

‘LIFTING ON TO A NEW PLANE’: GYMNASTICS AND THE SOMERFORD STREET WOMEN’S FREE EVENING INSTITUTE 1917–1921

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SUMMARY

In 1913, the Higher Education Sub-Committee at the London County Council proposed changes to the provision of evening education which it hoped would greatly improve the outcomes for the young people of the city. The encouragement of non-vocational subjects and of wider social activities led to the provision of more broadly educative experiences through the setting up of such organisations as the East London Girls’ Gymnastic Association. A review of its activities will illustrate the contribution of gymnastics to the social development of young women and the Committee’s initial proposals will be compared with the experiences of staff and students at one of the evening institutes offering post-school education to young women in East London in the years 1917–1921.

EVENING SCHOOLS: A NEW START

The evening school system in London needed ‘lifting on to a new plane’.¹ This is how in May 1913 the Higher Education Sub-Committee (the Committee) summarised its report to the Education Committee of the London County Council. Continuing education at evening schools had been provided for those who had attended elementary schools but there had for some time been concerns about ‘serious defects in the attendance’. The Report on Technical and Continuation Schools in 1912 had stated that:

... the students themselves develop the bad habit of non-attendance. Their enrolment and subsequent withdrawal destroy classes wholesale, rendering useless the efforts and organisation provided for their instruction

and spreading want of confidence among staff as to the value of all or any efforts.

To remedy this situation, the Committee considered, but rejected, a system of compulsory evening education and opted instead to attempt to make continuing education more attractive to potential students. The need for non-vocational subjects was accepted, as was the desirability of fewer restrictions on the subject choices of post-18-year-olds. They also advised that ‘a strong effort should be made to infuse freshness and attractiveness into the system’. Financial constraints, as ever, precluded provision of new premises, facilities, or equipment, but at least there could be a new name. The Committee recommended that ‘the evening schools and centres shall in future be designated institutes’.

The work of these Institutes impressed the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction in 1919, but H J Edwards (1961) felt that many of the LCC’s optimistic plans came to nothing in the period of serious necessary economies after the First World War. This assertion will be examined in the light of the experiences of staff and students at an Institute in Bethnal Green. Those of the staff are recorded in the Log Book of the Institute. My records and recollections of treasured conversations over many years with the late Caroline Barker and Margaret Brion reveal the responses of two of its lively students (Fig 1).

The Institute that Caroline and Margaret attended was the Somerford Street Women’s Free Evening Institute. It shared the premises

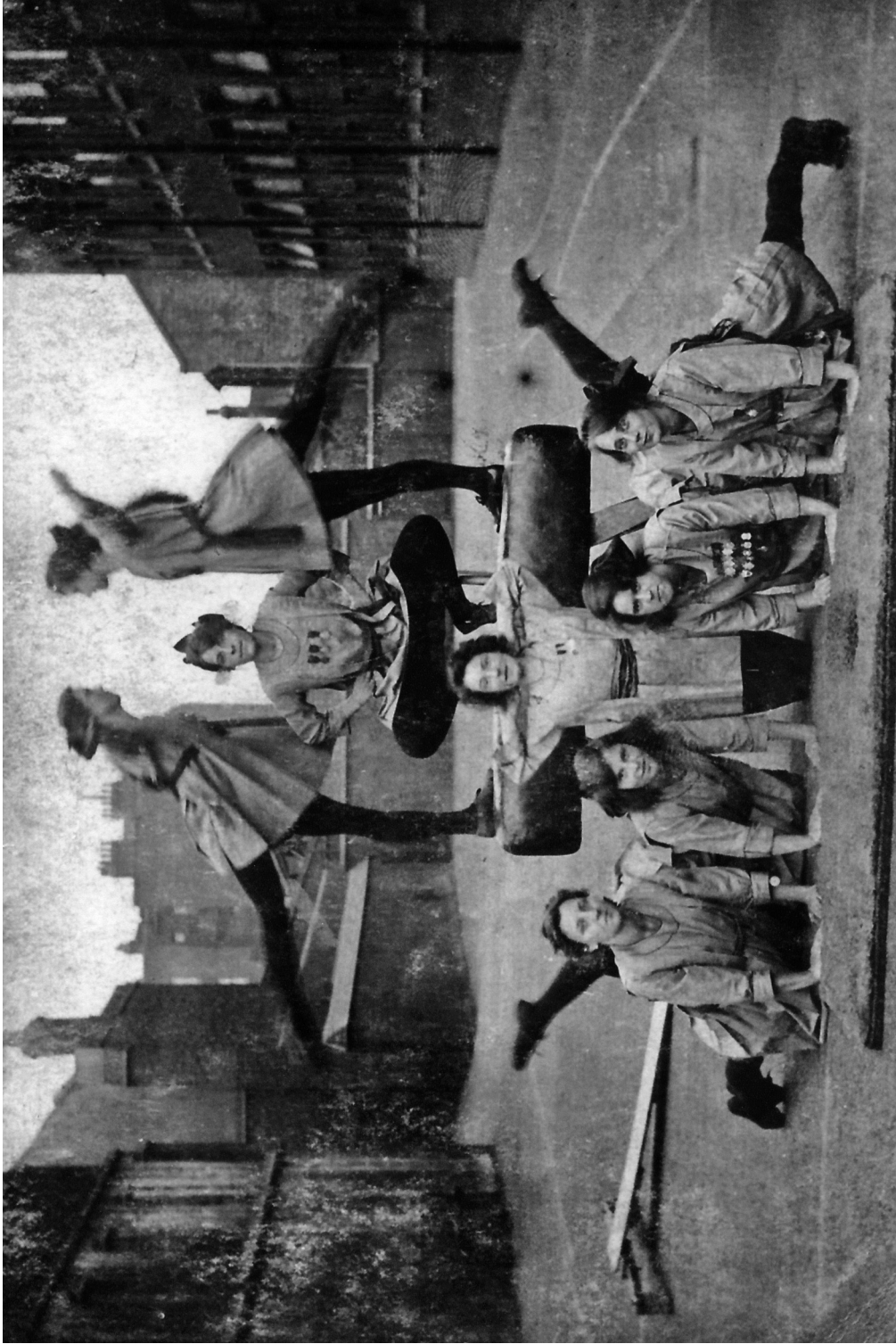


Fig 1. The Somerford Street senior gymnastics team in 1921 wearing their green gymnastics uniform. Margaret is second from the left in the front row and Caroline is maintaining a straight-backed squat position between the pommels of the vaulting horse. Several of the exercises recommended in the LCC Syllabuses of Instruction are shown here, including the stand, kneel and squat positions with alternate or combined leg extensions backward. The photograph was probably taken in the playground of Somerford Street School (Photo: author's collection)

of Somerford Street School and had two other branches, at the Robert Montefiore School in Vallance Road, Whitechapel and at the Pott Street premises of the Bethnal Green Congregational Church. Most classes took place from 7.50 to 9.50pm on Mondays to Thursdays. The eventual catchment area was bounded to the north by Bethnal Green Road, to the east by Globe Road, to the south by Mile End Road, and to the west by Commercial Street (Fig 2).

