

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



For ‘the Love of Nature’: the Flower Show and Floral Encounters in Everyday Deptford

Jude Pretoria

‘The Love of Nature and care of plants is fostered by the Flower Show’. (Annual Report, 1913)

If you were to take a wander through Deptford’s lanes of packed housing in the early 1900s, the scene would be rather drab. Wet cobblestones soaked in manure piled on either side of the road, plain brick façade after plain brick façade, tightly packed, without a spot of green or a tree to be seen. The faint smell of offal and putrescence drifting from the monstrous cattle market and its slaughterhouses, and from the Creekside industries, a noxious aroma from the gasworks, smog from the mills, and an indiscernible chemical smell from the works on Creek Street.

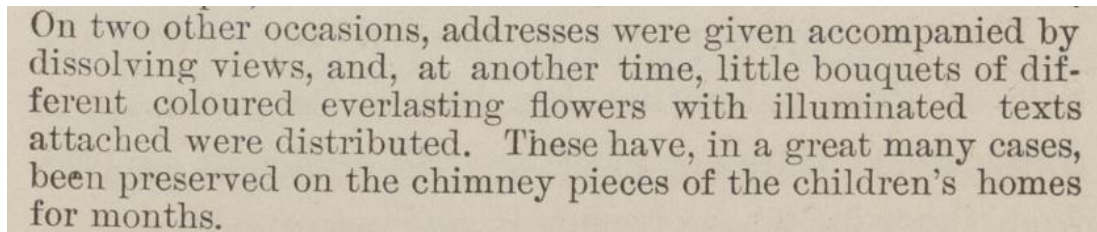
But off along the street, you might spot a small pop of colour. A window box of geraniums, perhaps fuchsias, perhaps nasturtiums, and perhaps more flowers or plants on the other side of the window. A fragrance of faraway rolling fields. Were you to enter the home, the family would echo in words the pride with which they displayed these plants conspicuously at their windows. The scene would have been mirrored in many homes, and in springtime you would be hard pressed to find a street or lane in Deptford without at least one such profusion of floral joy. For each spring and summer, the Deptford Ragged School held a flower show, whereby huge amounts of plants and seeds were distributed to children to grow in their own homes, and brought back again a few months later to be judged and awarded prizes.

The Flower Show is not the only floral encounter recorded in the Deptford Ragged School archive, but it was the most frequent and conspicuous. The engagement with flowers, plants, and growing took many different forms, and appears in the archive in instances such as:

- The annual Flower Show
- Harvest Festivals
- Special Flower Services
- As gifts for local disabled children
- The Swiss Village Bazaar held to raise funds for the new building in 1884
- As decorations for key public events regarding the school
- As an everyday resource of survival under the Benevolent Fund: either for destitute families, to be hawked on the street, or as a component of local small-scale florist businesses

The earliest mention of anything floral in the archive dates to 1879. The Tuesday Evening Service for Children and Young People reported that, at one service, bouquets of variously

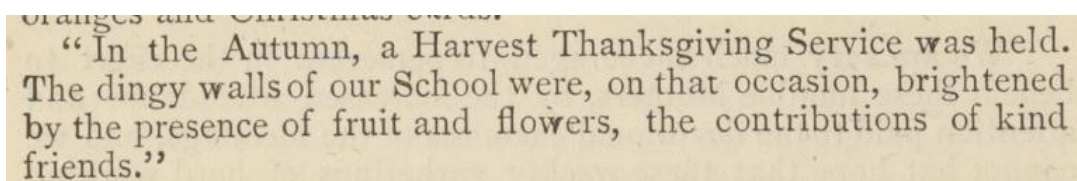
coloured 'everlasting flowers' had been distributed 'with illuminated texts attached', no doubt Bible verses. (Annual Report, 1879) Whether these were dried flowers or paper ones is not clarified, but regardless, these were reportedly displayed with pride on the chimney pieces of the children for many months after.



On two other occasions, addresses were given accompanied by dissolving views, and, at another time, little bouquets of different coloured everlasting flowers with illuminated texts attached were distributed. These have, in a great many cases, been preserved on the chimney pieces of the children's homes for months.

