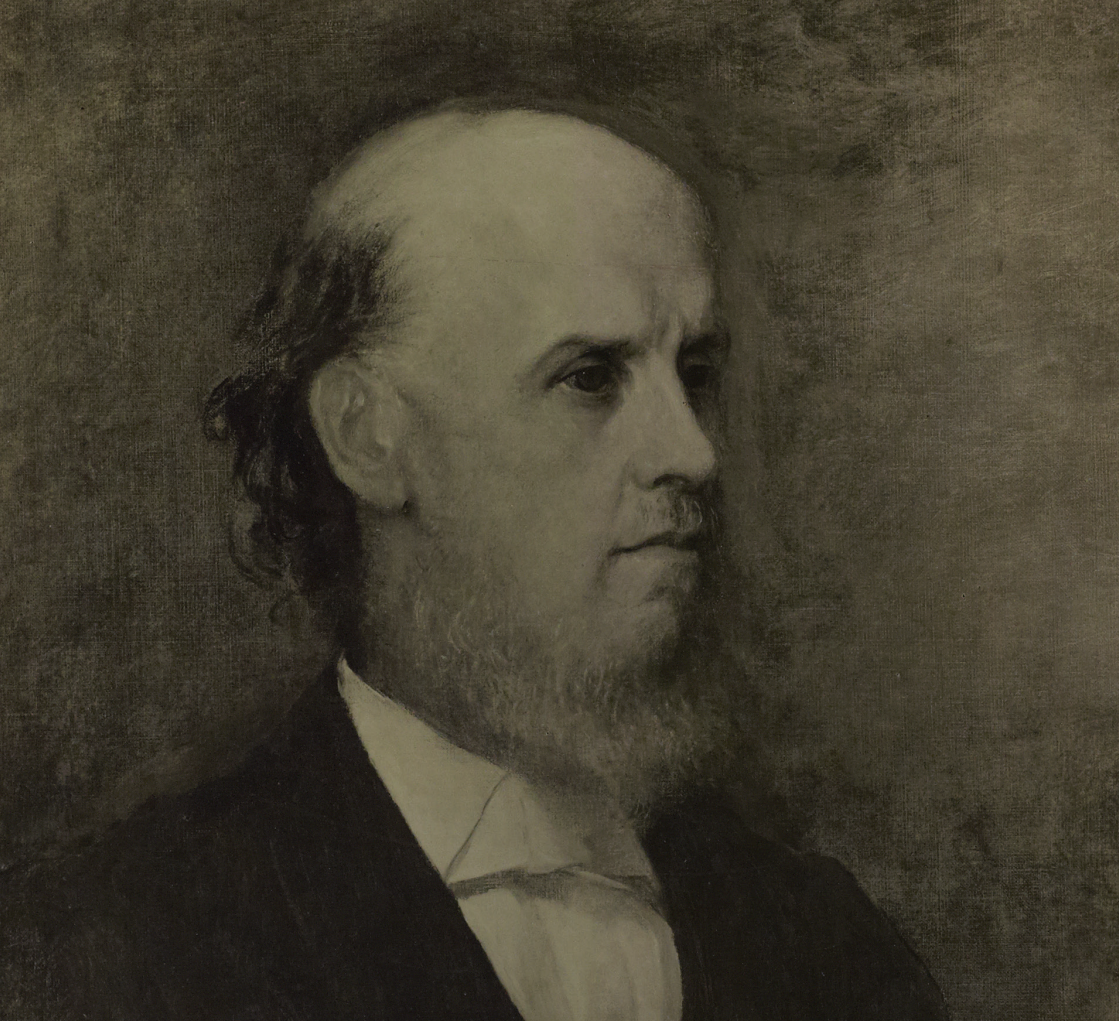

Icons of Toynbee Hall

Samuel Barnett

By Jo Till

TOYNBEE HALL

For a future without poverty

On Christmas Eve 1884, the doors of Toynbee Hall opened for the first time. Established as a settlement and one of the first of its kind in the world, it was the brainchild of Samuel Barnett, who was also its first warden. June 2013 marks the centenary of Barnett's death and, though his name may not be familiar to many today, it was his original vision which led to the founding of Toynbee Hall.

