

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



Rose Howard

The thoroughfares and alleys around Covent Garden and Drury Lane, Theatre Land, (map found at)

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Theatreland/Theatreland.htm>

were the haunts of flower sellers such as Rose Howard, unfortunately official records had other epithets for Rose and others such as she. The flower sellers of theatreland were immortalized by George Bernard Shaw with his story of Eliza Doolittle, the London flower girl who he transformed from a “gutter snipe” to a lady, citing her Cockney language as the root of her trouble. This image from the stage play shows Eliza wearing a similar hat to that worn by Rose in her criminal record image an interpretation of which seen below.



http://www.coventgardenmemories.org.uk/page_id_59.aspx?path=0p36p#:~:text=The%20first%20and%20most%20notable,hoping%20to%20sell%20their%20wares.

Her criminal record describes her in the following terms; height 4' 10"; build, thin; complexion, fair; hair, Light brown; eyes, blue; shape of nose, thin with no distinguishing marks, Her occupation was flower seller.



Postcard depicting a flower girl in Piccadilly Garden. It coincides with the popular image of flower girls in Covent Garden. 1910.
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(Image of postcard produced with permission of Westminster City Archives)



(Image of Rose after the image in Habitual Criminal Register)

“She stands in The Circus, day after day, hail, rain, snow or fine, amidst a very welter of motors, cabs, omnibuses, and the flotsam and jetsome of the London thoroughfare” (Charles N.L. Shaw, “The Flower Girl,” *The Woman Worker*, 17th Nov 1909)

The above quote was taken from a publication for women workers.

Unfortunately Rose Howard would probably not have been interested in reading the publication, firstly she could not have afforded it and secondly she would have been much more interested in keeping body and soul together.

There are several Rose Howards around the same time in and around London but the Rose Howard from our database is probably the one who frequented the alleys and thoroughfare of London’s theatreland, Covent Garden and Drury Lane. According to Henry Mayhew in 1851 in, “*London Labour and the London Poor*”, there were

“2 types of flower girl, 1st younger children who worked in the streets, selling to support families. 2nd were in their early 20s and of “immoral character” and

would continue to sell goods late into the night” and Rose would certainly have been numbered amongst the latter class.

Flower sellers occupied an ambivalent position in the fabric of city life. They were as Deborah Cherry points out in “Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists” hidden in plain sight, working women who, to some, signified social disorder but selling the sweet smelling blooms, it “ was very little use offering any that’s not sweet. I think it’s the sweetness as sells them” (flower girl in Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*) a sweetness needed to mask the pungent odours of the city streets, they provided a bridge between the city haves and those that had not, an accepted form of begging. They had little money and obtained their blooms from the markets. In the mid 1800s 12 bunches could be obtained for a penny. The girls would then split them making 3 out of 2. Twine they got free and gathered leaves to wrap violets in. Paper for other varieties had to be purchased at between ½ d and 1d.

According to Deborah Cherry no one may have documented them but they were stylized and even romanticized by artists and fiction, notably George Bernard Shaw’s, Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* and even further away from the truth with *My Fair Lady*. Rose’s truth was a million miles away from a few elocution lessons to bring her into high society. The highest society Rose met were the judges presiding over the courts where she found herself on charges ranging from drunk and disorderly to malicious damage.

Rose’s beginning was not auspicious as she is first found being baptised on 31st March 1861 just before the 1861 census having been born on 24th February, in Richmond in Surrey. Her mother was Mary Ann Howard of Red Lion Street a

single woman. So unless Rose married someone named Howard her assertion that she was a widow in several records was a cover. She also sometimes used the alias Lydia Howard. Her travels around London included frequent stays in the workhouse due to being destitute and listed as a prostitute. She was probably in some sort of institution on census night 1891 as she is unable to be found but her habitual drunkenness took her to the Farmfield Reformatory for inebriate women in 1901 where she was recorded as 41 years of age, a flower seller working on her own account and a widow from Maldon in Essex (RG13 629/152/11)

10 years later Rose was a patient in the Central London Sick Asylum, Collingdale Avenue, The Hyde, Hendon. (RG14 7128/RD 130) An extensive article can be found on it on Workhouses of London and S.E. by Peter Higginbotham It was developed from a workhouse but serving several unions. Conditions were not good. Again Rose describes herself as a widow and flower seller. This is actually the last definitive sighting we have of Rose. Her probable death is in the 3rd ¼ of 1918 in Holborn, Middlesex.

Sadly Rose's story was all too familiar. Not only did her way of life hide her in the shadows but her name being a more common one made her indistinguishable from a number of other, similarly circumstanced poor women and life not being romantically inclined, as is life for characters in fiction, where even there Eliza was not regarded as a person to be saved and rescued from a life of drudgery but an object to be played with and manipulated. Such was the condition and position of the poor flower seller, hidden in plain sight.

References:

Ancestry

Find My Past

Wikipedia

“Flower Girls and Fictions: Selling on the Streets” by Kristina Huneault

“Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists” by Deborah Cherry

“The Flower Girl” in The Woman Worker 17th Nov 1909 by Charles N.L. Shaw

“Covent Garden Memories” website

Workhouses website by Peter Higginbotham

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