

Children of the State

MICKY WATKINS

Henrietta Barnett worked for child welfare all her life. She was especially concerned with 'cared for' children, then called 'Children of the State': orphans, children of abusive parents, children of widows too poor to keep them, and children of parents who were in the Workhouse. In the 1890s there were over 300,000 Children of the State. There was no relief. The choice was either starvation or the Workhouse.

BARRACK SCHOOLS
In 1875 she was made a guardian of the Forest Gate School, an institution of 800 children. These schools were known as 'Barrack Schools' because of their grim appearance. The children there were treated in a most unloving and inhumane manner. Henrietta said: "The children were dressed in a uniform, and no one had his or her own clothes. They wore any which happened to fit, as they were handed out on the day of the weekly change... Silence reigned at mealtimes. The regulation weight of food was handed out to each child according to its age, regardless of its size... The hours out of school were not play hours. The girls scrubbed vast areas, I had almost said acres, of boarded rooms, but they were not allowed even to do it together. Each child was placed a few yards off the other. The children were not called by their names. Each was commonly addressed as 'child'. They had no toys, no library, no Sunday school, no places in which to keep their personal possessions, no playing



Barrack School girls, with hair shorn to avoid lice. (Photo: From the collection of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust)

fields, no night garments, no prizes, no flowers, no pets, no pictures on the walls, no pleasures in music, no opportunities for seeing the world outside the school walls."

Henrietta, with some friends, brought in toys, made a library, took groups out for walks and above all gave the children affection. She became known as 'the Guardian of the Children of the State'. In 1894 she was appointed as a member of a government committee to investigate these schools, the first woman to be given such a role. Largely owing to Henrietta's knowledge and powers of persuasion the committee recommended that the children should be fostered, or cared for in small groups with a house mother, and go to the local school. These changes were secured very gradually during the 20th Century.

CHILDREN'S COUNTRY HOLIDAY FUND
In 1877 Henrietta and Samuel went on holiday in Devon and as usual took some ailing Whitechapel families and children with them. The children got on their nerves, so Henrietta asked a 'cottager' if she would look after a child for five

shillings a week. The cottager was very willing. The next year she arranged for nine children to go on holiday for a fortnight and thus the Children's Country Holiday Fund (CCHF) started. Country clergy found cottagers and the scheme grew rapidly to 34,000 in 1903, and in 1912, 46,402 children from the slums were going on holiday. The CCHF was supported by the Prince of Wales, Princess Louise, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Gerald du Maurier, and Israel Zangwill. Thousands of volunteers accompanied children from their homes to the country or helped to entertain them there.

In 1908 a schoolmaster, who was a member of CCHF, got permission to take a group of older boys away in term time, the CCHF bearing the cost. The system was adopted by the LCC and so School Journeys were founded.

Today the CCHF is called The Outward Bound Trust.

STATE CHILDREN'S ASSOCIATION

Henrietta understood a great deal about the way government worked and she knew that Government Reports were often forgotten, and

the recommendations never implemented, so she founded the State Children's Association, a pressure group to get fostering and small homes for poor law children implemented.

Lord Lytton was the chairman, many influential people and MPs were members of the Association, and it was supported by city companies. The offices were in Victoria Street, close to Parliament. Henrietta held meetings of MPs in the House (though she did not have a vote!). They helped to secure many reforms, such as an amendment to the Infant Life Protection Act to strengthen the law against infanticide. They worked for the passing of the Children's Act of 1908. This act created Children's Courts, abolished the death penalty for children under 16 and replaced prison with remand homes for young people.

The State Children's Association continued until Henrietta's death in 1936. After her death there was no general oversight for child welfare and children were left without this important protection until in 2004 the first Children's Commissioner was appointed.

Real Talk

JUDY MARCUS

When my three 20-something year old children came home to stay over the winter holidays, I was busy. We all spent time together either watching TV, going for dog walks on the Heath Extension and in Bigwood or venturing to Hampstead High Street. They were home for about a month. Then they left.

After a week of re-establishing routines, and getting myself and the house back together, I noticed a new feeling, a kind of quietness

which was hard to define. I was busy restarting all my systems and routines but it was something outside of these tasks and work that was missing. I realised I was lonely.

I decided I would phone my local Suburb friends just for a chat (if they couldn't get out), or to organise a dog walk, or a coffee, if they could.

It's made a big difference to me and it was interesting to see that people liked the fact I had called them rather than sending a text. In these days of brief texts, immediate WhatsApp's and impersonal e-mails; talking feels better. There is something about a telephone conversation which allows your thoughts to meander

and where you can take your guard down. It also lets you improvise as you talk: as you continue to express yourself and reply to someone else, you develop your thoughts. The intimacy of a phone conversation stands out as something rare and special and in these trying times is something to be cherished.

In the cold weather, not everyone is happy meeting up outdoors; and with fears of Covid, fewer people are happy with meeting indoors; so there is less chance for bumping into friends.

For the same reasons, churches, synagogues and community centres are not able to provide, as before, hubs where people can meet for a chat.



Photo: Dr Anjali Shah

For me, when Netflix gets stale, there is nothing quite like hearing a friendly voice at the other end of the line to cure those empty nest blues.

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