Deptford’s Ragged History! Heritage events celebrate a historic school and how it shaped the communities around it

Tuesday 5 May, 2026

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

In May and June 2026, the National Lottery Heritage Fund Project, ‘Educating Deptford’, will be staging events to share the rich history and heritage of the Deptford Ragged School and the fascinating stories the project has uncovered.

On **Sunday 31 May 2026 between 11.30am and 1.00pm at The Bear Church in Frankham Street, Deptford,** there will be a public ceremony to unveil a new Lewisham Heritage Maroon Plaque commemorating the Ragged School and its legacy. This follows a church service at 10.30 – 11.30am commemorating the history of the Deptford Ragged School, to which all are welcome. There will be free refreshments from 11.30am, the unveiling will be at midday, and there will be photo and interview opportunities after that.

On **Saturday 13 June 2026 between midday and 4.00pm at The Bear Church in Frankham Street, Deptford**, there will be a free Community Heritage Festival celebrating the end of the project. The festival will be an exciting day of activities related to the history and heritage of the Deptford Ragged School and showcasing the creative work of our partners, IRIE! dance theatre, Creekside Discovery Centre, and The Bear Church. It will include a Flower Show, a Food Festival, displays about the history of the Deptford Ragged School, talks from the community researchers, short films, and more.

The Educating Deptford Project

‘Educating Deptford: The Deptford Ragged School and its place in the community’ is a year-long project, made possible by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Working with the Deptford Ragged School Archive, the project has digitised the rare historical records of the school and used the material to investigate and document the rich and fascinating history of the institution and its relationships with the people and communities of Victorian and Edwardian Deptford.

The project partnered with the Creekside Discovery Centre, IRIE! dance theatre, and The Bear Church, who have used the stories of the Deptford Ragged School to develop new programmes and run events in the local community. The project is also producing a range of resources, including short films, a travelling exhibition, resources for schools, a new heritage trail. This has all been made possible with the support of players of the National Lottery.

The NLHF award is held by The Deptford Ragged Trust, the charitable trust of The Bear Church. The recently constructed Bear Church building on Frankham Street in Deptford, where the Lewisham Heritage Plaque is being unveiled, is historically connected to the Deptford Ragged School. Not only did the Trust inherit the school’s archives, but the new building is located on the former site of the Shaftesbury Christian Centre, demolished in 2022, which was directly descended from the Deptford Ragged School.

Further Details and Context

The Deptford Ragged School was founded on 1 December 1844, twenty-seven years before State education was introduced. It was founded by William Agutter, a member of the Deptford Congregational Church, then located in Deptford High Street. As Agutter travelled around Deptford he was appalled by the poverty and by people’s living conditions, being especially concerned for the children who appeared wretched and in great need. He resolved to do whatever he could for these poor neglected children, and along with seven other members of local churches, they formulated a plan of action.

For the next 75 years, the Deptford Ragged School served and supported the very poorest children in the area. It situated itself at the centre of one of the most deprived areas of Deptford, with temporary sites at Flood Street and Duncan Yard, before settling more permanently in Giffin Street.

By 1859, weekly attendance averaged 160 at the day school, 100 at the night school, and 330 across three Sunday Schools. In 1885 the school constructed a new, purpose-built building in Giffin Street, which was opened on 12 March 1886 by the Duchess of Argyl, Princess Louise, one of Queen Victoria’s

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five daughters. The opening of the new building prompted the Earl of Shaftesbury to write ‘there is no institution in England more worthy of support than the Deptford Ragged School’.

The first decade of the twentieth century arguably represented a high point for the school and its work. Attendance at the day school was over 2,500 children a week, with well over 1000 attending Sunday School classes, as well as the after-work classes and activities offered to adults and older children in the evenings.

In 1912, the school purchased a piece of land in Hales Street and constructed a building to cater for the increasing demand from young adults, aged 14 and over, who were working all day but wanted somewhere to go in the evenings. This additional building was opened on 1 December 1914 by Princess Louise, who became a Patron, and the building was named the Princess Louise Institute in her honour.

In 1913, the Earl of Shaftesbury wrote, ‘It is difficult to convey to those who are unacquainted with Deptford’s backstreets what a mine of national wealth exists in the young life which abounds there, only awaiting development’.

Five years later, in 1919, the mutual aspirations of The Deptford Ragged School and the Princess Louise Institute were recognised when the institution renamed itself as ‘The Princess Louise School and Institute’.

Quotes

“It is so exciting to be able to share the fascinating history of this extraordinary Deptford institution, that was so much a part of the district for so many years, but which has been largely forgotten and overlooked. This is very much a People’s History, with the children, their families, the teachers, and the wider community at the centre of the stories”

Dr John Price, Consultant Historian and Project Manager

“Having overseen the Deptford Ragged School Archive for seven years, it has been an amazing privilege to have this opportunity, funded by the NLHF, to comprehensively research the history of Deptford Ragged School and use this to inspire community events which share the stories. Stories from The Bear Church’s history which still resonate and inspire today.”

Dr Katharine Alston. Archives Manager and Engagement and Education Coordinator

Notes for Editors

There will be excellent photo and filming opportunities at both the plaque unveiling and the Community Festival, with local councillors and other public figures invited to attend.

Dr John Price, the Consultant Historian and Project Manager and Dr Katharine Alston, the Archives Manager and Education and Engagement Coordinator will be available for interview at both event.

At the Community Festival, some of the Community Researchers who worked on the archive, the Research coordinator who oversaw the process, and representatives from the three partner organisations who ran projects using the research will also be available for interview.

Contact details

For further information, please contact the Project Manager, Dr John Price
johnprice.historian@outlook.com

Also, see the Deptford Ragged School Archive website: https://www.deptfordraggedschoolarchive.org.uk/

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