

MATCHGIRLS STORIES

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1. The Matchgirls and Sarah Chapman's Role

On Friday 15th June 1888, the Fabian Society met at 31 Upper Bedford Place, London, for Mrs Clementina Black's talk on 'Female Labour'. Following this, Henry Hyde Champion proposed a resolution contrasting the income of shareholders of Bryant and May with the factory worker's pitiful pay and awful working conditions. Thus, were sown the seeds of the Matchgirls Strike. The following four weeks saw the strike supported by the Fabians, particularly by Annie Besant; by MPs Bradlaugh, Conybeare, and Cunninghame Graham, who met a delegation of Girls in the Parliamentary Lobby and raised questions in the House; and by the Press, London Trades Council and Toynbee Hall. On 17th July, the Directors agreed terms with the Girls and the Strike was over. The Matchgirls were the vanguard of new unionism, and inspired the 1889 Dockers Strike.

Sarah Chapman was brought up with six siblings in Swan Court, just off Mile End Road, two miles from the Bryant and May factory. She became a leader in the Strike. After around 200 workers marched down Fleet Street, she was one of three women nominated to go to Annie Besant's office. Sarah was one of the Strike Committee that negotiated with the Bryant and May Directors. Following the Strike, Sarah went on to represent their new Union at the 1888 and 1890 TUC, where she seconded a motion to extend protection under the Truck Acts.

2. Issues Over Sarah Chapman's Grave

Sarah is the Great Grandmother of Samantha Johnson from Southampton. It was only on September 2016 that Sam discovered Sarah's role in the Strike. Sarah died in 1945, and Sam found her grave to be an unmarked paupers' plot, a mere grassy patch (photo below) in Manor Park Cemetery, Forest Gate London. Sam wants to preserve and mark her grave, not just for family reasons, but also to recognise Sarah's role in Labour history.



Sarah was a forgotten woman, hidden from the public eye. Louise Raw's 2009 book mentions her but so little that she doesn't warrant an entry in the index. Sam knew of Sarah but not the Matchgirl connection until she saw a request for information on an Ancestry.co.uk Message Board. The request came from Anna Robinson, a poet, who Sam met for the first time in November 2016. Anna had made Sarah the subject of her MA thesis in 2004, '*Neither Hidden Nor Condescended To: Overlooking Sarah Chapman*'. This was not published but is held in the Bishopsgate Institute. Anna had also located Sarah's grave.

The difficulty is that to provide more burial space, the Cemetery (a private business, not municipal) has chosen the technique of 'mounding' to do this. Early graves are covered by soil and new burials put on top. The graves of Sarah's husband and daughter have already been lost to 'mounding'. Unlike municipal cemeteries, Manor Park does not keep a surveyed record of the early 'mounded' graves, and they were unable to direct Sam to either of the graves.

The Cemetery says that Sarah's area will not be mounded for maybe five to ten years, but a nearby area is currently cordoned off for imminent work. The Cemetery has recently conceded that a two-foot high memorial can be put on the grave. They have offered the option of buying a plot above Sarah when mounding happens. However, as they do not keep any surveyed records of the earlier graves, it is questionable how they can guarantee to be exactly over her grave. Nor is the technical process of mounding clear. They say that digging the new graves will not disturb those below (some are multiple burials) but there appears to be no external monitoring.

Sam does not want the grave to be 'mounded', and thinks Sarah deserves a significant memorial. Here is a link to our petition to save the grave: goo.gl/Q41uLF

3. The Matchgirls and the Arts - Theatre, Poetry, Music, Sculpture

The Matchgirls Strike has inspired the arts. There were two West End plays both written in the 1960's. They were both musicals and continue to be performed today in various guises. Tantalisingly, one by Joyce Adcock had the lead character as Sarah Chapman but Sarah's family haven't yet been able to find out why. The second, more successful, was by Bill Owen. There was a performance of this in 2013 at the old Wilton's Music Hall in London, to mark the 125th Anniversary of the Strike. The most recent reincarnation was in April 2017 at the Barn Theatre, Welwyn Garden City.

Then there is poetry. In 2012, the London Olympic Committee commissioned Lemn Sissay to write a poem as part of the permanent arts at the site. He was inspired by what he read about the Matchgirls (the factory where the strike took place still stands near the Olympic Park), and his poem, *The Spark Catchers* is now engraved on a fence there. Lemn can be seen talking about it on YouTube, 3rd April 2012:

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Vi_a0Xkddk), and to read it, go to Proletarian Poetry and look him up in their index of poets:

(<https://proletarianpoetry.com/2017/06/27/spark-catchers-by-lemn-sissay/>).

Modern music has been composed. Lemn's poem inspired a young composer, Hannah Kendall, to write a piece - also called *The Spark Catchers* - interpreting his words into music. It was premiered at the London BBC Proms in 2017. Sam and her husband had the good fortune to be there. To hear it, go to YouTube:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbfW87tL9a8>).

Now a sculpture. Sam and her husband are in discussion with an internationally known sculptor who is interested in producing a tribute to the Matchgirls. The latter could be located on or near the factory (now the Bow Quarter dwellings) or, for example, at Mile End Waste, where some strike meetings took place.

4. School Curriculum

Its high time that the important story of the Matchgirls is put back in the school curriculum. Do you know of anyone in the education system that could help make this happen?

5. Future - A New Stage or Screen Production?

Is it possible to bring to life a modern musical, or film? We have the following players:

- Oppressed workers, mostly girls, some married, some boys, suffering work related illness - 'white slaves' as Annie Besant called them;
- The socialist reformers, professionals, middle and upper class, determined to bring about change, but disputing over the methods to achieve this;
- The MPs. Colourful characters ready to stand by their views, and to take part in public protests, to the point of being banned from Parliament or jailed;
- The supporting paper editors, particularly W T Stead who was jailed for his method of revealing child prostitution;
- The Bryant and May Directors and their efforts to suppress the action, their erection of the Gladstone statue (red handed to this day with the girls 'blood');
- The triumph, the new Matchworkers' Union;
- Sarah Chapman's experience at the (to her) foreign world of the TUC;
- The discovery of Sarah's history and her unmarked grave;
- The battle to save it, with a private commercial cemetery unfettered by municipal control.

Over fifty years on from the first musicals, it is time for a modern production? Do you know anyone that might be interested in bringing their skills to bear on this?

6. The 2018 Anniversaries

2018 will see two significant anniversaries in trades union and the Labour Movement history; the 150th anniversary of the TUC in June and the 130th anniversary of the Matchgirls victory over Bryant and May in July.