

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



‘Trust the Mother’s Influence’: Mothers’ Meetings at the Deptford Ragged School

Sunday Ellis

The Deptford Ragged School’s relationship with the mothers of their pupils develops across the period, from one predominantly concerned about their negative influence, to a greater sympathy and understanding of their lives. In 1855, the focus was on religious education for parents but there was already an awareness that, by working with parents, they could improve the outcomes for the children (fig. 1). The establishment of Mothers’ Meetings, first referenced in an 1862 Annual Report, indicates that the Ragged School was determined to work with the parents, not only to intervene, but also to prevent deprivation in the neighbourhood.

The popularity of the Meetings continued throughout the period, with membership of over 100 but with fluctuating attendance, depending on economic and familial demands on the women’s time. By the 1880s a report indicated that the meetings were embedded in the Christian ambitions of the school, hoping that the children would influence the mothers, and the mothers the fathers, to bring about long-term salvation for all (fig.2).

truth, and that thus the home influences which are in general only detrimental to the children, may be so changed in their character as to become auxiliary to the school,

Fig. 1: DRSA_1_1_1_1855, p.5

Many of the mothers are greatly influenced by the children who attend the Sunday School, and we trust the mothers influence the fathers. We have our troublesome and noisy members, but we must not despair, but believe that after many days, our hearts desire, the salvation of all, may be granted.

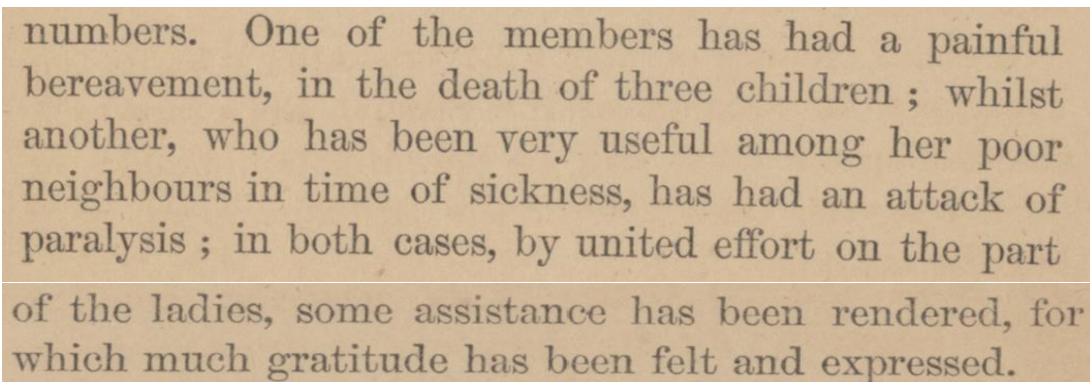
Fig. 2: DRSA_1_1_3_1886-87, p.14

The Mothers’ Meetings fulfilled a range of means for supporting the community. They were used to provide material support, such as the loan of blankets, advice on thrift, and savings schemes for boots and coal. Teachers and other volunteers were encouraged to assist with finding employment particularly in domestic service. In 1868-69, Mrs Maltby co-ordinated the Maternity Society which loaned bags of linen, provided visits during pregnancy, and financial support. However, this society does not appear to have continued and may have been subsumed into the Mothers’ Meetings.

The practical nature of the meetings is shown through activities that were focused on financial management and clothing repair. Unlike most aspects of the Deptford Ragged School there was limited time on scriptures with concerns expressed that the meetings were too secular. However, an important aspect of the Mothers’ Meetings was the respite provided by leisure activities such as magic lantern shows, annual Winter teas, and day trips, such as to Epping Forest. Sometimes these activities were also a means of involving husbands to extend the influence of the charity on the neighbourhood.

The Reports provide an insight into the problems that mothers were facing but also their resilience. Employment regularly impacted attendance, seasonal work such as the summer hop-picking season led to meetings being suspended, and the demands of work such as charring (cleaning) affected women's ability to be punctual to meetings. The archive shows great sympathy for the difficulties of juggling work and attendance, including explaining a concession made for seamstresses who needed to complete 'shirt work' in the first half hour of the meeting to meet deadlines.

