

NOTTING DALE

Christian Effort in the Kensington Potteries, Notting Hill by Robert Lee, London City Mission Magazine, March 1 1902

This is, we believe, one of the lowest districts in London, though situated in the western portion of the Metropolis. Those who know London only from what they read of it might imagine that nearly all the poverty and crime were to be found in the East End. Of late years the sad condition of a large portion of South London has been more fully brought to light both by the secular and religious press. But the misery and sin of London does not end even here. There are slum districts in the North, and even in the West of London, oftentimes not far from the abodes of wealth and grandeur.

Our readers who are acquainted with the whole of Notting Hill will be grieved to learn that there are localities in that neighbourhood so low as the one described in the following report, but the description is a true one. Indeed, it might be painted even blacker, but we have felt constrained to omit some sentences from the missionary's report lest we should shock our readers. We believe that every attentive reader will feel the great importance of the work being carried on in this district, and will be grieved to learn that the committee have no guaranteed support for the district. Will some supporter kindly give or collect £50 per annum towards the missionary's salary?...

Description of new district I am now stationed at the People's Hall, Latimer Road (now Freston Road), Notting Hill, the Mission branch of a church in Kensington. I take part in the work of the hall, and assist in the general mission work. New premises are being built, when we hope to launch out into more aggressive effort. In my district there are 14 streets, with about 475 dwellings – viz, 225 four-roomed, 50 six, and 200 eight-roomed houses, accommodating 1,500 families.

Of the above mentioned number of dwellings, 150 are used as lodging-houses, 123 of them being let out as furnished apartments, which the remaining 17 are registered Common Lodging-houses. As far as I can ascertain, at least 800 families live in one-roomed furnished apartments, whilst 300 men and 200 women may be found, during the cold season, in residence in the common lodging-houses. I should think that on my district fully 1,000 families live in one room each, furnished and unfurnished.

The moral condition of the people Of the 14 streets comprised in my sphere of service, 7 are occupied by the respectable working class, whilst the remainder, constituting by far the larger portion, forms one of the worst slum districts in London. As my efforts have been concentrated mainly upon this worst section, I would speak more particularly concerning it. Whether there is any improvement in the morals of this latter portion is a question. Enquiring from old residents whether this part is better or worse than it was 10 or 20 years ago, I have received conflicting reports. For various reasons I cannot see how there can possibly be any change for the better.

(1) In the first place, I notice the houses were built for a class altogether different from those now occupying them. (2) Secondly, the close proximity of one of His Majesty's Prisons for short-timers leads many of the prisoners when they are released to find their way here by sort of instinct. Proof of this is to be found in the great number of 'lags' residing here. (3) Then last, but not by any means the least, large numbers of the poorest and most depraved, who are turned out of other slum districts to make way for street improvements, flock here. One woman, who once carried on a business in Drury Lane, told me she often comes across old Drury Lane residents now living in this part of the Metropolis.

How the wolf is kept from the door The means whereby these people can earn their living are as various as their personal characters. Some work in foundries and factories as mechanics, others as cabmen, or horse-keepers; many more as labourers in various trades; whilst many manage to earn a livelihood as costermongers, rag and bone men, hawkers and flower sellers, laundry workers, Punch and Judy showmen, and street organists; and numbers are professional thieves, cadgers, pickpockets, and the most degraded women.

The professional cadger is an unlimited quantity here, and, generally speaking, lives well, for Kensington is, from their stand-point, a happy hunting-ground. Upon an athletic-looking young fellow being remonstrated with for his lazy life, he replied: "What! Me work? Why, bless you, I can earn more money *looking out for work* than I can working."

Numbers of the lowest class of women are here, and are of the most hardened type. All have had from time the proffered hand of help held out to them, but they prefer their evil courses. They are to be found in

the common lodging-houses and furnished apartments. One experienced worker in rescue work, who has laboured in Whitechapel for fully 20 years, declared to me the type of women in the latter place were far better than those here in my district.

Anarchy Some time ago there was a local body of Anarchists who met regularly in secret, but as far as I can find out, the meetings have been abandoned, and the members scattered. That there are odd ones holding socialistic and revolutionary doctrines I have not the least the doubt, for I meet with them occasionally; but as to the majority of my people, I have been deeply touched, at times, to see how firmly-rooted the King and Queen are in the affections of even the most depraved and violent.

Bad Language In common with districts of this character, most unparliamentary, and often obscene, language forms a large portion of the working vocabulary of the people. I have shuddered when hearing mothers use such language to their children and girls of tender age to others. What an indication of a low moral tone.

Drunkenness As might be expected, drunkenness is one of the prevailing characteristics of the people. Drunkenness is the inseparable companion of vice. There are fourteen streets within the boundaries of my district, and in these fourteen streets there are fourteen public houses. In any of them, at any time of the day, you will find great numbers of women. Many army and navy pensioners reside here, and on 'pension day', and the day following, the river of intemperance reaches high-water mark.

Very many earn good wages, but through intemperate habits are destitute. I know of one man who, though earning weekly from 25s to 35s, lives in a common lodging-house, so that he may have all the more for drink. One good-natured young fellow, who goes in company with another playing a street organ, and breaking on his head with a heavy sledge-hammer the thick paving street flag-stones, told me they often earn 18s a day, 'go on the booze, and when night comes haven't a blooming penny for our lodgings.'

