

From Slums to Homes: Samuel Barnett and The East End Dwellings Company

By Artemis Photiadou, 2014

TOYNBEE HALL
For a future without poverty

Some of London's most recognisable landmarks are found in the East End. Exit Aldgate station, walk towards Leadenhall Street and you will be surrounded by buildings that reach for the sky, albeit standing on narrow medieval streets. Wander around the busy pavements and you will find yourself walking down the same streets that Samuel Barnett did in 1873, when he arrived to assume his duties as the vicar of St Jude's, and eventual co-founder of Toynbee Hall. The streets, however, belonged to a different era, one caught in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution and about to enter the Long Depression that was to last until 1896. It is perhaps symbolic of the times that the term 'unemployment' was coined during this period.[1]

In a Victorian England that had already categorised society into classes, the East End's 'blight' was that only the poorest lived in it.[2] Casual labourers, as well as Jewish and Irish immigrants, predominated the area and to them, Barnett's strolls would often cause great anxiety, as with his tall hat, white shirt and silk tie, he would often be mistaken for a rent collector rather than a vicar. Books such as Dickens' *Oliver Twist* had also created a criminal image for the East End, giving it a reputation of being a dangerous and impoverished area, whilst synonymising poverty with immorality.

The precise living conditions of the East End are difficult for us to comprehend today, not least because we know that yards away from Toynbee Hall, encased in those spectacular buildings, professionals make some of the world's most important financial decisions. In Barnett's time, even basic resources such as water were limited, and it was not uncommon for women to drop their buckets of filthy water into the same water they had for drinking.[3] Families would live in a single room, whilst a whole neighbourhood would share a single lavatory with sewers running down the middle of the streets. This community, however, were paying more per cubic foot in the slums than the rich did in South Kensington, despite living in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, due to unscrupulous landlords setting unregulated rents.[4]

1 http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/unemployment
2 Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform 1880-1914*, (1987), p.4.
3 ibid., p.18.
4 Magdalen Stuart Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week*, (1914), p.23.

It is this unfair world that Samuel and Henrietta Barnett strived to change. Working alongside them were figures such as Octavia Hill, Helen Bosanquet, Charles Booth and Beatrice Webb, all of which have left a significant legacy in Britain's social history. The organisation that brought these illustrious benefactors together was the Charity Organisation Society (COS). Sharing the common belief poverty would be eliminated through shaping the family life of the poor. The COS envisaged change could occur through building modern dwellings that would be made available to the poor, and managed by selected rent collectors who would befriend and guide tenants.

Influenced by the COS, Barnett was determined to bring attention to the living conditions the people in the East End were forced to live in. Once he settled into his role, he invited Princess Alice and the Home Secretary, Sir Richard Cross, to see for themselves the slums of East London. During Cross' visit, Barnett seized the opportunity and presented him with the COS' report on 'the Improvement of the Dwellings of the Poor'. In response, the Artisans' Dwellings Bill was presented to Parliament, in what was to become the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act of 1875.



Picture 1. Residents in Little Collingwood Street: c.1900. Taken by John Galt © Ian Galt/ Museum of London. This photograph was taken by John Galt, a missionary with the London City Mission and shows the cramped housing conditions of the labouring classes in the East End. These homes in Little Collingwood Street, Bethnal Green, stood only 2.74 metres apart.



Picture 2. Christmas! In the East; In the West: 1868. © Museum of London. Echoes from the Clubs. This engraving depicts the contrasting experience of Christmas for Londoners living in wealth and poverty. A wealthy family celebrates christmas in west London with a lavish feast whilst a destitute poor family in an east London slum barely survive the festive season.

The purpose of the Act was to enable local authorities to condemn houses unfit for habitation, buy them and sell them to companies wanting to build houses for the poor. Initially, the Act looked like a success; once and for all, the slums would be cleared. In reality, the Act officially recognised the slums' unfitness, yet families carried on living in them. The reason was that authorities were not forced to buy the condemned properties and landlords were then unwilling to spend money on repairs in case they were required to sell them under the Act.

The Barnetts did not give up. Making use of their private connections, they appealed to Augustus George Crowder, a great friend to Barnett and future director of the East End Dwellings Company, to purchase a piece of unused land in Whitechapel. The land was turned into Balliol House, housing fifty families towards the end of the 1870s. Similar housing projects around London had already captured the attention of Charles Dickens a decade before, and it is he who would encourage Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts to build similar ones in Shoreditch, proliferating the idea that social reform and housing conditions were linked.[5]

5 Alan Palmer, *The East End: Four Centuries of London Life*, (2000), p.79.

Perhaps the most famous dwellings of the time were the Peabody Trust, housing 20000 people by 1900.[6] Peabody nevertheless had strict rules on whom to admit and interested tenants had to provide references from regular employers – an impossible task for casual or unskilled labourers. In contrast, Balliol House, following Barnett's direction, would admit anyone so long as they did not "earn their living by vice".[7]

Determined to see similar dwellings erected across the East End, Barnett chaired a meeting in 1882 in his vicarage drawing room, and founded the East End Dwellings Company. The meeting included Mr Alfred Hoare, Mr Edward Bond , Mr Crowder, and Mr and Mrs Murray Smith. The meeting raised £36,000 for what was to become the first company to successfully provide homes in the East End, followed by the Four Percent Industrial Dwellings Company, set up a year later by Baron Rothschild.[8]



Picture taken from Terry McCarthy, ***The Great Dock Strike 1889,*** the Archives of the National Museum of Labour History

The East End Dwellings Company's first project were the Katharine Buildings, erected in 1885 in Cartwright Street, a short walk from the Tower of London. The buildings included 281 rooms, the condition of which was noted as "exceptionally healthy", and many of the 680 occupants remarked on the improvement of their children's health.[9] Notable is also the fact that the health of occupants was the first point of discussion at the Company's annual meeting, reinforcing the belief that the Company's success was due to a genuine care for the residents' wellbeing rather than for financial gain.

