

THE SPA ROAD ELEVATOR

BERMONDSEY

The next Institution that I inspected was that of a paper-sorting works at Spa Road, Bermondsey, where all sorts of waste paper are dealt with in enormous quantities. Of this stuff some is given and some is bought. Upon delivery it goes to the sorters, who separate it out according to the different classes of the material, after which it is pressed into bales by hydraulic machinery and sold to merchants to be re-made.

These works stand upon two acres of land. Parts of the existing buildings were once a preserve factory, but some of them have been erected by the Army. There remain upon the site certain dwelling-houses, which are still let to tenants. These are destined to be pulled down whenever money is forthcoming to extend the factory.

The object of the Institution is to find work for distressed or fallen persons, and restore them to society. The Manager of this 'Elevator,' as it is called, informed me that it employs about 480 men, all of whom are picked up upon the streets. As a rule, these men are given their board and lodging in return for work during the first week, but no money, as their labour is worth little. In the second week, 6d. is

paid to them in cash; and, subsequently, this remuneration is added to in proportion to the value of the labour, till in the end some of them earn 8s. or 9s. a week in addition to their board and lodging.

I asked the Officer in charge what he had to say as to the charges of sweating and underselling which have been brought against the Salvation Army in connexion with this and its other productive Institutions.

He replied that they neither sweated nor undersold. The men whom they picked up had no value in the labour market, and could get nothing to do because no one would employ them, many of them being the victims of drink or entirely unskilled. Such people they overlooked, housed, fed, and instructed, whether they did or did not earn their food and lodging, and after the first week paid them upon a rising scale. The results were eminently satisfactory, as even allowing for the drunkards they found that but few cases, not more than 10 per cent, were hopeless. Did they not rescue these men most of them would sink utterly; indeed, according to their own testimony many of such wastrels were snatched from suicide. As a matter of fact, also, they employed more men per ton of paper than any other dealers in the trade.

With reference to the commercial results, after allowing for interest on the capital invested, the place did not pay its way. He said that a sum of £15,000 was urgently required for the erection of a new

building on this site, some of those that exist being of a rough-and-ready character. They were trying to raise subscriptions towards this object, but found the response very slow.

He added that they collected their raw material from warehouses, most of it being given to them, but some they bought, as it was necessary to keep the works supplied, which could not be done with the gratis stuff alone. Also they found that the paper they purchased was the most profitable.

These works presented a busy spectacle of useful industry. There was the sorting-room, where great masses of waste-paper of every kind was being picked over by about 100 men and separated into its various classes. The resulting heaps are thrown through hoppers into bins. From the bins this sorted stuff passes into hydraulic presses which crush it into bales that, after being wired, are ready for sale.

It occurred to me that the dealing with this mass of refuse paper must be an unhealthy occupation; but I was informed that this is not the case, and certainly the appearance of the workers bore out the statement.

After completing a tour of the works I visited one of the bedrooms containing seventy beds, where everything seemed very tidy and fresh. Clean sheets are provided every week, as are baths for the inmates. In the kitchen were great cooking boilers, ovens, etc., all of which are

worked by steam produced by the burning of the refuse of the sorted paper. Then I saw the household salvage store, which contained enormous quantities of old clothes and boots; also a great collection of furniture, including a Turkish bath cabinet, all of which articles had been given to the Army by charitable folk. These are either given away or sold to the employes of the factory or to the poor of the neighbourhood at a very cheap rate.

The man in charge of this store was an extremely good-looking and gentlemanly young fellow of University education, who had been a writer of fiction, and once acted as secretary to a gentleman who travelled on the Continent and in the East. Losing his employment, he took to a life of dissipation, became ill, and sank to the very bottom. He informed me that his ideals and outlook on life were now totally changed. I have every hope that he will do well in the future, as his abilities are evidently considerable, and Nature has favoured him in many ways.

I interviewed a number of the men employed in these works, most of whom had come down through drink, some of them from very good situations. One had been the superintendent of a sewing-machine company. He took to liquor, left his wife, and found himself upon the streets. Now he was a traveller for the Salvation Army, in the interests of the Waste-Paper Department, had regained his position in life, and was living with his wife and family in a comfortable house.

Another was a grocer by profession, all of whose savings were stolen, after which he took to drink. He had been three months in the works, and at the time of my visit was earning 6s. a week with food and lodging.

Another had been a Barnardo boy, who came from Canada as a ship's steward, and could find nothing to do in England. Another was a gentleman's servant, who was dismissed because the family left London.

Another was an auctioneer, who failed from want of capital, took to drink, and emigrated to Canada. Two years later he fell ill with pleurisy, and was sent home because the authorities were afraid that his ailment might turn to consumption. He stated that at this time he had given up drink, but could obtain no employment, so came upon the streets. As he was starving and without hope, not having slept in a bed for ten nights, he was about to commit suicide when the Salvation Army picked him up. He had seen his wife for the first time in four years on the previous Whit Monday, and they proposed to live together again so soon as he secured permanent employment.

Another had been a soldier in the Seaforth Highlanders, and served in the Egyptian Campaign of 1881, and also in the American Army. Subsequently he was employed as a porter at a lodging-house at a salary of 25s. a week, but left because of trouble about a woman. He came upon the streets, and, being unable to find employment, was contemplating suicide, when he fell under the influence of the Army at

the Blackfriars Shelter.

All these men, and others whom I spoke to at random but have no space to write of, assured me that they were quite satisfied with their treatment at the works, and repudiated--some of them with indignation--the suggestion that I put to them tentatively that they suffered from a system of sweating. For the most part, indeed, their gratitude for the help they were receiving in the hour of need was very evident and touching.