

Salter [*née* Brown], Ada

(1866–1942)

Sybil Oldfield

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38531>

Published in print: 23 September 2004

Published online: 23 September 2004

Salter [*née* Brown], Ada (1866–1942), socialist and pacifist, was born on 20 July 1866 at Raunds, Northamptonshire, the second daughter of the three daughters and a son of Samuel Brown, a farmer, and his wife, Sarah Ekins, both of them Wesleyan Methodists. In her late twenties she left her comfortable home to join the West London Mission, at first out of a spirit of religious evangelism, but once there she developed a sense of serious social purpose. In 1897 she transferred to the Bermondsey settlement, recently founded by John Scott Lidgett, as the worker in charge of girls' clubs. The girls were 'rough and tough'—rag-pickers, wood-choppers, tin smiths in the local factories, who sometimes arrived drunk at the club. Her gentleness and affectionate concern for them won many of them over to her own values of kindness and a responsiveness to beauty, even in their grim world.

In 1899 Ada Brown startled her friends and family by becoming engaged to a revolutionist five years younger than she—the settlement's militant socialist, pacifist, agnostic teetotaler, Dr Alfred Salter (1873–1945). Very soon she was as enthusiastic as he for radical political, social, and economic change in a Britain of poverty and chronic unemployment. On 22 August 1900 they were married. As the wife of a poor people's doctor, who charged only 6d. (or even nothing) for a consultation, Ada Salter willingly led a life of altruistic self-denial herself. They first lived in two rooms above the surgery in Jamaica Road, and later moved to 5 Storks Road, Bermondsey, whose unlovely situation and aspect Ada so startlingly transformed that thirty years later she was invited to write in *The Lady* in 1940 about her garden in Bermondsey. Dr Alfred Salter worked from early morning until late at night—seeing up to sixty patients in an evening; meanwhile Ada did unpaid social work among the poorest families he discovered in his practice as well as continuing her work with the settlement girls and beginning her political life with the then reformist Liberal Party, becoming president of the Rotherhithe Women's Liberal Association.

The Salters began their lifetime practice of reserving the hours between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. for their quiet time together, Alfred's ebullient idealism that could suddenly sink into acute depression being balanced by Ada's steadiness and serenity. They had one child, Joyce, born in June 1902. Very soon they were faced by the supreme challenge to their social conscience: should they protect their only child from the dirty, verminous, sick children of Bermondsey and eventually send her away to a Quaker boarding-school? They felt they could not give her the chance denied to the unprivileged slum children around them and Joyce attended the local Keeton's Road School. Twice she caught scarlet fever. In 1910 Joyce was attacked by the disease for a third time and on 10 June she died. 'Ada's sadness never quite left her' (Brockway, 43). Thereafter both parents dedicated themselves with even more commitment to the needs of the poorest parents and children in London.

In May 1908 the Salters gave up their promising political career prospects with the Liberal Party in order to found the first branch of the young Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Bermondsey, and in November 1909 Ada Salter was the sole ILP candidate returned and the first woman borough councillor to be elected in London. Though widely expected to support the Progressive (radical Liberal) bloc on the council, she declined to vote with the Progressives 'unless my conscience or my own [ILP] organization so direct' (*Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder*, 12 Nov 1909). Her refusal to support the Progressive aldermanic slate at the first meeting of the elected councillors allowed the Conservatives to retain control of the finely balanced council and ensured her ostracism from the Bermondsey Liberals, who denied her election to the housing and public health committees. She none the less developed her own municipal agenda: she hoped one day to introduce gardens and beautiful parks as well as maternity and child welfare centres into Bermondsey. In August 1911, when the whole working population of Bermondsey went on strike for decent employment conditions, it was Ada Salter who organized free meals for the women and children (as she would again in the 1926 dockers' strike, when she served as treasurer to the London Dock Strike Fund). Her first spell as a Bermondsey councillor ended with defeat in the 1912 elections.

The First World War was a second tragic challenge to the Salters. As declared pacifists they had to witness the destruction not only of their idealistic vision of the international working class but also of much of their own welfare work for the London poor. They also had their house attacked by enraged stone-throwing mobs and Ada had to give long hours of work as trusted treasurer of the maintenance department of the No-Conscription Fellowship, supporting impoverished families of imprisoned conscientious objectors. The Salters purchased and used Fairby Grange in Kent as a convalescent home for released, weakened conscientious objector prisoners. One such ex-prisoner, the Jamaican carpenter Isaac Hall, reduced by mistreatment to a skeleton, was nursed by the Salters themselves and housed for nine months in their own home. In 1915 Ada Salter was accepted into the Religious Society of Friends, remaining a Quaker to the end of her life. At the end of the war she represented the British section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Zürich and Vienna, bringing back hungry Austrian women and children to recuperate at Fairby Grange.