Only a few weeks back I attended the funeral of a man I visited. Many of the mourners smelt strongly of drink. As we walked in procession towards the grave, the man who walked in front of me was so intoxicated that it was with the greatest difficulty he maintained his equilibrium. Though following a corpse, he and his wife quarrelled and nearly came to blows. The scene at the grave side was one of such disorder that the clergyman, determining to watch as well as pray, read the church prayers with his eyes upon the mourners. After the service, by some means or other, the intoxicated man I have just referred to got separated from the rest. Finding him sitting upon a vault in another part of the graveyard, I had a most earnest talk with him. Tears ran down his cheeks as I spoke of his dead comrade, of the inevitable result of his intemperate habits, and of the love and grace of God.

And yet these people are to be pitied. Perhaps there was only too much truth in the boast of one of the most hardened and horrible-looking men. Speaking to him of the evils of intemperance, he ejaculated: "But, Guv'nor I'm very happy. What! Give up drink? Not me. Why, bless you, *I was born drunk*, and I'll die drunk." How true it is that many are thus trained from their earliest days.

The Worst Street in London More than one street has been denominated, and amongst them one in my district. Several experienced workers have declared to me that it is the worst in the whole Metropolis. "Talk about Seven Dials, why it's now't to this," one policeman was heard to say to another." There are about 40 houses of 8 rooms each, 12 of which are used as common lodging-houses, whilst nearly all the remainder are let out as furnished apartments. The tenants of these rooms are comprised of degraded women, unmarried couples, or husbands and wives who have lost their homes and come down in the world through drunkenness, gambling, ill health, or misfortune.

Renting a house of 8 rooms for about 14s or 15s per week, and furnishing each room with an old secondhand bed, a table, a couple of chairs, two cups and saucers, and a kettle, they charge 4s 6d for back rooms, and 6s 10d or 7s to 7s 6d for front rooms, realising £1 10s to £2 2s per house. In these miserable homes, I am thankful to say, I have had most encouraging receptions from both Romanists and Protestants.

One of the many lessons taught us by the present campaign in South Africa is the fatal evil of under-estimating the power of the enemy. The first week in my new charge sufficed to show me the immense difficulties of the work. That the great enemy of righteousness was only too securely entrenched here was at once manifest. My heart sank within me, having little hope of being able to dislodge such a crafty foe, until I remembered that the Lord was with me. Counting upon the Presence, I felt that victory was assured, and I went forward with a cheerful heart...

Work in the Common Lodging-houses Here one meets with the very scum of the earth.

The Power of Music On Sunday December 15 one of the kitchens visited was for men. Tapping at the door we entered, and found thirty men sitting upon forms all around the room. With a "Good evening, gentlemen," I stepped into the centre, but there was an ominous silence. "I've a good friend with me this evening; would you like to hear his auto-harp?" "No, guv'nor, we want no music here!" one man replied. Then two others began raving at us in a fearful manner. Some accepted my books and tracts, whilst others refused. My friend looked frightened and kept near the door. "Give them a tune," I whispered.

I can't get away from it There have been many disappointments in this trying lodging-house work, as one may expect. For instance, I became very much interested in a man who introduced himself to me as "a phrenologist, poet, dramatic reciter, and wandering minstrel." He had moved in better society – he told me that once he had been an editor of a weekly paper – but drink and immorality had been the cause of his downfall. I had many long chats with him, and thought he was a hopeful case. A situation was secured for him, but he never turned up at the appointed time or place. I have seen him once since then, but now have lost all traces of his whereabouts.

Off the Track in London – in the Royal Borough of Kensington by George Sims, 1904 (first published in *The Strand* magazine 1904, as *Off the Track in London* 1911, and *The Avernus of Kensington – Highest Death Rate in London in St Clement's parish magazine*)

The sun shines brightly on the gay Kensington thoroughfare in which I meet my artist confrere and prepare to wander off the track in a district which is held to be the wealthiest in the Empire. It is a winter morning, but the sky is blue, the air is balmy, and the flood of sunlight gives a Rivieran aspect to the stately mansions and pleasant villas that we pass on our way to the point at which we are to turn off and make our plunge into one of the strangest districts of London, a district of which its rich neighbours have no knowledge, although it lies at their doors.

A walk of a few minutes and we have left wealth and fashion behind us; the gay shops have vanished, the well-dressed people have disappeared as if by magic. The mansions and the villas have given place to the long streets of grey, weather-beaten, two and three story houses, in which the local industry writes itself large in white letters.

Here we are in Notting Dale and in the heart of Laundry-Land. In every house in street after street the blinds of the ground floor are down as though someone lay dead within. But if you look from the opposite side of the street you will see that in every room above the blinds lines are stretched from wall to wall, and from these lines wrung out details of the washing-tub are hanging. If you cross to the dilapidated railings of the sorry little patch that was once a front garden and peer into the basement you will see that laundry work is in full swing. The blinds of the ground-floor rooms are probably drawn because the hand laundresses do not like to be criticised too closely by the neighbours, who are also their business rivals.

