

# The Life and Times of Ada Salter (transcript)

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

ada, london, alfred, salter, area, lived, life, salters, women, politics, people, medical officer, sheila, liberal party, reform, radical, housing, slums, conditions, podcast

## SPEAKERS

,Ada, Graham, Sheila, Emily, Medical officer of health

### Emily 00:03

Hello, and welcome to this podcast. My name is Emily and today I want to take you on a journey through the life and times of Ada Salter.

### Emily 00:10

Ada Salter was far more than just Alfred Salter's wife. Carving her own place in politics she led the way for so many more women to follow in her footsteps, and certainly shaped the lives of people here in Bermondsey. Today we will explore how Ada's influence extended to a radical rethinking of public health, housing and the urban environment, as well as the ways in which her feminist spirit helped to shape a vision for Bermondsey.

### Emily 00:43

It was 100 years ago that Ada became the first female mayor in London, which is commemorated by the centenary, shining a light on her many achievements. Today we reflect on the legacy of the built environment in this once poor district in which she came to live many years ago.

To help us to understand Ada's life and vision we are very fortunate to be joined by two local Bermondsey residents, Sheila and Graham. Sheila is the chair of the Cherry Garden Tenants and Residents Association, as well as being a trustee of the Salter statues campaign. Alongside her Graham is an established historian and author of Ada's biography, *Ada Salter: pioneer of ethical socialism*, certain to provide some expert contributions and help answer some of our questions in today's discussion.

So to begin this exploration, let's start where Ada was born. Somewhere quite far away from Bermondsey. Ada Salter was born in Raunds in the East Midlands in July 1866 to a Methodist family. She was one of six children and her family were involved in farming,. However, would we be correct in thinking that her family, aside from their farming background was also stirring up more of a political fever in this area?

### Graham 01:51

Her family were a somewhat political family, they were Gladstone liberals so on the radical end of the Liberal Party. And, and in fact, one of her brothers was a local councillor there.

**Emily 02:10**

That's really interesting to hear how Ada's family were influential in local politics. And I suppose it's not surprising, then, that she felt motivated to pursue a career in politics in her later life. Methodism too was an important influence in her life. And many Methodists were drawn to radical politics, social reform, and philanthropy at this time,

**Graham 02:30**

One of the main leaders of the Methodist church called Hugh Hughes was editor of the *Methodist Times*, and he highlighted the slums of London. And when I did my research, I actually found donations sent from Raunds from the Brown family to London to help Hugh Hughes in his work in the slums. And so Ada was already contributing to work against the slums while she was up in Raunds.

**Emily 03:05**

That certainly suggests that even from an early age, Ada was aware of the poverty which existed in London, an awareness that would eventually draw her to the slums of Bermondsey. But before we discuss Ada's journey to London let's first travel to Bermondsey to understand why there was such a pressing need for social reform and improvement at this time.

**Emily 03:36**

Bermondsey lies on the southern banks of the Thames close to London Bridge and Tower Bridge. In the 19th century it was well known for its stinking tan yards and leather workshops. Cattle and sheep hides were processed here, adding to the stench of the area. Even today, as we walk along the Thames foreshore it will often reveal the bones of animals which lived along this part of the river. Bermondsey was also an important dock area, and ships would queue up in the pool of London off its shores waiting to unload their cargo in the many warehouses which lined the riverbank. Not surprising, perhaps it was a very poor area. Wages were low and housing was in short supply, competing with workshops, tan yards and warehouses for space.

**Graham 04:18**

Bermondsey had hardly any middle class, let alone upper class, it was almost entirely working class, by the time the Salters lived here, which of course made it very difficult to put on any local taxes, rates in order to raise money. And the other thing was, as well as not having a middle class or an upper class, it had very little underclass. So there was, although it was a slum area, they the Bermondsey people were very respectable, working class. They were people who had standards, who were clean, who didn't get drunk in the pubs. And so it was an exceptional area. The East End was different. The East End had a big underclass, a big criminal element, a big prostitution element, hardly any of that at all in Bermondsey in the early 20th century.

**Emily 05:26**

Housing in this area was particularly bad. During the mid-19th century, the largest cholera outbreak ever to hit London began in Jacob's Island, a notoriously poor locality, close to an inlet in the Thames and right in the heart of Bermondsey. By the end of the century, conditions were even worse and severe enough to be communicated beyond London, and back to Ada who was living in Raunds. Of

course, the housing situation and poor living conditions did not go unnoticed. The spread of disease from places such as Bermondsey attracted the attention of local authorities. We had a look at the medical officer of health reports in Bermondsey at the turn of the century to learn more about health concerns at the time. In 1899, the medical officer noted that diseases such as diphtheria, summer diarrhoea and measles were common and death rates were high, especially among infants and young children. When writing about the efforts to clean up the slums, the medical officer stated

**Medical officer of health 06:22**

A number of houses in a dirty and dilapidated condition which will cause to be cleaned and repaired was 460. Four houses were closed as unfit for human habitation. 39 cases of overcrowding was abated, the number of dead bodies which were removed from rooms to the Parish mortuary was 47.

