

If, whilst in Oxford, I had not visited the local workhouse, my life would have taken a very different turn.

There I met women and children who led very painful and difficult lives, having to make decisions that people like me had never had to face or even knew about. Not just adults but children kept themselves alive by prostitution. These meetings opened my eyes to the hardship of poverty and the lack of power and control the poor, particularly women, had over their lives.

Many of the women had become infected with venereal disease. There was no pity for the suffering women but great sympathy for men, many of whom were in the army or navy. Some had perhaps caught it from the women or, of course, given it to the women in the first place. The women were the villains. They had to suffer the indignity and pain of forced medical examinations under the auspices of The Contagious Diseases Act, passed in 1864. I called this 'surgical or steel rape'. After the act was passed, my fellow reformers and I started a campaign to end it. It was hard going but eventually, in 1886, it was repealed after 22 horrific years for the women.

My memories of Oxford were of a closeted and misogynist community. My husband George was a fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. I was usually the only 'lady' at social gatherings and would become very angry at the open acceptance of the double standards by the 'gentlemen' of Oxford who considered it natural that 'a moral lapse in a woman was spoken of as an immensely worse thing than in a man'. I made the decision that I would not challenge these opinions but to speak little with men and more with God.

In 1852 our son George was born, followed two years later by a second son Arthur. My health had become compromised. I had a lesion on one lung, and it was suggested that the poor air in Oxford was not helping. So, in 1856 we moved to Cheltenham where we continued our support of liberal causes. Our support of the Union side in the American Civil War led to some social ostracism; however, though this was painful, the discipline was useful.

Our third son Charles was born in 1857, and in 1859 we were blessed with a daughter: Evangeline Mary. Sadly, we only had our beloved daughter for five years as, in August 1864,

she fell forty feet from the top-floor banister onto the stone floor below and died three hours later.

The tragedy was a turning-point. As I mourned, I became possessed with an irresistible urge to go forth and find some pain keener than my own. By this time, we were living in Liverpool where George was headmaster of Liverpool College. There was great need in Liverpool. I used to visit the women residents in Brownlow House, a workhouse. I would join the women and we picked oakum [flax fibres for making tarred rope] together, a job of hard physical labour. Unsurprisingly the women, many of them in the terminal stages of venereal disease, were not paid for their work. Their keep was considered payment.

We took some of the women into our home, but it soon became clear that the number of women who needed shelter far outnumbered the space we had. So, successfully, we sought funds to provide a hostel for their use.

My fellow suffragists and I decided that our next goal was achieving education for all women and girls. In 1867 the suffragist Anne Clough and I established The North of England Council for Promoting the Higher Education of Women. We made significant progress, but I'll have to tell you about that another time!

Josephine Butler, 1828-1906

Charlotte West-Oram