

Matchgirls Strike of 1888

The birth of the new Labour Movement

Presentation prepared by Samantha Johnson

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What is the connection between the 2012 Olympics, the 2017 BBC Proms and the 2017 UK U2 concert?



Bryant & May Match Factory



Events before the Strike

15 June 1888

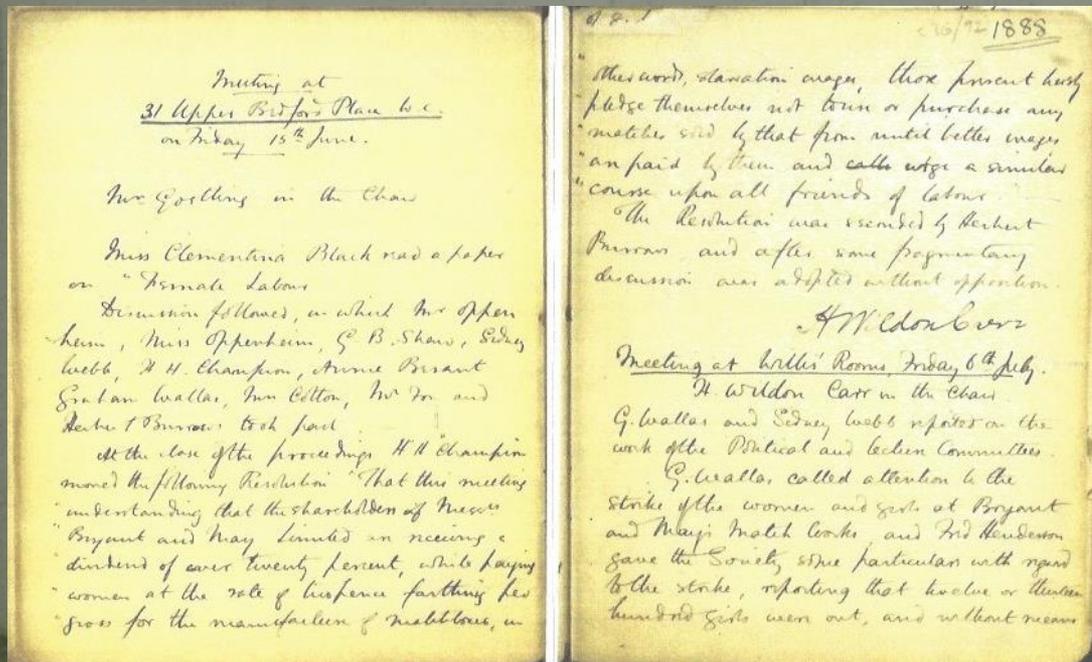
Fabian Society fateful meeting

- Clementina Black spoke on the state of female labour
- Henry Hyde Champion stated that Bryant & May took over 20% dividends and yet paid their workers 'starvation wages'. He proposed a motion to boycott the purchase of Bryant & May matches
- Herbert Burrows seconded the motion

16 June 1888

Annie Besant and Herbert Burrows approach the Bryant & May workers

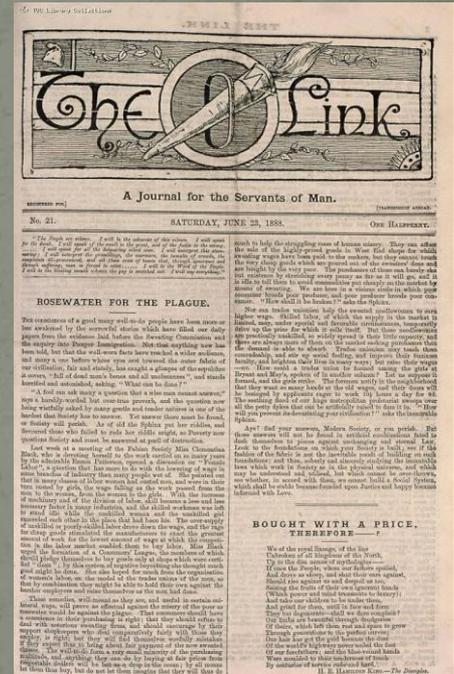
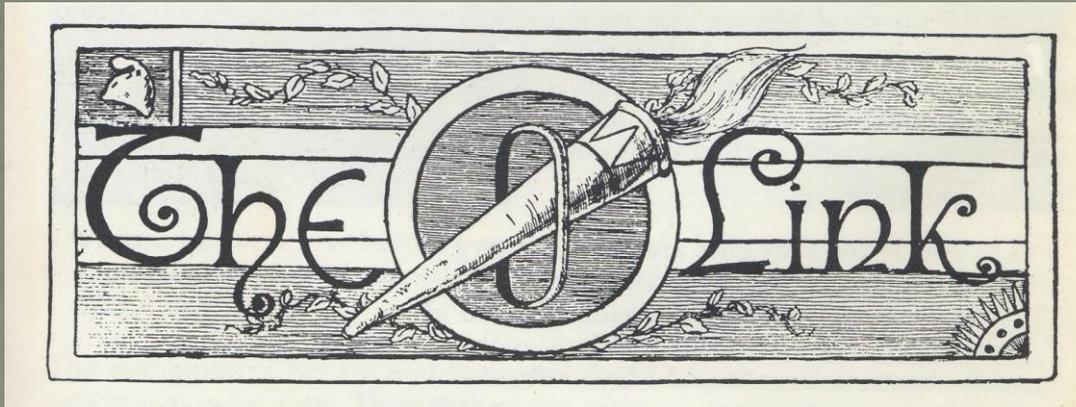
- They are asked about their experiences, conditions and pay
- They report poor working conditions, i.e. risk of phossy jaw and long hours, fines and low pay