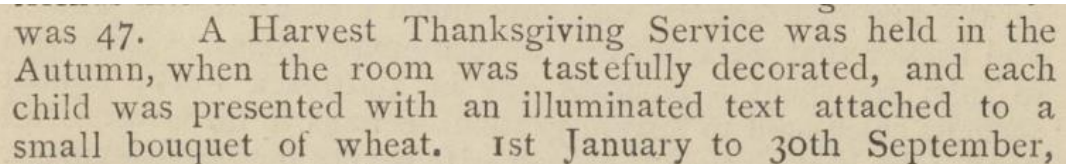
Fig. 1: DRSA_1_1_3_1879, p.13

In the autumn of the following year, the same organisation held a Harvest Thanksgiving Service in which the school was 'artistically decorated with wheat, fruit, and flowers.' (Annual Report, 1880) This would be held intermittently for many years thereafter, aided by annual donations of a 'splendid quantity' of corn and flowers from St. Peter's, Brockley. (Annual Report, 1891-91) With such natural decoration, 'the dingy walls' of the school were 'brightened by the presence of fruit and flowers', and the novelty was clearly sufficient to bring in extra children. (Annual Report, 1881) In 1882 a dedicated 'Flower Service' was put on by friends from the Brockley Wesleyan Chapel, and brought in 300 children, much higher than the usual numbers attending the Sunday Evening School in which it took place.



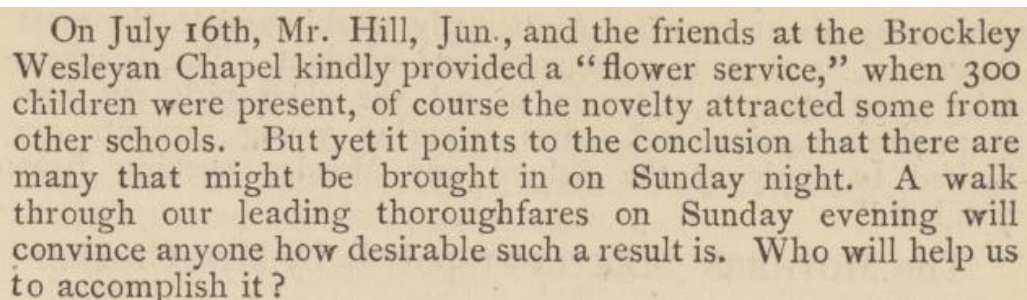
“In the Autumn, a Harvest Thanksgiving Service was held. The dingy walls of our School were, on that occasion, brightened by the presence of fruit and flowers, the contributions of kind friends.”

Fig.2: DRSA_1_1_3_1881, p.12



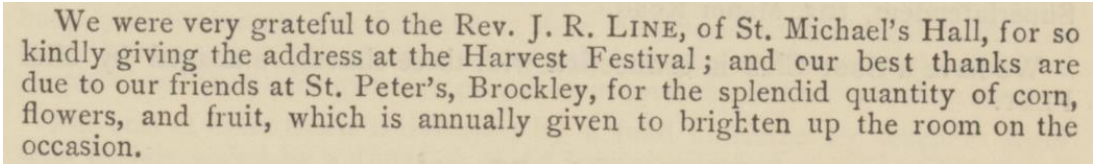
was 47. A Harvest Thanksgiving Service was held in the Autumn, when the room was tastefully decorated, and each child was presented with an illuminated text attached to a small bouquet of wheat. 1st January to 30th September,

Fi. 3: DRSA_1_1_3_1883-84, p.10



On July 16th, Mr. Hill, Jun., and the friends at the Brockley Wesleyan Chapel kindly provided a “flower service,” when 300 children were present, of course the novelty attracted some from other schools. But yet it points to the conclusion that there are many that might be brought in on Sunday night. A walk through our leading thoroughfares on Sunday evening will convince anyone how desirable such a result is. Who will help us to accomplish it?

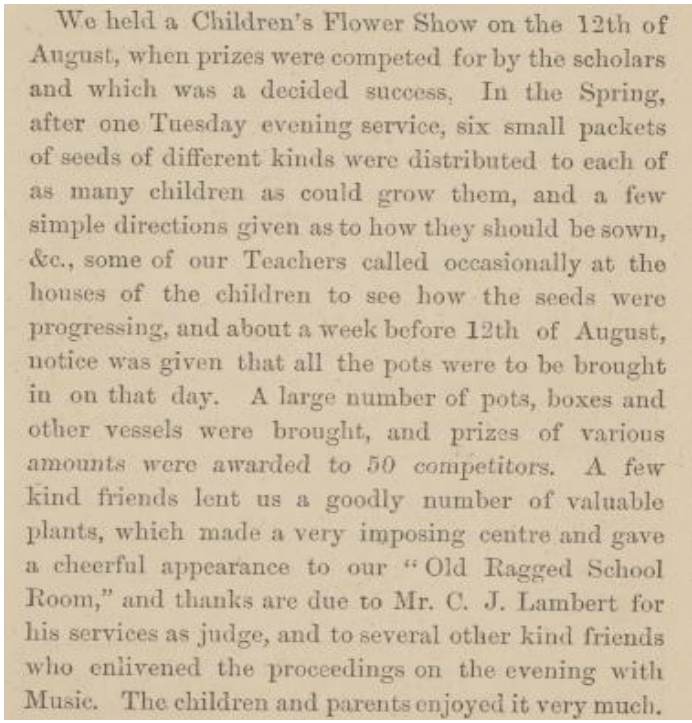
Fig. 4: DRSA_1_1_3_1882, p.9



We were very grateful to the Rev. J. R. LINE, of St. Michael's Hall, for so kindly giving the address at the Harvest Festival; and our best thanks are due to our friends at St. Peter's, Brockley, for the splendid quantity of corn, flowers, and fruit, which is annually given to brighten up the room on the occasion.