Barnett himself was described as a shy and modest man, who looked older than his years. His future wife, Henrietta Barnett, admitted that she was surprised when he proposed to her, as, although he was only 27 at the time, she had previously viewed him as "a kindly, elderly gentleman", with "a bald head and shaggy beard", who she said "dressed very badly" and always wore "a tall silk hat which… never fitted, tilted over his forehead or rammed on at the back of his head".

He was an unlikely pioneer, but by the time of his death in 1913, he had become a respected public figure, whose ideas and influence extended well beyond the doors of Toynbee Hall. He was also involved in many other ground-breaking charitable projects. He helped to establish the East End Dwellings Company, which built the first 'social housing' for workers, Dunstan Buildings; one of their first blocks still stands in Stepney Green today. He was also a founder member of Tower Hamlets Pensions Committee, which, in 1877, started an innovative pension scheme for local residents. Barnett's work and lobbying in this area was instrumental in the eventual passing of the first national Pensions Act in 1908.

The future French Prime Minister, George Clemenceau, described Barnett as "one of the greatest men [he] met in England" and, in 1913, in recognition of his tireless charitable work, as well as his experience as a cleric, Barnett was appointed sub-dean of Westminster Abbey.

(Front Cover) Samuel Barnett: original portrait by G.F. Watts,1887. Copy image taken from the Hampstead Garden Suburb Collection held at London Metropolitan Archives

He is commemorated by a memorial in the Abbey, but he always maintained his connection with Toynbee Hall and continued his work there until the end of his life. Settlements based on his model have been established all across the world, in places as diverse as Tokyo and Edinburgh.

At Toynbee Hall, Barnett hoped to establish a University Settlement in East London, where a small community of 'settlers' could live and work amongst the local people. The settlers were resident volunteers who lived at Toynbee Hall, the vast majority of them Oxford students or graduates, and many of them drawn from Balliol College where Barnett had developed close connections. In its simplest sense, Barnett saw the settlement as "a means by which men or women may share themselves with their neighbours" and historians have suggested that, in describing Toynbee Hall as a 'settlement', Barnett was trying to emphasise its local roots and the commitment of its residents to serving the local community. This sense of local connection is still central to Toynbee Hall's work today. The majority of its clients are still residents of Tower Hamlets and the charity is always looking for ways to strengthen its connections with the local community in East London.

(Above) Samuel Barnet t with residents in front of the Lecture Hall entrance c.19 03 - 05, Toynbee Hall

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

Barnett believed in education as a way of empowering people and thought that everyone should have access to art, music, literature and learning, not just a wealthy or University-educated elite. As he put it, "what is good enough for the University is good enough for East London".

This was a brave statement to make, as, at that time, the East End, wedged between the industrial bustle of the docks and the financial hub of the City, was one of the poorest and most notorious areas of London. To outsiders it was a place of fear, filled with slum housing and perceived as the haunt of prostitutes, beggars and criminals: the "Achilles heel" of a prosperous empire. Barnett himself, writing in 1898, described it as a place where no one lived of their own free will, and where residents were either striving to move out, or unable to do so.

Barnett and his wife Henrietta had first arrived in the East End in 1873, when Samuel became vicar of St Jude's Church in Whitechapel. Census records showed that, at that time, most families in the parish lived nine or ten to a property. The Bishop of London described it as "the worst parish in [his] diocese" and warned Barnett that it was "inhabited by a mainly criminal population".

Undeterred, Barnett, who was Oxford educated and had turneddown a comfortable living in a small Oxford parish to come to St Jude's, spent the next ten years living and working with local residents. Eventually though, faced with a dwindling congregation and disillusioned with the methods of the established church and what he saw as its inability to connect with, or offer effective help to, his impoverished parishioners, his thoughts turned to a new kind of social enterprise - a settlement which would allow a small group of educated resident volunteers, with a range of skills, interests and religious beliefs, to live and work amongst the poor of the East End, sharing their skills and experience with the local community, and learning from it too.