Miss Edith Dunn was appointed Responsible Teacher, based at Somerford Street, and evidence of her work between 1917 and 1921 will be considered, since this is the period when Caroline and Margaret, both born in 1901, were students. The Institute was renamed when it transferred to the Essex Street Junior Mixed School in November 1921, when Somerford Street School was being reconstructed.

THE SOMERFORD STREET INSTITUTE: THE CHARACTER OF THE AREA

The nature of the environment in which the Institute was set is best conveyed in Miss Dunn's own words, taken from the book in which she was required by the Education Committee to characterise it.²

1916-17

SW Bethnal Green contains the Parish of St Bartholomew, the poorest in London. Condemned streets by Gov. not pulled down owing to crisis. Upper portions of Brady St, Neath Place, Somerford St, Pereira St and various blind alleys leading from Brady St works. Bethnal Green: machinists and blind alley occupations. Whitechapel: tailoring, wholesale blouses, underwear, millinery, furs, jewellery.

She mentions frequently the large population of immigrants, whom she refers to as 'aliens'.

1917-18

The aliens are more industrious and sober than the Bethnal Green people. Many of the better class in the factories do not live in district but come from Bow, Poplar, Hackney.

1918-19

This Institute works in a plague spot unhealthy and wretchedly housed, 15,000 considered living in insanitary homes. Many of the slums are condemned, some since 1854, zymotic diseases are prevalent. 40% of men offering for the army were tubercular.

1919-20

After the peace many women became unemployed. Money is not so good and the pupils desirous of education cannot afford material, etc.

1920-21

All pupils mainly in Clothing factories, Box making, Packing — groceries, etc. The mass of the pupils are unskilled. ... unsuitable scholastic building.

Momentous and destructive events were taking place in the wider world in this period. Severe economic problems exacerbated the personal tragedies visited upon local people as a result of the First World War. Homes and places of work had been destroyed; rents and the prices of basic commodities had risen dramatically — wholesale prices to three times pre-War levels by 1919. Unlike Caroline's family, a large proportion of residents were not native Londoners, many of them being, like Margaret's family, of Irish extraction. Miss Dunn lists Russians, Poles, Germans, families from the Netherlands and Portugal, and Jewish people from many European countries in her catchment area and notes particularly the large number of Jewish families in Somerford Street where previously there had been none.

The Russian Revolution in 1917 and the continuing Civil War; the influenza pandemic in 1918; the formation of the IRA in 1919 and the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1920; the Balfour Declaration favouring a Jewish homeland in Palestine. All these must deeply have affected many people in Bethnal Green. Some must have felt restless from their experience of upheaval and become subject to multifarious anxieties: others would have been excited and energised by the perceived prospect of fundamental change and burgeoning opportunity. The population in almost all senses was 'on the move'.

It was in this social environment that Miss Dunn worked to maintain an attractive and effective Evening Institute for the local young women.

THE CURRICULUM

Institutes for women were expected to provide classes in these categories:

- Domestic
- Needlework
- Health
- Humane Subjects
- Light Physical Exercises (Drill or Gymnastics).

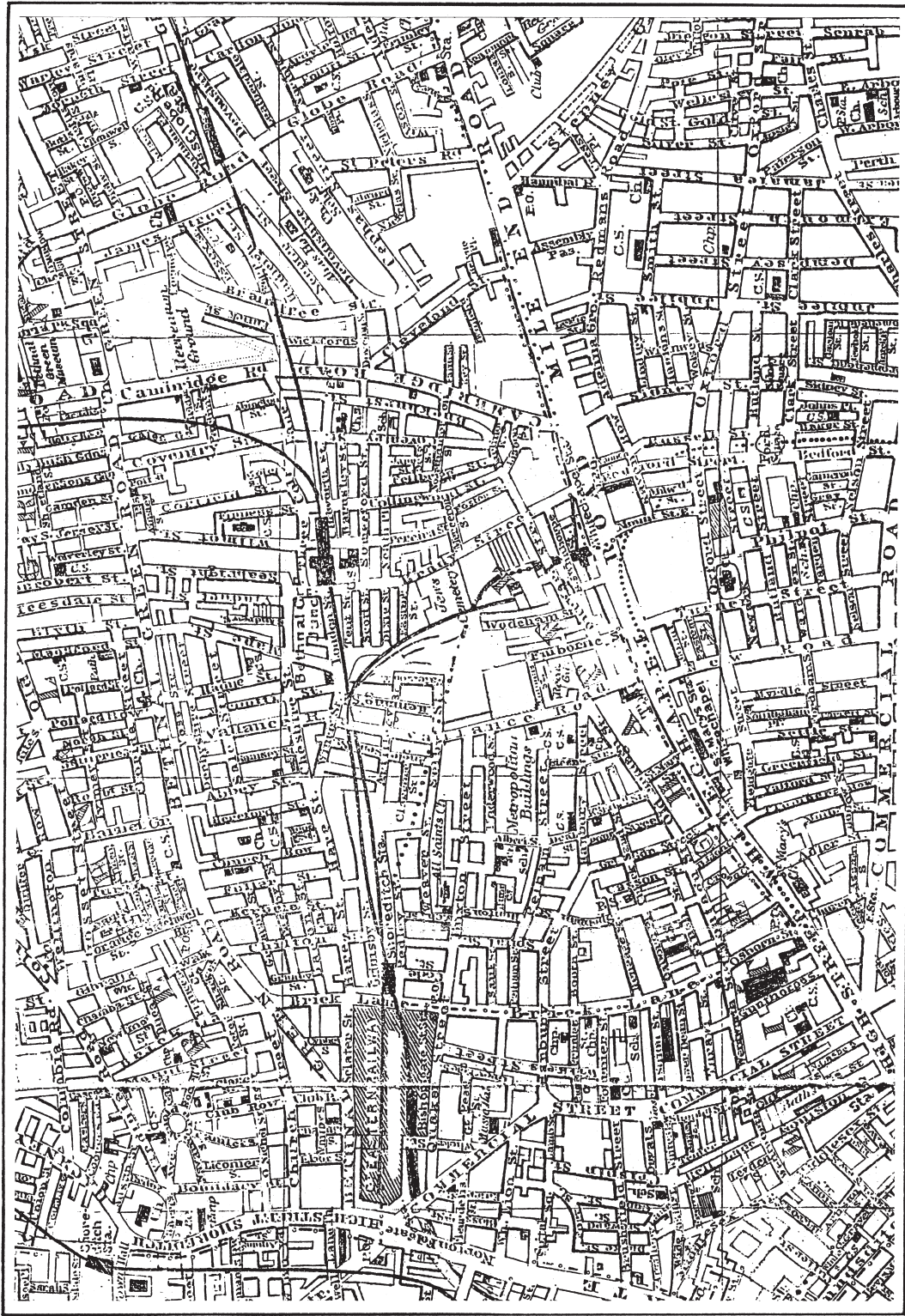


Fig. 2. Bethnal Green 1918. The area served by the Somersford Street Institute. Somersford Street is just south of Bethnal Green Station (Post Office Directory Map: Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive)

As a Free Institute, Somerford Street was required at least to aspire to such provision and to make as many classes as possible available not only to young single women like Caroline and Margaret, but also to older and married women.

