

= Alice Ayres =

Alice Ayres (12 September 1859 ? 26 April 1885) was an English nursemaid honoured for her bravery in rescuing the children in her care from a house fire . Ayres was a household assistant and nursemaid to the family of her brother @-@ in @-@ law and sister , Henry and Mary Ann Chandler . The Chandlers owned an oil and paint shop in Union Street , Southwark , then just south of London , and Ayres lived with the family above the shop . In 1885 fire broke out in the shop , and Ayres rescued three of her nieces from the burning building , before falling from a window and suffering fatal injury .

Britain , in the wake of the Industrial Revolution , experienced a period of great social change in which the rapidly growing news media paid increasing attention to the activities of the poorer classes . The manner of Ayres ' death caused great public interest , with large numbers of people attending her funeral and contributing to the funding of a memorial . Shortly after her death , she underwent what has been described as a " secular canonisation " , being widely depicted in popular culture and , although very little was known about her life , widely cited as a role model . Various social and political movements promoted Ayres as an example of the values held by their particular movement . The circumstances of her death were distorted to give the impression that she was an employee willing to die for the sake of her employer 's family , rather than for children to whom she was closely related . In 1902 her name was added to the Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice and in 1936 a street near the scene of the fire was renamed Ayres Street in her honour .

The case of Alice Ayres came to renewed public notice with the release of Patrick Marber 's 1997 play *Closer* , and the 2004 film based on it . An important element of the plot revolves around a central character who fabricates her identity based on the description of Ayres on the Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice , with some of the film 's key scenes shot around the memorial .

= = Work with the Chandler family = =

Alice Ayres was born into a large family in 1859 , the seventh of ten children of a labourer , John Ayres . In December 1877 , her sister Mary Ann (older than Alice by eleven years) married an oil and paint dealer , Henry Chandler . Chandler owned a shop at 194 Union Street in Southwark , about 400 yards (370 m) south of the present @-@ day Tate Modern .

In 1881 Ayres worked as a household assistant to Edward Woakes , a doctor specialising in ear and throat disorders . By 1885 she had become a household assistant and nursemaid to the Chandlers , living with the family . After her death , Ayres was described by a local resident as " not one of your fast sort ? gentle and quiet @-@ spoke , and always busy about her work " . Another neighbour told the press that " no merry making , no excursion , no family festivity could tempt her from her self @-@ imposed duties . The children must be bathed and put to bed , the clothes must be mended , the rooms must be ' tidied up ' , the cloth must be laid , the supper carefully prepared , before Alice would dream of setting forth on her own pleasures " .

= = Union Street fire = =

The Chandler 's shop at Union Street , as depicted in a contemporary newspaper illustration , occupied the corner premises of a building of three storeys . The family lived above the shop , with Henry and Mary Ann Chandler sleeping in one bedroom with their six @-@ year @-@ old son Henry , and Ayres sharing a room on the second floor with her nieces , five @-@ year @-@ old Edith , four @-@ year @-@ old Ellen , and three @-@ year @-@ old Elizabeth . On the night of 24 April 1885 , fire broke out in the oil and paint shop , trapping the family upstairs . Gunpowder and casks of oil were stored in the lower floors of the building , causing the flames to spread rapidly . Although the shop was near the headquarters of the London Fire Brigade and the emergency services were quickly on scene , by the time the fire engine arrived intense flames were coming from the lower windows , making it impossible for the fire brigade to position ladders . Meanwhile , Ayres , wearing only a nightdress , had tried to reach her sister but was unable to get to her through the

smoke . The crowd that had gathered outside the building were shouting to Ayres to jump . Instead she returned to the room she shared with the three young girls and threw a mattress out of the window , carefully dropping Edith onto it . Despite further calls from below to jump and save herself , she left the window and returned carrying Ellen . Ellen clung to Ayres and refused to be dropped , but Ayres threw her out of the building , and the child was caught by a member of the crowd . Ayres went back into the smoke a third time and returned carrying badly injured Elizabeth , whom she dropped safely onto the mattress .

After rescuing the three girls , Ayres tried to jump herself , but overcome by smoke inhalation , fell limply from the window , striking the projecting shop sign . She missed the mattress and the crowd below and fell onto the pavement , suffering spinal injuries . Ayres was rushed to nearby Guy 's Hospital where , because of the public interest that her story excited , hourly bulletins were issued about her health and Queen Victoria sent a lady @-@ in @-@ waiting to enquire after her condition .

