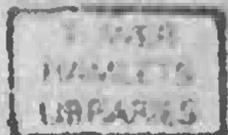


EAST LONDON HISTORY SOCIETY

WINTER NEWSLETTER 80/81



1. "RECORD" No.3. - It is regretted that production difficulties have extensively delayed the issue of No.3. It is, however, expected that this will shortly be available.

2. PROGRAMME : On the 18th March, Belle Aronovitch will be talking on life in East London hospitals in the 1920's. She has seen changing hospital patterns over many years and this talk is something no member should miss.

The talk on the 16th April 1981, which is our Hackney evening, will be at the Rose Lipman Library, De Beauvoir Road, as usual, at 7.30 p.m. We are hoping that Mr. Robert Thompson (Hon. Librarian of the Royal Numismatic Society and District Reference Librarian at Shoreditch Library) will be speaking to us about coins and trade tokens of East London. This Hackney event has always been well worth the journey to De Beauvoir Road and we look for a good attendance.

All members are welcome to the following talks at the Jewish Institute at Adler House, Adler Street, London E.1. (Second floor). -

Sunday, 15th February : Mr. R.C.S. Lawton FCIS. F.A.I. will talk on "The History of the Industrial Dwellings Society (1885) Limited." This gives an interesting background of the Rothschild Buildings, etc.

Sunday, 15th March : Mr. Harry Blacker will give some reminiscences. "Just like it was : Memoirs of the Mittel East."

These talks are at 3 p.m. and there will be refreshments afterwards.

COACH OUTING : There will be a coach outing on Sunday, 10th May 1981 leaving Mile End Station at 10.00 a.m. to Knole House, Nr. Sevenoaks, Kent. This magnificent 15th/17th Century mansion is one of the largest in the country and has an extensive deer park. Lunch can be brought or obtained in Sevenoaks. The coach cost will be £3 per head, but this does not include entrance to the House which is £1.50 per adult, 75p for children and free to members of the National Trust. Tea will be arranged and is to be paid for separately. Names please to Miss Sansom (524 4506).

3. MEMORIES OF WAPPING

I was born in 1907 in Prusom Street, Wapping. Wapping is the area on the North side of the River Thames extending from just below Tower Bridge to the Prospect of Whitby pub by the King Edward Memorial Park in Shadwell. It was an island then and could only be reached by crossing bridges at Nightingale Lane (Thomas More St.), Old Gravel Lane, New Gravel Lane and Glamis Road. The bridges cross entrances to the London Docks (now filled in).

Being an island made Wapping an enclosed community and all families knew one another and a strong bond of friendship maintained. Us kids knew all the adults and whose parents they were and in turn there was always a watchful eye on us by a Mum or Dad wherever we went and whatever we did. We were all taught to respect our elders and be polite, and grown-ups had a free hand to chastise us if we were doing wrong. There was a tremendous spirit of sharing between families and when a home was struck by misfortune, help was never far away. When a new baby was expected, arrangements were made well beforehand for a neighbour to "do" for the mother and care for the other children for a few days, and a teenage daughter in the family would take over responsibilities of the house and a midwife would be booked weeks beforehand.

There were three churches, St. John's, St. Peter's, and St. Patrick's, and good work and spiritual comfort was forthcoming from all three, also from Benn's Chapel (Nonconformist).

The majority of the weddings were of the local boy meets local girl variety and many families were related by marriage and us kids called many adults Uncle or Aunt.

Most men were casual workers in the Dock or Riverside

Wharves and there was a good sprinkling of Lighterage families (Coombe Mitchell, Pope, Launder, Daniels, West, etc). Dock and Riverside work was irregular and conditions of employment were uncertain and men were engaged and paid off by the hourly payment in the early days; later a half-day minimum was established. These were the 'Blue-eyed Boys' and later a Pref. ticket was followed by the Registration Scheme and Brass Tally. Families who were a little better off were those of men in permanent employment such as Firemen, Postmen, etc. but they in their turn shared their degree of prosperity with others in many ways such as passing on "cast-offs" etc. Local shopkeepers were generally very good in allowing "tick" when things were bad and work was slack.

My earliest memories were of the 1912 strike. I was five and had one brother and three sisters older and there were two younger children. Two had already died young as babies, a common thing in those days. Generally speaking, children were not 'over the hill' up to about 10 years of age and until that age they ran the gauntlet of whooping cough, scarlet fever, measles, and many other child ailments.

I didn't understand about the strike just that I remember going along with my elder brother and three sisters to a coffee shop opposite Hermitage Wharf, High Street, for a breakfast of cocoa and bread and dripping before going off to school. This by the way was free and the cost (I learned in later years) was met by local shopkeepers. Dinner time was another coffee shop in Turks Court or an improvised soup kitchen in Meeting House Alley and that would be a basin of soup and bread. Tea time would be in Benn's Chapel (Captain Wedgewood Benn DSO, DFC. - Labour Party 1927, aged 50) in Old Gravel Lane after school and it consisted of tea and bread and jam. For the younger children at home Mother would go to the Board of Guardians (later R.O) for milk tickets and bread tickets but it seems that the parents must have been near starvation level.

Times were hard especially for the parents but somehow us children were happy and content because we knew nothing different, we seemed to be well fed. The main meals were porridge breakfasts and bread and jam teas, but there always seemed to be a good stew at midday. Bullocks cheek and cow heel, Irish stew, ham bone and pea soup. Stews were bolstered with barley, lentils, "pot herbs" and dumplings. Clothing for the kids was a problem and hand-me-downs were regular not only in the family but also from family to family.

This was the general picture of life in Wapping then and the next important date came in 1914 when war was declared. The seriousness of that did not strike home to us kids. We looked upon it as something far away and another glorious event in the history of Great Britain. This we were being taught in school. I, for instance, first imagined red-coated soldiers in the thin red line we saw in our history books until Dads, including my own, were coming home on pre-embarkation leave dressed in khaki. Later on of course, food shortages began and we were getting accustomed to queuing for $\frac{1}{2}$ lb margarine or sugar etc. until eventually rationing began. Then someone's dad would be discharged with an arm or leg lost and worse still were the deaths in action, as children became fatherless. Later came the Zeppelin raids and these were usually on moonlight nights. The air raid warning consisted of the local police and boy scout volunteers riding round on bikes blowing a whistle and shouting "take cover". The air raid shelters were then basements, or cellars, or used to go to the River Police Station at Wapping. My family's basement mortuary and drying rooms. Fortunately, the damage done by the Zeppelins was minimal and the highlight of events was the night when a Zeppelin was brought down in flames over Enfield.

In those days only a few people were fortunate enough to have a house to themselves, mainly the three-room scullery type. The largest houses (3-storey) were occupied by 3 or 4 families (in our case 5) on Lower Road. In 1916 Dad was in France and Mum heard of a small house on a plot in Green Bank which we eventually obtained. I the 9-year old moved to the family, my two elder sisters helping, moved from 2 rooms in Lower Road to 79 Green Bank. I first borrowed the barrow from Annie Winn (Green Bank's end Coal shop) at 6d per day and about 5/6 trips completed the job. I treasured ornaments and the clock and mirrors were carried by hand to ensure safety. In a few days we were settled and happy in our 2 rooms with our own street door and back yard. Toilets and water-tap in back yard.

Jack Banfield.