The street is typical of a dozen others. You may see again and again that broken down little front garden, with its stunted trees, strewn rubbish, and the little wooden, lopsided railing that looks as though it no longer thought the patch it once guarded worth standing up for. On the windowsill of the top floor of a score of houses you may see a lonely, empty flowerpot that looks more like a handy missile in an emergency than an adjunct of window gardening. The rain-sodden, blackened stucco meets you at every turn, and when you have counted the twentieth cat sitting on a sill or a doorstep washing its shirt to snowy whiteness you begin to wonder why the local influence has not made itself more widely felt. Everybody in the houses is washing for other people, everything is conducted with scrupulous cleanliness and under official inspection, but there are plenty of streets adjacent to Laundry-Land in which only the cats make themselves conspicuously clean.

A little further away towards Latimer Road are the great steam laundries employing a small army of young women, who at the dinner hour will turn out and make every street in the Dale a forest of white aprons. But all the streets of Laundry-Land are not given up to useful industry. A portion of the district is so notorious as a guilt garden that it has been called the London Avernus. It is packed with common lodging-houses, a large number of them for women, and it has streets of evil reputation in which almost every window is broken and stuffed with rags. The Borough Council has now in hand a splendid rehousing scheme which will vastly improve the district, but we must take it as we find it today. (This must be referring to the Kenley Street redevelopment. It would take half a century and two world wars before the Notting Dale 'Special Area' streets were demolished and replaced by Henry Dickens Court shortly before the 1958 riots.)

We turn out of the sunlight, and entering a narrow doorway descend into the basement of a typical lodging-house. The house is known locally as the 'Golden Gates', a name bestowed upon it in a spirit of badinage by a client with a sense of humour. The kitchen is crowded with women, young and old. Some are sitting on the benches around the wall, one or two are making a late breakfast; an old woman is cooking something at the red coke fire.

As a rule there is little conversation in a lodging-house in the morning hours. I have been constantly struck by the note of moodiness, not to say sullenness, which hangs over the company during the hours of daylight. The men are, as a rule, more communicative than the women. Women of the class that drift to the doss-house are not inclined to exchange confidences with their neighbours.

But the kitchen of the Golden Gates has one talkative occupant. As soon as our eyes get accustomed to the gloom, which is only relieved by a ray of light filtering through a small, dust-covered window, we notice that a tall woman in faded finery and an astrakhan hat, and with some traces of refinement in features and bearing, is standing in the centre and chaffing the others. One or two smile at her jokes, but the majority are wholly indifferent, wearing that air of sullen aloofness which is peculiarly characteristic of a woman's lodging-house.

I have not intruded on the privacy of the ladies of the Golden Gates without a show of justification. To enable my companion to make a sketch of the scene, I have resorted to an expedient which permits me to make certain enquiries of a semi-official nature, and to attract the attention of the guests while my confrere is at work. If they were aware that they were being sketched it is quite likely that there would be trouble, and my comrade might find himself in as unpleasant a fix as did a photographer who once went with me to the Chinese quarter in Limehouse, for *Living London*, and attempted to take the proprietor of an opium den and some of his clients. The photographer emerged unscathed, but the camera required a considerable amount of repair.

Fortunately I have an inquiry to make which puts my audience in sympathy with me, and my confrere is supposed to be making notes of the information supplied as to the last movements of a woman who had used the house for some time and had mysteriously disappeared. During the whole time the lady in the dingy astrakhan keeps up a running fire of chaff, which materially assists us. She welcomes us to the "Hotel de Fourpence," and says, though it isn't exactly the Carlton, it is quite comfortable when you get used to it. She interlards her bantering remarks with French words, and we come to the conclusion that she is a governess who has drifted down.

It is no uncommon thing to find men and women of education in the lowest lodging-houses of London. I have found a clergyman in one of the worst dens of Flower and Dean Street. In one of the Dale lodging-houses there is a woman whose father had his town house and country house and his villa in the South of France. This woman in the Astrakhan hat is a striking contrast to her surroundings. Most of the other inmates are of the usual type – women who have drifted down from honest industry to vagabondage, or have been born to it.

Returning through the Golden Gates into the sunshine, we make our way to Jetsam Street. This is not its real name, but the one I have given it. This is a street of black and battered doors, of damaged railings, and of broken windows. On the doorsteps here and there stand groups of slatternly, unkempt women. From the windows above a tousled head occasionally appears. Many of the houses here are common lodging-houses; but some of them are in the hands of the house-farmers, who let them out in furnished rooms at a shilling a day. We enter a room which is unoccupied and take stock of the furniture. It consists of a bed, two chairs, and the wreckage of a dirty deal table.

In this room a man and his wife and children are accommodated at night, but the shilling paid only entitles the family to remain there until 10 in the morning. At that hour they are turned and their tenancy ceases. If they wish to renew it they can do so in the evening, but not before. These people, who are paying 6 shillings a week, or 7 shillings where Sunday is not a free day, for a single room, have to spend the day in the streets. Many of them make their way to the public parks and sleep on the seats or on the grass. Some of them beg, some of them hawk trumpery articles. They are probably paying £18 a year for a wretched room, and yet in the house-farmer's hands they are homeless every day in the week.

Jetsam Street is flooded with golden sunshine as we pass through it, but the sunshine has not made the inhabitants light-hearted. Halfway down the street a man and a woman are fighting. The man is delivering a series of kicks in the style of La Savate at the woman, who is defiant and nimble and defends herself with her jacket, which she has taken off and uses both as a guard and as a weapon.

One or two women standing on the doorsteps watch the proceedings, but apparently without interest. An old woman proceeding to the public house for beer turns her head for a moment and then passes on her way. A little boy in rags passes the fighting couple and takes no notice whatever. It is an ordinary incident, and has no special attraction for the neighbours.