The oil and paint stored in the shop caused the fire to burn out of control , and when the fire services were eventually able to enter the premises the rest of the family were found dead . The body of Henry Chandler was found on the staircase , still clutching a locked strongbox filled with the shop 's takings , while the badly burnt remains of Mary Ann Chandler were found lying next to a first floor window , the body of six @-@ year @-@ old Henry by her side . Ayres 's condition deteriorated and she died in Guy 's Hospital on 26 April 1885 . Her last words were reported as " I tried my best and could try no more " . Elizabeth , the last of the children to be rescued , had suffered severe burns to her legs and died shortly after Ayres .

= = = Funeral = = =

Ayres 's body was not taken to Guy 's Hospital 's mortuary , but was laid in a room set aside for her . The estimated value of the floral tributes came to over £ 1 @,@ 000 (about £ 97 @,@ 000 as of 2016) . Ayres was posthumously recognised by the Metropolitan Board of Works @-@ controlled Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire (today the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire) , who awarded her father John Ayres a sum of 10 guineas (about £ 1 @,@ 020 as of 2016) in her honour . A memorial service for Ayres at St Saviour 's Church (now Southwark Cathedral) attracted such a large crowd that mourners were turned away due to lack of standing room , while a collection taken at the memorial service comprised 951 coins , totalling over £ 7 . Ayres was given a large public funeral , attended by over 10 @,@ 000 mourners . Her coffin was carried from her parents ' house to her grave in Isleworth Cemetery by a team of 16 firemen , relieving each other in sets of four . The church service was attended by a group of 20 girls , dressed in white , from the village school that Ayres had attended . It had been planned that the girls should follow the coffin to the graveside and sing , but a severe hailstorm prevented this .

Henry and Mary Ann Chandler were buried in Lambeth Cemetery along with the two children who had died in the fire . Edith and Ellen Chandler were accepted by the Orphan Working School in Kentish Town and trained as domestic servants .

= = = Memorial = = =

Shortly after the fire it was decided to erect a monument to Ayres , to be funded by public subscription , and by August 1885 the fund had raised over £ 100 (about £ 10 @,@ 000 as of 2016) . On 15 August 1885 work began on the memorial . The monument was erected above her grave in Isleworth Cemetery , and was of an Egyptian design inspired by Cleopatra 's Needle , which had been raised in central London in 1878 . It took the form of a 14 @-@ foot (4 @.@ 3 m) solid red granite obelisk , and is still today the tallest grave marker in the cemetery . On the front of the obelisk is inscribed

Sacred to the memory of ALICE AYRES , aged 26 years , who met her death through a fire which occurred in Union Street , Borough , the 24th of April , 1885 A.D.

Amidst the sudden terrors of the conflagration , with true courage and judgement , she heroically

rescued the children committed to her charge . To save them , she three times braved the flames ; at last , leaping from the burning house , she sustained injuries from the effects of which she died on April 26th 1885 .

This memorial was erected by public subscription to commemorate a noble act of unselfish courage . " Be thou faithful unto death , and I will give thee a crown of life . "

The right hand side of the monument lists the ten members of the Alice Ayres Memorial Committee , chaired by Rev H. W. P. Richards . The Union Street fire and Ayres 's rescue of the children caused great public interest from the outset , and the fire , Ayres 's death and funeral , and the fundraising for and erection of the memorial were all reported in detail in the local and national press and throughout the British Empire .

= = " A secular canonisation " = =

The British government had traditionally paid little attention to the poor , but in the wake of the Industrial Revolution attitudes towards the accomplishments of the lower classes were changing . The growth of the railways , the mechanisation of agriculture and the need for labour in the new inner @-@ city factories had broken the traditional feudal economy and caused the rapid growth of cities , while increasing literacy rates led to a greater interest in the media and current affairs among ordinary workers . In 1856 the first military honour for bravery open to all ranks , the Victoria Cross , had been instituted , while in 1866 the Albert Medal , the first official honour open to civilians of all classes , was introduced . Additionally , a number of private and charitable organisations dedicated to lifesaving , most prominently the Royal Humane Society (1776) and Royal National Lifeboat Institution (1824) , were increasing in activity and prominence , and gave awards and medals as a means of publicising their activities and lifesaving advice .

Painter and sculptor George Frederic Watts and his second wife , designer and artist Mary Fraser Tytler , had long been advocates of the idea of art as a force for social change , and of the principle that narratives of great deeds would provide guidance to address the serious social problems of British cities . Watts had recently painted a series of portraits of leading figures he considered to be a positive social influence , the " Hall of Fame " , which was donated to the National Portrait Gallery ; since at least 1866 he had proposed as a companion piece a monument to " unknown worth " , celebrating the bravery of ordinary people .

