

# Octavia and Henrietta

'Childlike reverence and energy': those were the characteristics of Henrietta Barnett when, as the very young heiress Miss Rowland, she began work for the housing reformer Octavia Hill in 1869, whom she soon came to idolise. It certainly was not for dumpy Octavia's looks (or clothes sense) that she admired her, and the lively Henrietta insisted on restyling her unbecoming hair before the party to celebrate her 32nd birthday. (At this party Henrietta met the curate Samuel Barnett, whom she was to marry a few years later.) The two women became lifelong friends, going for walks and holidays together.

'Yetta' as Octavia called her, soon learnt from her not only the practical side of housing but fundamental concepts of how to help the poor to help themselves rather than through indiscriminate doles. (The two would have been appalled at a recent headline, 'One third of households now on benefit'.) Her face-to-face experience of the lives of the poor started when she was as a volunteer rent-collector into what had been one of the worst Marylebone slums before Octavia took it over: Barrett's Court, now modish St Christopher's Place, off Wigmore Street.

Later, it was the Barnetts who first interested Octavia in the even greater problems of Whitechapel, when Samuel became vicar of St Jude's there. Henrietta sold her jewels, and Octavia's fiancé (they never married) raised money 'to buy a group of rickety dwellings, give the degraded inhabitants the chance to reform and tidy up the property' under Octavia's management: this site later became part of Toynbee Hall's grounds. More purchases followed, with the Barnetts taking on management while Octavia raised funds and recruited volunteer housing visitors for them, until over a thousand people were decently re-accommodated: unskilled labourers, dockers and the poorest of the poor. Among the rent-collectors in 1885 was Beatrice Webb (née Potter) who described 'long trudges through Whitechapel . . . a constantly decomposing mass of human beings, few rising out of it but many pressed out existence in the struggle'. She became increasingly critical of the model dwellings and disgusted by the tenants ('one almost shudders to touch them') and departed. Not so Princess Alice (Victoria's second daughter), who left Buckingham Palace incognito to go with Octavia and the Barnetts into the grimmest slums, becoming an unwavering friend and supporter.

Octavia soon persuaded Henrietta of the necessity for green open spaces, and early on the Barnetts turned a rubbish tip near St Jude's into a garden ('the



one bright spot in this dark neighbourhood'). In the courts of crowded tenements, Henrietta often had to break up brawls herself and she learnt from Octavia that good housing alone was not enough: essential adjuncts were gardens, playgrounds, amateur dramatics, clubs, classes and so forth (thus seeds of several ideas germinated which, twenty years on, would grow into Hampstead Garden Suburb). Octavia was the first to propound such community ideas, now taken for granted.

About 1884 (when the Barnetts were starting Toynbee Hall, model for later settlements) a split began to develop - not in the underlying friendship of the two women, but in their philosophy. Octavia had always strictly distinguished between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor; increasingly the Barnetts perceived that reality was not so clear-cut. And there had been a singularly high-handed letter from Octavia to the Rev. Samuel Barnett a few years before, upbraiding him for insufficient religious commitment in his social work; after which it is not surprising that the two never saw eye-to-eye again. She supported the Toynbee Hall project, but supported even more actively the mission-style settlement of Oxford House that was soon established nearby in Bethnal Green. It says a lot for all concerned that affection survived these disagreements.

In 1888, writing to thank Henrietta for a present on her 50th birthday, Octavia said: 'We do indeed seem to see little of one another now . . . but the love, and knowledge of what old friends are at heart, goes so much deeper than these small outside separations.'

