

SANDRA ALEXANDER : OCTAVIA HILL

Octavia Hill (1838 – 1912)

I was drawn to research Octavia Hill because of my interest and appreciation of The National Trust. Octavia was not only a founder member of the formation of The National Trust, she was an English social reformer, public figure, artist and activist. She strongly believed that good environments make better people and campaigned to give ordinary people, particularly those living in cities, access to the countryside.

Octavia was born on 3 December 1838 in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire She was the eighth daughter (and tenth child) born to her parents James Hill and Caroline Southwood Hill. Caroline was James' 3rd wife. He had been widowed twice and he had taken on Caroline to be governess to his then six children. They married and had a further four children. They were both progressive and socially-concerned parents. Octavia's father was a corn merchant and initially they lived in a comfortable 18th-century townhouse at Wisbech. During this time James also built an Infant School, which was run by Caroline and according to Octavia, her mother was the first Englishwoman to teach using the methods of Johann Pestalozzi. According to the records Octavia and her sisters were educated at home by her mother.

However, all this changed when James was declared bankrupt after his investments failed. He fell into depression and 'a term of insanity' and subsequently abandoned his wife and children. Caroline took charge of the family, moving them in 1852 to Finchley on the edge of London, and then to the capital itself, where the grim urban poverty horrified Octavia. Caroline took a job with the Ladies Guild and her father Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith, a health reformer and unitarian became involved in the childrens' upbringing. Octavia was influenced by her maternal grandfather. He was "the Physician to Mankind", a friend of Jeremy Bentham and tireless campaigner for decent living conditions for poor people.

Octavia started her first job at the age of 14, She became her mother's assistant in a Christian Socialist Cooperative, designed to empower women by giving them economic independence. She took charge of the workroom. This was where the Ragged School Girls made toys and dolls'-house furniture. (Ragged schools is a name commonly given after about 1840 to the many independently established 19th century charity schools in the United Kingdom which provided entirely free education and, in most cases, food, clothing, lodging and other home missionary services for those too poor to pay).

Seeing the poverty of the girls at the school had a profound effect on the young Octavia. Practical by nature, she organised midday meals for her workers, visited them when they were sick and also took them on nature-study walks around the

London commons. It was the first of many initiatives that she pioneered to improve the lives of those less fortunate than herself.

At this time, Octavia wrote the entries in her “Commonplace Book”, containing extracts of her readings and accounts of lectures she attended, which can be seen at the Birthplace House. In 1853 Octavia Hill met John Ruskin who, was part of Maurice's Christian Socialist circle. Ruskin also taught at the Working Men's College that had been founded by Maurice. Ruskin employed Octavia as a copyist. In 1856 Maurice offered her a job as secretary to the women's classes for a salary of £26 per year. The college aimed to educate women "for occupations wherein they could be helpful to the less fortunate members of their own sex". During this period Octavia attended the lectures of Frederick Denison Maurice and was deeply influenced by his Christian Socialism. Brought up a unitarian, her mother left Octavia's religious allegiances deliberately untouched. and in 1857, as a result of her friendship with Maurice and his circle, Octavia was baptized and then confirmed into the Anglican Church. She regarded faith as a personal matter and never intruded upon the religious observance of the tenants she was to acquire - many of whom were Irish Catholics.

Octavia had started reading Mayhew's articles which concerned the life of the working class living in London. This started her thinking about what she could do to relieve their suffering. However, conservative-minded people condemned this call for charity.

By 1859 Octavia's daily routine of copying in Dulwich Art Gallery or the National Gallery, followed by many more hours spent teaching, had become punishing. Maurice told her that trying to do without rest was very self-willed but she took no notice. Eventually her family forced her to go to Normandy on holiday, Despite this she continued a gruelling work schedule to the point of collapse. This pattern of work continued and it would periodically interrupt her work and life over the coming years.

