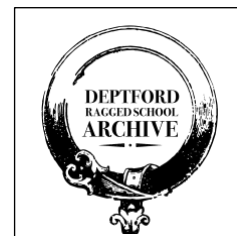


Extracts from the Deptford Ragged School anniversary celebration booklet, 2007



The Deptford Ragged School was founded in 1844; our records give the exact date as 1 December 1844. The Ragged School was so-called because of the condition of the children who attended; they were dressed in rags and had bare feet in all weathers. Sunday School teachers described them as "*half-starved, half-dressed and half-wild*". The honour of founding the School went to Mr William Agutter, a member of the Deptford Congregational Church. As he made many journeys through the High Street and into the side streets, he was appalled at the conditions of life that met his eyes. He was especially concerned for the children who looked so wretched and were obviously in such great need. He felt must do something for these poor neglected children of Deptford, and seven other members of his church agreed to help him.

Life in Deptford

Deptford at this time was considered as the lowest of the low, with streets often deep in mud and filth; whatever Police Force there was at that time felt that it was too dangerous to patrol alone. We are told from our old records, people lived, fought and died like animals and the poverty was horrendous. Children were so utterly uncared for that some were even without names and were known to each other by nicknames. Many were homeless and lived on the streets or under the railway arches, forming part of the 30,000 children who were homeless in and around London at that time.

For those children who did have homes, they were certainly not the homes of all mod cons comfort and luxury that our children have today. When our teachers visited these so-called "homes", they often found them without doors or furniture as these items had been used for fuel. They also discovered large families of up to ten persons all living in one room. When a census in 1889 was taken of old Giffin Street it was found that 1,300 people lived in only 50 of those very small houses.

In these awful conditions with no sanitation or privacy, sickness and fever quickly spread. Starvation was a constant visitor to many homes. In these early days of our work, before we could teach, we had to feed adults and children with bread and soup.

In one family there was only one pair of boots! The son wore them to school in the morning, the daughter then wore them to school in the afternoon and mother wore them to the Women's Meeting in the evening.

Such were the appalling conditions of life in our part of Deptford; yet a short journey away up Friendly Street and across the road to Lewisham and into Wickham Road, Brockley, one found a different world. Here the big, posh houses were built for the well-to-do people who had servants, maids and even a horse and carriage.

In 1900 a teacher said about a lad in her class, "*I was struck by his appearance, his pale face and emaciated figure. The collar of his so-called coat was pinned tightly round his throat, I later discovered that he had no other clothes on under his coat*".

Children like this poor lad knew they could come into our warm school and find love, care and attention. They could receive something warm to eat and drink and leave wearing clothes provided from our many cupboards stocked for such emergencies.

Life at the Deptford Ragged School

Agutter and his colleagues rented a small room in a house in Flood Street. This street is no longer in existence. Into this little room they crammed as many children as possible, and on Sundays they began the task of teaching them Bible Stories as well as how to read and write.

Mr Agutter and his helpers were to find their task was not an easy one. The children they so wanted to help and teach were often difficult and rebellious. Classes were disrupted and broken up by troublemakers. Mud, stones and filth were thrown at the teachers and, on one occasion, Mr Agutter's head was cut by a stone. Another teacher had his coat torn from his back. There were frequent interruptions from whistling, swearing and the roughest of horseplay. Mice and birds were brought into the School and let loose to add to the confusion as the teachers fought to keep control and maintain some order. Later a retired policeman was hired as a doorkeeper and this did wonders in the maintenance of law and order.

To help the folk keep themselves in good, warm, sensible clothes a sewing class was started which produced a nightly attendance of over 140. A Boot and Clothing Club, where items could be saved up for by putting a few pence away each week, allowed these items to be bought cheaply; clothing repairing classes ensured that these precious items were well maintained. A Slate Club, for a few pence saved, gave people help in times of sickness and bereavement. A Coal Club which for a few pence, good coal would be available. Later, we opened a Penny Bank where people were able to save their few pennies for that "rainy day".

A dispensary and a local doctor, who was paid to attend, gave medical care to those who could not afford to obtain it elsewhere. Expectant mothers could borrow blankets and maternity clothes. We even had a form of employment agency for our girls who were leaving school and looking for work, which for most meant going into Service as a maid or servant.

In 1859 over 400 children were taken on their Sunday School Treat to a field in Brockley so that these poor children could be given a day in the fresh air in the country!

Buildings of the Deptford School

By 1848 the School had outgrown its accommodation and rented even larger premises at the rear of the Admiral Duncan public house in Deptford Broadway.

In 1849 the School had grown and it became necessary to open a night school.

In 1851, a day school was added to the many activities it was now offering to adults as well as children. The day school was for the 5-13 age group and, where possible, a charge of one penny per week was asked for. These day and night schools, had as many as 170 attending, continued right up until 1871 when the state started providing education for all children.

The Ragged School decided that they would carry on and continue to teach our children to read and write, for many of the children attending our schools were either too old or too young for the state schools. Some of children left the state schools unable to read or write, and the School endeavoured to correct this. They paid teachers a salary of £30 per year.

In 1855 a new building was erected, opened in March 1886 by the Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyle. This new building was open every night and, on most days, as it provided the people of Deptford with a large variety of services. Over 1,000 children attended the Sunday School classes.