

Su Lois - Black and Asian People in Victorian Bexley

The story of Su Lois born in China in 1825 and living in Erith by 1881.

Rev. J.H. Bernau

The nineteenth century was a period of particularly active European missionary work in South America, Asia, Africa and the Pacific. One of these missionaries was the Rev. J.H. Bernau of All Saints in Belvedere. Bernau was born at Danzig in Prussia (presently Gdansk, Poland) and had been a missionary for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) at Bartica on the Essequibo River in British Guiana (Guyana) and in New Guinea.

Su Lois

Su Lois was born in Ningpo (also called Yin-hsin, Ningbo or Yinzian) in northeast China in 1825. Life in China during this period was very difficult. British forces took possession of the walled city of Ningpo in October 1841. Ningpo was one of the five Treaty Ports opened by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 at the end of the First Opium Wars. Then in 1864 the forces of the Taiping Rebellion held the city. Perhaps it was during these troubled times that Su Lois became a widow. The Treaty of Nanjing opened Ningpo to foreign traders and to foreign influences including the missionaries.

Rev. Bernau's son-in-law Arthur Evans Moule was also a clergyman and had been a missionary in China since 1861. Between 1867 and 1875 five of the Moule children were born in China. In Asia it was common for Europeans to hire a local woman as a nanny for their children. These nannies were known as "amahs" in the Far East and "ayahs" in South Asia. With no husband her life in China would have been very difficult. Su Lois was probably a convert of Arthur Moule and was offered the position as amah. She returned with the Moule family and lived in the Bernau household at 1, Vicarage, Bexley Road, Erith.

The 1881 census shows Su Lois as aged 56 and as working as a nurse in the home of the Rev. J.H. Bernau. At this period Arthur Moule was

serving in China. He returned to England in 1899 but went back to serve in China between 1902 and 1910. There is no record of Su Lois dying in England and we can only surmise that she returned to China. All of the four Moule children took up the missionary cause. Three died in China and one in Japan. Arthur Evans Moule died in 1918.

Belvedere during the 1880s

By the 1880s Belvedere was a district of two halves, upper and lower Belvedere. Upper Belvedere retained a rural village character with its parish church of All Saints (consecrated in 1861) and substantial houses. In contrast, Lower Belvedere had a very different atmosphere, with its railway station built in 1859 and modest terraced houses providing working class housing for riverside factory employees.

In common with other well to do households in Upper Belvedere the Bernau residence had a number of servants. Working alongside Su Lois were two other servants: Elizabeth Coleman, a cook from Surrey who was 20 years old and Emma Terry, the housemaid who was aged only 15 and who also hailed from the county of Surrey.

Research by Cliff Pereira & Simon McKeon

References and further reading

Local Studies & Archive Collection:

- 1881 Census Return
- Photographs of Victorian Belvedere
- OS Maps of Belvedere, 1865 and 1897
- Celebrating Black and Asian History in Bexley Teacher's Pack