Presently the man succeeds in planting a blow that sends the woman down. She is up again in a moment and faces him, prepared to continue the contest. But he thinks he has scored a point and is satisfied. "Now I'll go to the workhouse," he says, "And the best place for you," answers the woman.

The man thrusts his hands in his pockets and slouches off. The woman puts on her jacket and strolls away. If we were to investigate the circumstances that have led up to the fight, we should find that we had been assisting at a Notting Dale version of the story of Carmen, Don Jose, and Escamillo, only Carmen in this case is a laundry girl, Don Jose is an idle ruffian, and Escamillo is another, only of a bolder type.

In Notting Dale, the women are the principal wage earners, and the district is infested with a contemptible set of men, who are loafers or worse. It is a common thing in the Dale for a man to boast that he is going to marry a laundry girl and do nothing for the rest of his life. It seems difficult to realise that such a scene

and such a street can exist within a stone's throw of a quarter crowded with the wealth and fashion of the capital. But wherever you step off the beaten track in London a hundred surprises await you.

I do not wonder at the fight in Jetsam Street which fails to arouse the lookers-on from their mid-day lethargy, for I am an old traveller in this strange land. But I must confess that it gives me a little shock when at the end of the street I come upon a man in the last stage of consumption sitting propped up with pillows in an armchair on the doorstep. He has been brought out to sit a little while in the sunshine. The poor fellow has, I ascertain, taken his discharge from the infirmary a few days previously. He wants to die at home – at home in Jetsam Street.

The picture I have had so far to draw is a painful one and a squalid one. But it is typical of the neighbourhood, and could not be omitted if in these travels off the track I am to give a faithful account of the London that is so little known even to Londoners. Let us hasten through the sordid streets, looking up at the blue skies and ignoring the squalid house, and make our way to a more romantic spot.

"The Potteries." How odd this description of a portion of Kensington sounds, yet the district we are now in is known by this name, and yonder is what remains of the kiln. Here in the Potteries the spell of the old romance still lingers, for this is the district of the gipsies. In front of it is the pleasant recreation ground, Avondale Park, which the County Council has made beautiful for the children of the Dale, and just round the corner is hidden a space where, year after year, the gipsies came with their vans and encamped for the winter. And close at hand are cottages and gardens, to which ducks and geese give quite a rural appearance.

The gipsies are not here this winter, but there are one or two vans left to mark the spot where, until quite recently, the sons and daughters of Egypt pitched their 'tans' in the heart of fashionable Kensington. Some of them, yielding to the force of such modern ideas as the sanitary inspector and the School Board officer, have given up the fight for existence in a dwelling-van and have gone to live under a roof like the gorgios, though a gipsy of the true Romany blood believes that nothing but ill-luck will attend the Romany chal or the Romany chi who lives in a house.

Today the children of the gipsies are, many of them, in the Notting Dale Board School and the fathers and mothers are in the lodging-houses. One of the wanderers, who in the old times used to pitch on the vacant ground of the Potteries, so far fell into gentile ways as to take a lodging-house and run it himself. He and his wife became noted characters in the Dale, and when he died a little time ago the gipsies came from far and near and gave him a genuine Romany funeral, with all the ancient rites and ceremonies of the great Pali tribe who wandered out of India long centuries ago and gave the word 'pal' to our language to signify brother.

Though the gipsy camp has departed and the ground will know it no more, the surroundings are still suggestive of the old days. Hard by a dwelling-van left, like the rose of the poet, blooming alone is the shed of a chair-caner, a handsome, prosperous looking man, who is working in the open and singing at his congenial task. The battered carts, the old chains, the broken wheels, the pigeon lofts, and the wooden sheds standing on a patch of waste ground remind you of the pictures you were given to copy at school when you were in the drawing class. If there had only been a mill handy the resemblance would have been complete, but the chimney of the old kiln dominates the scene and takes the mill's place.

Here the note of Jetsam Street has disappeared. All around are respectable working class dwellings and stable yards. A little farther up is a double row of cottages with a paved way between them that seem to have been lifted bodily out of a Yorkshire mill town and dropped with their quaint out-houses on to the confines of Kensington. When you come upon Thresher's Place you rub your eyes and wonder if it is possible that five minutes' walk will bring you out on Campden Hill.

In the mews round about the Potteries are the remnants of the Italian colony that drifted here some years ago, when Little Italy in Clerkenwell began to be encroached upon by the modern builder. The majority have now drifted farther afield, to Fulham and Hammersmith. But there are still a fair number of the children of the Sunny South in the Dale. You may see the organs in the early morning being polished up outside the houses, and if you go into the yards you may discover the ice-barrows packed away in the coach-houses, waiting for the disappearance of the baked-chestnut season and the coming of summer.

Here, in a large coach-house in a mews, is a proprietor of ice-cream barrows hard at work repainting his stock in gorgeous colours. (Jo Mancini?) Brilliant streaks of red and green light up the dreary place where the signor is working. When we look in upon his artistic proceedings he is filling his studio with melody. He

is singing an air from 'Il Trovatore' in his native Italian, and at the same time painting an Italian girl in her national costume on the panel of an ice-barrow.

