

“PETTICOAT LANE”  
A GREAT TOMBOLA AND FAIR  
ROYAL ALBERT HALL, December 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>



4.9 Petticoat Lane Poster, December 1917  
(Imperial War Museum, London, PC0770 Cat. No. IWM PST 6257)

of fashion clothing provided entertainment with a fancy dress ball for munitions workers on the final night. A coloured promotional poster was designed by Mr Plank, and ‘it occurred to Mrs Lyeal that pillar-boxes formed admirable posting stations, and one morning London woke to find nearly every pillar-box in the West End surrounded with this delightful picture’. Officials obviously noted their impact, ‘for afterwards pillar-boxes were strictly reserved for Government posters’.<sup>104</sup>

The Fair received extensive press coverage, with frequent reference to the many women involved in its success. An enthusiastic response from the public ensured good attendance and income. The remote *Irish Times* published the only disagreeable and pompous comment:

Miss Lena Ashwell’s ‘Concerts at the Front’ Fund has been doing splendid work and deserves substantial support; but I am doubtful whether the ladies who organised the Petticoat Lane Fair, which opened at the Albert Hall this afternoon, have chosen an altogether satisfactory method of helping it. No doubt, a good deal of money will be raked in, but at what a cost for preliminary expenses and with how much expenditure of labour which might surely be better employed! The craving for excitement of some fashionable dames seems insatiable. It is better they should indulge it for a good object than a bad one, but why in war-time should they want to indulge it at all?<sup>105</sup>

The writer did not appreciate the long-term value of this collaborative morale booster after more than three years of war. The 261 tombola prizes were announced in late January 1918, prior to which one-third of tickets were sold outside London. After £3,000 expenses, £34,000 was raised from this brave and amusing enterprise.

Meanwhile Ashwell, with 4,000 concerts having taken place in France and 1,000 elsewhere, began promoting the idea of local artists going to the Front as ‘gifts’ from their home towns. With the support of regional Concerts at the Front societies, antiques were donated and auctioned. J.G. Russell Harvey and Charlie Thomas, authors of an ‘excellent and amusing little book’, *Ollendorff Up-to-Date*, donated profits from the second edition (5,000 copies already sold),<sup>106</sup> and in Cairo money raised at the Grand YMCA fête, the first such large-scale event, held in May 1917, was used to ensure concerts continued there. Visiting Hull, York and Doncaster, Ashwell recited patriotic and vividly descriptive poems written at the Front, including ‘Fighting Men’ and ‘St George of England’ by C. Fox Smith, ‘The Sea is His’ by R.E. Vernede, and Paul Bewsher’s epic ‘The Bombing of Bruges’. Taking great care to announce any official recognition she received, she made promotional use of Field Marshall Haig’s view that concerts were ‘a source of endless pleasure and relaxation for many thousands of soldiers’ and his wish that the scheme ‘may not collapse through lack of funds’.<sup>107</sup> Haig’s acknowledgement of her work was an important step forward.

Local organisers set up auditions, and in the presence of experienced musicians and ‘leading members of the city’ Ashwell heard many potential artists. In Man-