Fig. 5: DRSA_1_1_4_1891-92, p.11

In 1880, the first Flower Show took place, a novel undertaking with no guarantee of acceptance, and yet, 'the children and parents enjoyed it very much', and the result was 'a decided success'. (Annual Report, 1880) The process was as follows: in the spring, seeds were distributed to the children, who were given simple directions as to how to sow and grow them at home; teachers would check in at the homes to make sure all was well; in August the plants were brought back in a variety of different vessels, displayed along with 'a goodly number of valuable plants' lent by friends of the School. (Annual Report, 1880) 50 competitors were judged, and prizes awarded based on the quality of the plant. (Annual Report, 1914) This formed the basis for all subsequent flower shows, though numerous developments, and issues, occurred over the years.



We held a Children's Flower Show on the 12th of August, when prizes were competed for by the scholars and which was a decided success. In the Spring, after one Tuesday evening service, six small packets of seeds of different kinds were distributed to each of as many children as could grow them, and a few simple directions given as to how they should be sown, &c., some of our Teachers called occasionally at the houses of the children to see how the seeds were progressing, and about a week before 12th of August, notice was given that all the pots were to be brought in on that day. A large number of pots, boxes and other vessels were brought, and prizes of various amounts were awarded to 50 competitors. A few kind friends lent us a goodly number of valuable plants, which made a very imposing centre and gave a cheerful appearance to our "Old Ragged School Room," and thanks are due to Mr. C. J. Lambert for his services as judge, and to several other kind friends who enlivened the proceedings on the evening with Music. The children and parents enjoyed it very much.

Fig. 6: DRSA_1_1_3_1880, p.13

The show flourished in the following years and soon became a 'spot of brightness' and a regular fixture in the school calendar. (Annual Report, 1914) In 1892 the large main room of the new building was turned into 'flower land', adorned with plants, flowers, and fairy lights 'with a most pleasing effect'. (Annual Report, 1891-92) It was clear that the children had 'showed very great care and attention' to their plants and the growing process, and fuchsias and geraniums were particularly noted, both staples of the show. (Annual Report, 1891-92)

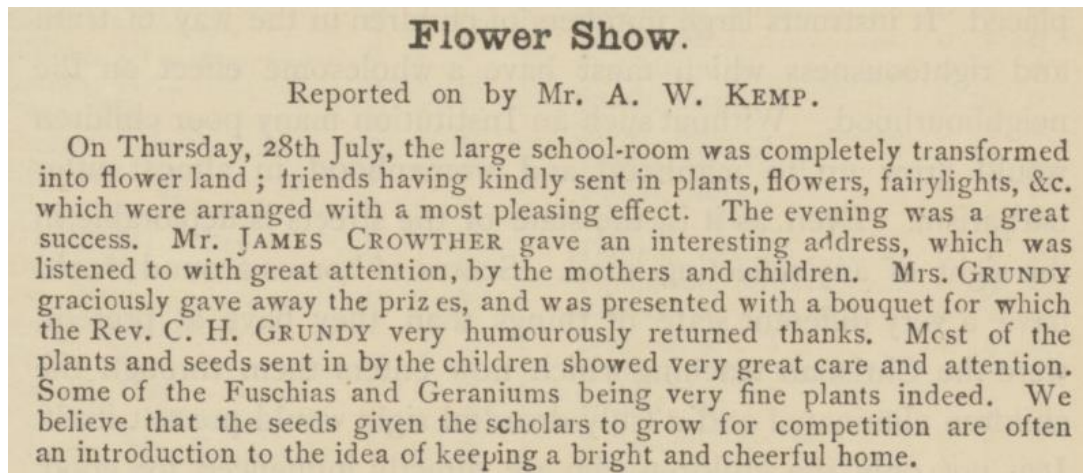


Fig. 7: DRSA_1_1_4_1891-92, p.17

In 1895 the platform was a 'triumph of colour' owing to the plants given by Miss Simpson, a regular donator of high-quality plants for the school's events and an organiser of the Flower Show. (Annual Report, 1895) For the Annual Meetings 1895–1898 she is noted as having lent ferns to decorate the meeting room. Living in a large home at 105 Manor Road, Brockley, she presumably had access to garden space and perhaps a glasshouse to grow in, unlike those living in the tightly packed terraces of Deptford.

