

STRIKING A LIGHT

Louise Raw, whose book on the ‘matchgirls’ strike of 1888 is out now, hails the East End women who took on a ruthless cartel and changed the course of British labour history



IN THE SUMMER of 1888, fourteen hundred workers, mostly young women and girls, walked out of an East End match factory and into the history books.

Before their strike, Bryant & May’s matchwomen were dismissed as a “rough set of girls” and the “lowest strata of society”. Yet, during the dispute, questions were asked in Parliament, and thundering editorials appeared in *The Times*. Just holding shares in the match firm tarnished the reputations of distinguished politicians and clergymen.

The women even earned the dubious accolade of receiving a threatening letter from Jack the Ripper, or someone claiming to be him.

The ‘matchgirls’ continue to exert a powerful hold over the public imagination to this day – plays and musicals written about them in the 1960s are still performed.

The women certainly were a colourful and vibrant presence on the East End streets. Even out of work, accounts tell us that the matchgirl could be distinguished by the “freedom of her walk, shrillness of her laugh and number of her ‘friends’, as well as the bright clothes, fringed

hairstyles and high-heeled boots they favoured. Appearance was important – the women paid into ‘feather clubs’ to buy and share between them the biggest hats they could find, trimmed with the largest feathers.

Even when not seen they were heard – many an East End night echoed to “Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay,” and “Knocked ‘em in the Old Kent Road” from matchwomen on evenings out. “They seem to know by heart the words of all the popular music hall songs of the day”, sighed one local magistrate.

The women received a threatening letter from someone claiming to be Jack the Ripper

However, in June 1888, an incendiary article by an East End woman of a very different class – but no less notoriety – revealed the horrors of the women’s working lives.

Annie Besant’s life was an extraordinary *fin de siècle* search for meaning, encompassing devout Christianity and marriage to a clergyman and loss of faith. It also comprised relationships with famous, if not notorious men like scandalously-atheist MP, Charles Bradlaugh, and George Bernard Shaw. Besant ended her life as the de facto leader of a new religion and a venerated figure in India, where her body was cremated on a funeral pyre.

The first East Enders

The term 'East Ender' was coined in the 1880s – as an **insult**. "A shabby man from Paddington... might (be) one of the respectable poor. But the same man coming from Bethnal Green... was an 'East Ender', the bug powder must be reached for, and the spoons locked up."

Surrounded by water on three sides, East London was an obvious location for **docks**, first established in the 1700s.

Construction of ultimately unprofitable St Katherine's Dock alone **displaced 11,300 people**, destroying ancient buildings.

The coming of steam trains allowed more affluent workers to move out into new suburbs from the 1860s, leaving behind "...**a hell of poverty**".

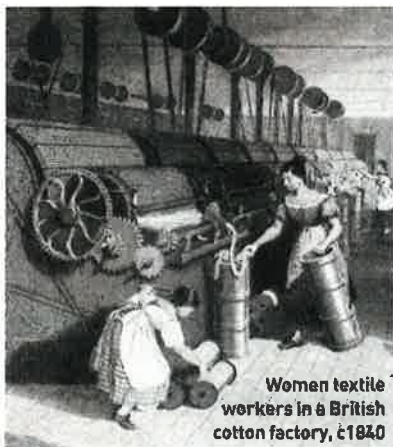
Charles Dickens called the neglect of the East End poor "wholesale murder". **Cholera** killed thousands of people in 1866 alone.

Though some middle-class Londoners living close to the 'mysterious East' apparently could not find it on a map, there was an insatiable appetite for sensational reports from this **'exotic' underworld**.

In 1884 extreme poverty in the East End was considered "a great danger to the Commonwealth". It became "quite the proper thing to do to go down East", and **charitable missions** and settlements were established.

Volunteers included unmarried women, often regarded by Victorian society as "superfluous", who "made middle-class homes in the slums".

East End girls were considered too rough for domestic service, and many worked **in factories**. Women were vital to industrialisation – by 1838, 77 per cent of workers in textile factories were female, earning half the male wage – but they were often accused of prostitution.



