

U3A Bikers The Salter Trail Friday 21st October 2022

This ride around Bermondsey visited ten sites associated with Ada and Alfred Salter. The year 2022 marks 100 years since Dr Alfred Salter was first elected as MP for Bermondsey and his wife Ada was elected as Bermondsey's Mayor.

A [Salter Centenary Project](#) has been organised and this ride has been planned in conjunction with the Centenary coordinator, Sheila Taylor. Both Ada and Alfred were cyclists.

With rain threatened during the day, 12 of us assembled at Brockwell Lido and set out on the well-established route to Burgess Park, crossing the Old Kent Road safely on cycle lights at Glengall Road.

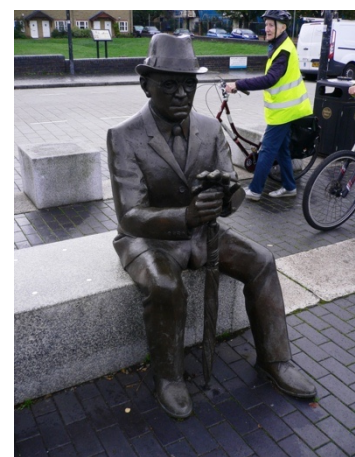


A well-researched route took us to Southwark Park, and leaving the park at the northern end it was just a few minutes more until we arrived at King's Stairs Gardens.

Here, as arranged, was our guide for the ride, Sheila, who had kindly agreed to accompany us and provide a commentary on each of the points of interest along the route.

At this location on the Thames at Bermondsey Wall were the very conspicuous **statues of Ada and Alfred Salter**, their daughter Joyce, and a cat sitting on the wall.

Sheila provided us with an interesting account of their early lives, the choice of their life path, and their huge contribution to the improvement of the lives of the impoverished residents of Bermondsey in the early twentieth century.



A list of all the locations is shown below, with some notes about each.

Nearby was a building clad in scaffolding and plastic sheeting which was the site of **St George's Hall** where Ada ran clubs for girls; we continued on to see some of the 54 fine houses in Wilson Grove and the adjacent streets. These 1928 houses were designed as "model" houses for families, to replace what were some of the worst slums in south London.

The development attracted much attention, including from a German delegation which visited the area.



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It was now time for coffee and cakes! A short ride along the cycle path on Jamaica Road took us to Barton's café. How fortunate we were! Safely seated beneath canopy we watched as the torrential rain shower arrived.



The cycle lane along Jamaica Road took us to Tooley Street and the turning into Fair Street, then into the little play area, the **Alfred Salter playground**.

Within the playground is a casket containing the ashes of both Ada and Alfred Salter.

A casual visitor might have some difficulty finding it. The casket is almost hidden in bushes beside a tree with a small plaque in front of it. Sheila described how it came about that this is the site for the casket, and what plans there are to move it to a more suitable location.



Our route was then across Tower Bridge Road, turning into St John's Churchyard before arriving at the **Tanner Street Park**. It was here that Ada opened the playground in 1929 and planted a tree – a Tree of Heaven -to commemorate the occasion.

The tree, long gone, has recently been replaced by another tree, seen beyond Sheila's right shoulder. A photo shows the 1929 opening ceremony.



A short ride to Grange Road, past Bermondsey Spa Gardens led to a stop opposite a modest brick building, the **Bermondsey Health Centre**.

Opened in 1936, this building contained clinics set up by the Health & Maternity Committees; a solarium for TB patients, the first in Britain; dental, foot, antenatal, and child welfare clinics. Truly "the NHS before the NHS."



The next stop was at Sainsbury's. The store occupies the site of the former **Bermondsey Old Town Hall** where Ada was the mayor.



The building was damaged in WWII, and later demolished, and all that remains are two columns. Sheila produced a photo of the Old Town Hall for us to view. Next door is the New Town Hall.

The next destination was St James's Church where the memorial services were held for Ada (1942) and Alfred (1945). Although they were Quakers, they were good friends of the two vicars there.



It was another friend, Arthur Carr (of Peak Frean biscuits), who proposed that a slide be constructed for local children. The huge wooden **Joy Slide** was built in 1921.

Years later this was demolished but on the centenary year a new slide was installed, designed by Fergus Carr, an architect and a great-great grandson of Arthur.



Then it was off down St James's Road to a small car park. This was dominated by a huge mural on the gable end of a building, the **Mural in the Blue**. Only recently completed, this was a montage of people and scene associated with Ada and the surrounding area. The central figure of Ada is prominent.



Adjacent to the car park was the Blue Market where – by the miracle of time travel! – we were to meet one of the figures who appears alongside Ada in the mural, the fishmonger, an acquaintance of Sheila's and featured at lower right.