A little farther down the mews we climb the crazy staircase that leads to the loft, and find a middle-aged widow occupying it with five children. We have arrived at an awkward moment, for the widow is in tearful converse with the Industrial Schools officer. One of the children has been caught the previous night begging. Children are not allowed to beg in the streets today, and if it is found that the parents send them out or have not sufficient control over them to keep them in the little offenders can be taken before a magistrate and sent to an industrial school, to be trained for more reputable occupations in life.

The widow declares that the boy was not sent out by her, and weeps copiously, while she relates the story. She has five children and no money. I don't think the officer is very much impressed. I am afraid he knows more about the widow and the begging boy than he cares to reveal in the presence of strangers. He gives the woman a kindly warning, and leaves her with the intimation that if any more of her children are caught begging she will be invited to pay a visit to the magistrate.

The Industrial Schools officer has a busy time in the Dale, for there are many young children living in vicious and criminal surroundings, and it is his task to remove them at the first opportunity, in order that they may have a chance in life. The work the industrial schools are accomplishing is invaluable. Under the Act a careful guardianship can be exercised by the State until the rescued boy or girl has reached the age of 18. There is no coming out of the industrial schools and returning to the evil surroundings now. But the task of the officer who has to see that the lads and lasses do not, after their school days are up, return to their evil associates is not a light one. He has occasionally to exercise the ingenuity of a Sherlock Holmes in order to get on the track 'one of his young people' who has mysteriously disappeared from the place that has been found for him or her.

Not long ago a young girl who had been sent to Canada, and was supposed to be doing well there, was discovered dressed in boy's clothes back again in the Dale with her uncle and aunt, who were undesirable companions for her. The girl had in some way managed to get her passage-money and come home, and had hoped, disguised as a young man, to escape the vigilance of the Industrial Schools officer.

Through a couple of streets and we are back in common lodging-house land. There is one long street in which the houses are registered from end to end. Some of them look like shops with the shutters up, others like private houses that have come down in the world. But every room is packed with as many beds as the law permits, and the common kitchen is reached by the area steps.

At one of the houses along this street a man and a woman are standing at the door. The woman has only one arm and one eye, the man has no arms. But they are a highly popular couple, and a good many of the lodging-houses in the street belong to them. The lady is said to be quite equal to quieting any disturbance among the lodgers with her one hand, and the man displays the most remarkable skill, suffering apparently little inconvenience from his loss. When you have seen him take his pipe out of his mouth with the empty sleeve of his jacket you will understand how he is able, with his wife's assistance, to keep his rough clientele well in hand, and to compel their respect.

There is one feature of Notting Dale which strikes you forcibly if you go into a local crowd engaged in a heated argument, and that is the preponderance of the rural accent; for this is a district in which the evil of rural immigration has written itself large. Thousands of honest country folks crowd up year after year to the great city that they believe to be paved with gold. Of those who come in by the Great Western a large percentage drift to the Dale, failing to find room in the districts around the terminus; and in the Dale a process of moral deterioration goes on which is a tragedy.

The husband fails to find the work he expected would be ready to his hand in busy London. The little savings are soon gone; the man and his wife are driven to the common lodging-house, or, if there are children with them, to the furnished room. The wife perhaps goes to the laundry work. The husband's enforced idleness often ends in his becoming a confirmed loafer, contented to live on what his wife can earn. There is in Notting Dale a large working population living cleanly by honest industry, but the country folk who have been unfortunate at the commencement of the struggle for life in London cannot avail themselves of the cleaner accommodation and the better environment. They are forced into the area which is given over to the vicious and the criminal, and they gradually sink to the level of their neighbours.

Many a tale of heroic struggle against evil surroundings do the women tell who come before the School Board officials to explain the non-attendance of their children. Sometimes it is the man who has had the moral strength to resist, and with tears in his eyes will tell of the healthy, country-bred wife who came with

him one day from the far-away village full of hope, but who has yielded to the awful environment, deserted his home, and left his children to fall into evil companionship.

There is no sadder chapter in the story of London than that of the light-hearted country folk who come to it full of courage and hope, and gradually sink down under the evil influence of a slum to which their poverty has driven them, until they themselves are as criminal and as vicious as their neighbours. For them little can be done, though now and again the brave men and women who are working in the good cause succeed in rescuing them, even though they have fallen to the lowest depths of the abyss.

But for the next generation the hope is greater. High above one of the most notorious streets in the Dale tower the great buildings in which the children are gathered together and educated and taught the principles of right doing. This is the thought that comes to me as, fresh from our pilgrimage of pain, we stand in the big playground and watch the little ones filing out in the sunshine to go to their homes. Some of them are well clad, the children of honest, hard-working folk who love them and care for them. But many are going back to miserable dens where there is neither love nor care, where there is no respect for the laws of God or man.

They cannot all be saved from the evil environment that awaits them, but they come day after day to the schools, and there they fall under an influence which, if they are not inherently bad, will stand them in good stead through all their lives. We watch the little ones as with the light-heartedness of childhood they trip away, some to the meal which loving hands have prepared for them, others to crowd and clamour at the doors of the mission-house, where the free meal stands between them and the hunger pain, and then we turn into a street that bore formerly so ill a name that the authorities changed it, to remove the stigma of the address from the few decent people in it. (George/Crescent?) In five minutes we are once more on the beaten track and in the heart of Royal and aristocratic Kensington.

The lady in the dingy Astrakhan keeps up a running fire of chaff. Illustrator?

