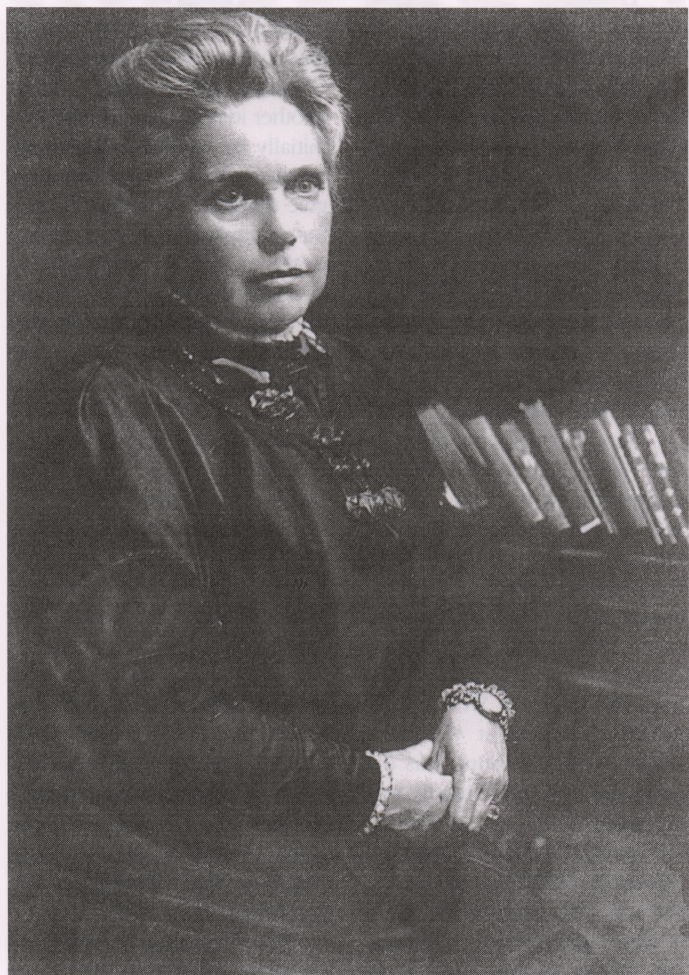


# Henrietta Barnett before the Suburb

by Micky Watkins

4th May 2001 will be the 150th anniversary of Dame Henrietta Barnett's birth



Henrietta Barnett

When Henrietta Barnett set about buying land for the Suburb in 1904 she was rebuffed by the agent acting for the Eton College Trustees, who doubted whether a woman would be accepted as a responsible purchaser. Quickly Henrietta found collaborators – two earls, two lawyers, two Free Churchmen and a bishop – and together they formed the first Trust. But here's a puzzle. How could Henrietta summon support from the great and the good of Edwardian society when she was 'only a woman'?

Did Henrietta's family background give her some advantage? Henrietta Octavia Rowland was the eighth child of a comfortable middle class family, but within days of her birth her mother died and the management of the household was undertaken by Aunt Sophey, her father's sister.

The Rowland children were mainly educated at home, particularly the daughters, as Auntie was not keen on education for girls. At first Henrietta was excluded from the schoolroom and made to play with her mentally disabled sister Fanny, for Henrietta was sickly

and perhaps not expected to live long. However she shone in mental arithmetic, which later she thought was useful for her economic housekeeping at Toynbee Hall and her grasp of Suburb finances.

When Henrietta was born the family were living in Lewisham, but as Mr Rowland's trade in macassar oil flourished, they moved to 'Champion Hall' in Lower Sydenham, a spacious residence in its own grounds. It was a big household, with Father, Auntie, Mrs Moore, eight children, the Nurse, a groom and several maids. They had horses and all the children learned to ride. Mr Rowland loved art, and every Sunday evening after tea, he called the children to the drawing-room, 'not to sing hymns, but to be shewn beautiful engravings. These our father explained to us and taught us how to look at a picture.'

Presumably the family attended church, but Nurse was the main religious influence, for she made the children read the Bible to her while she brushed their hair. Henrietta attributed her real spiritual awakening to the year she spent at boarding school in

Dover when she was 16 to 17. It was run by the Misses Haddon, three sisters. One was married to James Hinton, a charismatic man who was a doctor and spiritualist and keen on social reform. He tried to save prostitutes, frequenting music halls to reform the girls who solicited round the bars. Henrietta was now at a sensitive adolescent age, ready to fall in love with an ideal and a teacher, and she became particularly fond of Caroline, one of the sisters, who 'as my teacher and my friend had a dynamic effect on my then somnolent character'. Following James Hinton's teaching, the girls were given practical experience of social work: boys from the Dover workhouse were invited to tea at the school and the girls were encouraged to entertain them. Henrietta was shocked by these rough boys and later she said that this experience inspired her work for poor law children and the feeble minded.

Not long after this happy and formative time at school, disaster struck Henrietta's family. In 1869 Mr Rowland died and Henrietta, 18 years old, was bereft of father as well as mother. Besides her deep grief, the death of her father led to a drastic reduction in standard of living. He had been a prosperous tradesman and on his death left his share of the business to his eldest son and £45,000 to be divided between the other beneficiaries – the seven children and two spinster sisters. Thus they each expected £5,000, though it is uncertain whether they received so much after all outstanding debts were paid. It was impossible to continue with the big house at Sydenham, so Aunt Sophey, Henrietta, her older sister Alice, poor Fanny and Nurse all moved to the smaller 20 Westbourne Terrace, Bayswater. Today this seems an elegant white stucco, bow-fronted terrace house, but by comparison with Champion Hall it was a sad comedown.

