

Dr Thomas Barnardo

An Irish migrant from Dublin, came to London in 1866 looking for work - he was hoping to train as a missionary in China. That didn't work out so he became a teacher instead, at one of the East End's many 'ragged' - free - schools. In 1867 a cholera epidemic confronted him with the stark details of the terrible sanitation of the area, and he found a new job. He set up a school of his own in Hope Street and a charitable empire was born. His name - familiar to many generations of modern children - was Dr Thomas Barnardo.

Free state education was not a right until 1870; the ragged schools were mainly designed to instill Christian behaviour and to 'stop crime while it is in seed, and sin before it has broken into flower.' Barnardo engaged the support of Lord Shaftesbury and the bank Robert Barclay. In 1877 he brought 2 warehouses by the Regent Canal in the Mile End and turned them into what would become, in 2 years, the biggest such school in London, with over 1000 children. The school flourished. Book learning was only the half of it. 'We find many cases', wrote Barnardo, 'that food is more essential to the boys and girls than education.' They were given breakfast (bread and cocoa), and 'lentils or pea-soup and bread, varied occasionally by rice and prunes or haricot beans.'

It wasn't all plain sailing. Barnardo's eagerness to spread the word took him to a large, local pub called Edinburgh Castle. He strode into the smoke-filled and gin-soaked room and started offering Bibles for threepence or New Testaments for a penny. There weren't many takers. Barnardo recalled the lack of enthusiasm, 'I presently found myself on the ground with the flat part of the table pressing on me. Several of the biggest lads leaped inside it, dancing a "devil's tattoo" to my great discomfort.'

Barnardo did get revenge. He bought the pub and turned it into a Christian mission, which became the headquarters of a charitable giant, 'Barnardo's'. By the time he died in 1905 his schools had educated over 50,000 children. His orphanages had housed over 12,000. He also sponsored the emigration of some 18,000 children to new lives in Canada and Australia.