

## Women of the Well Hall Estate in World War 1

I undertook most of the research for this talk when I was a volunteer with the Heritage Centre in 2015 focussing on the lives of women during WW1.

The Well Hall Estate - now known as The Progress Estate - was conceived, designed, built and occupied within the space of twelve months during the war. It was intended solely for the families of workers at the Arsenal. There were about 1300 dwellings in all, both houses and flats. The men were there because they all worked at the Arsenal but it was mainly the women who would spend more time on the estate. Their history is not easy to uncover but I have been able to find out about some individuals and some groups of women to tell their story.

In March 1915 the estate was visited by Queen Mary who met four local residents. In a Class 1 house she met Mrs Eliza Mabb. The newspaper reported that 'with a true mother's instinct the Queen delighted Mrs Mabb by sympathetic questions about her boys'. It went on to paint an image of the Queen as 'a model housewife' who clearly appreciated the cleanliness and tidiness of Eliza Mabb's home. Probably a full time housewife, Eliza herself was involved in activities on the estate, helping for instance at the tenant's dance and social in January 1917.

Women who were not working were able to attend afternoon meetings of the Pioneer Circle. This group supported The Labour Party, but their other aims included fund raising and self education. The women met weekly to discuss items of topical interest in the house of their secretary Rhoda Baillie.

They covered a range of issues from food shortages to pioneers of the past and from the need for communal kitchens to Venereal Disease. When they discussed education they visited the Rachel MacMillan Baby Camp in Deptford. They were also concerned with the education of the 5 - 12 year olds and campaigned for schools on the estate. The nearest schools, Deansfield and The Gordon, had needed temporary classrooms in the playground to accommodate hundreds of children joining in autumn 1915

The Pioneer Circle women began making contributions to an inquiry on house planning organised by an Association in South Wales. One of their comments was that they would like to see more built in furniture - fitment (i.e.fitted) furniture - to minimise the problem of dust and also of lifting and moving heavy items. There are other insights into what the women may have thought the houses including a lengthy article in the Pioneer newspaper.

There were complaints about aspects of the scullery and living room. For instance, there was no room in the scullery for a wringer or a table. There were however very positive comments about the deep porcelain sink and the washable tiles and paintwork; the copper with its tap; and the coal cupboard and ventilated larder.

The women of the Pioneer Circle condemned washing-day 'as one of the most exhausting of the house-wifely work days' and lamented the fact that centralised wash houses and kitchens were not provided on the estate.

A Tenants Association was started in August 1915 and this Association campaigned about the rents, the tenancy conditions and facilities. Before the provision of a Tenants Hall they met in the open air on Lovelace Green.

It had something of an ethos of equal opportunities: men and women were admitted on the same terms. Like many forward thinkers of the time, they seem to have held the view that although housework was the province of women this role should be properly recognised, acknowledged and valued.



Lovelace Green

There were some women on the estate who worked. One woman who worked part time at the Arsenal along with her husband was Eda Kate Biddlecombe. We know about this because of the wonderful diary her teenage daughter, Eda, wrote during the first six months of 1918. Because both her parents worked at the Arsenal, Eda undertook many household chores - cleaning, cooking and shopping. Her help was vital in allowing both her parents to work.

In Edie's diary, of all her chores shopping is mentioned the most. Food shortages, especially of bacon, margarine and cheese had become quite serious at the beginning of

1918 and queuing when shopping was a problem. Brother Tom was kept off school to help but that led to trouble. Mother got a letter from the authorities and had to appear in court because of his repeated absences. Fortunately the case was dismissed. Once rationing was introduced on February 25th 1918 things became easier.



Eda and her sibings

The war years had an impact on the estate other than through food shortages a and indeed a zeppelin raid. A number of families on the estate were affected by the death of a family member in the fighting. Susan Capon was one of the first bereaved woman on the estate. Her son Victor was 'killed in action' in July 1916. One of twelve children he was presumably no less missed.

But of course some aspects of life went on as usual during the war. There were seventy six babies from the estate baptised at St John's, Eltham, during the period of the war and one of the official photos of the estates captures a moment in the life of one of recently baptised Ronald Beckett with his mother. Her husband was an engineer and after the war I believe they ran a motorcycle business in Sherard Rd, Eltham.



### The Beckett's House on Well Hall Road

There are many more stories that could be told of the estate and it's people from this short period of its history and once the 1921 census is available to consult we will be able to learn even more about them.

Lynne Dixon  
March 2021