6 ibid., p.76.
7 Henrietta Barnett, Canon Barnett: His Life, Work and Friends, (1919), p.132
8 ibid., p. 83.
9 Minutes of the East End Dwellings Co, 1985, B/CAP/A/1/1, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.



Picture taken from Terry McCarthy, ***The Great Dock Strike 1889,*** the Archives of the National Museum of Labour History

As well as having a healthy environment to live in, residents were offered the chance to participate in clubs, use a library and open a savings bank account. Instrumental in such activities were Ella Pycroft and Beatrice Webb, acting as managers and rent collectors. Their duties, however, went beyond mere administrating tasks: their overall aim was to introduce tenants into responsible housekeeping. Enforcing regular payments of rent was one way of introducing responsibility and regularity, whilst befriending tenants enabled the women to provide advice on their family lives. In today's world, such an interaction might seem too interventionist or even patronising, and many times advice was indeed unwelcomed. However, judging such interventions based on today's standards would be a failure to appreciate how much times have changed.

To make sure that all their properties remained free from scarlet fever and other illnesses, the Company's stakeholders would also pay for a nurse to be on site. Following the Jack the Ripper murders, a night watchman was also hired to guide the Company's Lolesworth Buildings, ensuring that all 300 families living in the building remained safe.[10]

10 Minutes of the East End Dwellings Co, January 1889, B/CAP/A/1/1, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

With the Company's work gaining ground, approximately 6,000 Londoners had been living in its seven buildings by 1899.[11] Eight more buildings would be erected by 1906, bringing the total number to fifteen. In the meantime, Parliament passed the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890, forcing local authorities to redevelop unfit houses and made it illegal for landlords to continue renting properties deemed unhygienic, essentially ratifying what Barnett had been calling for since 1873.



Picture taken from Terry McCarthy, ***The Great Dock Strike 1889,*** the Archives of the National Museum of Labour History

With housing reforms gaining momentum, a further initiative was taken at Toynbee Hall in 1898, which resulted in the establishment of the East London Tenants' and General Legal Protection Committee. Solicitors and barristers would volunteer their time weekly at Toynbee Hall to provide free legal advice to locals whose salary was below a certain amount. The cases they would advise on ranged from employment to housing disputes and from negligence to domestic issues. Such a service was not unlike the Free Legal Advice Centre still operating at Toynbee Hall today. Such services were invaluable to those who could not otherwise afford to get legal advice, a service which is just as important for Londoners in the 21st Century.

11 Minutes of the East End Dwellings Co, 1899, B/CAP/A/1/1, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.



The crucial decades leading to 1900 saw many changes in the East End. The East End Dwellings Company, along with many of the Victorian reformers who endeavoured to find long-term solutions to poverty, significantly improved the lives of Londoners during this time. The Company never claimed to offer a panacea to poverty. What it did was to offer housing alternatives for the East End when there was none, enabling tenants to lead decent lives as independent citizens in the process. Neither was Samuel Barnett looking for a perfect solution. Instead, he was looking for ways to empower the poor in order to make them equal and self-reliant citizens, living in healthy houses and aware of their legal rights - nothing less that what any citizen should be entitled to.

With the experience of managing the Katharine Buildings, Beatrice Webb would continue her work on poverty through co-founding the London School of Economics and being an early member of the Fabian Society. Charles Booth would be encouraged by the Barnetts to conduct groundbreaking research on the social problems of poverty, in what was to become *the Life and Labour of the People in London*, a survey published in seventeen volumes between 1889 and 1903. As for Barnett, two years after he helped found the Company, his next step was to establish Toynbee Hall in 1884. The same way he invited Princess Alice and Sir Richard Cross to the slums in the mid-1870s, his vision was to have a permanent University Settlement in the area, inviting students from Oxford and Cambridge to live amongst the working classes. It was his belief that such an integrated experience would stop volunteers from forgetting the East End and its people, once they were in a position of power.

Over a century on since Barnett's death, the East End is a very different place to the one he arrived in. Yet, his vision for an East End free from poverty remains just as needed today, with many local residents still living on low incomes. Although the model dwellings' original transformative social purpose has faded away as many of the buildings have been demolished, Barnett's vision for decent, accessible housing for everyone is still a topic of great debate today; with welfare reforms and increases in rent putting limits on the quality of housing tenants can afford.

Barnett's dedication to instigate change, however, still lives on through all the Toynbee Hall staff, volunteers and interns who work hard to ensure that locals have access to free financial, legal and wellbeing advice. His determination to bring attention to the East End is carried on by all the people who work for Toynbee Hall; campaigning for a future without poverty and making sure that the East End is not without a voice. Many things have changed in the East End, yet Toynbee Hall still stands as a reminder of how the East End has come a long way from its humble beginnings, but that there is still much more to be done.

Help us create a future without poverty

Toynbee Hall
28 Commercial Street
London E1 6LS
Tel: +44 (0)20 7247 6943
Email: info@toynbeehall.org.uk

www.toynbeehall.org.uk

Find us on Facebook
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