**Emily 06:47**

Inspectors also kept a watch on food that was considered unfit for consumption. In 1899 181 cases of condensed milk, that is 7000 tins, were seized. Adulterated food went hand in hand with poor living conditions, and both contributed to high rates of sickness and mortality in this area. It was a growing awareness of such conditions deep in the heart of London, the richest city in the world at the time that drew people like the Salters, eager for change, to Bermondsey.

**Emily 07:16**

From the end of the 19th century, women like Ada had started to further their education, and attend universities. Although women did not have the vote, growing awareness of social problems meant that many women were drawn to politics and social reform. Ada was one of them. With these ideas firmly in place, Ada's only issue was her actual move to London. But this was not easy. And many women like Ada had to overcome many barriers in order to achieve their goals.

**Graham 07:47**

Problem women had at that time was that they weren't allowed to move about. So if you left home on your own, you were assumed to be pregnant, and the family fell into disgrace. If you walked down the street on your own, without your hair being covered, well, if you walk down the street on your own, that was problematic if you didn't have a chaperone, because you might be confused with a lower class person or a prostitute even.

**Emily 08:15**

Ada was not someone who could be easily put off. When her sister Mary married a man in London, the opportunity arose to come to the city. This was her golden ticket to leave Raunds and the start of her work in London.

**Emily 08:32**

Now in London, Ada began work towards her larger goal, starting with her involvement with Hugh Hughes' West London Mission. She worked alongside his wife Catherine, with their offshoot organization, Sisters of the People, which focused on helping women in poverty-stricken areas. These kinds of charitable efforts brought the wealthy into direct contact with the poor, who often lived in neighboring streets tucked away from view. Ada's work at the Sisters of the People, whilst being

successful, was short lived. With growing tensions between the Methodist Church and the West London Mission Ada resigned and relocated to Bermondsey, a decision which shaped the rest of her life and career.

**Emily 09:20**

After relocating to Bermondsey, Ada joined another Methodist organization, the Bermondsey Settlement, doing similar work to her role in the West London Mission by helping working-class women, and they're often unruly young children. It was here that she met Alfred. Little did she know that it was to be the start of a lifelong partnership.

Considering the extent that religion played a part in many of Ada's ideals and visions at this time, would you say that Alfred's visions also aligned with the kind of things that Ada was trying to achieve?

**Graham 09:53**

When they met in 1898, Alfred was actually a Marxist socialist at that time. And he was he'd been a member of the Social Democratic Federation that William Morris belonged to. He was quite notorious at Guy's Hospital, where he won all these gold medals and was the best student they ever had. And he was quite notorious for his radical, radical views. And as I said, Ada was a radical liberal, so not quite as left wing as him. But they both came from a left wing political commitment. He was an atheist. She was more religious at that time, but they actually swapped that around because after meeting Ada, he became religious. And he ended up more religious than she should she was, and she always sounds completely non-religious, and at the end of their lives anyway,

**Emily 10:51**

I suppose moving to Bermondsey, as an area which had quite a dubious reputation must have been considered quite a radical decision for Ada and Alfred to make.

**Emily 10:59**

Welcome to the podcast Sheila. I'd like to begin by asking, what do you think the Salter's initial experiences would have been like when they moved to this area,

**Emily 11:08**

Ada just looked at the people around them and wanted to create a healthy decent life for them all, by providing the basics, you know, a health service, housing, employment.

**Emily 11:24**

Really fascinating to hear how committed they both were to those three key pillars of social reform. Even to the extent that Alfred was willing to give up his post at Guy's Hospital as a house physician, in order to improve the health of the local community.

In 1900, at the age of 34, Ada and Alfred married, and from then on, it seems their endeavor to improve their community became their life's mission. When they moved into a flat above a shop on Jamaica Road, they were not simply aiding the community, they were now part of it themselves.

**Emily 11:58**

It was from this point that their social revolution really began to take shape, Ada continued to work in Bermondsey in the settlement, whilst Alfred began his medical practice in the locality. There were many challenges for them to face. Tuberculosis, for example, was common, and it was claimed that it was present in one in every three houses in Bermondsey. There were very few effective treatments at the time, and those who contracted the disease were lucky to survive for more than a few years. Such challenging conditions, however, only seemed to motivate Ada and Alfred even more. Alfred began to provide cheap or even free health care to local residents. He even had a mobile film unit that toured the area showing public health films from the back of a van. He campaigned successfully for the tubercular testing of milk and was instrumental in setting up the Bermondsey Healthcare Centre on Grange Road, a building which still stands today, and his principles of free health care at the point of demand, underpin the National Health Service which serves us all today.

**Emily 13:03**

But there was also sadness in their lives. Living in the midst of Bermondsey in these slum conditions brought its own dangers. And in 1910, Ada and Alfred's only child Joyce died from scarlet fever. However, in Joyce's memory, Alfred and Ada were effectively constructing a new revolutionary blueprint for public health care.

Sheila, how significant would you say their work was in formulating the foundations of what you've now come to know as the NHS?