Domestic subjects

A cynic might relate these subjects to the 'servant problem' of late Victorian and Edwardian London, though the government was in theory unwilling to allow elementary education to be used for training domestic servants. Certainly in the 1911 Census, 34.8% of girls aged fourteen to eighteen were in some kind of domestic work. Immediately on leaving school, Margaret had been placed in domestic work at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea and was amazed at the environment around her in Tite Street.

There were powerful pressures from the almost entirely male medical and other professions to increase domestic training for schoolgirls, and remedying the very poor standards in health and fitness discovered in Boer War recruits was regarded largely as women's responsibility. The government's Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in the population had recommended in 1904 that cookery and household management should be compulsory for all girls, even possibly after they had left school. Proficiency with the needle was thought to imply the much valued qualities of femininity and thrift — regarded as particularly appropriate in areas necessitating Free Institutes — and there was also a growing number of women teachers, examiners, and inspectors of needlework powerful enough to promote their own interests. This part of the curriculum, then, had scarcely been lifted 'on to a new plane'.

Caroline and Margaret would have preferred to enrol for gymnastics alone. This was not allowed but such was their enthusiasm that they were prepared to endure two hours of cookery and needlework, the price then exacted for access to the world of gymnastics. Their cookery teacher had a strong Scots accent and her pronunciation of the names of ingredients led to much mirth, Caroline in particular being easily reduced to helpless laughter. Needlework proved useful since throughout their lives they were able to make many of their own and their families' clothes in mid-20th-century times of widespread hardship. They followed fashion as

far as their finances allowed. On one occasion, a milliner friend gave them some surplus georgette. Caroline's was pale lilac, Margaret's apple green, and Margaret cut out a low-backed dress for each of them. Caroline's mother was horrified when they tried them on without wearing vests, but they bought satin in the Roman Road market to make under slips and used long strips of georgette as scarves, looped over their hair and down their backs. Their sewing gave them a great sense of achievement, unlike the mundane and repetitive tasks allocated to young women in local clothing factories, where, as Miss Dunn noted, they were never involved or trained in the more interesting and skilled work of cutting out garments.

Laundry and housewifery were also offered, in part to correct the perceived inability of women in such areas to care properly for their homes and families. There is an irony here in that in 1919 Queen Mary visited that very place — incognito according to Miss Dunn's log — guided by the Mayor of Bethnal Green, who showed her the deplorable state of the housing stock which he had long campaigned to have replaced by sound homes and well-planned streets. Although shocked by the squalid, insanitary buildings, she was reported in the *Daily Chronicle* as contrasting them with 'the general cleanliness and splendid housewifery which she saw in evidence so abundantly'.

The notion of discovering what the customer wants and then providing it was yet to arise and students were offered subjects that the Advisory Committee and staff considered appropriate. One can imagine that the activities least likely to raise the spirits and aspirations of the young women would be more of the drudgery of home, laundry, and kitchen work. The Institute, however, gradually offered a wider range of non-vocational subjects.

Infant Care and First Aid were offered, possibly in response to a suggestion from local brewers Truman and Hanbury, and English and Drill were combined as a course. Embroidery and Design became very popular and students obviously made great progress since on one of her visits Miss Moore, an inspector, suggested organising the classes by ability to offer some students more demanding work. Miss Dunn, however, knew that they much preferred to stay within their own age group and that the very best embroidresses might lose their class altogether if there were not sufficient enrolments at their

level. By the time of the move to Essex Street the Institute also offered Drawing, Dramatic Literature and Education, and Vocal Music.

Humane subjects

On the handbill for 1921–22, the Institute offers:³

- a) History and Geography,
- b) Nature Study with lantern lecture.

This is the first appearance of what the Committee referred to as the ‘Humane subjects’, history and geography, and dealt with in its Report at length and with enthusiasm but concern, particularly about history. They felt that existing evening schools had failed their students in these subjects which ‘ought to be approached directly, not through a text book, but from the living event’. They listed some of the important events that had taken place since September 1912 which they felt could form the subjects of ‘interesting (and well illustrated) talks on “living” events; a live point of contact between the student and the world in which he lives’. This would help to ‘cultivate the reading and reflecting habit’. They proposed that twelve centres should concentrate solely on lectures of this type and that ‘lecture centres’ should be available to serve, in a similar way, ‘better educated audiences’. Among the subjects to be presented they mentioned:

In particular, much broad and wise teaching as to the great peoples in France and Germany — their history, traditions, science, art and literature — would come as a revelation to the people of London.

The Committee’s Report was presented in May 1913. It was not attendance at lecture centres that in little more than a year brought the young men of London into the closest and most tragic contact with ‘the great peoples of France and Germany’. Nor were the majority of sufferers from the ‘better educated audiences’. Bethnal Green sent a larger proportion of men to the war than any other part of London and their total death rate was the highest of any in the metropolis. The Committee members, of course, could never have foreseen the tragic events of the First World War, but a modern reader must surely feel the ghastly and heart-wrenching ironies in the expression of their sound and optimistic proposals, particularly that of the value of learning ‘from the living event’.

Few students in Bethnal Green can have been without close contact with one of the thousands of men and women who had become visual aids in the terrible lessons that Europe was teaching itself. Caroline lost a very dear friend but the menfolk in Margaret’s family were merchant seamen. It was grim work stoking boilers, but at least they were not directly in the line of fire. The war, of course, had come to the Institute’s students, involving them too in living events from which others would later learn. Nevertheless, it was commendable that the Institute was eventually able to offer a ‘humane subject’ through illustrated talks and it is tantalising to guess what was presented under ‘History’ and how it was interpreted.

Light physical exercises

Gymnastics and Drill were both included in the Institute’s courses. The LCC ‘Syllabuses of Instruction’⁴ lists three schemes:

- A No apparatus work. Includes dancing and indoor games.
- B Exercises on fixed apparatus. Free exercises with or without music and light hand exercises.
- C Only to be taught by fully qualified teachers of Swedish gymnastics and only in a gymnasium fitted with Swedish apparatus.

Drill classes probably followed Scheme A. Although some teachers were fully qualified in Swedish gymnastics, the various premises were not fully equipped and Scheme C could not have been operated. Caroline and Margaret spoke enthusiastically about using the vaulting horse and about the music which accompanied their exercises, so Scheme B was probably the one they followed in gymnastics.

Interest in and opportunities for gymnastics had been developing for many years in Bethnal Green, which was home for well over a hundred years to the Orion Gymnastics Club, the oldest in Great Britain and regarded by the British Amateur Gymnastics Association as having made a unique contribution to British gymnastics. The club began in temporary premises in St Peters School, Mile End in 1868 and by 1883 had a permanent purpose-built gymnasium in Casteton Street, Hackney, continuing with help from the Bethnal Green Men’s Institute until late in the 20th century.