Women textile workers in a British cotton factory, c1840

In 1877 she was tried for 'obscene libel' in connection with a campaign to teach contraceptive methods to poor East End women. She narrowly escaped prison, and the press had a field day with the spectacle of a young, attractive woman, the estranged wife of a clergyman, being tried for obscenity.

In the 1880s Besant became a socialist after meeting Shaw, joining the Fabian Society of which he was a key member. At a Fabian meeting in June 1888, she first heard about conditions at Bryant & May's, and decided to investigate. Interviewing a handful of women outside the factory, she published her findings in political paper *The Link* under the resounding title 'White Slavery in London'.

By this time the firm, controlled by sons of founder William Bryant, was a powerful player in both domestic and export markets, and a household name. By acting as a cartel, it had driven wages down so far that they were lower in 1888 than ten years previously. Besant found the truth of this written on the bodies of the workers: the youngest, malnourished while developing physically, were small and frail.

One 16-year-old earned four shillings a week; after rent, she could afford to eat only bread for every meal. The "sole bit of colour" in her life was provided by rare and longed-for occasions when someone would "stand treat" to the Paragon music hall in Mile End.

Bryant & May imposed fines on the women when matches accidentally caught fire, for having dirty feet, even for simply talking to one another. One girl was fined for altering a machine to prevent it cutting her hand, and told to look after the machinery and "never mind your fingers". Her workmate subsequently had her finger cut off by the same machine, and was left unable to work and penniless.

A grisly disease

What the women feared most was 'Phossy jaw', the grisly industrial disease of matchmaking. Ingesting even a small amount of white phosphorus could cause vomiting. The effects of full-blown poisoning were horrific: beginning with toothache and a swollen



Annie Besant in 1888. Was she a mere bit-part player in the matchgirls strike?

face, the disease would rot the lower jaw, forcing pieces of bone the size of peas out through 'putrid abscesses' in the gums, filled with such evil-smelling puss that even loved ones couldn't bear the odour. Disfigurement and agonising death could result. Bryant & May's sole precaution seems to have been to dismiss anyone with a swollen face, or force women to have all their teeth pulled: it was alleged that a pregnant matchwoman who refused, fearing a miscarriage from shock, was sacked.

All in all, Besant concluded, 'chattel slaves' would have been better off than the unfortunate matchwomen.

The exposé was published on 23 June 1888, and it is perhaps not surprising that when the matchwomen walked out on strike days later Besant was widely assumed to be behind it; so much so that she has, for 121 years, been regarded as the strike's leader.

That the women won the dispute, going on to form the largest union of women and girls in the country, was remarkable, given the power of their employers and considering that many unions would not let women join. The TUC's Henry Broadhurst was not alone in urging the return of women to "their proper sphere at home".

Just as remarkable was the impact the strike had on the matchwomen's fellow workers. Following their victory a wave of strikes, including 1889's Great Dock Strike, swept the country. Tens of thousands of the most exploited workers formed new unions to fight for decent wages and conditions, sowing the seeds of the modern labour movement, and Labour Party.

However, because middle-class socialists rather than the workers themselves supposedly led the matchwomen's strike, some historians dismiss it as a mere footnote in history with no influence on what followed. The lives of the women themselves, unlike those of the dockers' leaders or indeed Annie Besant, were not thought worthy of further study. They seemed destined to remain silent, nameless faces looking solemnly out from a black and white photograph, frozen forever in one moment in time – until now.

Recent research has, however, uncovered new truths about the strike, proving beyond doubt that the workers themselves were the driving force behind the walkout – and that their



An illustration showing John Burns addressing striking dockers, East and West India docks, 1889

actions altered the course of British labour history.

The strike actually began in response to management bullying, not any urging by Besant. Bryant & May, furious at Besant's article, demanded that the women sign a statement saying that they were happy and well-treated. The women refused, and warned Besant in a note delivered to her home: "Dear Lady they have been trying to get the poor girls to say it is all lies that has been printed and to sign a paper... we will not sign... We hope you will not get into any trouble on our behalf as what you have spoken is quite true."