When she was making her Hampstead Garden Suburb plans, Henrietta sought Octavia's involvement, but by now she was a celebrated figure, her work known internationally, and she could not take on any more major commitments. In 1912 she died. Dissatisfied with the obituaries, Henrietta summed up the character of her mentor and friend in her own words:

**'the strong will was never pursued for self. She was impatient in little things, persistent with long-suffering in big ones; often dictatorial but humble before those she loved or admired. She had high standards for everyone, for herself ruthlessly exalted ones'**

The reputation of Octavia Hill, who was as important to housing reform and the conservation of open spaces (she was co-founder of the National Trust) as Florence Nightingale was to hospitals, was for decades sadly neglected. Now there is a good biography by Gillian Darley (to which I am indebted for much of the foregoing) an Octavia Hill Society (with talks, outings and so forth - £8 p.a. to 2 Nene Quay, Wisbech PE13 1AG), and next year an Octavia Hill Museum will open in her birthplace at historic Wisbech, two hours from the Suburb. A coachtrip to see this and nearby Peckover House (National Trust) will be organised next spring. To receive details later, please send a postcard to me at 30 Southway, NW11 6RU. I would be glad to hear from anyone who would join me in occasional research into Octavia's life and times for the Museum's archives, or who would like details of the lovely free-flowering and fragrant pink rose called Octavia Hill, developed by NT for this their centenary year.

Elizabeth Gundrey



During the Garden Suburb Gallery opening Linda Bailey looks on while Trust and RA Council member Colin Gregory and artist Clare Curtis discuss Denman Drive

Photo: Kay Morgan

## BURGLAR ALARMS are you legal?

It would seem that there are a number of people with burglar alarms on their houses who are under the impression that they do not have to comply with the regulations because they apply only to alarms that are newly fitted. But this is not so. The fine for non-compliance has now been increased to £5,000, and Barnet are being increasingly vigilant in enforcing the regulations and in bringing offenders to

court.

Anyone with a house burglar alarm - whether a new or an old one - must ensure that it is fitted with a 20-minute cut-out device and must notify the local police station of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of at least two local keyholders. In addition, anyone who is installing a new house burglar alarm or, as a new resident, is taking over an existing one must also notify the

London Borough of Barnet.

Excuses for not complying with these requirements, such as that the house is for sale and it will be up to the purchasers to update the system, are no longer accepted, and the owner of any alarm that rings for longer than 20 minutes is likely to be prosecuted, and is especially likely to be if neighbours complain of the noise.

Peter Loyd

## LOW RISK HOUSEHOLDS SHOULD NOT PAY HIGH RISK PREMIUMS

Are you a low risk household?

Do you belong to

Neighbourhood Watch?

Have you adequate security?

If so, you may substantially save on your Building and Contents Insurance and also enjoy the benefits of NO CLAIMS BONUS.

For further information and advice please write to:

**Brownhill, Morris and West  
(Insurance Services) Limited**  
16 Bromley Road, Beckenham, Kent BR3 2JE.  
Telephone: 0181-658 4334

**General  
Accident**

Underwritten by the  
**GENERAL ACCIDENT FIRE & LIFE  
ASSURANCE CORPORATION PLC**

## Calling all youngsters of 60+

Fellowship House Club held its AGM on 19 September. We reviewed the activities of the year, and all agreed that the club is in good heart, and that our sessions are very enjoyable. They include Keep Fit, Dancing, Scrabble, Music, Handicrafts, Bridge, and a special programme each Tuesday of talks, slide-shows, films, play-readings, etc.

This is a special invitation to all the newly retired to join Fellowship House Club, which is open to Suburb residents over 60 years young. For details apply to the Hon. Secretary, 145 Hampstead Way, NW11 7YA.

WE STOCK QUALITY  
**FABRICS**  
DISCONTINUED,  
CLEARANCE &  
END OF RUNS

EXAMPLES:			
SANDERSON	£6.99	CROWSON	£5.99
SCHUMACHER	£7.99	BLENDWORTH	£7.99
MONKWELL	£8.99	PRICES START at	£2.99 <small>plus VAT</small>

FULL MAKING-UP SERVICE AVAILABLE  
Also RE-UPHOLSTERY & FURNITURE  
REPAIR SERVICE AVAILABLE

OPEN DAILY : 9.30 - 5.30  
(LATE NIGHT THURSDAY til 8pm)  
SUNDAY: 10-3pm

**Fortune Fabrics**  
\* Adams & Sheridan

7 ASHBURNE PARADE, FINCHLEY ROAD,  
TEMPLE FORTUNE, LONDON NW11 0AD  
TEL: 0181 455 6970 MOBILE: 0831 879082