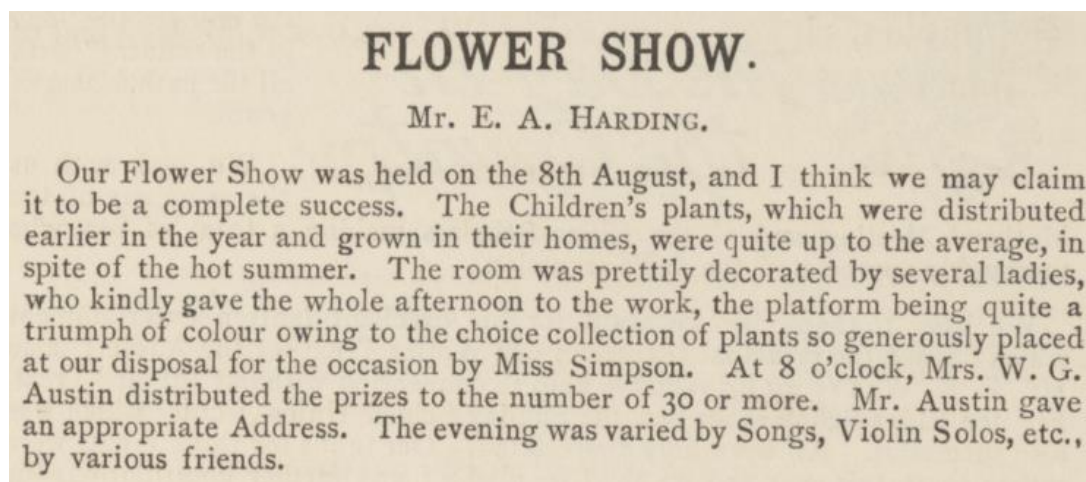


Fig. 9: DRSA_1_1_4_1895, p.18

Miss Simpson reported upon the 1897 show where, instead of seeds, the children were given small plants already in pots, which were judged by a professional gardener who was 'very pleased with the appearance of a great many of them'. (Annual Report, 1897) As the prizes were monetary the motivation for diligent growing may have been more than simple enthusiasm for the horticultural process.

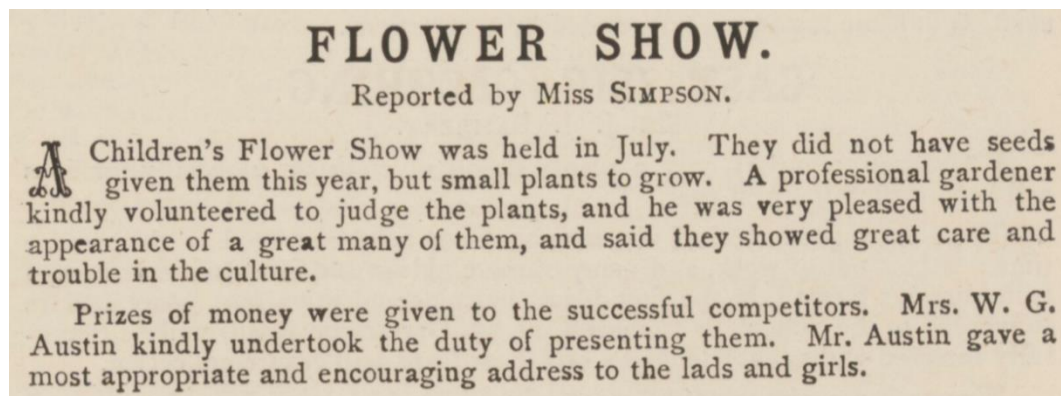


Fig. 9: DRSA_1_1_4_1897, p.17

In keeping with the Christian paternalism that pervaded much of the school's work, the purpose of the Flower Show was principally one of edification. This exhibited itself both as a form of Christian moralism and holistic wellbeing, especially mental wellbeing, though wrapped up in middle-class values. As the 1892 report states, the show was intended as 'an introduction to the idea of keeping a bright and cheerful home.' (Annual Report, 1892-92) Furthermore, 'besides interesting the children in flowers, many of the windows in the homes are brightened during the summer months' by the pots and boxes sprouting colourful plants, which imparted a 'softening influence' onto the otherwise rough streets of Deptford. (Annual Reports, 1898 and 1899)

So too, the presence of plants within the home was hoped to impart 'a brightening and refreshing influence' to the home environment, the proof of which is shown by the enthusiasm with which families reportedly showed off their flowers to visitors. (Annual Reports 1901 and 1899) Addresses were often given at the shows, such as that given by Rev. Grundy in 1910 'who took the occasion of the flower cultivation to impress on the children the value of cultivating the growth of all that is good', linking the horticultural process to a broader moral development within the children themselves. (Annual Report, 1910)

There was also recognition of the environmental difficulties of growing in Deptford. The 1899 report noted that 'the air of Deptford may not be the best, but the love of flowers latent in all children's hearts is not lacking.' (Annual Report, 1899) 'Deptford is not an ideal spot for cultivation', the 1910 report notes. (annual Report, 1910) In 1907, on top of a 'dull summer', one boy had his window box ruined by a local cat, who no doubt found it to be a comfy spot to curl up. (Annual Report, 1907) Yet despite any adversity, 'the natural love of flowers has not been crushed out of the hearts of our children, notwithstanding their dreary surroundings.' (Annual Report, 1911)

FLOWER SHOW.