Ada Salter returned to Bermondsey council in 1919, one of many Labour and Progressive beneficiaries of a leftward swing that overturned the long-established Conservative control of the borough. Re-elected three years later, she was chosen to be the first woman Labour mayor both in London and in the British Isles. (Dr Garrett Anderson had been the first woman mayor, of Aldeburgh, in 1908.) She refused to wear the mayoral robes or chain of office or to impose chaplain-led prayers on the council, instead starting meetings with a Quaker-style service. The inter-war years saw Bermondsey council fall under virtually unchallenged Labour control, but the wider social ambitions of the Labour majority were generally thwarted by the inadequate resources of an exclusively working-class borough. The most enduring feature of Labour Bermondsey would prove to be the environmental politics pioneered by Ada Salter. A lifelong gardener, she created the council's beautification committee (chairing it between 1923 and 1925) to promote the 'greening' of Bermondsey. In due course it planted 9000 trees and 60,000 plants in the hitherto dreary borough, and created two unlikely sounding species of dahlia—the 'Bermondsey Gem' and the 'Rotherhithe Gem'. She struggled to convert churchyards into the only open spaces for children's recreation and to substitute cottage housing for the worst slums. The Wilson Grove estate, on the site of the Salisbury Street slum, displayed silver birches, cottages, and climbing roses within yards of Tower

Bridge. Wilson Grove was intended to be the first instalment of a wider programme to replace slums with cottages. The project was given a fair wind by the short-lived Labour government of 1924, but in the long run this attempt to apply environmentalism to housing policy implied residential densities so low as to create major rehousing problems. It was consequently unacceptable both to the London county council (LCC) and to the Ministry of Health, which dispensed the housing subsidies on which a poor borough depended: no subsequent cottage-estate proposals in the borough would be endorsed by Whitehall, and Bermondsey would instead be covered by tenement blocks.

Ada Salter's other principal council work was in the field of public health: together with her husband and other Labour colleagues she introduced several health clinics and a solarium to fight tuberculosis. These resulted in a drop in infant mortality and an even greater fall in maternal mortality in the borough. Though she remained a borough councillor until her death, Ada Salter also served as a Bermondsey guardian in the 1920s and as a London county councillor from 1925. She was elected first for the southern division of Hackney, where the local Labour Party was run by Herbert Morrison, once a protégé of Alfred Salter in the pre-war ILP, but in 1928 she moved to home territory in West Bermondsey, the only constituency of the LCC to be represented by two women. This was also Alfred Salter's seat in parliament, but by now the charge once levelled against Ada that she was her husband's puppet carried no weight. She saw herself as 'not a militant feminist or a pioneer or anything like that' (*Evening News*, 25 July 1939), but she had been prominent, with Margaret MacDonald and Mary McArthur, in early attempts to found women's branches of trade unions and had served on the executive of the Women's International League. Her municipal programme in 1934, when Labour finally gained control of the LCC (and she secured the highest Labour vote), was marked by an emphasis upon domesticity characteristic of female local politicians of the period — 'in the affairs of State is needed the unselfish spirit of the good mother who considers the happiness and well being of all the members of her household rather than the aggrandisement of some' (*South London Press*, 8 Dec 1942). She laid an equally characteristic stress upon the personal social services, calling for the humane administration of relief and a unified medical service for London separate from the poor law. She appealed to the female voter, hoping to 'induce the home-loving woman to serve the community as she serves her family by helping to secure a Labour majority' (*Daily Herald*, 28 Feb 1934). As vice-chair of the LCC's parks committee, she continued to pursue her environmentalist objectives, identifying herself with the Labour advocates of a green belt policy, eventually secured in 1938.

The Second World War was a tragic horror to both the Salters. Once again isolated as pacifists, even within the Labour Party, they lost many of their Bermondsey friends in the blitz, as well as their lifelong home. But worse still was the descent of the world into competitive barbarism once more. Ada struggled to hold her faith—and to convince her despairing husband—that the ultimate victory must, one day, be that of the forces of creativity and kindness. She died in Balham, London, from cerebral thrombosis on 5 December 1942, and was cremated at Camberwell crematorium five days later. Alfred was overwhelmed by the hundreds of written tributes to her from all over Britain. The Quaker James Hudson wrote:

by her faith in the people for whom she laboured [she brought] ennoblement of spirit. ... They revered her. ... They often saw her frail figure threading its way on cycle through their streets. ... They knew of her investigations, her encouragements, her committees without end. ... Socialism in action; that is what she was.

Friends' Quarterly Examiner, 1 March 1943, 12

Over forty years earlier Alfred Salter had written to his wife: 'You and I ... are living and working for the same goal—to make the world, and in particular this corner of the world, happier and holier for our joint lives' (Brockway, 16). The Old English Garden in Southwark Park, the railings of which she had vainly attempted to save from being turned into Spitfires, had been commonly known as 'Mrs Salter's Garden' during her lifetime and was formally renamed the Ada Salter Garden in 1958. In 1960 the ashes of Ada and Alfred Salter were moved to a vault in a children's playground in Coxon Place, Bermondsey.

Sources

F. Brockway, *Bermondsey story: the life of Alfred Salter* (1949)

The Friend (18 Dec 1942)

J. F. Hudson, *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, 77 (1943), 11–14

J. Vellacott, *Bertrand Russell and the pacifists in the First World War* (1980)

b. cert.

m. cert.

P. Hollis, *Ladies elect: women in English local government, 1865–1914* (1987)

S. Goss, *Local labour and local government: a study of changing interests, politics and policy in Southwark, 1919 to 1982* (1988)

South London Press (8 Dec 1942)

Likenesses

photograph, 1938, repro. in Brockway, *Bermondsey story*

See also

Salter, Alfred (1873–1945), medical practitioner and politician