



ADA SALTER

*Bread & Roses*

*Beauty at our doors*

*If they might inhale the  
sweet scents of the  
flowers*

**bread and roses  
beauty at our doors  
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the sweet scents of the flowers**

Linda Jane James

My change maker is Ada Salter. Born in Raunds,  
Northamptonshire in 1866.

I have chosen Ada for her inspiring work as an early environmentalist in this country, her lifelong work as a champion of working women, her advocacy for mutualism and social enterprise and her belief in the redemptive and transformative power of beauty.

Ada Salter was a pioneer of ethical socialism, urban gardening, and a campaigner against air pollution who believed in the right of everyone to have decent housing with the needs of the working class woman in mind.

As a successful community organiser Ada believed in the power of local clubs as a way of generating forces that change the world. It was her hands on and direct involvement, living her life with the people in the slums, often in extremely challenging circumstances, that make her work so remarkable.

When Ada Salter arrived in Bermondsey in 1897, leaving behind her comfortable life, she found that industrialisation had etched ugliness into the landscape of the human soul.

Ada Insisted on living among the poor, in the air polluted slums of Bermondsey, in drab poverty. Like Friedrich Schiller, John Ruskin and William Morris before her Ada believed in the redemptive power of beauty.

She saw beauty as a transformative power in society, a means of moral regeneration.



Always conscious of the need to think beyond the current desperation, Ada and her young daughter planted an acorn so that Joyce would have an oak tree to be proud of when she grew up. But with epidemics running rife in the slums Joyce didn't get the chance to experience her growing tree, Ada's only child died of scarlet fever, aged 8.

Ada approached her many challenges believing that 'Fresh gusts of wind offered solace to stifled souls'. After Joyce had died Ada would keep a photograph of her, decorated daily with fresh flowers and ivy leaves. A gentle reminder of the importance of nature and beauty in times of despair.

With Ada's focus on campaigning for the demolition of the slums and creating opportunities for the unemployed, her beautification work never ceased.

As a quaker, Ada promoted the need for human unity and a world of peace where individuals would practice personal virtues in everyday life. Her story illuminates how in the depths of poverty and despair it was possible for people to come together at a local level to work for small changes. She believed in empowering people to protest about their unacceptable conditions. Ada worked with women in poverty to develop a practice of making arguments from a humanitarian and moral imperative and encouraged everyone 'to spread, everywhere, the importance of

**conciliation, equal treatment and beauty**



The impoverished women in the factories of Bermondsey were overwhelmed by the futility of trying to oppose their rich and powerful employers - 'You might as well try to spit in the canal long enough to make the water run over' they would say. They resisted who they considered to be 'the preachers of revolt, the liberators who descended on us from unknown worlds of competence and comfort, too palpably unblemished by the experience that was ours'.

Working conditions in the sweet smelling Jam factories were dire. Many women were seriously injured in the factories because of an absence of care for health and safety. They worked long hours for little pay. Ada was desperate to encourage women to become unionised. It was through Ada's determination, sensitivity, kindness and patience that her efforts would be rewarded.

In 1911 14,000 women put down their tools and walked out of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe's factories and marched to a demonstration at Southwark Park, in protest against "appalling" working conditions and pay.

The strike action, known as the Bermondsey Uprising, was successful and could not have happened without Ada Salter – Bermondsey's first female councillor elected in 1909 – and her friends Mary Macarthur, who set up the *National Federation of Women Workers* (NFWW), and Eveline Lowe, who was the first woman elected chair of London County Council.

At this time we also see the emergence of the phrase "**Bread and Roses**" a political slogan as well as the name of an associated poem, originating from a speech given by American women's suffrage activist Helen Todd; The poem was first published in *The American Magazine* in December 1911, with the attribution line "'Bread for all, and Roses, too'—a slogan of the women in the West." The phrase is commonly associated with the textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, between January and March 1912, now often referred to as the "Bread and Roses strike".

The slogan bread and roses resonates with the strike action we are witnessing one hundred or more years later. Many women workers, a large proportion of those on strike, working in our caring professions, for health and well-being and the public good, are campaigning not just for fair pay but for better working conditions and quality of life - a right to have a life that does not revolve around overwork and food banks.