23 June 1888

Failing a poet to hold up their conduct to the execration of posterity, enshrined in deathless verse, let us strive to touch their consciences, i.e. their pockets, and let us at least avoid being "partakers of their sins", by abstaining from using their commodities.

- Annie Besant writes an article in The Link, 'White Slavery in London'



Late June/Early July 1888

- Bryant & May threaten to sue Annie Besant for libel
- Bryant & May management demand that their employees sign to say the article was untrue but they refuse
- Three girls are dismissed by Bryant & May
- Letters are published in both The Star and The Pall Mall Gazette in support of the girls

Gaining Support

5 July 1888

- 1400 girls and women walk out on strike
- They write a letter to Annie Besant

“Dear Lady...you need not trouble yourself...you have spoken the truth. We will not sign...we hope you will not get into any trouble on our behalf”

6 July 1888

- 200 girls and women march to Bouverie Street to speak to Annie Besant
- A deputation of 3 were invited up to see her (Sarah Chapman, Mrs Naulls and Mrs Mary Cummings)
- Plans were initiated to form a Strike Committee

“You had spoke up for us and we weren’t going back on you”

8 July 1888

- First meeting held on Mile End Waste
- The Pall Mall Gazette and The Star provided positive publicity
- Charles Bradlaugh MP raises questions in the House in support of the strike

11 July 1888

- Annie Besant takes 56 girls and women to the House of Commons
- A deputation of 12 meet Robert Cunninghame Graham MP and Charles Conybeare MP
- The London Trades Council get involved



Winning

12 July 1888

- A Strike Committee is formed, which included Sarah Chapman
- Some of the committee take supper with Annie Besant

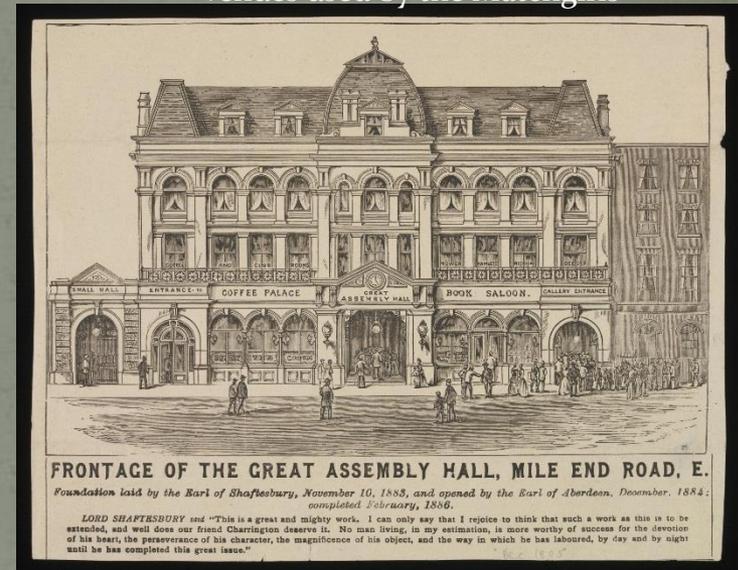
Charrington's Hall was one of the venues used by the Matchgirls