A FLOWER SHOW was held in the Summer, and prizes awarded to scholars for the best grown plants. These were Fuchsias, Marigolds, Geraniums, and Nasturtiums, and all showed a great amount of attention and care. Some plants were grown, and besides interesting the children in flowers many of the windows in the homes are brightened during the summer months.

Fig. 10: DRSA_1_1_4_1896, p.18

FLOWER SHOW.

THE air of Deptford may not be of the best, but the love of flowers latent in all children's hearts is not lacking, nor do their window ledges look less bright for having pots and boxes of flowers growing on them during the summer. Plants are distributed early in the season, and great is the enthusiasm when it is time to send them in for judging for prizes at the Flower Show in July. Well does the writer remember the whole family interest in showing the flowers when visiting. The softening influence of some 300 or 400 pots of flowers cannot be without its effects, apart from the training it affords the children in the love and care of plants.

Fig. 11: DRSA_1_1_4_1899, p.14

FLOWER SHOW.

FLOWER growing in Deptford may be considered unlikely. However, our Children have again been encouraged to grow some in pots in their windows during the Summer, and compete for prizes. We supply pots, good soil with seeds or plants which the children grow. The results show great pains and attention, and the presence of so many hundred plants in the homes must have a brightening and refreshing influence. The Show was a success, and the prizes were again presented by Lady Darling, who inspected with interest the childrens' exhibits, and in addressing them afterwards spoke most encouragingly of the pleasures and benefits of such efforts. The kind remarks and congratulations to every prize-winner as they received their prizes from her hand, will not soon be forgotten.

A bouquet was presented to her, and on leaving the cheers, appreciative of her kindness, were most hearty. Miss Simpson kindly lent some flowers and plants for the occasion.

Fig. 12: DRSA_1_1_4_1901, p.20

FLOWER SHOW.

Secretaries.—Mr. W. NEWELL and Miss ARNOLD.

THIS is a hardy annual, and has quite taken root, and continues to blossom, although Deptford is not an ideal spot for cultivation. Our people and children are however accustomed to do the best with what they have, and the results this year were encouraging, notwithstanding the fact that we had to give a prize for a few luxuriant weeds, which had been cultivated with great care, in mistake for the flower seeds.

842 packets of seeds, 113 fuchsias, 122 geraniums, were distributed, and 316 pots were presented for show. The judging was kindly undertaken by Mr. BOURNER, and prizes distributed by MRS. GRUNDY who was accompanied by REV. C. H. GRUNDY, and who took the occasion of the flower cultivation to impress on the children the value of cultivating the growth of all that is good.

Fig. 13: DRSA_1_1_5_1910, p.18

FLOWER SHOW.

NOTWITHSTANDING the dull summer, the children's plants were very creditable. It means perseverance to grow flowers in Deptford; one poor boy had his hopes ruined by a local cat. About 900 pots were given out and 435 exhibited. Three classes of prizes were given for Geraniums, Fuchsias, Marigolds and Nasturtiums, as well as one for best plant in the show. Mr. Boorner (of Messrs. Child's), kindly acted as judge. Mrs. D. HINES distributed the prizes and several ladies and gentlemen, invited by Miss HOLMES, gave an excellent concert.

We are also indebted to Mrs. HINES for growing the Fuchsia cuttings for the children to cultivate.