This club was, of course, open only to men

and followed the German system of apparatus gymnastics pioneered in the early 19th century by Carl Voelker and Friedrich Jahn, and involving strenuous exercises on vaulting horses, ropes, rings, and parallel and horizontal bars. The aim was to develop strength and sporting prowess and originally there were clear military overtones.

However, the exercises which Caroline and Margaret enjoyed so much were probably a modified version of the system devised by Per Henrik Ling and taught at the Royal Central Gymnastics Institution in Stockholm from 1814. Ling based his system of precise and highly regimented exercises on what he called his 'exact knowledge' of human anatomy and physiology and, unusually for the early 19th century, considered it suitable for women as well as men. He believed that it would develop its practitioners physically, mentally, and morally.

Until the late 19th-century developments in gymnastics, unlike those in team sports, took place outside the mainstream of education and athletics. Entrepreneurs took advantage of the increasing interest of women as well as men in bodily health, and established private gymnasia employing various systems in London and other cities. It became perfectly acceptable for properly chaperoned women and girls to attend their classes and, although these were wealthy and well-connected patrons, the acceptability of organised gymnastic exercise eventually percolated through to respectable young women at other levels of society.

In 1881, Concordia Lövfing, a graduate of the Stockholm Institution, was appointed Superintendent of Physical Education in Girls' Schools in London at the instigation of Mrs Alice Westlake of the London School Board, there being no suitable English candidate. She was succeeded by Madame Martina Bergman-Österberg (Fig 3), an energetic and visionary proponent of the value of physical education for girls and a brilliant organiser who realised the immediate necessity of providing excellently trained teachers. In 1885, she founded a college for this purpose in a house in Broadhurst Gardens, Hampstead (Fig 4), later transferring to larger premises in Dartford, Kent.

The Hampstead gymnasium (Fig 4) was fitted with the equipment Madame Bergman-Österberg had incorporated into her development of Ling's system. Within five years, 1,300 women teachers had been trained in Ling gymnastics.



Fig 3. Madame Martina Bergman-Österberg 1849–1915 (The Bergman-Österberg Archive, University of Greenwich)

At the Chelsea College of Physical Education, established in 1898, the course included German, Swedish, and Military gymnastics, but by 1907 the Ling system predominated. Bedford College too had a Ling-based course. A most important aspect of the courses in these colleges was that, unlike the university courses, they were all promoted, institutionalised, and authorised by women. The female staff were intelligent and idealistic and they sent out qualified teachers with a missionary zeal not just for gymnastics but also for women's emancipation. In 1908, the Gymnastic Teachers' Suffrage Society was formed and it was students from this enlightened background who went as teachers, judges, and inspectors into London's elementary schools and evening institutes. It was these influential women with whom the Somerford Street students came into contact in their classes, competitions, and displays of gymnastics.

THE RESPONSIBLE TEACHER

The person in charge of each Institute whom we

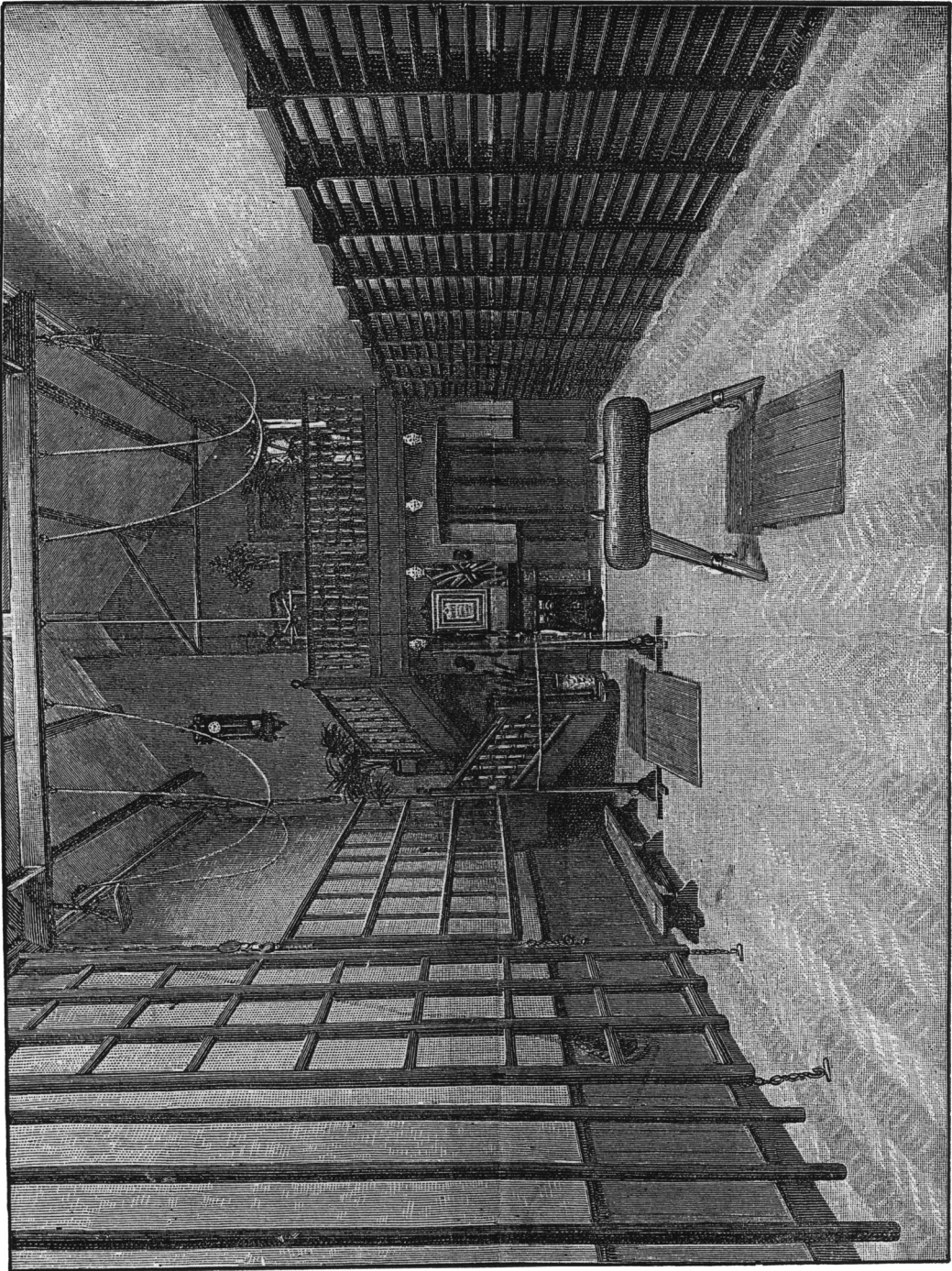


Fig. 4. The gymnasium of the College founded in 1885 by Madame Bergman-Österberg to train women in the Swedish gymnastics methods of Per Henrik Ling (The Bergman-Österberg Archive, University of Greenwich)

might now refer to as the Principal was called the Responsible Teacher (RT). The Committee was most concerned that these teachers should not, as had happened in the past, also be day-time teachers. They wished to avoid the accusation of having 'tired pupils taught by tired teachers' and wanted the RTs to be free to forge links with those in commerce, industry, and education in their areas to the benefit of their students.

