have eaten before the rest came home.' (Chinn, 1995)

The emphasis on the mother as a recipient of the school's sick dinners could be viewed as a redressal of the food imbalance in the home, a disparity of which Miss Omash would have been made aware through her involvement with several of the school's women's groups.

As a final point, it can be argued that the sick dinners program, though a charity project, was indicative of the localised community projects and a general sense of 'neighbourliness' which were widespread despite the difficult circumstances of life for London's poor communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Writing of these communities, Carl Chinn states, 'they banded together to form neighbourhoods. They clung to each other against an inhospitable environment. They supported one another when the state and the wealthy ignored them.' (Chinn, 1995, p. 147)

As seen, the effects of illness on a family and its ability to earn a wage could be devastating, aside from the immediate danger to health and life. The Deptford Ragged School Sick Dinners program, though apparently short-lived, displays in microcosm the values of neighbourliness, kindness, and charity which characterise the school project as a whole and make the archival material of the school fascinating and inspiring to study.

When viewed as a community project, it is notable that the organiser Miss Omash was a resident of nearby Drakefell Street in Brockley. (Annual Report, 1903) There has not been scope in this case study, but it would be interesting to identify more biographical information about this individual. After twenty-five years, Miss Omash disappeared from the reports of the Ragged School in 1917 without further mention. There is also a need for further investigation into the connections between the Albany Institute and the Deptford Ragged School in the delivery of this project, and the interconnectedness of charitable organisations in South-east London more generally.

References:

Carl Chinn, *Poverty amidst prosperity: The urban poor in England, 1834 – 1914*, (Manchester University Press: 1995)

Ellen Ross, *Love & Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870 - 1918*, (Oxford University Press, 1993)

Jess Steele, *Turning the Tide: The History of Everyday Deptford*, (Deptford Forum Publishing, 1993)

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