15 July 1888

- A jubilant crowd meet on the Mile End Waste
- Toynbee Hall add their support to the strike and a letter is published in The Times

16 July 1888

- The London Trades Council meet with the Bryant & May Directors
- The strike demands are discussed and agreed that a deputation of the Strike Committee could meet the Directors and put their case



© Victoria and Albert Museum London

17 July 1888

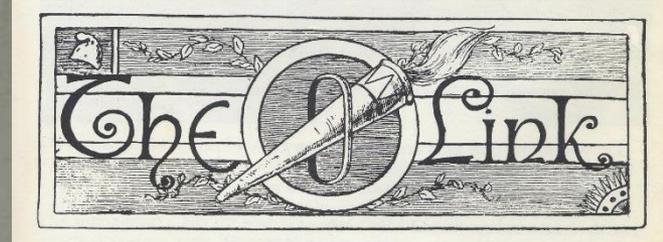
- The London Trades Council meet with the Bryant & May Directors plus the Strike Committee
- Their demands are met and terms agreed in principle
- The Strike Committee put the proposals to the rest of the girls and they enthusiastically approved
- The next day it was in all the papers

The Matchgirls Strike Committee and the Agreed Terms

The Committee:

- Mrs Naulls
- Mrs Mary Cummings
- Sarah Chapman
- Alice Francis
- Kate Slater
- Mary Driscoll
- Jane Wakeling
- Eliza Martin

These above went on to form the core of the New Matchmakers Union Committee



21st July 1888

On Monday the following members of the Council saw the Directors: Messrs. Cooper, Coulson, Davis, Drummond, Steadman, and George Shipton, Secretary. After a long discussion it was agreed that these gentlemen should bring a deputation of the match girls to meet the directors on the following day, when it was hoped that a settlement would be arrived at. Accordingly, on Tuesday, the Strike Committee—Mrs. Naulls, Mrs. Mary Cummings, Sarah Chapman, Alice Francis, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling, and Eliza Martin—accompanied the above-mentioned members of the London Trades' Council into the presence of the directors, and put their own case. It was finally agreed that (1) all fines should be abolished; (2) all deductions for paint, brushes, stamps, etc., should be put an end to; (3) the 3d. should be restored to the packers; (4) the "pennies" should be restored, or an equivalent advantage given in the system of payment of the boys who do the racking; (5) all grievances should be laid directly before the firm, ere any hostile action was taken; (6) all the girls to be taken back. The firm hoped the girls would form a union; they promised to see about providing a room for meals away from the work; and they also promised to provide barrows for carrying the boxes, which have hitherto been carried by young girls on their heads, to the great detriment of their hair and their spines.

27 July 1888

- The inaugural meeting of The Union of Women Match Makers takes place at Stepney Meeting Hall
- 12 women were elected, including Sarah Chapman (ringed in red in the photograph below)



Trades Union Congress

- Although Emma Paterson and Edith Simcox were the first women delegates at a TUC, in 1875, Sarah Chapman is among the very early days of women's involvement
- She was the first elected TUC representative from the Match Makers' Union
- Sarah was one of 77 delegates to attend the 1888 International TUC in London – she went with Annie Besant
- She may have attended other conferences but definitely also attended the 1890 TUC in Liverpool as she is recorded as having seconded a motion

Trades Union Congress

Other Key Players

ANNIE BESANT

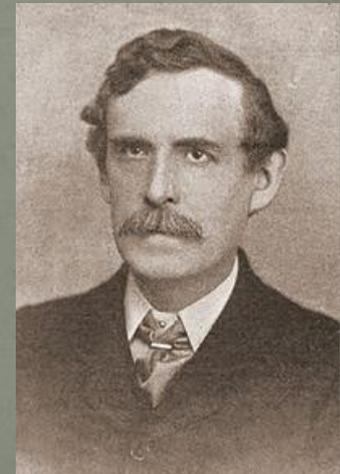
- b. 1st October 1847, Clapham, London
- d. 20th September 1933, Adyar, India
- British socialist, atheist, theosophist, women's rights activist
- Writer, orator and supporter of Irish and Indian self-rule
- Member of the Fabian Society
- **Secretary of the new Union of Women Matchmakers**

"Better to remain silent, better not even think, if you are not prepared to act"

"It has always been somewhat of a grievance to me that I was born in London, "within the sound of Bow Bells," when three quarters of my blood and all my heart are Irish"