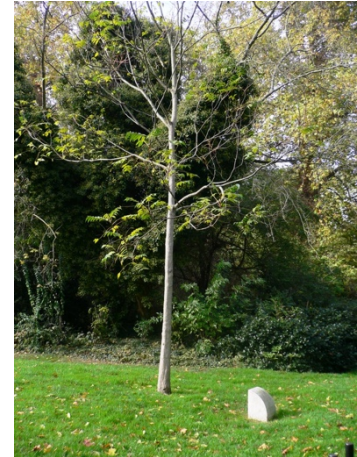
Southwark Park Road led us to the park and to our final location, the **Ada Salter Gardens**.



Ada had been put in charge of the LCC Parks and Open Spaces Department and for Southwark she designed an old English garden with a beautiful terrace, crowned by a rose-covered pergola, overlooking the lake.

This was opened in 1936, and after her death in 1942 the garden was officially named the "Ada Salter Gardens". An information board provides details of Ada and Alfred Salter

A tree of heaven (much favoured by Ada) was planted near the eastern end. We paused for a moment to look at the replacement tree with a memorial stone there.



Then it was on to the park café for our lunch stop.

We thanked Sheila for her most interesting commentary along the way, bringing to life the story of two remarkable people who changed the lives of so many impoverished folk living in Bermondsey - and beyond - in the 1920s and 1930s. Thank you very much, Sheila!!

Riders

Andrew, Chris, David, Denise Davies, Felicity, Jane, John, John, Martin, Martin, Tony.

Time; About 5 hours

Acknowledgements: Wikipedia; notes provided by Sheila Taylor.

Ride leader: John Clements with Sheila Taylor

Convenor: John Clements

Report and photos: John Clements, 23rd October 2022

Notes:

Locations visited on the ride

1) SALTER STATUES: Statues of Alfred, Joyce and the cat, designed by Diane Gorvin, and funded by LDDC were installed in 1991, and the statue of Alfred was stolen in 2011. A fund-raising campaign raised half of the £120,000; the other half was provided by Southwark Council. The new collection of statues, which now included Ada (omitted from the original group!), was unveiled 2014. The statue of Ada was the 15th of a woman in London, the first woman trade unionist, environmentalist, a Quaker, and elected politician.

2) WEST LANE, ST GEORGE'S HALL: St George Working Girls Club was started 1896. Ada came to Bermondsey in 1897 and by 1898 she was in charge of all four girls clubs. They were 'rough and tough', but she 'found God in all of them', and they 'looked and were as good as duchesses'. She introduced a chess club, taught the girls and set up a team. She played for the local Bermondsey team in the South London League. [The first Women's International Chess Congress was held in London 1897.]

3) WILSON GROVE, 54 SALTER COTTAGES: Salisbury Street was site of one of the worst slums; condemned in 1890s, it was finally demolished in 1923. Wilson Grove and several adjoining streets, were completed in 1928 to Ada's design and show the utopian vision for ideal social housing to replace the slums. Rows of neat, faintly art deco garden-cottages were designed in consultation with local women who advised on the practical necessities required for their new homes. These were initially opposed by the Government and the LCC, but building proceeded and they were opened in 1928.

4) ALFRED SALTER PLAYGROUND AND ASHES: Originally called Coxson Place playground and opened in 1921, this was renamed after Alfred in 1945. Ada died in 1942, Alfred in 1945. For each, a service was held in Peckham; memorial services were held at St James's Church. Their ashes were originally in garden of the Quaker Meeting House Peckham, under a magnolia tree. When the Meeting House was sold (altered and now used as P.O. sorting office) the ashes were transferred in 1960 to their present inconspicuous location in the playground.

5) TANNER STREET PLAYGROUND was opened 1929 by Ada, and marked by the planting of a tree of heaven. A netball court, football pitch, two tennis-courts and a pavilion with toilets were provided. Unique for its state-of-the-art facilities, the playground included cages and enclosures for cricket and football practice, for use by local schools and the public. A replacement tree was recently planted.

6) HEALTH CENTRE A medical pioneer, Alfred Salter campaigned to clear the slums and improve public health and had set up a small public health centre in Grange Road, providing free health care for those who could not afford to pay. The Health Centre was opened in 1936. In this building were dental, foot, antenatal, and child welfare clinics, a bit like a modern-day polyclinic. A solarium for TB had been established in 1926 the first in Britain and was incorporated. This was one of only 12 Health Centres in Britain. And so through radical policies, and at some expense, this "NHS before the NHS" was established., some 20 years before the creation of the National Health Service. There was also a 'palace of baths' (set up in 1927 when there were only 150 bathrooms in 20,000 homes in Bermondsey), providing a place to bathe, swim or do the laundry, a major step forward.