Downing tools

Bryant & May did not stop there, next making an example of one girl they believed had spoken to Besant, a "pale little person in black" who was popular with her workmates. When she was sacked, her workmates immediately downed tools and followed her. Quickly assembling a picket line at the gates, they elected six women to put their terms: reinstatement of their colleague, an end to fines, and a dining room – currently the women had to eat in the work rooms and toxic particles settling on food was a factor in 'Phossy jaw'. Bryant & May responded by threatening the strikers with dismissal, but the "spirit of revolt against cruel oppression" had been ignited; they would not go back.

One local paper, initially siding with the 'gentlemen' employers, disapprovingly noted: "the ... streets and thoroughfares of East London... swarmed with the girls... (who) marched up and down the streets soliciting coppers, quite willing to pour their tale of hardships into every sympathetic ear. On Tuesday

morning... a vanload of pink roses drew up... sent down – by whom it did not transpire – to be worn by the strikers as badges."

By the end of the first week the "whole factory was lying idle..." "Eleven hundred employees paraded the streets in the neighbourhood of Bow on Thursday and Friday. A large number of police have had to be stationed in the neighbourhood."

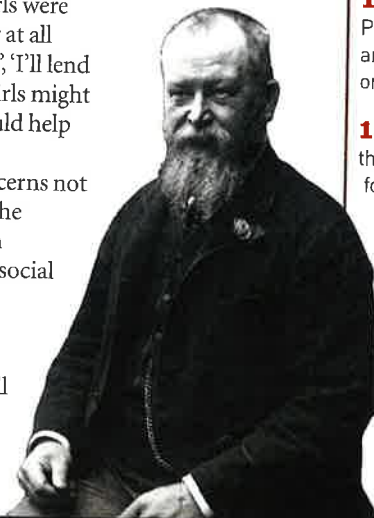
Annie Besant's own accounts show that she was working upstairs in her offices four days after the walkout began, when a group of matchwomen arrived asking for her. Her first concern was they were blocking the pavement below, but she finally agreed to talk to three "respectable" looking matchwomen – and only then discovered that they were on strike.

Besant was not closely monitoring, let alone directing, events. And she never claimed so, insisting: "With regard to the charge that we instigated the strike... this statement is absolutely false, nor were we, as asserted, near the factory on the day it commenced." In fact she thought striking was a mistake, and said so in *The Link*.

The women went several days without money but maintained a cheerful solidarity: "...the girls were determined to stand together at all costs. 'I can pawn this for you', 'I'll lend you that', in every direction girls might be seen plotting how they could help one another..."

The strike crystallised concerns not only about 'factory girls' but the exploitation of the new urban working poor at a time when social revolution seemed a genuine possibility. There were accusations of hypocrisy: "Messrs Bryant & May are well

Trade unionist Henry Broadhurst opposed those who spoke up for working women



Timeline

The fight for workers' rights

1788 The first recorded all-female union, of Leicester spinners, numbers some 18,500.

1799–1824 It becomes illegal for working people to 'combine' together for better pay and conditions.

1825 After these 'Combination Acts' are repealed in 1824, there is a wave of strikes. So another Combination Act is passed in 1825.

1834 Six men, the so-called 'Tolpuddle Martyrs', are deported to Australia for joining a union.

1837 The Chartist movement calls for all men to have the vote – but women are still active and influential in the movement.

1846 An employer has striking women arrested and sentenced to hard labour.

1848 Chartist leaders are arrested after a huge demonstration in London in 1848. The movement begins to decline.



Chartists demonstrate in London, 1848

1850–1870 'New model' unions from the 1850s to 1870s represent a minority of skilled workers. Low-paid women are seen as unwelcome competition.

1870 When middle-class women begin to appear at the TUC to speak for working women, Henry Broadhurst has them removed, as "under the influence of emotion they might vote for things they would regret in cooler moments".

1874 Organisations like the Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL) are established in 1874 and are generally organised outside the labour movement.

1888 Outbreaks of industrial action by the most exploited workers begins to force the country to "take their predicament and determination seriously".

1890 By 1890, average working-class life expectancy is 27 years. It is estimated that half of the children of the poor die before they are five.

known Liberals and have... paraded their Liberalism before the world... more than one shareholder is a well-known member of parliament who... profess to champion the cause of the poor and the oppressed. How could they meet their constituents with large dividends in their pockets... when their employees in the east of London existed on next to starvation wages?"

As pressure grew, the directors had to accept that a mere "set of girls" had humbled them, and reluctantly conceded to their demands.

