



Henrietta Barnett: Co-founder of Toynbee Hall,
teacher, philanthropist and social reformer.

by Tijen Zahide Horoz

TOYNBEE
HALL



For a future without poverty

“

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In 1884 Henrietta Barnett and her husband Samuel founded the first university settlement, Toynbee Hall, where Oxbridge students could become actively involved in helping to improve life in the desperately poor East End neighbourhood of Whitechapel. Despite her active involvement in Toynbee Hall and other projects, Henrietta has often been overlooked in favour of a focus on her husband's struggle for social reform in East London. But who was the woman behind the man?

Henrietta's work left an indelible mark on the social history of London. She was a woman who – despite the obstacles of her time – accomplished so much for poor communities all over London. Driven by her determination to confront social injustice, she was a social reformer, a philanthropist, a teacher and a devoted wife. A shrewd feminist and political activist, Henrietta was not one to shy away from the challenges posed by a Victorian patriarchal society. As one Toynbee Hall settler recalled, Henrietta's “irrepressible will was suggestive of the stronger sex”, and “there was always something maverick, dominating, Roman about her, which is rarely found in women, though she was capable of deep feeling.”¹

(Cover photo): Henrietta in her forties.

1. Creedon, A. *'Only a Woman', Henrietta Barnett: Social Reformer and Founder of Hampstead Garden Suburb*, (Chichester: Phillimore & Co. LTD, 2006)

The Early Years

Dame Henrietta Octavia Weston Barnett was born on 4th May 1851 to a wealthy family in Clapham. Despite being financially comfortable as a child, Henrietta had her fair share of barriers to overcome. Her mother, who had born eight children in the space of ten years, died sixteen days after giving birth to her and the young Henrietta was prone to bouts of illness. She was also born into a society where women, even wealthy ones, were viewed in many ways as second class citizens, with little opportunities in education and the workplace.

As a young child Henrietta was excluded from lessons with the children's governess, perhaps due to her ill health, or because her "Aunt Sophie... did not agree with girls being educated."² It was only through her own determination that Henrietta was even allowed to sit in on the lessons. Later on in life, Henrietta became a staunch advocate of educating girls in order to give them the chance of a better future. One of the biggest examples of this is Henrietta Barnnet School which she founded in Hampstead Garden Suburb, North London, which is still running today.

2. Watkins, M. *Henrietta Barnett: Social Worker and Community Planner*, (London: Micky Watkins and the Hampstead Garden Suburb Archive Trust)



(Above): Henrietta as a young teenager.



A fourth sister had married Mr James Hinton, the aurist and philosopher, whose thought greatly influenced Miss Caroline Haddon, who, as my teacher and my friend, had a dynamic effect on my then somnolent character.”

In 1867 Henrietta attended a boarding school in Dover for three terms. The school was run by the Haddon sisters, whose brother-in-law was the social and moral philosopher, James Hinton. The principles of social altruism taught by such figures and the school's involvement in social work, including organised visits to the local workhouse, obviously influenced the thinking of young Henrietta. In her own words: "A fourth sister had married Mr James Hinton, the aurist and philosopher, whose thought greatly influenced Miss Caroline Haddon, who, as my teacher and my friend, had a dynamic effect on my then somnolent character."³ After meeting the housing and social reformer Octavia Hill in 1870, Henrietta became actively involved in the social housing and welfare projects that Octavia had set up. By the age of nineteen, Henrietta was already a member of Octavia's local *Charity Organisation Society Committee* and had even been allotted her own district, Barnett Court, to work in. Octavia also introduced her friend to the works of her own patron and mentor, John Ruskin, one of the leading philanthropists and social critics of the time.

3. Dame Henrietta Barnett, *Matters that Matter*, (London: John Murray, 1930)

The Beginnings in East London

Henrietta met Samuel Barnett for the first time when they sat together at a birthday party hosted by Octavia Hill. Although Samuel and Henrietta went on to form “one of several partnerships of husband and wife which has contributed so notably to English public life”, it was not love at first sight. As both reflected on their first meeting, Samuel was wondering, “what this ‘child’ with brown curls down her back, handsome furs and a Tyrolese hat... could be doing among this set of pioneer philanthropists” and Henrietta, knowing that he was a clergyman, was, “thinking half-contemptuously of him as a member of that fraternity.”⁴ Three years later, at the age of twenty-one, Henrietta married Samuel on 28th January 1873.⁵

The Barnetts moved to the parish of St Jude's in Whitechapel in the same year. The area made a strong impression on Henrietta: “The whole parish was covered with a network of courts and alleys... In some, the houses were three storeys high and hardly six feet apart, the sanitary accommodation being pits in the cellars... in many instances broken windows had been repaired with paper and rags, the banisters had been used for firewood, and the paper hung from the walls which were the residence of countless vermin.”⁶

But rather than letting it overwhelm her, Henrietta faced the challenge of helping her community head-on. Whilst she worked tirelessly with her husband to improve life for all members of the community, Henrietta was especially committed to assisting and educating the two most vulnerable and disadvantaged sectors of society at the time: women and children.