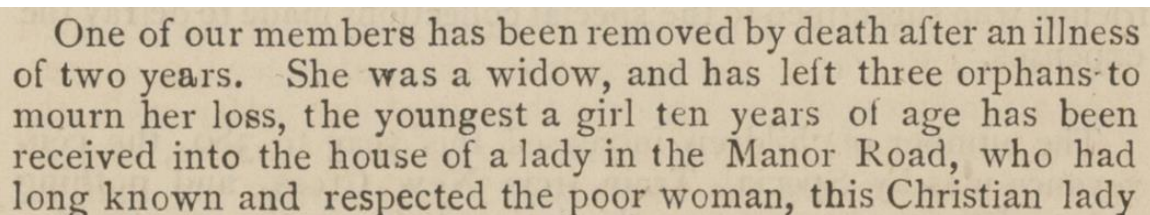
However, the most important role of the Mothers' Meetings appears to be the emotional and practical support that members and volunteers provide. There are numerous accounts of the relationships between the women that provided significant support in times of need, such as illness, bereavement, and unemployment. The reports reflect the regular impact of illness and domestic difficulties, usually referred to as 'trouble'. The mothers are responsible for helping each other with childcare, frequently visiting the sick and dying (fig. 3). They are also instrumental in expanding the involvement of the school in the neighbourhood, recommending others who require help, but who were too proud to ask for it. The Annual Reports recount these positively, probably because the qualities that the women demonstrated reflect the Christian values of the Ragged School movement.



numbers. One of the members has had a painful bereavement, in the death of three children ; whilst another, who has been very useful among her poor neighbours in time of sickness, has had an attack of paralysis ; in both cases, by united effort on the part of the ladies, some assistance has been rendered, for which much gratitude has been felt and expressed.

Fig. 3: DRSA_1_1_2_1865, p.8-9

The reports also reveal that the Ragged School volunteers developed strong bonds with the mothers. This can be partly attributed to the longevity of the involvement of some volunteers. Mrs Harris led the Mothers' Meetings from 1869 to 1899, and in 1872 Mrs Crocker was held in such high regard she received a gift of a silver-plated tea pot from the mothers to celebrate 30 years of volunteering. In addition, former pupils became members of the Mothers' Meetings, with mention of several in the 1897 report. The importance of the relationships between mothers and volunteers is exemplified in the excerpt below from 1884-85, when a volunteer from Manor Avenue assisted a recently orphaned family by fostering the youngest child, due to her longstanding relationship with the deceased mother (fig. 4)



One of our members has been removed by death after an illness of two years. She was a widow, and has left three orphans to mourn her loss, the youngest a girl ten years of age has been received into the house of a lady in the Manor Road, who had long known and respected the poor woman, this Christian lady

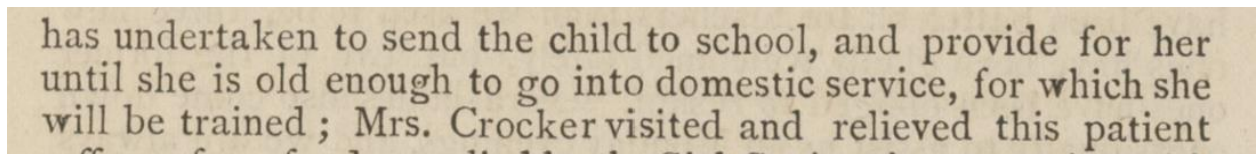


Fig. 4: DRSA_1_1_3_1884-5, p.13-14

The Deptford Ragged School provided a much-needed safe space for a significant number of the neighbourhood's mothers, and the archive reveals a rich history of the tribulations faced by the women of Deptford. There is far more to explore about the impact of events that contributed to the unpredictable economic situation of the Ragged School's families, such as the impact of the 1860s Cholera epidemic, the dock strikes of the 1880s, the Great Freeze in the 1890s, and the First World War. The archive does reveal harsh judgments on women, especially involving alcohol and the neglect of children, but the overwhelming picture of the neighbourhood is the solidarity and resilience of the community.

Sunday Ellis worked in London and Cornwall for over 30 years as a secondary school History teacher and Assistant Headteacher. Many years after studying a History BA at SSEES/UCL she did an MA in the History of Cinema and Popular Culture at Exeter. She began a PhD in Cultural Studies, but the love of teaching drew her back into the classroom. She now focuses on volunteering for local projects and is a History examiner and tutor.