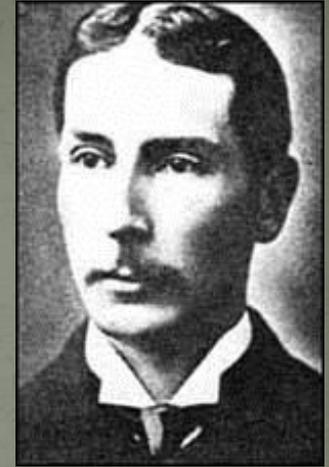
HERBERT BURROWS

- b. 12th June 1845, Redgrave, Suffolk
- d. 14th December 1922
- Founder member of Aristotelian Society, member of the Social Democratic Federation and the Theosophical Society
- **Treasurer of the new Union of Women Matchmakers**
- Unsuccessfully stood for Parliament in Haggerston 1908 and 1910



HENRY HYDE CHAMPION

- b. 22nd January 1859, India
- d. 30th April 1928, South Yarra, Australia
- A Christian Socialist, objected to Atheism
- Member of the Social Democratic Society – arrested after a demonstration in London
- Member of the Fabian Society
- Edited the Labour Elector, arguing for a new working class party
- Sowed a seed in the Matchgirls Strike - proposed a motion condemning Bryant and May at the 15th June meeting of the Fabian Society
- A leader in the 1889 London Dock Strike



SIDNEY WEBB

- b. 13th July, London 1859
- d. 13th October, Liphook, Hampshire, 1947
- Early member of the Fabian Society
- Married Beatrice Potter and together worked on several books, including 'The History of Trade Unionism'. Together founded the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
- In the 1923 election won the Seaham constituency
- In 1929 became Baron Passfield, after Passfield Corner, his Hampshire home
- Was at the first Fabian meeting to discuss Bryant and May



CLEMENTINA BLACK

- b. 27th July 1854, Brighton
- d. 19th December 1922, Brighton
- Writer, Fabian Society member, secretary of Women's Trade Union Association, and active in Women's Suffrage
- She had presented a paper on 'Female Labour' at the Fabian 15th June meeting, prior to the Bryant and May discussion
- Promoted 'equal pay for equal work' at the 1888 TUC



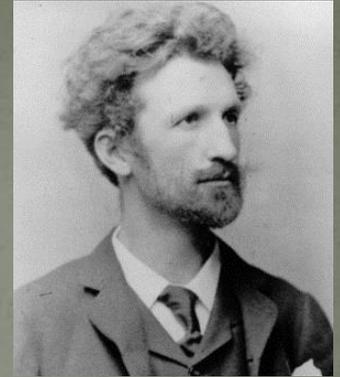
CHARLES BRADLAUGH, MP

- b. 26th September 1833, Hoxton, London
- d. 30th January 1891, London (buried Brookwood, Surrey)
- A fervent Atheist, he also spoke on birth control, unionism, and women's suffrage
- Founded the National Secular Society, 1866
- With Annie Besant published a pamphlet on birth control, resulting in both being charged in 1877 under the Obscene Publications Act. They were found guilty, but won their appeal
- Elected MP for Northampton 1880 but refused entry to the House of Commons because of his Atheism
 - On one occasion he tried to take his seat and was arrested and held on the Clock Tower, below Big Ben
 - In 1885, was finally allowed to take his seat
 - His Private Members Bill allowing a non-religious affirmation for new MPs, was passed in 1888
- In 1887, promoted an extension of the 'Truck Act', to protect workers
- Met with the Matchgirls and spoke in Parliament on their behalf, particularly about fines imposed on the girls by Bryant and May



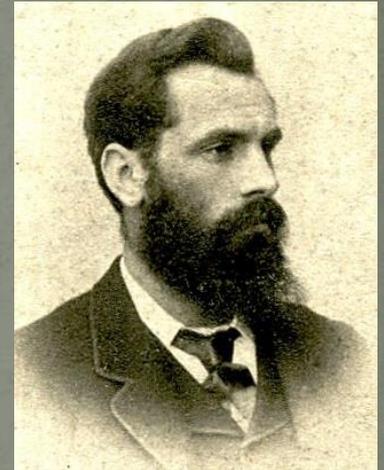
ROBERT CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM, MP