They hoped to find and develop 'freshness of mind and width of outlook' in their RTs. By employing them on a full-time basis, they felt that the RTs would 'enjoy a certain necessary amount of leisure for recreation and for enlarging their own views'. Miss Dunn's role as administrator, teacher, and ultimate disciplinarian would have occupied her fully when the Institute was in session. An examination of her Log Book entries relating to other tasks and the likely expenditure of time on them shows that she may actually have had little time for other valuable pursuits. Although she was in an area of particular need, other RTs in East London almost certainly had similar experiences.

Until May 1919 she had no clerical assistance and that was instituted only after a petition had been presented to Sir Robert Blair, the Education Officer, by the Responsible Teachers. The clerical assistant, Mrs Archer Clark, resigned in February 1921 as she received only 5s 8d (*c.*28p) for two hours work.

Miss Dunn was required to visit all local elementary schools to enrol as many leavers as possible and to make frequent visits to local businesses and factories to do the same for their female employees. She was a member of the LCC's Care Committee and was elected to the executive of the Juvenile Advisory Committee at Oxford House, a local university settlement in May 1918. She was a very active member of the Association of Responsible Teachers, presenting papers and leading discussions. In addition, she frequently attended conferences on matters of social concern. She worked very hard to help set up the East London Girls' Gymnastic Association (ELGGA) and, after its inauguration in 1917, much of her time was taken up with meetings and personal contacts to organise and finance its activities. The tasks which consumed a great deal of her time and energy related either to finance or staffing.

Finance

Her students were required to enrol for courses rather than single subjects and this enabled Miss Dunn to integrate their work to some extent. In October 1918, she recorded the purchase of 20 yards (about 18m) of casement cloth for the Tuesday Drill class to make into drill slips in their Needlework class, though she does not record how the cost was met. In its proposals for Women's Institutes, the Committee wrote:

We think that under appropriate safeguards the Council might provide materials at cost price for making a gymnastic uniform.

Such recommendations, of course, are statements of the ideal — the actualities are almost invariably less favourable. No receipt of funds is logged and, in the light of the desperate need to finance post-War reconstruction, any failure of provision is understandable. Nevertheless, the uniforms were needed and the students themselves had too many other calls on their meagre wage packets. There is no record of who paid for the cloth in 1918, but Miss Dunn records in November 1920 'this year all needlework materials supplied by me'.⁵

The cost of the green drill slips for gymnastics classes was a recurring problem and in 1921 even obtaining cloth for them and other dressmaking became increasingly difficult. However, Miss Connington and Miss Smyth, His Majesty's Inspectors of Physical Education, visited the Institute in May 1921 and were obviously so pleased with what they saw, as indeed they had been on their previous visit, that they allocated 36s (£1.80p) for the outfit of a team.

Financing specifically ELGGA activities was a constant problem. Within months of its inception Miss Dunn reports, perhaps quite cheerfully, that they were 'only short of 18/-' (90p). Three years later they had a debt of £7 14s 3d (*c.*£7.71p) and she reports an interview at the Mansion House with the wife of the Lord Mayor of London, Lady Cooper, who 'undertook to pay off the debt'. In more prosperous areas of London, students could have afforded to meet the costs as they arose and there would have been plenty of local benefactors able and willing to underwrite costs. For RTs in East London, lack of money must have been a constant serious concern.

In May 1921, Miss Dunn investigated the cost of shoes for the Drill and Gymnastics classes.

She notes:

Drill shoes. Rope sole with unbleached upper.
 Price 13/- doz sizes 2-6
 15/- doz sizes 7-10

To be got from

A Norman & Sons, 130-132 Shoreditch Road E1.
 NB (1) Not less than one doz at a time of any
 one size can be ordered.

(2) All business to be done by correspondence.

The minimum order requirement, though appropriate for a shoe shop, was an impossible arrangement for her and she was forced to abandon the excellent idea of providing the proper footwear.

At exactly this time a much more serious matter was occupying her thoughts. On 6 May she had read the Council's proposal to abolish the free status of some Institutes and to charge fees to all students. On 25 May she signed the petition against the proposal, but learned at the beginning of June that the imposition of fees was a certainty. How worrying and disheartening this must have been at just the time when the staff and students were working so hard on preparations for the splendid annual ELGGA gymnastic competition. At the beginning of May she had noted 'the trouble to outfit the various teams this year is greater than I have ever experienced. The poverty is great and the result will be fewer teams than usual'.

Later that year 'the enrolment was very large' with a particularly high demand for Drill. Wage rates in the area had already fallen and by November the number of unemployed students was 'very great'. Some needlework students had already started work on their drill slips but it seems that either they could not afford the cost of the material or, because of the fees, they were unable to attend classes at all. At any rate, Miss Dunn reports the most disappointing outcome of all:

1. Material cut up and left.
2. No drill garments made.

Fees were imposed rigorously and, at this time of high female unemployment and half-time working, those who could pay could only do so in instalments. Fortunately for them, Caroline worked as a machinist at a men's tailoring company and Margaret was a box maker at the Ardath Cigarette Company, so they were able to afford the fees.

Unemployment was, of course, a severe nat-

ional problem for years beyond those dealt with here, particularly in areas such as Bethnal Green. The young women who were employed, therefore, had no option but to work long hours in unpleasant or potentially dangerous places for low wages and with no job security. There were other problems too. Margaret, for instance, worked for a short time as a wire stitcher at dingy premises in Whitechapel Road. Concerned about her employer, an unpleasant elderly man, she asked Caroline to accompany her through the dark corridors and up the ladder-like stairs and sit with her while she worked. At the end of the first week she received only 2s (10p) and discovered that her employer had allowed another member of her family to take away the rest of her wage.

Her records show that Miss Dunn was intimately aware of the work-related problems of her students and that she responded with genuine sympathy and understanding. A great deal of her time and energy had to be spent dealing with problems caused directly by the poverty of the area, so that much of the energy needed to further the educational and social development of her students was constantly expended on dealing with finance. As is still the case in the 21st century, educators like Miss Dunn felt compelled to try to mitigate the effects of problems utterly incapable of solution within the education system itself.

Staffing

Miss Dunn's final log entry for 1916-17 is 'I find great difficulty in getting staff for Cookery and Drill'. Staffing was, in fact, a constant problem. It seems that she had no help in recruiting teachers and she records many visits made in search of them. Those she obtained were 'very crude' at the outset.

Staff were to be engaged not by the evening as previously, but by the term so as to ensure continuity. The Laundry teacher who failed to turn up after two weeks, however, was not untypical and Miss Dunn ruefully noted 'this is often the fate of classes in the East End'. Teachers simply did not 'care for the quarter'. Teachers were often absent through illness. Dr Bate, the Medical Officer of Health, frequently reported to the Council on the insanitary conditions in the area which must have made the Institute an unhealthy working environment.