One or two women standing on the doorsteps watch the proceedings. H Robinson

Brought out to sit a little while in the sunshine. H Robinson

There are one or two vans left to mark the spot. H Robinson

Many are going back to miserable dens. H Robinson

In the Potter's Field, London City Mission Magazine, October 1911

Pottery Lane, one of the Boundaries of Notting Dale (now Walmer Road). Facing the disused kiln is the entrance to Avondale Park, the site of which was given by Sir Henry Robson to mark the year of his Mayoralty of the Royal Borough 1894-5.

"In that dark spot in the West of London, the Kensington Avernus, made famous now by Mr Harold Begbie, it has been my happiness to know intimately three of the missionaries of this Society, and of their zeal, their wisdom, and their indomitable perseverance in Christian evangelisation it would be impossible for me to speak too highly." Rev Thomas Yeates, at the Society's Annual Meeting, held in Queen's Hall, May 6 1911.

A typical scene in the Potteries district, where most of the people are below the poverty line.

The Worst Spot in London?

Midway between Holland Park and Shepherd's Bush, with its western boundary abutting on to the White City, is the notorious district of Notting Dale, 'that dark spot' so graphically described in the now familiar pages of *Broken Earthenware*.

For three score years a succession of godly City missionaries have visited this benighted area, which in the Handbook of our Society, is named after the Kensington Potteries, the site of which now marks the northern boundary. There have been deeply interesting and striking trophies of the grace of God in this neighbourhood from time to time. It was here, in the early days, that one of the Society's missionaries was made a channel of blessing to three gipsies in a common lodging-house, the ancestors of Gipsy Smith and Gipsy Simon Smith, who have since become so noted in the evangelistic world as winners of souls.

As to the present condition of the district, decency forbids a detailed description. In the opinion of those best qualified to judge, it is possibly the worst in London. It is made up chiefly of folk who have sunk so low that they can find no resting place in any other neighbourhood. It is the criminals' rendezvous, the resort of disreputable women, and worse men. The very lees and dregs of society are here domiciled, often in dark and ill-smelling basements scarcely fit for a dog. Once on the scene, you are sickened by an odour of staleness and putridity. There are innumerable lodging-houses, and whole streets of furnished rooms (!), the latter being let at 10d or 1s per night.

Vice and squalor of the meanest and most repulsive type are everywhere. In certain directions every third pane of glass is broken, while the tousled heads of dissipated-looking tenants are to be seen at the windows, or leering at you from the doorways as if they resented your presence, for, as MR GR Sims has said, 'the district is honey-combed with criminality, vagabondage, and immorality.' It is moreover plagued with poverty – ghastly, sordid, degrading – much of it being directly attributable to wilful sin.

Things are here seen and heard that cause one to shudder – men and women glorying in their shame. Hundreds of little children, sadly neglected and half clad, swarm the gutters, doomed apparently from birth, and bound in time, unless Providence forbids, to recruit the ranks of vagrancy and crime. Such is a faint description of what, 60 years ago, was the Potters' Field – a picture of social decay, a mass of human wreckage, a blot upon our civilisation, and situated within the Royal Borough of Kensington.

The missionary Mr Lodge among the habitues of a low-class lodging-house, inside of which he regularly conducts a gospel service.

The Parable of the Potter's Field

In the course of a sermon on 'The Potter's Work on the Wheels', Dr Campbell Morgan points out that the Potter's Field is last mentioned in Scripture in strange company. The priests bought it with the price of Him Who was pierced, and called it (little thinking of the full significance of the name) 'the field of blood.' This is both historical and parabolic. 'Behold the human wrecks scattered about the field which is the world. They are so much waste in God's universe, vessels half formed and flung away, lives that might have been fashioned to forms of beauty, had they but yielded to the Potter's hands. But the field has been purchased with the price of blood! Blessed be God, He has come down into and purchased the Potter's Field, so that now He can gather up the marred and broken vessels, and make them new again.'

That the process of making new men is still going on is evidenced by the latest reports of our missionaries, from which we proceed to quote. Incidentally, they prove that the old Gospel is not

moribund, that the old methods are still up to date, and that the arm of Christian compassion is long enough, to reach the weakest and the worst.

A casual talk on the steps of a lodging-house in one of the worst streets in London. The attitude of the women is too significant for words.

The Bright Side of the Picture

'The Potteries district,' writes the present missionary, 'is too well known to require any lengthy description, so I content myself with noting a few changes that have transpired during the year. The one-room fraternities are always flitting; I hardly ever meet the same people twice over. One lodging-house has closed of late, leaving eleven of the ordinary type – five for men and six for women. There are about 40 occupants in each. Laundries are on the increase. I have 50 on my list which are visited in rotation. The proprietors are extremely kind, and the employees mostly women and girls, greatly appreciate my efforts. House-to-house work in the Dale is trying to flesh and blood, but there is no better way of reaching the people. The moral conditions can only be described as awful. Spiritually, death reigns. The scenes I witness, the stories I hear, the difficulties I encounter, might easily fill one with despair. But there is a brighter side: the occasional victories, and the joy of seeing one-time desperadoes walking in newness of life. I am sometimes amazed at the converts – they are so enthusiastic, so brave, so impervious to criticism. Nothing can keep them down. The case of Lincoln Tom will furnish an illustration.