In 1864 Ruskin's father died, leaving a substantial sum to his only son. John Ruskin agreed to invest some of his inheritance in Octavia Hill's long-held dream, to establish improved housing for "my friends among the poor". He purchased three houses in Paradise Place, Freshwater Place and Barrett's Court .and gave them to Octavia to manage. The aim was to make “lives noble, homes happy and family life good” in this, one of the most notorious London slums, known as “Little Hell”.

Octavia's determination, personality and skill transformed these poverty-stricken houses by cleaning, ventilation, clearance of the drains, repairs, and redecoration. Octavia also recruited a team of women to help her with this venture. She later argued that the most important aspect of her system was the weekly visit to collect rent. This allowed her and her colleagues to check upon every detail of the

premises and to broaden their contact with the tenants, especially the children. They also tried to find local and regular employment for the tenants.

In July 1877 Octavia was briefly engaged to Edward Bond, one of her co-workers in the COS. However, Bond's mother, apparently objected to the proposed union, and in these circumstances Octavia herself called off the engagement. Despite ill-health, personal unhappiness, and nervous collapse, Octavia's empire grew, taking in buildings across the capital. She became a major public figure and policy maker.

Army Cadet Movement

Never short on ideas or reformist zeal, in 1889 Octavia Hill formed the first independent Cadet Battalion in London, a concept which rapidly spread, becoming the Army Cadets. She felt strongly that the military context would socialise urban youths struggling for direction. There is a plaque in commemoration of her in Redross Way, South London.

The National Trust

In 1885, Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley (who collected rents for Octavia Hill as a young man) worked together to raise public awareness of the railway developments threatening the Lake District. This collaboration led to the foundation of The National Trust for the Preservation of Historic Buildings and Natural Beauty, to hold land and buildings in perpetuity "for ever, for everyone".

In 1907, Parliament passed the first 'National Trust Act'. This legislation defined the National Trust's purpose and gave the Trust unique powers to protect property forever, for the benefit of the nation.

Today the National Trust has over 3.4 million members. It protects over 166 fine houses, 19 castles, 47 industrial monuments and mills, 49 churches and chapels and 35 public houses and inns.

The Trust also cares for forests, woods, fens, beaches, farmland, downs, moorland, islands, archaeological remains, castles, nature reserves and villages. Protecting over 700 miles of coastline in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in total the charity looks after 617,500 acres (250,000 hectares) of countryside, moorland, beaches and coastline.

Open Spaces

Octavia Hill fought to save the recreational open spaces that were being devoured by the expanding metropolis of London. Amongst her most outstanding successes were the creation of Vauxhall Park and Brockwell Park, the campaigns for Queen's

Wood in Highgate, Parliament Hill Fields, West Wickham Common, Archbishop's Park and Hilly Fields, Lewisham.

The Kyrle Society

She was also the driving force of the Kyrle Society founded by her sister Miranda. This Society was formed to "Bring Beauty Home to the People" and was supported by William Morris, among others. It was a forerunner to The Civic Trust. The Trust wanted to enhance the quality of life in the communities with art, books and open spaces.

Chartered Institute of Housing

Women who had trained under Octavia Hill formed the Association of Women Housing Workers in 1916. This later changed its name to the Society of Housing

Managers in 1948. After merging with the Institute of Housing Managers in 1965, the society became the present day Chartered Institute of Housing in 1994.

Octavia Hill's Legacy

One of the three founders of the National Trust, Octavia Hill was a pioneering thinker and social reformer. She worked tirelessly to improve urban housing and to protect green spaces and the impact of her life and work is still being felt. Her belief in the importance of access to nature for human wellbeing and the need to stop the destruction of the natural landscape are even more relevant today.

Her birthplace in Wisbech has been turned into a Museum.

Octavia died in Marylebone, London and is buried with her sister Miranda and companion Harriot Yorke in The Holy Trinity churchyard at Crockham Hill in Kent.