Most staff lived out of the area, travelling in by

train. When wartime raids and post-war strikes disrupted services the Institute's work obviously suffered and potential transport problems may well have deterred some teachers. There were the usual problems of sharing premises and equipment — notably sewing machines — with the day school, which Miss Dunn occasionally had to resolve, and the ever-present incidence of petty theft.

Students came from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds but were mainly Protestants like Caroline, Catholics like Margaret, or Jewish. There is no mention at all of problems with languages, but some staff had difficulties in dealing with students from particular backgrounds, though the nature of these is not specified. By 1921, finding staff was even more difficult than it had been in 1917. Miss Dunn wrote, 'an enormous trouble to get staff. There is no choice, the institute simply takes what it can get'. In March 1921, the Montefiore branch was closed for lack of staff. Many of the teachers she did manage to appoint, however, were obviously dedicated to their work and took a genuine interest in the welfare and advancement of their students.

Displays and competitions were frequent and teachers must have worked tremendously hard to prepare the teams and choirs. The good standard reached in day-to-day classes is shown in Miss Dunn's comments and those of inspectors, though pertinent criticisms are also logged.

Some examples of particular dedication are recorded.

Miss Kirkup, a cookery teacher, 'brings in supplementary food every evening' and 'deserves great credit'.

One of the needlework teachers paid for all the materials for her class for one session.

Miss Duschek, Caroline and Margaret's much-respected gym teacher, initiated classes from 5.30–6.30pm on Saturdays to meet demand. She also became concerned on one occasion about how pale Caroline had become and made an appointment with a local doctor she knew, who diagnosed anaemia and treated Caroline.

In order not to be absent from her post because of a planned coal strike affecting transport, Miss Wakefield, Miss Dunn's dep-uty, offered to sleep overnight at the Pott Street premises. Fortunately the strike was cancelled.

When Margaret joined the singing class she was complimented on her good voice and the teacher invited her to free lessons at her home near Victoria Park, a luxuriously furnished house with a grand piano covered with a multi-coloured tasselled shawl. Sadly, after a few lessons, no-one answered when Margaret knocked and a neighbour told her that her teacher had died suddenly the previous night.

Miss Dunn frequently mentions the commendable conduct of her staff during air raids. During one such raid, the Infant Care teacher kept her students calm and continued the lesson in the dark. No problems ensued and to Miss Dunn this showed the right spirit.

Assessment

Miss Dunn was required to submit to the LCC a regular report on the work of the Institute but it is only in November 1920 that she refers to this. She had received from 'Head Office' the response to her report and it is quite distressing in the light of all her good work to read that,

It is simply a summary of the disabilities and not one word of commendation — nothing inspiring. The Office would seem to penalise the Institute for its poverty.

Her frustration and even anguish are clear as she spills into the log at this point her notes of some of the deficiencies with which she is having to cope. Apart from having personally to finance many activities, she does not even have a cupboard for her administrative documents. She was provoked by the injustice of the response to visit 'Head Office' and there is a cold feeling of resigned impotence in her log entry, 'was informed my interpretation was not correct'.

The Committee required its teachers to inspire but the officials charged with running the system were clearly unable to inspire the teachers, especially those working in areas where there was the greatest need for encouragement.

A SOCIAL SIDE

One of the factors which had influenced the Committee was the work of clubs and societies such as fellowship groups attached to places of worship, university settlements and other philanthropic organisations. Having indicated that 'the clubs have shown the evening schools the need for developing a social side', the 1913

Report proposed that 'the Responsible Teacher's time will be taken up to a large extent on this side of the work' and that, in the Women's Institutes,

... her initiation and supervision of social gatherings, clubs, magazines, excursions and so on would be fully as exacting as those of the Responsible Teacher of the commercial centre.

Gymnastics proved to be the most significant activity at Somerford Street which led to 'social gatherings', 'excursions', links with other institutions, and the organisation of competitions. Many entries in the Log Book for 1917 detail the problems resulting from the war but in spite of these it was in this year that Miss Dunn spent a great deal of time making personal contacts and attending meetings to set up the East London Girls' Gymnastic Association.

The inaugural competition for seniors on 9 June was held at Mansford Street School and was an impressive event with an audience of three hundred. The *East End News* and *London Shipping Chronicle* recorded that the gymnastic competition lasted almost three hours and that the event had begun at 6.30pm with a concert by the combined choirs of Somerford Street and the Montefiore branch. The Rev Stewart Headlam of the LCC (Fig 5), President of ELGGA, presided over the function with Miss Kingston and Mr G O H Smailes as judges. The Somerford Street team was beaten into second place; other competitors included a team from the 10th London Girls' Life Brigade and from a local firm, Glanfield and Sons.

In 1921, Caroline and Margaret were members of the winning Senior Team at the fifth annual ELGGA Competition for the Shield and Cup. They had been well prepared by Miss Duschek and performed with great skill and agility in spite of the heat of the July evening — that summer had been the hottest for many years. They must have been very proud to receive their medals from Baroness St Helier (Fig 6), an enthusiastic and active supporter of the Somerford Street Institute. Miss Dunn later wrote in the Institute Log Book 'A very successful evening. The public evince a great interest'.

They were unlikely to have attended them, but these events and the work that led up to them seem to epitomise the sort of achievement to which members of the Committee intended their Institutes to aspire and looked to their RTs to create. Participation in such events,

the Committee felt, would help young people avoid the pernicious influences often present in their surroundings. The more tired the young workers, they wisely admitted, 'the greater their moral effort in resisting the inducements to ease and amusement'.

Social functions at the Institutes could, however, offer suitable 'ease and amusement'. It may have been attendance at the Institute and its social events which brought Protestant Caroline and Catholic Margaret together. They were energetic, intelligent, and of good character — Caroline's attested to by the award of a beautiful bible by the Shaftesbury Society — but where could an unaccompanied respectable young woman go in the evening after a long working day? Hardly a pub, the music hall, or any costly quality entertainment venue. Street life, though

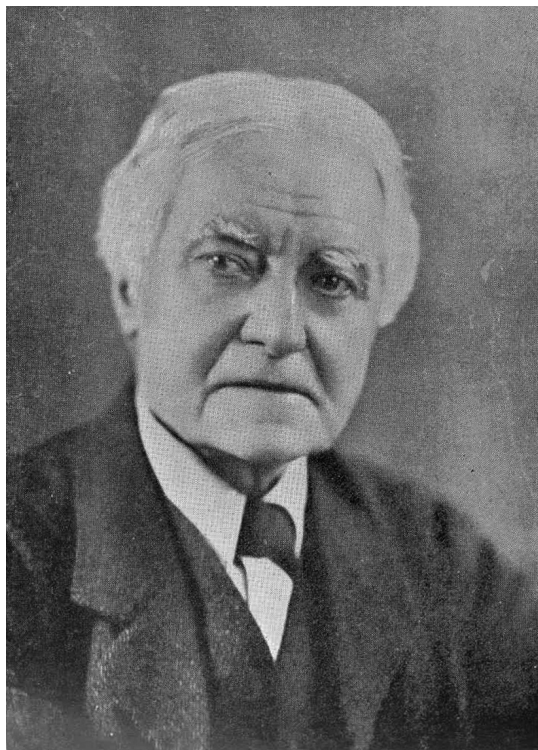


Fig 5. Rev Stewart Duckworth Headlam 1847–1924, President of ELGGA and a loyal supporter of the Somerford Street Institute. A Christian Socialist and member of the Fabian Society, he was elected to the London School Board in 1888 and to the LCC in 1907. He was a passionate supporter of evening education and campaigned to persuade the government to help intelligent members of the working class to receive a university education (London Metropolitan Archive)

it may have seemed lively, undemanding and free, was fraught with risks.