- b. 24th May 1852, Renfrewshire, Scotland
- d. 20th March 1936, Buenos Aires, (buried Scotland)
- An impressive socialist speaker, became an MP 1886 and supported abolition of the House of Lords, universal suffrage, nationalisation, and Scottish home rule
- First ever MP suspended from Parliament for swearing – the word ‘damn’
- Jailed for six weeks for involvement in a banned rally in Trafalgar Square (Bloody Sunday), 13th November 1887
- **Met with the Matchgirls deputation at Parliament**



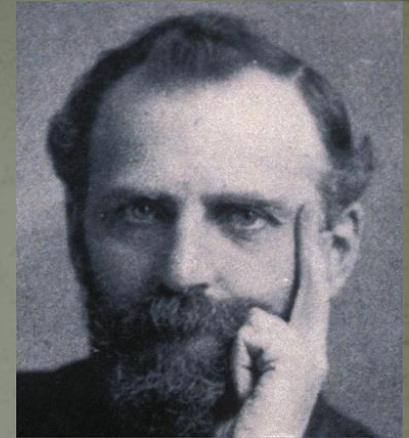
CHARLES CONYBEARE MP

- b. 1st June 1853, Kew, Surrey
- d. 18th February 1919, Biddenden, Kent
- A barrister and MP for Camborne, Cornwall 1885-95
- Actively involved in women's suffrage. In 1889 he was jailed in Derry for distributing bread to destitute evicted tenants
- **In July 1888, met with the Matchgirls delegation at Parliament, and spoke up for them in the House of Commons**
- A few days later, asked a Commons Questions about police rough handling of people at a meeting in Trafalgar Square, and about police accused of striking women



WILLIAM THOMAS STEAD

- b. 5th July, 1849, Embleton, Northumberland
- d. 12th April 1912 on the Titanic; never found
- Became Editor of the Pall Mall Gazette in 1883, and turned a gentleman's journal into a dynamic outrageous political organ
- In 1885 with the Salvation Army, he exposed London vice and child prostitution – known to the Government, but they had turned a blind eye. This led to the age of consent being raised from 13 to 16. Ironically he was prosecuted and jailed for three months after proving his point by staging the purchase of a young girl
- He was a friend of Annie Besant, despite his religious beliefs contrasting with her atheism, and the Pall Mall Gazette supported the Matchgirls

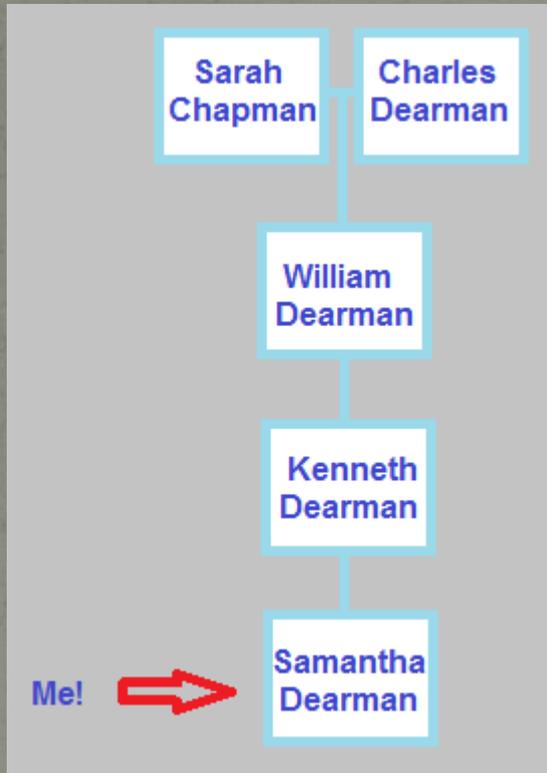


HELENA PETROVNA BLAVATSKY

- b. 31st July 1831, Dnieper, Russia
- d. 8th May 1891, London
- Born into an aristocratic Russian-German family, she grew up largely self-educated, and travelled the world
- Developed an interest in Spiritualism, and in 1875, co-founded the Theosophy Society
- After the Matchgirls Strike, Annie Besant had called for 'a drawing room' where the girls could relax, and in 1890, Helena Blavatsky funded the Working Women's Club – a home for working women at the East End of London



Discovering Sarah



Discovering my True Heritage

- In September 2016 stumbled upon a post on a family history forum dated 2003

Sarah Dearman nee Chapman

Posted: 05 Nov 2003 03:27PM

anna robinson ([View posts](#))

Classification: Query

Surnames: Chapman, Dearman, Hill

I've been looking for information about Sarah Chapman, one of the strike leaders of the match girls strike in 1888. I have found out that she got married in 1891 to Charles Henry Dearman. She died in 1945 - her death certificate was signed by her daughter Sarah who was by now called Sarah Hill. Sarah Hill lived in Bushey. I am particularly interested in contacting any relatives of theirs.