Some of Toynbee Hall's original aims were to "provide education and the means of recreation and enjoyment for the people of the poorer districts of London… to enquire into the condition of the poor and to consider and advance plans calculated to promote their welfare".

(Above) Samuel Barnet t and early volunteers outside Toynbee Hall: Image taken from the Hampstead Garden Suburb Collection held at London Metropolitan Archives.

(Left) Samuel Barnett: Image taken from the Hampstead Garden Suburb Collection held at London Metropolitan Archives.

Early residents, under Barnett's direction, were involved in a dizzying range of activities. Some helped conduct research for Charles Booth's ground-breaking social survey, "The Life and Labour of the People in London", assisting with the creation of his iconic poverty map. Some helped establish services such as the "Poor Man's Lawyer", the forerunner to today's legal advice clinics, and others held classes and meetings on subjects ranging from Esperanto to Ambulance Drills! Today, the nature of some of Toynbee's activities has changed, but Barnett's description of its aims still rings true. Sadly, many of the social problems which the charity is working to tackle today - overcrowded housing, lack of access to legal advice and the barriers which face those who are drawn into prostitution, to name just a few - would have been familiar to Barnett and Toynbee's early residents.

Barnett also emphasised the importance of developing personal relationships between rich and poor in order to break down the class divisions and mutual suspicion created by the Poor Law.

Although he did not believe in giving 'outdoor relief' to parishioners outside the workhouse, he was critical of the impersonal way in which the Poor Law operated, categorising people as rich or poor, deserving or undeserving, rather than viewing them as individuals.

His message still seems relevant today, at a time of economic hardship, when resources are stretched and controversial welfare changes are being fiercely debated.

Barnett's settlement model caught on quickly. By the end of the 1890s, there were at least 12 other settlements in London based on Toynbee's model, some of which are also still in operation today, such as Cambridge House in Elephant and Castle. The first settlement in the US, Hull House in Chicago, was opened in 1889, after its founder, Jane Addams, was inspired by a visit to Toynbee Hall. When Barnett died in 1913, there were 413 settlements spread across America.

Yet despite the numerous imitators inspired by Barnett, in many ways, his ideas and Toynbee Hall itself were uniquely progressive and radical.

Despite his clerical training, Barnett was adamant that Toynbee Hall should not be affiliated to a particular religious group or political cause. This was unusual at the time, as most other settlements aligned themselves with a particular religious group, whether Catholic, Methodist or High Church.

(Above) Halls Building, Early 1900s

They also required their volunteers to be believers and to help spread their religious message among the local population. But Barnett was convinced that having a religious or political agenda would alienate the local people and make them suspicious of the settlers. At the end of the nineteenth century, Whitechapel was a predominantly Jewish area. Many residents were recent immigrants, who had fled anti-Jewish pogroms in Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish rather than English as their first language. In what was then a very anti-Semitic society, Barnett was ahead of his time in calling for social and religious tolerance. In 1899, he wrote the introduction to a new book called "The Jew in London", which described the Jewish Community in London and assessed its social and economic impact on the capital. Barnett said he hoped that its publication "would do away with the prejudices which are founded either on the selfishness which is jealousy of the Jew's success, or on the ignorance which is irritated at their different habits and opinions".

His comments resonate today, as the multi-cultural population of Whitechapel and Spitalfields is still a focus for extremist and nationalist demonstrations. Principles of diversity and equality remain at the heart of Toynbee Hall's operations, reflecting the community it serves.

But Barnett's ideas did not always make him popular, even with those he was trying to help. Because of its lack of religious connections, Toynbee Hall was denounced as a "den of dissenters" by members of other Christian settlements. Barnett was opposed to indiscriminate charitable giving, which, in his view, was unhelpful in encouraging people to rely on hand-outs and discouraged them from developing the skills they needed to support themselves and their families. But when he stopped the practice of giving alms during his time at St Jude's the parishioners were furious. Barnett had to install a hidden door in the vicarage, which allowed him to escape into the church and call the police, as disgruntled parishioners often turned up at the vicarage, angrily demanding alms and sometimes breaking windows.