On 5 September 1887 , a letter was published in The Times from Watts , proposing a scheme to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria by means of collecting and commemorating " a complete record of the stories of heroism in every @-@ day life " . He cited the death of Alice Ayres as an example of the type of event he proposed to commemorate , and included in his letter a distorted account of Ayres 's actions during the Union Street fire .

The roll would be a long one , but I would cite as an example the name of Alice Ayres , the maid of all work at an oilmonger 's in Gravel @-@ lane , in April , 1885 , who lost her life in saving those of her master 's children .

The facts , in case your readers have forgotten them , were shortly these : ? Roused by the cries of " Fire " and the heat of the fiercely advancing flames the girl is seen at the window of an upper story , and the crowd , holding up some clothes to break her fall , entreat her to jump at once for her life . Instead she goes back , and reappears dragging a feather bed after her , which , with great difficulty , she pushes through the window . The bed caught and stretched , the girl is again at the window , a child of three in her arms , which with great care and skill she throws safely upon the mattress . Twice again with still older children she repeats the heroic feat . When her turn comes to jump , suffocated or too exhausted by her efforts , she cannot save herself . She jumps , but too feebly , falls upon the pavement , and is carried insensibly to St. Thomas 's Hospital , where she dies .

Watts had originally proposed that the monument take the form of a colossal bronze figure , but by 1887 was proposing that the memorial take the form of " a kind of Campo Santo " , consisting of a covered way and marble wall inscribed with the names of everyday heroes , to be built in Hyde Park . Watts 's suggestion was not taken up , leading Watts to comment that " if I had proposed a race course round Hyde Park , there would have been plenty of sympathisers " . However , his high

profile lobbying further raised the already high public awareness of the death of Alice Ayres .

= = = Depiction in literature and art = = =

Emilia Aylmer Blake wrote perhaps the first poem about Ayres , titled Alice Ayres , which she recited at a social gathering in June 1885 . Sir Francis Hastings Doyle also wrote a well @-@ received poem in honour of Ayres , as did leading social reformer and women 's rights campaigner Laura Ormiston Chant . By the late 1880s Ayres was coming to be seen as a model of British devotion to duty , and her story was told in collections of heroic and inspirational stories for children , including as the first story in F. J. Cross 's influential *Beneath the Banner* , in which Cross remarked that : " She had tried to do her best always . Her loving tenderness to the children committed to her care and her pure gentle life were remarked by those around her before there was any thought of her dying a heroic death . So , when the great trial came , she was prepared ; and what seems to us Divine unselfishness appeared to her but simple duty . "

In 1890 a series of painted panels by Walter Crane were unveiled in Octavia Hill 's Red Cross Hall , 550 yards (500 m) from the site of the Union Street fire . Inspired by George Frederic Watts 's proposals , the panels depicted instances of heroism in everyday life ; Watts himself refused to become involved in the project , as his proposed monument was intended to be a source of inspiration and contemplation as opposed to simply commemoration , and he felt that an artistic work would potentially distract viewers from the most important element of the cases , the heroic sacrifices of the individuals involved .

The first of Crane 's panels depicted the Union Street fire . It is an idealised image depicting Ayres as the rescued rather than the rescuer , blending religious imagery with traditional 19th @-@ century symbols of British heroism , and bears no relationship to actual events . Ayres , in a long and flowing pure white gown , stands at a first floor window , surrounded in flames and holding a small child . A fireman stands on a ladder and reaches out to Ayres and the child ; meanwhile , a sailor in full Royal Navy uniform holds a second child . Although in reality Ayres had been at a much higher level of the building and the heat of the burning oil and gunpowder had made it impossible for the fire brigade to approach the building , by depicting Ayres with the fireman and sailor , widely seen as symbols of British heroism and British strength , Crane 's picture further enhanced her growing reputation as a heroic figure . Crane 's picture in the Red Cross Hall was itself mentioned in *Alice Ayres* , a border ballad by National Trust founder Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley published in his 1896 *Ballads of Brave Deeds* , for which George Frederic Watts wrote the preface .

= = = Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice = = =

In 1898 George Frederic Watts was approached by Henry Gamble , vicar of St Botolph 's Aldersgate church in the City of London . St Botolph 's former churchyard had recently been converted , along with two smaller adjoining burial grounds , into Postman 's Park , one of the largest public parks in the City of London , and the church was engaged in a protracted financial and legal dispute over ownership of part of the park . To provide a public justification for keeping the disputed land as part of the park , and to raise the park 's profile and assist in fundraising , the church offered part of the park as a site for his proposed memorial . Watts agreed , and in 1900 the Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice was unveiled by Alfred Newton , Lord Mayor of London , and Mandell Creighton , Bishop of London . The Memorial consisted of a 50 @-@ foot (15 m) long and 9 @-@ foot (2 @.@ 7 m) tall wooden loggia with a tiled roof , designed by Ernest George , sheltering a wall with space for 120 ceramic memorial tablets .

