HISTORY
OF SOCIAL WORK

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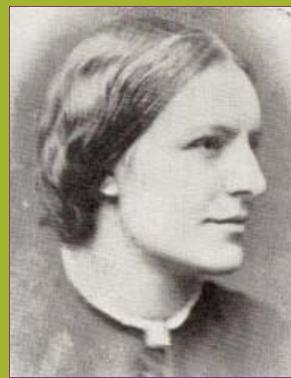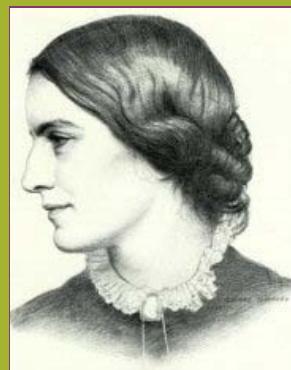
1864 Octavia Hill
Social housing and home visits

It was in 1864 that teacher and artist Octavia Hill (1838-1912) first started to work in the poorer neighbourhoods of late Victorian London (in what is now the borough of Marylebone and nowadays one of the most expensive places to live). She worked with people at the bottom of the social ladder: the poor and unemployed, living in cold and damp dwellings. Housing was her main concern. Hill believed that a well-maintained home, however small, with light, air and space – and with neighbours who care about each other – is one of life's main necessities. Using money from the art critic John Ruskin, she bought three houses in what is now central London. Each week, she personally collected the rent and discussed with the tenants the problems that were facing them.

Housing was the foundation for her work, but also the starting point for other activities: the development of gardens, creating playgrounds for the children and organising excursions. Octavia Hill decided to live in the Marylebone borough of London herself, and built a kind of club house behind her own house to host weekend and evening activities for children, women and older people.

As a result of careful management, her housing stock became an attractive investment, yielding a return of 5%. Her housing projects became an attractive investment. She expanded her work, gathering more funds and support along the way. Many women received training to undertake a similar role to Hill's, enabling them to act as social workers. The approach adopted by Octavia Hill and her fellow workers was designed to strengthen the self respect of tenants and to trust in their capabilities. These days, we would call this empowerment and resilience. She hated the kind of philanthropy or charity that creates dependency. She was one of the founding members of the Charity Organisation Society set up in 1869 with the aim of modernising social work to eradicate poverty. Its origins go back to Elberfeld, Germany.

A few years later in 1875 Octavia Hill began to campaign to protect the natural environment in and around London. She went on to help found the National Trust in 1894. The organisation still plays an important role in the maintenance of stately homes, parks and landscape in the UK. Octavia Hill's influence has been far reaching, including initiatives in Amsterdam, Berlin and Chicago. Her 1883 publication *The homes of the London poor* has helped spread her ideas across the world.

Towards the end of her life, interest in her way of working had declined because of the emphasis she placed on individual and small-scale social work,.Hill refused to acknowledge that significant government intervention might be needed to deal with major social problems such as poverty, housing and unemployment. She was of the firm opinion that government initiatives should never replace voluntary action and so her popularity eroded with the emergence of the welfare state. It is not surprising that with current debates about the functions and sustainability of the welfare state, there is once again a growing interest in Hill's work and philosophy.

Octavia Hill is significant in the history of social work because she rejected charitable alms. Her intention was to provide help without alms, arguing that charity tended to be resented and served to keep people on the margins of poverty. Nonetheless, Hill's approach could be called paternalistic in that it tried to change the attitudes and habits of poor people. She felt that more and better houses alone wouldn't eliminate slums, and once claimed that: "The people's homes are bad, partly because they are badly built and arranged, they are tenfold worse because the tenants' habits and lives are what they are. Transplant them tomorrow to healthy and commodious homes and they would pollute and destroy them" (1875).

Although in many ways Hill's approach created the profession of social work and transformed the provision of social housing, it was clearly

rooted in the ideas and experiences of the well-meaning middle classes.

Read more

- Smith, Mark K. (2008), *Octavia Hill: housing, space and social reform,* The encyclopaedia of informal education
- Malpass, P. (1984), *Octavia Hill,* in P. Barker (Ed.), The founders of the welfare state (pp. 31-36). London: Heinemann.

Additional information

- Hill, Octavia (1883), *Homes of the London Poor*
- Lewis, J. E. (1991), *Octavia Hill, 1838-1912,* in: Women and social action in Victorian and Edwardian England, Stanford University Press, pp. 24-82.
- Bell, E. M. (1943), *Octavia Hill: a biography* London: Constable and Co.
- Boyd, Nancy (1982), *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale. Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World,* London: Macmillan

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- x (2011), *BBC Radio 4 programme on Octavia Hill*

Links

- The Octavia Hill society (and birthplace)
- Wikipedia about Octavia Hill

Study tasks

Click here to see the study tasks