As Rose Schneiderman stated in 1912 in response to the bread and roses strike

***'What the woman who labors wants  
is the right to live, not simply exist –  
the right to life as the rich woman  
has the right to life, and the sun  
and music and art.***

***You have nothing that  
the humblest worker has not  
a right to have also.***

***The worker must have bread,  
but she must have roses, too.  
Help, you women of privilege,  
give her the ballot to fight with'.***

Ada's democratic and ethical campaigns rooted in communities and humanitarian arguments were difficult to refute and she was increasingly recognised for the impact she was having in transforming the everyday lives of hard-working people in the slums of Bermondsey.

In November 1922 Ada Salter became the first woman mayor in London, the first Labour mayor in Britain and only one of four women mayors in the whole country. Dispensing with the mayoral chain, giving money to the poor, Ada flew a red flag over Bermondsey, bearing local symbols and the badges of municipal socialism. The right wing newspapers were incandescent with rage.

In 1923 Ada set up a 'Beautification Committee' for 'Fresh Air and Fun' planting over 10,000 trees for the people of the borough of Bermondsey. Bermondsey became a blaze of colour, nodding yellow chrysanthemums in window-boxes, Michaelmas daisies glowing like purple stars, factory girls were hurrying home arm in arm.....many had flowers pinned to their coats. Ada would encourage individuals to plant stocks, sweet cherry pie, verbenas, blue lobelia, tobacco plants, cosmos, geraniums, Bermondsey Gems and lilies of the valley in shady corners, delicate fragrances mingling with the stench of the tanneries and the sticky smells of molten chocolate and sweet boiling jam.

The flowers and trees were not a decoration or a placatory backdrop to the industrial darkness, but a symbol. They were the symbol of the Bermondsey Revolution, that recognised that it was everybody's right to have fresh air and fun.

From the dirt and squalor of the slums Ada championed the idea of model housing and promoted the idea of a green belt. She tirelessly championed the need for homes for the working people that had spacious courtyards, flowerbeds and trees. She believed that 'What matters is the human suffering under your own control, within your own responsibility, here and now.'

The Bermondsey beautification movement created a profusion of colour and optimism, adding games, sports, concerts, playgrounds and the arts to the trees, flowers and gardens. Ada Salter's work was said to be unparalleled in the history of the slums in this country. People came from all across the world to marvel at her achievements.

The Evening standard described Bermondsey as having gone from being one of the worst slums in the country to the most optimistic place in London.

Today, we still tend to think of beauty and flowers as a privilege, something extra should only come after our basic necessities of food and heat. Being surrounded by beauty tends to be seen as for the privileged classes who can afford to give most of their lives to acquiring everything that is beautiful, because they have been smart and hard-working and therefore deserving.

The idea of beauty, fresh air and fun is seen by the decision makers as 'frivolous fripperies on the periphery' of the ordinary working lives of the population at large, things that in a time of a cost of living crisis we cannot afford until the hard working work hard some more.

What we learn from Ada Salter is that no matter what our circumstance it is important to demand beauty as a civic duty. In our drive for industrial development and focus on economic growth we cannot afford to lose sight of the importance of good pay and working conditions. Ada, with her husband Dr Salter (the man who created the NHS before the NHS was created) recognised that it costs society more to deal with the consequences of poverty than it does to invest in beauty, health and well-being for all.

I have only touched the surface of why Ada Salter is such an inspiring change maker for our time, her hard work and compassion shows us the potential for the redemptive power of beauty, and hopefully encourage us all to bring some much needed optimism. Ada would encourage us to know that it is within our power to make a stand for beauty as a transformative power for all in society, and not simply ring-fenced within the playgrounds of the privileged.

What might you do to make a stand for everyone's right to bread and roses, to live a life that is greener, and be part of creating a world in which we can all inhale the sweet scents of the flowers?

My Inspiration and thanks for this piece on Ada Salter as a change maker comes from reading 'Ada Salter, Pioneer of Ethical Socialism' written by Graham Taylor.

Also, with thanks for the many conversations with Sheila and Graham Taylor in making the Bermondsey Blue Peoples' Mural with Paul Butler in April 2022

Broadcast on Radio Norfolk as part of their BBC Upload 'Change Makers' - 4<sup>th</sup> February 2023

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Ada Salter  
detail,  
Bermondsey  
People's  
Mural 2022  
Paul Butler  
and Linda