Barnett's emphasis on bringing beauty and culture to the people of the East End meant that Toynbee Hall was far less austere than some other settlements, and it was decorated with pictures and statues. Because of this, many in 'polite society' were cynical about his aims and sometimes mocked the Oxford men of Toynbee Hall, whom they thought had built a comfortable enclave for themselves in the midst of the poverty-stricken slums. For local people unused to such surroundings, the Hall may have seemed an alien environment, but despite such potential deterrents, by the early 1890s, more than 1,000 students had signed up for classes.

If you look closely, there are many reminders of Barnett's work scattered across London and Oxford, the two cities that were probably closest to his heart. Canon Barnett School, the primary school which stands next door to Toynbee Hall, is named after him; Toynbee Hall still retains connections with Balliol College and the popular Whitechapel Gallery was established by the Barnetts and other supporters following the success of annual art exhibitions held at Toynbee Hall. When you get off the tube at Aldgate East, signs on the platform now point to the Whitechapel Gallery in one direction and to Toynbee Hall in the other.

But Barnett's legacy lives on today, most directly, in the continuing work done by Toynbee Hall and its staff and volunteers.

When Barnett died, his wife Henrietta suggested that the most appropriate way of remembering him was not to erect statues or monuments, but to establish new schemes and projects that reflected the educational and charitable principles he believed in.

There is still much to be done. Tower Hamlets is now a mixed and vibrant area but although, thanks to inflated Canary Wharf salaries, the average wage for those who work in the borough is around £69,000, 42% of children in the borough live in poverty and many of the same inequalities and social problems that Barnett fought against persist. In 1889, just five years after Toynbee Hall opened, Barnett said that he saw "much to justify the hope that, if not in our time, in some time, the forces at work will make a happier and a better East London". Toynbee Hall is still working towards that aim.

(Right) Ashbee Hall, Dining Room, 1896, Toynbee Hall

References:

Books

H Barnett H, "Canon Barnett, his life work and friends".
J.E. Connor and B.J. Critchley, "The Red Clif fs of Stepney: History of Buildings erected by the East End Dwellings Co. 1885 -1949".
Sally Ann Hastings, "Neighbourhood and Nation in Tokyo, 1905 - 1937". Seth Kovacs, "Slumming: Sexual and social politics in Victorian London". John Macnicol, "The politics of retirement in Britain, 1878 - 1948".

Articles and short pieces

Samuel Barnett introduction to "The Jew in London: A study of racial character and present day conditions" " (Arkell, Russell and Lewis (eds.)
Samuel Barnett, " University Settlements" (published in W.Reason (ed.) University and Social Settlements, London).
H. Hussock: "Bringing back the Set tlement House". Public welfare: 51(4).
Brigitte Koenig, foreword to centenary edition of "People of the Abyss".
J. A .R. Pimlott, "The mother of settlements: Toynbee Hall: Fifty Years in the East End"(re -printed in The Times, 21 December 1934).

Websites

"One Tower Hamlets: diverse communities and distinct places"; www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/idoc.ashx?docid=bcdbf9f4-1457-42cf-800d-9f82a28e089 6&version=-1
The Campaign to End Child Poverty; www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/why-end-child-poverty/poverty-in-your-area

Other sources

Memorandum and Articles of Universities Settlement Association. Toynbee Hall Annual Report, 1890.

Thank you

We would like to thank the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, the London Metropolitan Archives, and the Museum of London.

Jo Till, Historical Research/ Writing Intern February – May 2013

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
Follow on Twitter @Toynbee Hall
Sign up to our e-news online

Registered Charity No. 211850. A company limited by guarantee.
Registered Office as shown.
Registered Number. 20080 England