(Above): Two children living in the slums of East London, likely to have been taken by Henrietta.



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4. Barnett H. *Canon Barnett: His Life and Friends, By his Wife*, (London: John Murray, 1918)

5. *Ibid*

6. Watkins, M. *Henrietta Barnett in Whitechapel: Her First Fifty Years*, (London: Micky Watkins, 2005)

Helping Vulnerable Women

In 1874 Henrietta set up *Mother's Meetings*, where women could discuss matters of public morals and family ethics, seek advice and forge important friendships. She said of them, "The advantage of Mother's Meetings, I believe, consists not so much in the actual teaching which is given, nor in the habit of saving which is encouraged, as in the sense of fellowship which is fostered. Women especially need some whole, bigger than the family, of which they can think, and whose needs they serve."⁷ It was this kind of forward thinking and understanding of the importance of women's contribution to society that also inspired projects such as the *Intercentral Reading Club*, where young female teachers could discuss and debate works of literature.

For the most vulnerable young women of Whitechapel, Henrietta began a scheme for assisting them into respectable service jobs. Many young girls and single mothers, especially those without the support of a strong family unit, were open to exploitation. Police records from the period show that there were 8,600 prostitutes in London and of these 1,803 were based within Spitalfields, Houndsditch, Whitechapel and Ratcliff.

Henrietta became a *Poor Law Guardian* in 1875⁸ and paid regular visits to the workhouses – where the most destitute members of society were given meagre lodgings in exchange for hard labour – and to individual households in the area, persuading girls to train for service jobs. In the first year alone 192 girls were placed into service positions and out of this grew the Whitechapel branch of the *Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants*. This involved volunteers making friends with the girls and providing them with an important network of support: "To this end there were schoolroom meetings, days in the country, Exhibition parties, gatherings which included the girl's mothers, and annually a united service in the Church."⁹



(Above): The Barnett's purchased St Jude's Cottage in 1889. As well as serving as a holiday home for the couple, it was used as a location for training workhouse girls to become domestic servants and as accommodation for convalescents from the London Hospital.

As the years went on, young servants who had benefitted from the scheme carried on working together to support and guide younger girls out of the danger of the Whitechapel streets and into secure employment. From these humble beginnings we can trace the history of Toynbee Hall's current mentoring schemes. Just as young servants were encouraged to inspire those after them towards self-improvement, projects like *Inspire* and *Make It!* allow young adults to mentor and support other teenage volunteers who want to learn new skills and help the community. Also, former projects like *Safe Exit*, aimed "to develop better support services for those in prostitution through pioneering strategies to reduce harm to those involved; supporting them to change their lifestyles and to prevent vulnerable people entering prostitution."¹⁰

7. Barnett, H. *Canon Barnett: His Life and Friends, By his Wife*, (London: John Murray, 1918)

8. The Oxford Index, Accessed online 19/03/14, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=30610&back>>

9. Barnett, H. *Canon Barnett: His Life and Friends, By his Wife, Henrietta Barnett*, (London: John Murray, 1918)

10. The Big Give Donation Page, Accessed online 19/03/14 <<https://secure.thebiggive.org.uk/projects/view/2566/safe-exit>>

A Better Future for Disadvantaged Children

As well as providing assistance to the women of the East End, Henrietta was actively involved in improving conditions for disadvantaged children. After moving to St Jude's, one of the first actions the Barnetts made was to re-open the derelict school behind the vicarage. This interest in educating the local children was keenly pursued by Henrietta for the rest of her life and is exemplified in her creation of *The Children's Holiday Fund*, a scheme that was set up in 1877 to take impoverished city children for days out in the country. To this day, Toynbee Hall still provides local children with the opportunity to get out of the city. Projects like Be Active! have been taking inner city children on adventure days to the countryside for the past twenty years.

In 1896 Henrietta was appointed as Manager of the District Schools. These were boarding schools in Forest Gate that housed the most disadvantaged children in society, many of them coming from the workhouses. Henrietta was very critical of the schools, complaining that the children were worked too hard when not in lessons and that, "they had no toys, no library, no Sunday school, no places in which to keep possessions... no night garments... no pets, no pictures on the walls, no pleasures in music [and] no opportunities for seeing the world outside the school walls."¹¹ She worked hard to improve their environment: setting up a lending library, introducing games and toys and getting her West End friends to provide entertainment for the children. She also prevailed on the Matron to address pupils by their individual names, rather than referring to them as "child".¹²

11. Watkins, M. *Henrietta Barnett in Whitechapel: Her First Fifty Years*, (London: Micky Watkins, 2005)

12. *Ibid*

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(Above): 'Pauper' children in a Barrack School. As the photos show, the children had no individual clothing or haircuts.