- Traced Anna to find her MA thesis was entitled, *'Neither Hidden Nor Condescended To: Overlooking Sarah Chapman'*
- Anna Robinson is now a Poet and Lecturer at University of East London
- Anna also discovered Sarah's grave during her research

A Sad Discovery



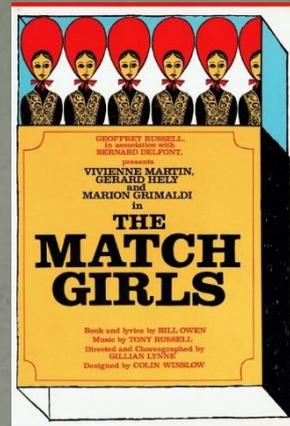
Sarah's grave (a grassy patch)

Grave reference: 147/D/114

Matchgirls on the Stage

1 March, 1965

- The Matchgirls by Bill Owen
- Globe Theatre London



5 July 1966

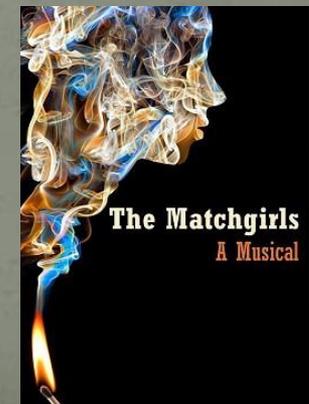
- Strike A Light by Joyce Adcock
- Piccadilly Theatre London



Bill Owen's version of the play proved the more popular and has been reproduced many times since 1965, however, one notable performance formed part of the Matchgirls Festival and marked the 125th anniversary of the strike:

3rd-5th July 2013

- The Matchgirls by Bill Owen (Produced by Dumbwise Theatre, Red Ladder Theatre and Unite the Union)
- Wiltons Music Hall London



Here is the connection between the 2012 Olympics, the 2017 BBC Proms and the 2017 UK U2 concert



2012 Olympics

25 July 2012

- Lemn Sissay commissioned to write a poem
- ‘Spark Catchers’ is a tribute to the Matchgirls, inspired by Annie Besant’s quote (Slide 5):

*Failing a poet to hold up their conduct
to the execration of posterity*

- Permanent physical landmark at the Olympic Park



Spark Catchers

Tide twists on the Thames and lifts the Lea to the brim of Bow
Where shoals of sirens work by way of the waves.
At the fire factory the fortress of flames

In tidal shifts East London Lampades made
Millions of matches that lit candles for the well-to-do
And the ne'er-do-well to do alike. Strike.

The greatest threat to their lives was
The sulferuous spite filled spit of diablo
The molten madness of a spark

They became spark catchers and on the word “strike”
a parched arched woman would dive
With hand outstretched to catch the light.

And Land like a crouching tiger with fist high
Holding the malevolent flare tight
'til it became an ash dot in the palm. Strike.

The women applauded the magnificent grace
The skill it took, the pirouette in mid air
The precision, perfection and the peace.

Beneath stars by the bending bridge of Bow
In the silver sheen of a phosphorous moon
They practised Spark Catching.

“The fist the earth the spark it’s core
The fist the body the spark it’s heart”
The Matchmakers march. Strike.

Lampades The Torch bearers
The Catchers of light.
Sparks fly Matchmakers strike.

A Recent U2 Concert

8 July 2017

- U2 perform Joshua Tree 2017 Tour at Twickenham Stadium
- In conjunction with Herstory, Bono wanted to celebrate some great women pioneers
- The track, *Ultraviolet (Light My Way)* was performed in front of a giant screen with pictures of significant women
- Matchgirls are shown on the left in the photograph of the stage below



This Year's BBC Proms

30 Aug 2017, Royal Albert Hall

- Hannah Kendall inspired by Lemn Sissay's poem
- Composes 'Spark Catchers', a tribute to the Matchgirls
- The World Premiere was performed as part of Prom 62 the BBC Proms at The Royal Albert Hall



Yes, the connection was The Matchgirls!



Sarah Chapman



1862 - 1945