She sought consolation in religion and had a period of intense belief attending St Mary's, Bryanston Square, where she met Octavia Hill who was to have a great influence on her development. Octavia was now 32 years old, an experienced and confident social worker and housing reformer. She was a founder of the Charity Organisation Society Committee at St Mary's. While most parishes distributed charity indiscriminately to those who asked for it, the COS kept case notes on applicants, visited them at home and sternly refused to help the able-bodied on the grounds that they should be encouraged to work.

Octavia soon co-opted Henrietta on to the COS Committee and set her to work with the families in a slum, Barret Court. It was at Octavia's birthday party that Henrietta was placed next to St Mary's curate, the Rev. Samuel Barnett. For him it was love at first sight, while Henrietta found him physically unattractive, but gradually warmed to him and they were married in 1873 and went to live at St Jude's vicarage in Whitechapel.

Octavia was pleased that the young couple were taking COS principles to this outpost in the East End and was generous in directing her friends and helpers to assist them at St Jude's. Henrietta wanted to demolish three tumbledown cottages which were occupied by prostitutes. Octavia introduced her lawyer, Edward Bond, who combined with Henrietta to buy the three houses, providing half the money while Henrietta sold her jewels to provide the other half. The cottages were bought, the prostitutes evicted and respectable tenants installed.

A small beginning, but then Octavia introduced A.G. Crowder, a wealthy philanthropist, to the Barnetts and he supplied the capital to build several large blocks of flats near St Jude's. These were mean tenement buildings, but they did have a lavatory and running water at the end of each corridor, low rents, and a lady rent collector to supervise the tenants.

Through Octavia Hill the Barnetts met many upper-class people who were interested in social reform. The three Potter girls came to Whitechapel to work as rent collectors: Katherine Potter was recommended by Octavia, and when she married, her work was continued by her sister Beatrice (Webb). Octavia's circle also included artists of whom Watts and Walter Crane became particularly helpful to the Barnetts. The Barnetts were a charismatic couple, with their fervent idealism and contrasting personalities: Samuel rather diffident, kind, a wise and understanding counsellor who could help young people to find the best in themselves; Henrietta so determined and with growing self-confidence in her powers of leadership. Marion Paterson, one of the young women drawn to Henrietta, became her lifelong helper and secretary. She willingly helped to cleanse slum girls of vermin to make them fit to take up jobs as maids as well as tackle Henrietta's voluminous correspondence. On the other hand, Beatrice Webb found Henrietta 'conceited' and she turned to Samuel who understood her spiritual yearnings.

A small group of like-minded people came to live near St Jude's in the 1870s, and many more came to help. Toynbee Hall was started in embryo and St Jude's Vicarage became the hub of educational, social and political work.

After Toynbee Hall was built in 1884, all the work could be expanded, and Henrietta appointed servants and acted as housekeeper. The Barnetts became well known in London Society. Samuel wrote to hundreds of people, asking them to speak at Toynbee Hall. They gave frugal dinner parties in the Warden's Lodge, and in turn were invited to dine with people far above them socially. Excellent accounts of Toynbee Hall have been written by J.A.R. Pimlott and Asa Briggs, but neither of them attributes much credit to Henrietta. Indeed Toynbee Hall was a very masculine place, managing a large household and arranging social occasions were women's duties and not appreciated. If Henrietta's work had all been so closely



East End slum conditions

connected with her husband, she certainly could not have called on distinguished people to help her build the Suburb.

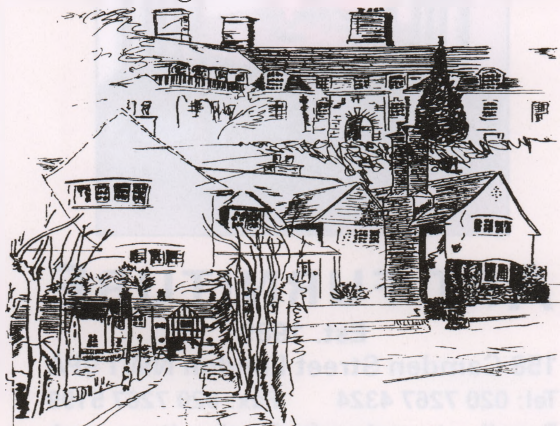
How did Henrietta establish her own reputation, looking at the work that she undertook independently from Samuel? Soon after the Barnetts moved into St Jude's, Henrietta started visiting the Whitechapel Workhouse, in particular the Lock ward where there were 'girl mothers' and prostitutes. She herself was 'in a condition of almost incredible innocence' and was deeply shocked. To learn the facts of sex lawlessness through the channel of the rude words and impure minds of the women in the underground Lock wards of the Whitechapel Infirmary made me ill, but I was absorbingly interested in the individual girls and never missed my weekly visit. Henrietta was soon trying to make new lives for these girls. Usually, after three weeks in the infirmary, those girls who were not infected with VD went home or to the workhouse with their babies, both bad options in Henrietta's opinion, for at home

they would be a bad example to their sisters. The best solution was to place the girls in service and put the babies with foster-mothers. Henrietta helped to found a branch of the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants in Whitechapel which undertook to prepare and place the girls out.

At this time there were thousands of women workhouse visitors in England, but their work was largely unrecorded. Henrietta, despite her lack of formal education, was a fluent writer, and discovered the advantage of using the Press. In fact it was her brother-in-law who first alerted her to this possibility. Her sister Alice had married Dr Ernest Hart, a brilliant man who, though debarred from going to Cambridge because he was a Jew, became Dean of St Mary's Medical School at the age of 28, and then Editor of the British Medical Journal for many years. It was he who chided the Barnetts for not using the Press. Henrietta was quick to follow his advice and in 1879 her first article, 'The Young Women in

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