Fig. 14: DRSA_1_1_5_1907, p.13

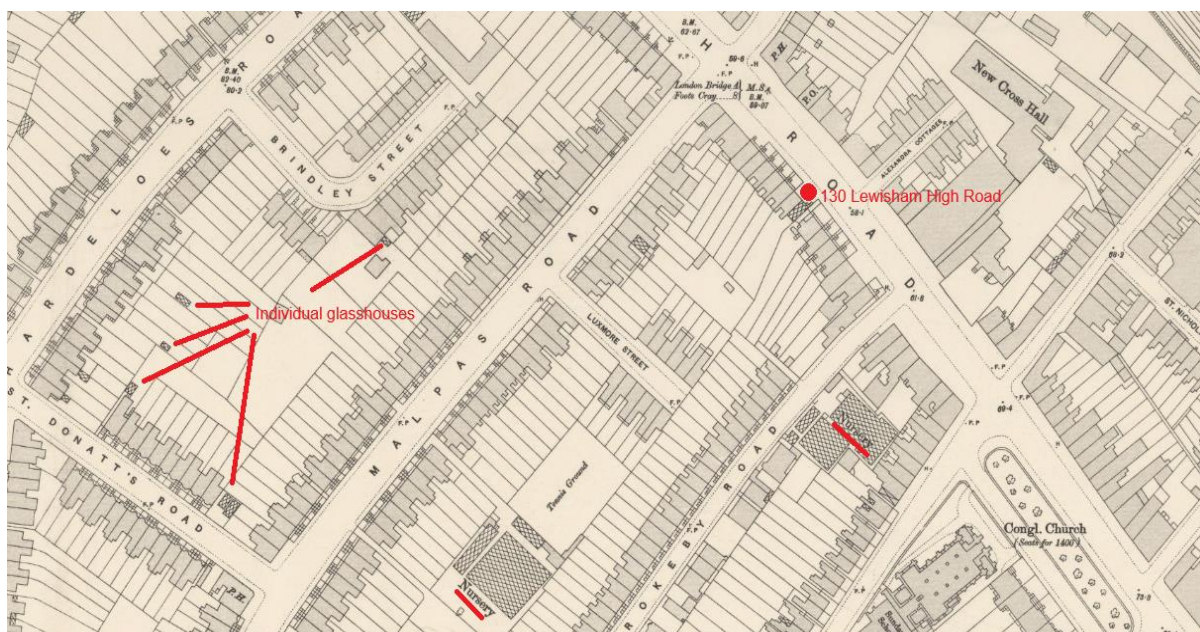
FLOWER SHOW.

THE natural love of flowers has not been crushed out of the hearts of our children, notwithstanding their dreary surroundings. We seek to foster this love, by encouraging growth of seeds and plants in pots in windows. We provide about 800 pots, soil, seeds and plants, leaving the nurture to the children, and the efforts are praiseworthy and their windows all the brighter.

The Show was held on August 1st, when Mrs. HINES distributed the prizes. The judging was kindly undertaken by Mr. BOURNER.

Fig. 15: DRSA_1_1_5_1911, p.14

Regardless of any issues, the Flower Show went from strength to strength and only blossomed as the years progressed. There was a difficult patch in 1904 and 1905 when the seasons were poor, and Mr. Laver (a key contributor to the shows) fell ill. However, the shows recovered quickly and soon new names became staples, most notably Mr. Bournier and Mrs. Hines. From 1907 onwards both names appear regularly on the annual reports. Mrs. Hines provided fuchsia and geranium cuttings and other plants for the children and often distributed the prizes, whilst Mr. Bournier came in as a judge, working as he did for J. E. Child florists, a local business with whom the Deptford Ragged School had a long relationship. Childs was based at 130 Lewisham High Road and grew its stock at the Malpas Road Nursery right around the corner from the shop. There was a similar nursery on the adjacent Rokeby Road, both of which must have provided a much-needed lot of space to grow in an otherwise thoroughly urbanised area.



Map 1: London Sheet XI.40, 1894, National Library of Scotland, edited by author

The school purchased buttonhole flowers from Child's to distribute at the opening of the new building in March 1886 (Loose Papers) and also thanked them for the plants which they gave for the opening ceremony. (Loose Papers) Again in 1914, Child's gave flowers to decorate the platform on which the Princess Louise opened the new building on Hales Street. (Loose Papers)



Fig. 16: DRSA_5_1_1, p.91



Fig. 17: DRSA_5_1_1, p.91 (detail)

At some stage it seems that Mr. Bourner took over the company, and in a memo from 1935 responded to a Ragged School inquiry as to the best plants with natural colours. After an exhaustive list, ultimately Bourner recommended an old faithful, the fuchsia, 'the best of all plants'. (Minute Book)