The smile of sinners who glory in their shame. The man wearing a light cap in the centre, who is reputed to be the biggest boozier in the Dale, and has spent 20 years in prison, has recently signed the Pledge. Note the jug and bottle in the hands of the women at the extreme left and right of the picture.

The Story of Lincoln Tom

There is no doubt about it – the conversion of Lincoln Tom (so called on account of his Lincolnshire birth) is as wonderful as anything recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. He says that from his earliest years he was a bundle of bad habits that eventually compassed his ruin, a mysterious circumstance for his father bore an excellent character, and his mother was a Christian of a pronounced type. However, Tom was the black sheep of the family – nine in number – most of whom were religiously inclined. His mother having died, Tom drifted towards the metropolis, where he found employment as a navy.

Here he became an easy prey to city life. He plunged into sin, and sacrificed everything, including his self-respect. The prayers of his saintly mother were lightly esteemed, and her wise counsels clean forgotten. Had forgotten too? Sated with worldly pleasures, and so involved in sin that escape seemed next to impossible, Tom suddenly awoke to the fact that he was a lost soul. The thought tormented him night and day. He was in the devil's clutches, and how to get free he knew not.

At this critical juncture I made his acquaintance, and hearing his story, urged him to stop drinking, and take advantage of the free grace of God. Seized with fear, and trembling with emotion, he fell on his knees, and vowed that, given one more chance, he would be a better man. His chance came when he attended a meeting at the People's Hall (on Freston, formerly Latimer, Road) a Sunday or two later. I had discoursed briefly on the Prodigal son, and was about to conclude when he left his seat, walked towards the platform, and collapsed under the power of the Word. There he lay in the throes of new birth, sobbing and praying as though his heart would break. Eventually he entered into peace; his heart glowed with a new joy; the sense of guilt and condemnation were gone. Verily, God had not forgotten!

That was two years ago; and despite manifold temptations and domestic martyrdom, he has stood like a rock – a shining witness to the Lord's upholding goodness. One of his first acts was to marry the woman with whom he had lived for 18 years. Unhappily, she has shown no sign as yet of sharing with him the life eternal; on the contrary, she sneers and scoffs at his religion, of which, however, she takes due advantage. That she may change for the better is the burden of his prayer, but he does not complain. He carries the cross of his own making with a kind of nobility that only comes by suffering bravely borne.

His sense of obligation to the Saviour is such, that he recently forfeited his job rather than toil on the Sabbath, while his 'goody-goodism', as the world calls it, has cost him two situations in two years. Nevertheless, he forges ahead, doing God's will according to his light, and bearing testimony at home, and in street and market, to the renewing and uplifting power of the sinner's Friend.

The Potteries district consists of 14 streets, which contain that number of public houses. Our picture shows a local pugilist, whose body is tattooed from head to waist, about to display his particular art.

The Transformation of Old Reuben

Another missionary, whose district adjoins the Potter's Field, has forwarded some interesting particulars of Old Reuben, the intimate friend of 'the Puncher', who figures prominently in Mr Begbie's wonderful book. He writes: 'Old Reuben is as well known in Notting Dale as any man could be for his wild career. Most of his life has been passed among the 'bottom lot', who quarrel and wrangle, drink and dance, scream and brawl, just as the mood takes them. He is no scholar, but he would like to forget much that he has learnt.

His nose was seldom out of the pewter for many hours together, and his temper was most violent. A rare fellow for street fights, he usually managed to come off little the worse, however serious the encounter. He has fought with 'the Puncher', a converted pugilist well known throughout the metropolis, with whom he now vies in extolling the Love that saved them from their sins. Old Reuben refers to himself as 'a queer card.' For a long period he fought shy of the Gospel, albeit his heart hankered after the best things. First he came to the Men's Club, then to the Temperance meeting, at which he took the pledge.

Mr Edward Pooley, alias 'Born-drunk Teddy.'

A Notable Miracle

Of the many trophies won for Christ from around the Potter's Field, Mr E Pooley, alias 'Born-drunk Teddy', is undoubtedly the most wonderful. It is the case of a man, comparable to a 'shrivelled potsherd', being remade into a vessel meet for the Master's use. We subjoin the details of his conversion as given by the missionary to whom Teddy, under God, largely owes the salvation of his soul.

Soon after I commenced work on the Potteries district, I was confronted by a man who introduced himself as 'Born-drunk Teddy'. He was of medium height, thick-set, with a brutal face that proclaimed his affinity with the devil. "Are you the missionary bloke?" he asked, at the same time dancing a jig with a view, I presume of making a favourable impression. Being satisfied as to my identity, he proceeded to ask if I could find him a job. I sent him with a note addressed to a friend, but Teddy was evidently nervous, for he called at two public houses and reached his destination 'three sheets in the wind.'

From the first I was strangely drawn to Teddy, and longed to influence him for the Lord Jesus. What is more, the interest was mutual, for in the early days of my lodging-house work, when receptions were often rough, Teddy would champion my cause, and woe to the man who dared to molest me or interrupt my meetings! He was a fearful fellow! His face was seldom without either bandage or sticking-plaster, sure evidence that he had figured in a street fight.