**Sheila 13:33**

As Graham said in his book, he really set up an NHS before the NHS because he believed in providing a good health service for ordinary people if they couldn't pay for a doctor's visit, even just visited free of charge. And they created an amazing health service here with state of the art, you know, marble clad public baths for people to go swimming and women to do their washing and a solarium for the treatment of TB, which was a real innovation.

**Emily 14:12**

Despite the Salters working on quite a small scale. The vision had much wider significance. And it's fascinating to think how progressive the ideas actually were in practice in creating a healthy city that served the many and not the few.

Putting this vision into practice drew Ada into the wider political realm. She campaigned for many causes in her time, but women's right to vote underpinned her politics from the outset. Her early involvement in politics was with the radical wing of the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party was in power in 1905. However, leading figures prevented the parliamentary vote on women's suffrage that many of the party's MPs wished for. In response, Ada left the Liberal Party in 1906. This change in political direction is what lead her to become involved in the labour movement. Bermondsey had been a promising area for the labor movement, particularly as more working class men got the vote after the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884. Having left the Liberal Party, Ada was drawn to the Independent Labour Party. This group was positioned to the left of the Labor Representation Committee that ultimately evolved into the modern Labour Party we have today.

One of the things that attracted Ada to this particular organization was its commitment to standing female candidates in its elections. She was determined that women should have the vote.

And as a member of the ILP, she pushed their commitment to women's votes further helping to found the Women's Labor League.

Ada's feminist spirit, and relentless desire to have her voice heard was all part of her vision that she had planned for Bermondsey. In 1909 she was elected as councillor in Bermondsey, both the first female and first Labour candidate to do so.

As a councillor, Ada advanced suffrage calls at the local level, recruiting local women into the National Federation of Women Workers.

Together with her best friend, Eveline Lowe, she helped to organize a strike in 1911 of 14,000 female factory workers, which would be known as the Bermondsey uprising.

In tandem with these events, the fledgling Labour Party was starting to take power away from the Liberals, especially with the growing importance of Labour following the First World War. Ada began to take a more prominent position in politics. In 1922, she was elected mayor of Bermondsey, making her the first female mayor in London. Of course, it is this centenary that we are marking with today's podcast. But Ada was not one to seek glory from office. She retained her principles of shunning a life of luxury and maintained her commitment to pacifism. Writing in *The Vote*, the weekly newspaper of the Women's Freedom League Ada said,

**Ada 16:58**

I do not intend to wear the chain of office for brilliant coloring, and for the brightness of gold, I have the greatest admiration, but I desire them not as symbols of place and power. In my capacity as mayor, I shall not accept invitations to attend any function which appears to me to tend to the glorification of militarism.

**Emily 17:18**

Looking around this area, it seems that Ada's vision for the good city is still evident in Bermondsey. The trees she planted throughout the area may have been replaced by others, but they're still very much part of the scene here. At the time planting trees and flowers in such a polluted part of London may have seemed idealistic, but it seems to have captured the imagination to make a real change in this area and improve local lives.

**Graham 17:47**

To come to the centre of London, to a well-known infamous foul slum area, and see all these green trees and flowers in the street was very, very striking at the time, it had an impact on the population. Ada's idea was an ethical one, it wasn't just to make it look pretty, she wouldn't have..., she wasn't interested in that. She thought that a green environment has a positive effect on people's morale. If they lived in dreadful conditions, then there was a tendency to be dreadful, you see what I mean, and if

you lived in ennobling conditions, there was a tendency to be noble. And so she really believed that. And in fact, I have come across that in, in, in in real life.

**Sheila 18:35**

I think that's been proved now. These days, everybody acknowledges that access to green is essential for mental health.

**Emily 18:45**

Definitely.

**Emily 18:51**

It's so fascinating to hear how pioneering Ada and Alfred's vision was for a healthy community and how far sighted they actually were in their reforms. Not just for this area, but the country as a whole, from influencing the ideas behind the foundations of the NHS, to making links between mental health and the environment. Ada's vision for the good city really was inspired by her politics and morals around the need for good health care and well-being. Inspiration for which many cities around the world are designed today. We will discuss this topic in more depth in our next podcast, which will explore Ada's beautification projects, the legacy of the Salter Cottages and the lived experiences of local residents who still live here today. For now, though, I would like to take the time to thank Sheila and Graham for joining me today. Your insight and knowledge has helped bring to life the story of Ada Salter, here in Bermondsey. I hope you, our listeners, have enjoyed listening to today's podcast and that you've learned a little bit more about the life and legacy of Ada Salter as a social reformer, feminist figure and environmentalist. I hope you will join us in our next podcast to hear more. Thank you.

**Emily 19:54**

This podcast was made with the help of a grant from the Department of Geography at King's College London. It has been made in collaboration between myself Emily Mayer, Dr. Joe Chick, Natasha Preger, and Professor David Green. Thank you also to our podcast producer and editor Amelia Parkes. Thanks also go to Jacob Parkes for voicing the medical officer. Music and sound effects were provided by Zap Splat, Adam A Johnson, Felix bloom, P M. S. F. X, Sound Ex Machina, Angela Poulson and Smart Sound and the Sound Pack Tree