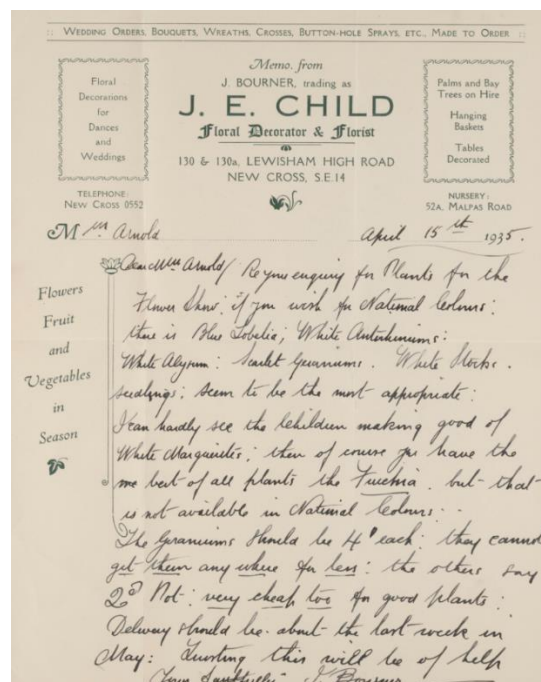


Fig. 18: DRSA_2_11, p.7

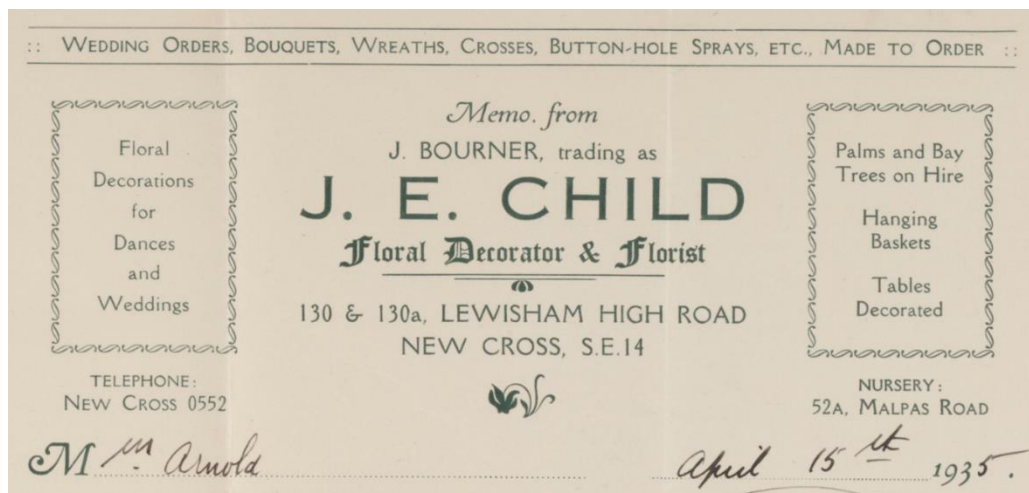


Fig. 19: DRSA_2_11, p.7 (detail)

Not all local florists were faring so well, however. There are numerous instances of the Benevolent Fund, a fund usually reserved for those in the direst need, being used to purchase flowers. In 1896, amongst the many uses of the fund listed, purchase of flowers for hawking (street selling) is listed, and the following year 10s. was given to a T. S. to allow him to set up his own florist business, which is noted as 'going well'. (Annual Reports, 1896 and 1897)

others would follow his good example so that we could send more away. In very many ways this fund has relieved distress, as for instance, 6 pairs of spectacles have been given, 14 cases in sore distress have been helped pecuniarily, boots provided, wood found for chopping, flowers for hawking, night shelter, bedding for blind man attending our Bible Class, &c.

Fig. 1: DRSA_1_1_4_1896, p.12

the Matrons, coupled with good, regular meals and good beds. We have rendered help to hawkers' baskets, started a man in business selling plants, given boots to two families, helped girls going out to service, supplied wood for chopping, nights' lodgings, &c. We return sincere thanks to the Vicar

Fig. 2: DRSA_1_1_4_1897, p.14

BENEVOLENT FUND—Deptford Ragged School.									
RECEIPTS.				EXPENDITURE.					
	£	s.	d.					£	s. d.
...	...	...	...	Ragged School Union for sending to Seaside 6 adults,	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	25 Girls, and 6 Boys	...	...	...	14	14 0
...	...	...	...	Starting T. S. with Plants and Flowers—doing well	...	...	...	0	10 0
...	...	...	...	E. S. for Clothes, going into service	...	...	...	0	6 6
...	...	...	...	M., Wood for chopping	...	...	...	0	4 0
...	...	...	...	Small amounts spent upon Clothes, Second-hand	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	Boots, Lodgings, and temporary difficulties	...	...	...	1	13 3
...	...	...	...	Relieved 288—	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	54 Milk Tickets	...	...	...	3	1 10
...	...	...	...	17 Meat	...	...	...	0	11 4
...	...	...	...	78½ lb. Beef for Christmas Dinner	...	...	...	2	15 5
...	...	...	...	43 Loaves Bread (17 Gifts)	...	...	...	0	8 10
...	...	...	...	101 Coal Tickets (65 Gifts)	...	...	...	1	1 10
...	...	...	...	152 Grocery Tickets	...	...	...	5	1 4
...	...	...	...	Balance in hand	...	...	...	3	3 9

Fig. 3: DRSA_1_1_4_1897, p.31

And again, the next year, 7s. is given to a wife and family, neglected by the husband, to purchase flowers at Covent Garden, presumably to then hawk on the streets. (Annual

Report, 1898) In 1911, 5s. were given to a woman who had lost her two children to disease and who was destitute, to refill her basket with flowers for hawking. (Annual Report, 1911) The resident Missionary of the School regularly visited a disabled man on Giffin Street who made wreaths for a living. (Annual Report, 1912) All these instances go to show that flowers and plants were not simply a nicety, but in many cases an essential resource for survival for those most desperate in the local community.