The memorial tablets were handmade and expensive to produce , and at the time of the Memorial 's unveiling only four were in place . In 1902 a further nine tablets were unveiled , including the memorial to Alice Ayres for which Watts had long lobbied . Made by William De Morgan in the Arts and Crafts style , the green @-@ and @-@ white tablet reads " Alice Ayres , daughter of a bricklayer 's labourer who by intrepid conduct saved 3 children from a burning house in Union Street , Borough , at the cost of her own young life April 24 , 1885 " .

= = = Changing attitudes and differing perceptions = = =

Although the public would have been familiar with the concept of a female national heroic figure following the widespread coverage and public admiration of Harriet Newell , Grace Darling , and Florence Nightingale , the ongoing coverage of Ayres and her elevation as a national hero was unusual for the period . Ayres was an uneducated working @-@ class woman , who after her death underwent what has been described as " a secular canonisation " , at a time when , despite the gradual formal recognition of the contributions of the lower classes , national heroes were generally male and engaged in exploration , the military , religion or science and engineering .

This was a period in which political pressures for social reform were growing . The version of Ayres presented to the public as a woman devoted entirely to duty embodied the idealised British character at the time , while the image of a hard working but uncomplaining woman who set the welfare of others above her own embodied the idealised vision of the working class presented by social reformers , and the ideal selfless and dedicated woman presented by campaigners for women 's rights . At the unveiling of the Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice the Lord Mayor , Alfred Newton , had remarked that it was " intended to perpetuate the acts of heroism which belonged to the working classes " , while George Frederic Watts , although he was opposed in principle to discrimination based on class and saw the Memorial as being theoretically open to all classes , had remarked that " the higher classes do not or ought not to require reminders or inducements " . Watts saw the purpose of his Memorial not as a commemoration of deeds , but as a tool for the education of the lower classes .

Watts 's view was shared by others who sought to provide inspirational material on British heroes , and authors writing about Ayres systematically altered the fact that the children rescued were members of her family , instead describing them as the children of her employer . Press reports at the time of the fire described Ayres variously as a " little nursemaid " , " a willing , honest , hard @-@ working servant " , and a " poor little domestic " . As well as Watts 's 1887 description of Ayres as " the maid of all work at an oilmonger 's " , Cross 's chapter on Ayres in *Beneath the Banner* is titled " Only a Nurse Girl ! " , while Rawnsley called her " the nursemaid in the household " . Barrington , writing five years after the fire at the unveiling of Price 's panel , acknowledges in a footnote that Ayres was related to the Chandlers , but nonetheless describes her as displaying the " typical English virtues ? courage , fortitude , and an unquestioning sense of duty " .

While George and Mary Watts and their fellow paternalist social reformers , along with the broadly sympathetic mainstream British press , portrayed Ayres as an inspirational selfless servant to her employer , others had a different view . The left @-@ wing Reynolds Weekly Newspaper complained that the lack of support for Ayres 's family from the state was symbolic of poor treatment of workers as a whole . The pioneering feminist periodical *The Englishwoman 's Review* described their " righteous pride " at Ayres 's " instinctive motherhood " ; on the other hand *Young England* , an imperialist children 's story paper , said that " there is no sex in self @-@ sacrifice " , lauding Ayres as a model of devotion to duty .

= = Later years = =

In 1936 the new Labour administration of the London County Council renamed White Cross Street , near the site of the Red Cross Hall and the scene of the Union Street fire , to Ayres Street in tribute to Alice Ayres , a name it retains today . The Chandlers ' house at 194 Union Street no longer stands , and the site is occupied by part of the Union House office complex ; immediately opposite the site of the fire is the present @-@ day headquarters of the London Fire Brigade .

Alice Ayres came to renewed public notice with the release of the 1997 play *Closer* by Patrick Marber and the 2004 BAFTA Award- and Golden Globe @-@ winning film *Closer* based on it starring Natalie Portman , Julia Roberts , Jude Law and Clive Owen . A key plot element revolves around the memorial tablet to Ayres in Postman 's Park , in which it is revealed that the character Jane Jones (played by Portman in the film) , who calls herself Alice Ayres for most of the story ,

has in fact fabricated her identity based on the tablet on the Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice , which she reads at the time of her first meeting with Dan Woolf (played by Jude Law in the film) at the beginning of the action . The park , and the memorial to Ayres , feature prominently in the opening and closing scenes of the film .