Miss Dunn recorded the organisation of several functions which, though not free, offered relaxation and enjoyment. Margaret's family circumstances were less secure than Caroline's and when she could not afford a ticket, Caroline and their friends would pool resources to help. They all enjoyed the

Fancy Dress Ball. May 3rd at Mansford Street. Limited to 200 at 1/- each. Profits to defray cost of [gymnastic] medals

recorded in the Log Book in 1919 (Fig 7). Other socials were held; all of them, obviously, solely



Fig 6. Mary, Baroness St Helier CBE 1920, DBE 1925, d. 1931. Alderman of the LCC 1910—1927. A brilliant society hostess, she was nevertheless an indefatigable campaigner for the improvement of housing conditions in London and the St Helier estate in Sutton bears her name. She was an energetic woman who enjoyed bicycling, riding and skating, and was a keen supporter of the Somerford Street Institute. She presided at a number of the gymnastic competitions and displays of the East London Girls' Gymnastic Association and in July 1920 she offered a holiday in the country, at her expense, for six deserving students (Copyright: National Portrait Gallery, London)

for the young women. Miss Dunn reports in November 1920,

A highly successful social, 7.30–10. Present: Misses Wakefield, R. Wakefield, Morrison and about 300 pupils.

She adds, rather darkly, '20–30 young men outside but no teacher with them'!

Even more frequent than social evenings were displays of gymnastics at the various branches of the Institute and at others further afield, such as Clerkenwell and the Regent Street Polytechnic. Caroline and Margaret both remembered their great enjoyment in travelling to displays in unfamiliar and interesting parts of London, usually beginning with a climb to the upper deck of the No. 8 bus. Displays must have been enjoyable social occasions with the spice of inherent, if not formalised, competition to keep everyone almost literally on their toes. Quite apart from the value of the exercises in compensating for the static or sedentary nature of many students' work, they must have increased their self-esteem and also attracted new students.

The young women were not cast aside when they had completed their courses. In October 1920, Miss Dunn proudly reported that, 'We have now 4 Old Scholars' Clubs: Hague St, Wilmot St, Essex St, Somerford St.'

If Caroline and Margaret's estimation of the value of their Institute days is any guide, what a fund of goodwill and possible voluntary help must have been present among the club members. Unfortunately, it is almost invariably the case that with educational establishments for those other than the most financially secure the support, financial or otherwise, that could flow from the old students cannot be used because the establishments themselves have later metamorphosed or been abolished under new legislation. However long they lasted, though, these clubs would have been enjoyed by the students and had the wholehearted approval of the Committee.

WHAT DID THEY WEAR?

When performing in competitions or practising in class, the Somerford Street gymnasts wore the very practical uniform shown in the photograph of the 1920–21 gymnastics team (see Fig 1). It consisted of a loose blouse with three-quarter length sleeves worn under a box-pleated tunic. The generous round neck of the tunic and the



Fig 7. Caroline's medals. The silver medal was awarded in 1919 and the bronze in 1918. Social events were held at the Institute to defray the cost of medals (Photo: author's collection)

blouse cuffs have piped decoration and a narrow sash is threaded through the box pleats at the waist. These are exactly the garments initiated by Madame Martina Bergman-Österberg for the students of her College. Each student was given a list of the clothing she would require and the lists for this period together with photographs of the students in action indicate what Caroline, Margaret, and their friends wore *under* their tunics and blouses.

The list specifies that the 'Gymnastic and College Costume' is to be ordered on arrival at the College, which indicates the services of a specialist supplier and prices beyond the budgets of the Somerford Street gymnasts. It is not clear whether special underwear or hosiery was included in this category, but garments in the clothing lists are probably the ones generally available and acceptable to young women. In the absence of tights, it was necessary to have some other means of covering the body and legs from waist to toe. Part of the answer lay in the 'plain black Cashmere stockings (extra long)' available

from 'Afford, The Village, Blackheath, S.E.'. The cover-up was completed by the garment displayed in the photograph of a student performing a beautifully poised handstand in the College grounds (Fig 8). The knickers are close-fitting and have legs long enough to cover the tops of the 'extra long' stockings.

But what kept up those stockings? This concern with the minutiae of clothing is not an irrelevance. The development of women's clothing is intimately connected with aspects of their emancipation, which is often mirrored, sometimes followed, and occasionally led by the activities women feel they are able to undertake and the clothes that are appropriate for those activities.

The half century leading up to Caroline and Margaret's gymnastic achievements had seen considerable changes in women's daily lives, not least in the possibility of their being more physically active other than of necessity at work or in domestic chores. Those, unlike Caroline and Margaret, able to finance a leisured lifestyle



Fig 8. A student of Madame Bergman-Österberg performing a handstand in the grounds of the College at Dartford in Kent c.1920 (The Bergman-Österberg Archive, University of Greenwich)

could engage in a variety of sporting activities and it was adventurous young women at this level of society who paved the way for the eventual acceptance of energetic activities as suitable for women. They were in no danger of placing their social position and reputation in jeopardy, as might have been the case with women whose families had a less secure position in the social pecking order.

In 1894, Paul Rénouard produced for *The Graphic* a drawing from life in the Girls' Gymnasium at the People's Palace, Mile End Road (Fig 9). It is entitled 'Drill Instruction' and the instructor is a ramrod, moustachioed man whose clothes could be a tee shirt and trousers. His

students, however, have a much more 19th-century appearance, wearing thigh-length, long-sleeved tunics over baggy knickerbockers over stockings – which returns us to the question of what held up those stockings.

The three clearly delineated young women in Rénouard's front row are all tightly corseted. Their stocking support was probably the 'bony stays with suspenders' that Gwen Raverat describes an 1890s schoolgirl as wearing. They of course were performing Drill, not gymnastic exercises. Garters, though widely worn until decades later, cannot have been the means of support, since they would have been useless during strenuous movement. By the time the Somerford Street gymnasts were exercising, women were encouraged to suppress rather than accentuate their curves, and corsets had less boning and more elastic, or were even replaced by unboned supports with suspenders, such as the liberty bodice. This garment then is almost certainly what kept up the Somerford Street stockings.