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

Fig. 4: DRSA_1_1_4_1898, p.32

BENEVOLENT FUND.

Hon. Treasurer—Mr. E. DODD. Hon. Secretary—Mrs. F. WRIGHT.

WITH great sympathy, and yet with care, this special fund is dispensed to necessitous cases and affords very welcome relief. One case assisted was that of a family.—

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. 5: DRSA_1_1_5_1911, p.19

There is a young man of 27, living in Giffin Street, who has lost the use of his legs, and is a prisoner. His mother is a widow, and misses the help that he used to give her. I see him occasionally, and find he is interested in the books and papers I give him. He makes up wreaths of flowers or evergreens. He is always glad to see me.

Fig. 6: DRSA_1_1_5_1912, p.20

Of course, flowers are also 'very greatly valued by the sick', and so when the Deptford Ragged School became the New Cross and Deptford Centre for Care for Disabled Children in 1896, part of its provisions included taking flowers to 'those that have to live in solitude' due

to their condition. (Annual Reports, 1912 and 1896) For those leading especially difficult lives, marginalised by class and disability in tandem, it was 'a pleasing sight to watch the sunshine these flowers carry into the homes, and the smiles, and often tears of joy from the parents, when inhaling their fragrance.' (Annual Report) In 1903 the Deptford Ragged School Band of Hope had a flower service which collected 45 nosegays and took them to the homes of isolated local disabled children. (Annual Report, 1903) These are merely a small sample of what must have been a whole nexus of everyday floral encounters in Deptford.

Returning to the Flower Shows, the 1922 Annual Report provides a wonderful illustration of how far the institution had come in its 40 odd years of existence. It was now an annual norm to hear the ragged children asking for a 'Drainam and a Future' (a geranium and a fuchsia) for their beloved competition.

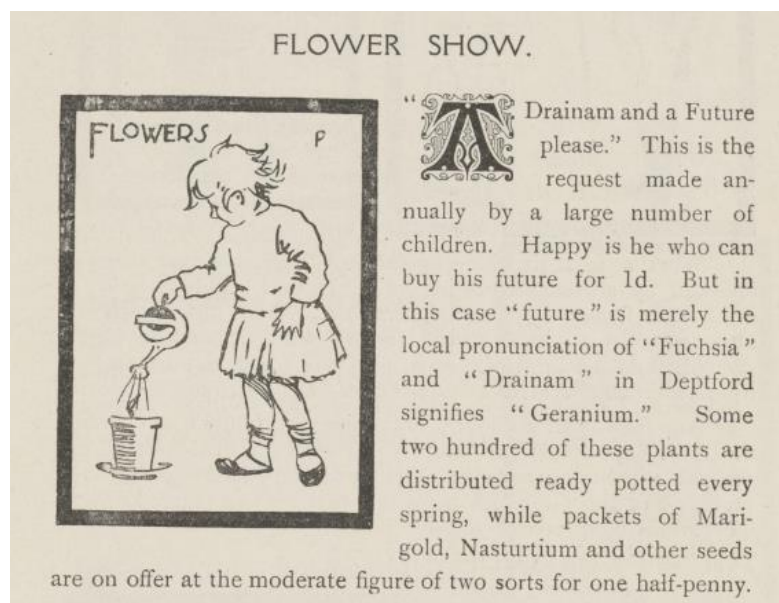


Fig. 7: DRSA_1_1_6_1922, p.9

The chronicle of the Flower Shows perhaps reached its zenith in 1924 when Princess Louise herself attended the show. According to the minutes of the next Committee Meeting, Her Royal Highness 'showed a keen interest in the exhibition of flowers and asked many questions. In her speech she highly commended the love of flowers as humanising and teaching many good qualities.' (Minute Book) Though the Princess had patronised the school for many years, had given the new institute its name, and was present at its opening, this visit nonetheless must have been a crowning moment in the history of the Ragged School Flower Shows. After almost 45 years, from humble beginnings to a staple of the school calendar, here they were, the ragged children and their plants, being praised by a Princess of the Realm.

Jude Pretoria is a recent History graduate with a specific interest in Victorian, Edwardian, and First World War People's History. He cares deeply for making history accessible and personable, and advocates for local history as a powerful force for mental wellbeing,

collective belonging, and the reflective appreciation of the world around us. He has contributed to numerous local history publications and is currently writing a walking tour titled 'World War Whitechapel', about the experience of the everyday people of Whitechapel in the First World War.