The Star enthused over the "magnificent" victory, "won without preparation – without organisation – without funds... a turning point in the history of our industrial development."

Who, then, really led the strike? An account from 1888 named a young matchwoman called Eliza as "one of the leaders...", and in 1999, a list of suggested 'ringleaders' was found in company archives, naming five women: Eliza Martin, Alice Francis, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll and Jane Wakeling.

After an extensive search for descendants, Eliza Martin's grandchildren were finally traced and interviewed. Though Eliza had died in middle age and possibly tragic circumstances, they had learned about her from her children, their own father, aunts and uncles. Grandson Jim Best recalled seeing a photograph of the strike committee in a local newspaper in the 1980s: "I remember my dad saying, 'that's your nan'. She'd told dad

she and her mates were involved in the strike... We're proud of that."

Mary Driscoll's granddaughter, Joan Harris, was also found. She was extremely close to her grandmother and recalled her talking about conditions in the factory and 'Phossy jaw'.

Historians have said that matchwomen were too different from dockers to have influenced their strike. Yet Driscoll was a docker's daughter and later wife. Eliza Martin's brother-in-law and nephews were dockers. As Jim Best put it, and as Census records confirm, matchwomen and dockers were "the same people" from the same East End streets and families.

Records also show that the dockers contacted the matchwomen's union for advice after their victory, and that there was an attempted strike on the docks just weeks later. Once the 1889 Dock Strike had begun, famous orator John Burns, later an MP, urged a mass meeting of tens of thousands to "...stand shoulder to shoulder. Remember the matchgirls, who won their strike and formed a union".

The Star described the victorious procession marking the dockers' victory: "...up came the dockers... Then a large contingent of women... match-makers, among others, advanced like a moving rainbow, for they all wore the huge feathers of many colours which the East End lass loves to sport when she is out for the day".

In 1940 Ernest Bevin wrote to surviving dock strikers about the importance of their action: "Fifty years



Matchgirls at work at Bryant & May's, c1888, before their famous strike

ago... you were among those who were involved in... a great industrial upheaval – virtually a revolution against poverty, tyranny and intolerable conditions. You little thought during those weeks... that you were laying the foundation of a great Industrial Movement".

We must now accept this to have been equally true of those other remarkable East Enders, the Bryant & May matchwomen. **II**

Dr Louise Raw writes and speaks on labour, the East End, and women's history. She has appeared on programmes including *Who Do You Think You Are?*, *GMTV*, and *The Worst Jobs in History*

JOURNEYS

Books

► **Striking A Light: The Truth About The Match Girls Strike And The Women Behind It** by Louise Raw (*Hambledon Cont.*, March 2009)

► To buy **Striking A Light** from **BBC History Bookstore** for **£66.50** (RRP £70) turn to page 72

On the podcast

Louise Raw talks about her research on April Pod 1 (online from 2 April) ► www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast.asp

"We owe them a debt of gratitude"

Louise Raw describes her fascinating hunt for the real matchwomen

"I'd always wondered about the best-known photograph of the matchwomen (left). Who were these waif-like figures, and what happened to them after the strike? Had they gone on to raise families, or had 'Phossy jaw' or one of the early deaths that claimed so many poor East End women got them first?"

I would spend more than ten

fascinating, frustrating years pursuing the matchwomen through the pages of history and East End memory. Appeals for descendants to come forward – through newspaper articles, radio and public talks about the matchwomen – made little progress. I was preparing to give up the search when I found myself talking to the grandchildren of women who were working at Bryant & May's in 1888.

Through their family memories my remarkable

interviewees could take me from the Victorian East End, to the Blitz, to the present day, and it was a privilege to hear their stories. Then, beyond my expectations, we were able to prove that two of the grandmothers were on the strike committee, and named on Bryant & May's list of 'troublemakers' – the very women I believe were the true leaders of the strike. They went on to have 14 surviving children between them, and were much loved by their

families. Through their courage and determination, they were also the mothers of the modern trade union movement. We sometimes forget the battles that were fought for the most basic workers' rights, but we owe them, and so many like them, a debt of gratitude."



Louise Raw



Members of the Union of Women Matchmakers, c1888