Illustrations in *Punch* in 1891 show Victorian ladies in large hats playing croquet, tennis or golf and even roller skating while dressed in long heavy clothes, even crinolines, over tightly laced corsets. These, however, are sports in which they were intended to remain upright and they could engage in as much or as little exertion as they chose or their clothes permitted. When cricket became popular for women such clothes were less suitable. The 'Original English Lady Cricketers', for example, are shown in *The Illustrated London News* in 1890 wearing voluminous but loose clothing and skirts only to mid-calf. It would just be possible to perform Drill in such clothes, though the skirt would be an encumbrance.

Gymnastics, however, absolutely necessitates moving freely in all directions, supporting the weight of the body other than by the feet, and exerting sufficient force to propel the body through space. None of this would be possible for a woman trapped in heavy, voluminous, tight clothing. In terms of women's dress then, gymnastics was probably the most emancipating 'non-vocational' activity that could have been offered to Evening Institute students and may indeed have made them less accepting of other, non-physical constraints. Caroline and Margaret were certainly interested in current affairs and occasionally attended political meetings where the extension of women's suffrage was addressed.



Fig 9. Drill instruction in the Girls' Gymnasium at the People's Palace, Mile End Road. An accompanying article notes that '... it is wonderful to note how surprisingly graceful and agile girls can be when placed on an equal footing with their brothers so far as costume is concerned' (Drawing by Paul Rénouard, 1894, from *The Graphic*)

According to *The East London Observer*, the first ELGGA gymnastic competition attracted a large audience. The reactions of these people to the activities and dress of the participants would have varied greatly: what made some envious would have horrified others. When King George and Queen Mary visited Madame Bergman-Osterberg's by then renowned College at Dartford in February 1918, the Queen was reportedly 'dismayed by the sight of young ladies doing handstands in their gym tunics'. Displays of gymnastics by men and women were frequently presented in East London, but at any such event there would have been some in the audience in that less image-rich society who had not seen young women in such a context. For them, the activities and clothes must at least have been a challenge to their preconceptions and 'confounded stereotypes of womanly weakness and inactivity', an important contribution to changing public opinion.

LIFTED ON TO A NEW PLANE

In *The Evening Institute*, H J Edwards considered the proposals made by the Committee in 1913 and judged that many of the optimistic plans came to nothing in the period of necessary economies after the First World War. This may be true of the whole London-wide plan but planners of vision always aim for far more than can readily be achieved or afforded in order to raise the standards and extend the horizons of those being advised.

The Committee acknowledged that excellent work had been done by their ablest teachers under the previous system and that there had been 'brilliant exceptions' to the generally mediocre standards. This must also have been true of the post-1913 Institutes. Whatever the fate of the whole scheme, at Somerford Street, despite the local, national and international circumstances, the staff achieved and the students experienced much that was of lasting value. If much good resulted from efforts in

such an unpromising area, what must have been the outcomes for students in more favourably endowed parts of London?

At the very least, even if they gained not one fact or skill, students were removed, however briefly, from the potentially corrupting evening life of the streets and what did *not* happen to them was what mattered. The Institute, in the shape of Miss Dunn, sought them out at their school or workplace rather than leaving them with the daunting task of making the first approach.

The healthy gymnastic exercise helped to combat the effects of static, sedentary work in close, poorly ventilated workshops and of the cramped conditions in which they lived. Participation in team sports is considered to inculcate habits and values beneficial to the individual and to society. Gymnastics has a particular combination of team and individual elements and the values of both were encouraged in the students who grew in poise and self-esteem.

Many of the drill and gymnastic exercises were performed to music and both Caroline and Margaret found that immensely enjoyable. Now that it is possible to summon good music at will, it is difficult to convey their very great pleasure in becoming familiar, through the piano arrangements of classical pieces, with a range of good music and developing an appetite for more. The tunes came back to their lips in times of content and relaxation throughout their lives and when Margaret later discovered a talent for playing the piano she was able to share her pleasure.

They both particularly valued the company of like-minded young women (Fig 10) and the opportunity to exchange experiences of work and family events in an unthreatening environment. Their environment and the necessity to change clothes for gymnastics also facilitated conversations about more intimate aspects of students' personal lives. Many women of all ages at this time were very ignorant about their own bodies and in the absence of ubiquitous advertising, it could be difficult for a respectable young woman to gain any information. Margaret knew nothing about menstruation until she experienced it and a relative advised a most unhygienic way of dealing with it, saying 'It will soon go away'. It was her friends who gave her sound advice.

The Board of Education Report of 1909 suggested that what young people needed was

the 'friendly counsel which good teachers give'. For Caroline and Margaret their gymnastics session was the highlight of their week and they were fortunate in having in Miss Nelly Duschek (see Fig 10) just the sort of teacher envisaged by the Board. Her classes were well organised, she demanded high standards of performance and behaviour, and her students greatly respected her, but they also found her approachable, friendly, and a reliable source of advice and opinion. The gymnastics teams often travelled on the bus with her to displays and competitions — good opportunities for informal, though influential, conversations. She broadened their horizons with references to her home in Switzerland and shared with them her plans to emigrate to South Africa. Miss Duschek taught many classes: other teachers would certainly have had many of her qualities. It is difficult to specify the gains but much that was of value came to the students through interaction with such women.

The London for which the Committee made its proposals for continuing education in 1913 was different in fundamental ways from the city in which Caroline and Margaret were performing their energetic gymnastic leaps in 1920, particularly in terms of the lives of young women. In education, as in other areas of public administration, plans that seem appropriate and achievable almost invariably have some of their fundamental premises swept away by events beyond the conception of their initiators. Nevertheless, when capable and conscientious people are involved in their implementation, outcomes at the individual level can be of lasting value. The Somerford Street Institute helped to compensate its students for the deficiencies of their elementary education by developing in them qualities that in schools for more prosperous young people would have been taken for granted. It succeeded in fostering in many of them the qualities they would need to lift their own lives 'on to a new plane'.

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Fig 10. The Somerford Street senior gymnastics class 1920–21. Miss Nelly Duschek is seated in the centre of the front row. Margaret is on the extreme right and Caroline is standing immediately behind the young woman on Margaret's right. Some young women, including Caroline, are wearing their medals. Margaret had been compelled to give up her medals so that the family could patron them and this may also be the case with other young women in the photo who are not wearing medals. The question of whether it was proper to wear medals during competitions was a hotly debated topic in gymnastics at one time (Photo: author's collection)

unusual and most interesting Bergman-Österberg Archive at the University of Greenwich and gave valuable help and encouragement.

My most sincere and heartfelt thanks are due to the late Caroline Barker and the late Margaret Brion who inspired this work and will live always in my memory.

NOTES

¹ LCC Education Committee. Minutes of Proceedings 1913, Jan–June 1913. LMA LCC 22.06.

² LCC Evening Institutes. Record of Character of Area and Relations with Business Houses. LMA LCC/ED/HFE/10/10.

³ LCC Evening Institutes: handbills. LMA LCC/EO/HFE/13/125.

⁴ LCC Evening Institutes. Syllabuses for Instruction. Physical Exercises for Women. M2027 May 1915. LMA LCC/EO/HFE/13/119.

⁵ LCC Log Book Somerford Street Women's Evening Institute, Essex Road (from 1921). LMA LCC/EO/DIV5/SOM/LB/8.

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