(Right): Henrietta's caption for this photo was, 'A court in Whitechapel and some of its children inhabitants'.



The Hampstead Garden Suburb and the Henrietta Barnett School

During her time at Toynbee Hall, Henrietta was particularly keen on mixing social classes at the various clubs and classes that were held. This is shown through the open invitations to parish workers, academics and local residents to attend the programmes at Toynbee Hall. In 1907 Henrietta founded the *Hampstead Garden Suburb*, with the intention of providing a healthy, clean area for different sections of society to live in together. Using the experience and knowledge acquired at Toynbee Hall – and in the parish of St Jude's – Henrietta made plans for a town that would provide a haven away from the dirtiness, poverty and overcrowding found in Whitechapel. Henrietta built on the work she had established in East London, fighting for women's and children's rights to education and respectable careers. She truly believed in making education accessible for girls of all social backgrounds and so, after fighting hard to persuade the authorities of the necessity for building a girls' school, her voluntary-aided State Grammar School, Henrietta Barnett School, was founded in 1911 and continues to flourish today. As with all of her projects, Henrietta remained personally involved with the school and an article from the school magazine in 1948 recalls how, "She came over to the school fairly often to tell us of her travels or anything else she thought might interest us."¹³

¹³. The Henrietta Barnett School, 2011, Accessed online 30/08/2013, <http://www.hbschool.org.uk/stylesheet.asp?file=121_history_of_the_school>

The Political Activist

Henrietta did not stop at influencing individual projects and institutions. Using her contacts, she sought to make a more systematic change to the condition of London's poor. Along with her brother-in-law, Dr Ernest Hart, she gathered support in lobbying the local Government Board Offices. As a result, in 1894 a *Departmental Committee on Poor Law Schools* was set up and Henrietta was appointed as a member. From this came the *State Children's Association (SCA)* which aimed to "obtain individual treatment for children under the Guardianship of the State."¹⁴ The SCA secured the passing of the Vagrant Act in 1903, giving homeless and orphaned children better protection. They also influenced the Probation of Offenders Act in 1907 and the Children's Act in 1908, amongst other legislation.

This direct impact on legislation shows how Henrietta – along with other social reformers of the time, many of whom worked in or around Toynbee Hall – directly changed the way in which the United Kingdom began to deal with disadvantaged members of society. The ideals that they strove for, as a group, were the beginnings of the Welfare State that is such an intrinsic part of the country today.



(Above): Henrietta and Canon Samuel Barnett pose for a group photo.

¹⁴. Watkins, M. *Henrietta Barnett in Whitechapel: Her First Fifty Years*, (London: Micky Watkins, 2005)



(Above): Henrietta and her husband, Canon Samuel Barnett, with a guest at St Jude's Cottage.

“

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A Social Pioneer in her own right

When Samuel was asked how the Barnetts kept their workers and volunteers together he answered, “Hospitality... St Jude's and Toynbee Hall and the Exhibition are all built on my wife's tea-table.”¹⁵ Whilst it is true that Henrietta's impeccable housekeeping, strong personality and unyielding determination would have all contributed to the success of Toynbee Hall, she was much more than just a supportive wife. She played an active role in many of the projects linked to Toynbee Hall, including personally hunting for and selecting pictures for the *Barnett's Community Art Exhibitions*, which grew into the Whitechapel Gallery, to arranging holidays for children or organising classical concerts given by the music society for the benefit of those living and working in East London.

Dame Henrietta Barnett was a philanthropist and social reformer in her own right, independent of her husband. In her article, ‘What has the Charity Organisation Society to do with Social Reform’, Henrietta states that: “It should be a matter of a man's free will alone that determines which life he lives. Social conditions over which... he has no power, now too often determine for him, for there are forces in and around society which crush down the individual man.”¹⁶ Her words, written in 1888, are still resonant today; economic uncertainty is impacting many families, unemployment is high and the welfare system is under constant debate. It is more important than ever to remember figures like Henrietta and the legacy she left.

(Photos on pages 5, 7, 9, 11 and 12 have been provided courtesy of Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust).

¹⁵ Watkins, M. *Henrietta Barnett in Whitechapel: Her First Fifty Years*, (London: Micky Watkins, 2005)

¹⁶ Barnett, H. ‘What has the Charity Organisation Society to do with Social Reform’, in *Practicable Socialism*, Canon S.A Barnett and Mrs Barnett, (London: Longman's, Green and Co, 1888)

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