When money was scarce, and he was very dry, he would enter the nearest 'pub', dodge round the bars, and when the customers were not looking he would drain off their half empty glasses and calmly invite those who objected to settle the question outside! With all his wickedness, Teddy knew he was wrong, and often in my room at the People's Hall he has knelt with me, while I entreated him to stop his terrible doings and commended him to the Lord. He invariably said, "It's all right, man; I was born drunk and I will die drunk." Knowing his mother, I could well believe the first part of the statement; as for the rest, I fervently prayed that he might be 'born again' and die happy.

Things came to a crisis seven years ago. 'Dying for a drink,' as he would say, Teddy entered a public house. There were no customers in the bar, no partly filled jugs on the counter. Penniless and parched, he pleaded with the publican to stand him a drink. He was curtly refused. Just then the band of the Salvation Army passed on its way to the barracks. "Look here," said the publican, "you ought to be with that lot instead of bothering me." "Right you are, my hearty," replied Teddy, and off he went to the meeting, and, to the amazement of the whole neighbourhood, he became a new creature from that hour.

North Kensington Citizen, May 1939

The Rag Fair started because of the existence of the workhouse(s) in the locality many years ago. It was held in two residential streets far from public transport. Notting Dale workhouse (was) on the site of what is now Avondale Park Gardens (and) was supposed to be the cruellest in London. To it were sent the difficult cases from all other workhouses and the threat to send inmates to it was an effective method of discipline to others. The cruel prison discipline, with its task work and starvation diet, drove the inmates from its doors almost as soon as they had entered it. These unhappy vagrants drifted into (a number of) the common lodging-houses which had sprung up in the two streets of Rag Fair. These lodging-houses were nothing like the few remaining lodging-houses of today.

They were more like stables and their occupants treated like cattle. Dozens of these vagrants would pay 2d a night for the privilege of sleeping in their filthy rags on bare floors. They would be packed so close together as to resemble a dirty patchwork carpet. Those who could afford 4d slept in beds of packed straw which were packed so tightly as to convey an impression of one huge bed, covering the entire floor space of the room. These poor creatures would beg or earn a few coppers a day. Those lucky enough to get a few coppers over and above the amount necessary for their food and shelter would be on the look out for cheap second-hand clothing to replace their rags.

The First Stalls

To cater for the meagre clothing wants of these unfortunate lodging-house dwellers a couple of second-hand stalls arrived every Sunday morning and pitched outside the lodging-houses. For many years (those) rags were the only articles traded in at the Fair. Later came some second-hand furniture to be bought by the most fortunate ones who had secured some kind of work and who were planning to escape from the hell of the common lodging-house.

The infamous workhouse was closed 40 years ago. (1899. This isn't correct. The Mary Place Workhouse is on the 1916 Ordnance Survey map, but not on Life and Labour of the People of London 1888-1902.) Then Notting Dale was no longer a centre for vagrants. The lodging-house owners were soon without their clients and so were compelled to close the worst of their dens. The Sunday morning stall holders too had to improve and vary their stocks to meet the different demands of different people. This process of improvement went slowly on for years but the fair still remained a local market; few people outside the immediate neighbourhood ever visited it or indeed knew of its existence.

Metropolitan Market

Immediately after the war the character of the Fair changed rapidly. From a local gathering it developed into a metropolitan market, attracting customers from all over London. In 1919 the first political meeting was held. A young, lone Labour propagandist from Hammersmith came to have a look at the Fair. He instantly decided it would make a good meeting place and he then borrowed a box for a stand and held a successful meeting.

For ten years he constantly preached at the Fair to huge congregations. The fame of his meetings quickly spread through London, so much so that the Rag Fair became known to many strangers, not through the market but through its meeting. The traders of the Fair christened this young speaker 'Bishop of Rag Fair' and I know he was far more pleased and honoured with that title than he was, when years later, he became well known as FR West MP for North Kensington.

He wrote a political pamphlet contrasting the wealth of Mayfair with the poverty of North Kensington. This pamphlet is titled *Rag Fair to Rotten Row*. For ten years after the war the Fair grew and grew until it almost rivalled Petticoat Lane. The variety of the stocks extended until it included almost everything. Auctions of all kinds were held and tipsters and medicine men vied with each other to capture the crowds and their money.

Babble of the Market

For two hours (days?) each week these two normally quiet streets were drowned in the babble of a prosperous market. The tenants of the houses would often sit in groups at their wide opened windows watching the surging mass of humanity, as it pushed its way along a narrow lane in the centre of the road, between the double line of stalls. Not an inch of space was wasted in those streets. Even the front railings and front doorsteps were let to traders for 2s 6d a week. The railings covered with second-hand clothes often resembled a line of scarecrows. On the front doorsteps would be marshalled rows and rows of old

boots and shoes ready for inspection. Even the deep, dark basements would be utilised as shop windows. It was indeed the heyday of Rag Fair.

In 1929 Kensington Borough Council decided that the Fair was undesirable and a little later developed its plans for closing it. It was discontinued (after 40 years) because the traders were trading without licenses. The traders informed the Council that they were quite prepared to apply for licenses but the Council replied that it had no power to grant licenses for trading on Sundays as it would be contravening the Lord's Day Observance Act.

A year or so later all traders were warned and a little later still batches of them were fined for trading without a license. That was the beginning of the end. Gaps began to appear in the lines of stalls. There was a show of fight by some, who had the backing of many of the residents of the two streets but it only prolonged the agony. Fair, Rag Fair was doomed. The actual date of its death is like the actual date of its birth, unknown, for no one can definitely say when the last single stall failed to appear.