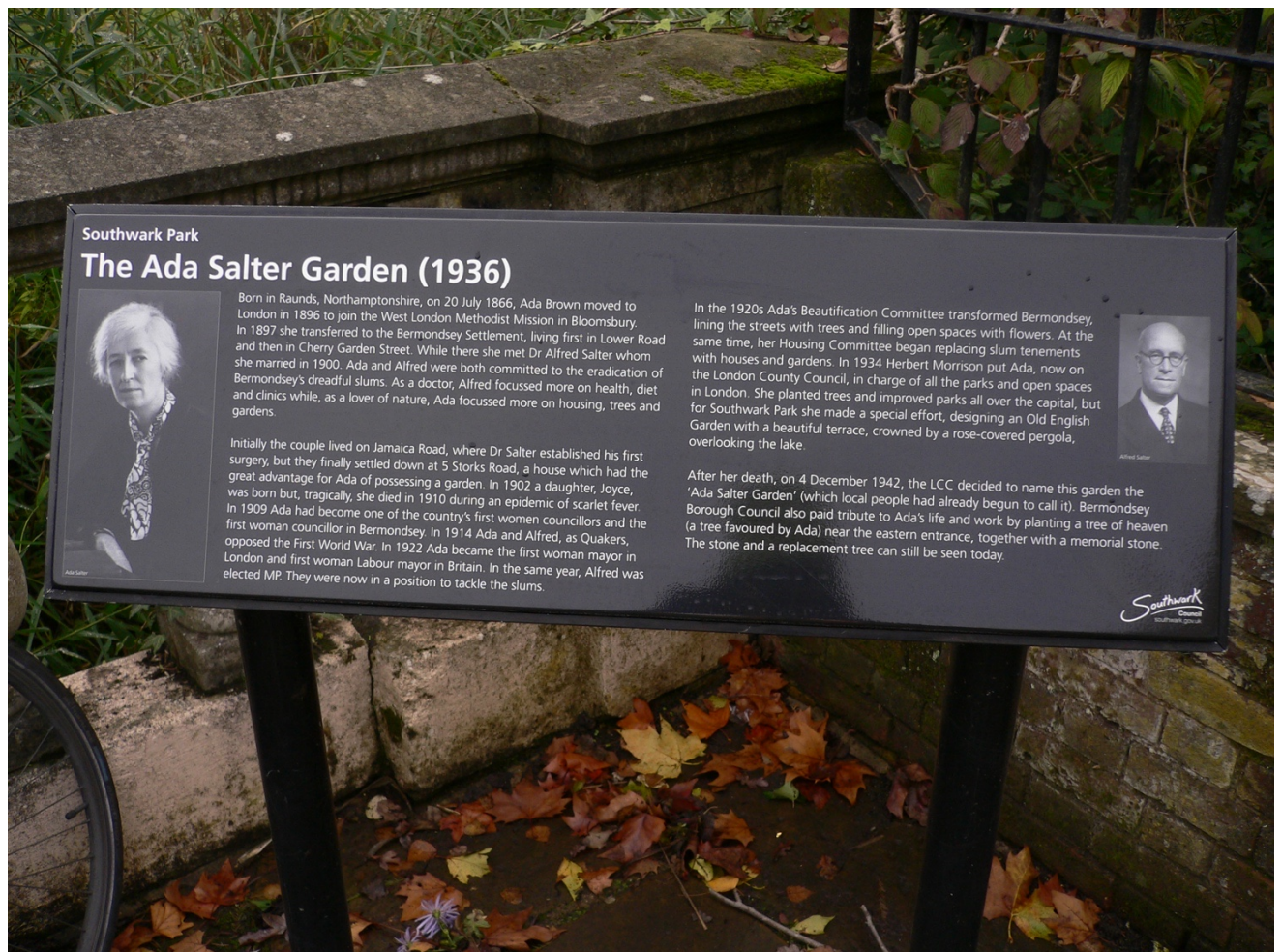
7) BERMONDSEY OLD TOWN HALL was originally a 19th century 'vestry' hall, and used by council from 1900. Only two pillars remain of the original building. It was here that the successful election of Alfred as MP for Bermondsey was announced by Ada as the Mayor. The Town Hall was damaged in WW2 and demolished.. A new Town Hall had been built 1928 on an adjacent site; in 2012 this Town Hall was sold and converted to apartments. in the entrance hall is a list of mayors, including Ada.

8) JOY SLIDE. ST JAMES'S CHURCH was the local parish church and hosted the memorial services for Ada (1942) and Alfred (1945). Ada and Alfred were Quakers, but good friends with vicars: Ernest Coulthard and George Balleine. The "Joy Slide" was the idea of Arthur Carr (of Peek Frean's biscuit factory) and built in 1921; mats were provided by an attendant! After demolition of the decayed slide, a new one designed by Fergus his great-great-grandson, was installed in 2021.

9) MURAL IN THE BLUE: A recent addition (in 2022) is the huge mural by Paul Butler showing Ada in the centre and some of the activities of the area (Millwall football club; canning factories, local fishmonger). The Radical Tea Towel Company has produced an Ada tea towel using her image from the mural.

10) ADA SALTER GARDEN

Designed by Ada for Southwark Park, this was originally named the Old English Garden but called 'Ada's garden' by locals. It was officially renamed in July 1943. There is an information board in the garden – a photo of it is shown below.



The Mural in the Blue

