

East London History Society

Newsletter

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**Victory
in
Europe
Day**

May 8th 1945

of flats in Vallance Road, Whitechapel on the 27th March.

The search for missing people went on for 3 days and nights. among the dead were 3 senior members of Stepney Borough Council, one of whom had been in the forefront of civil defence work in Stepney since 1938, only to be killed 5 weeks before the war ended.

The V2 which landed on Hughes Mansions was the last to be fired at London. As the German army retreated towards Germany, the UK could no longer be reached by the V2.

April came and an unusual silence settled over London. The bombing may have ended but the distrustful Londoners did not believe it, and still slept in their bomb shelters every night. The bureaucrats were very busy. New ration books were being issued and everyone had to attend the local food office in person, hand in the old books and collect the new books.

At Old Street Police Court, a young lady was sentenced to 14 days imprisonment for leaving her job without permission.

The lady stated that the noise in the factory gave her bad headaches. As the job was classed as war work she could not leave without permission from the local labour exchange. This had been refused, and she then walked out, and into a 14 day jail sentence.

May. The war in Europe did not come to a sudden end. It came slowly to a halt spread over 3 days. The war ended in the early hours of 7th May 1945. No official announcement was made until 7.40 pm on

the same day when the BBC broadcast that the following day would be a public holiday, to be called Victory in Europe Day, which everyone shortened to VE Day.

The Prime Minister made a broadcast at 3 pm on Tuesday, stating that the war in Europe was now over. That made Tuesday 8th and Wednesday 9th May public holidays.

The public were now getting tired of waiting and unofficial celebrations had started on Monday. The flags came out, crowds gathered in the streets, ships in the docks began to sound on their sirens 3 short blasts, 1 long blast, the morse code for V for Victory.

It was over at last.

John Harris

Local History Classes Summer Term

On Tuesday 9 May the Local History Studies Evening Class at Tower Hamlets College, Poplar High Street will be devoted to memories of VE Day and the end of the war.

Please do come along if you want to reminisce or if you want to share in others' memories of this momentous time in history.

The classes are from 7 - 9 pm and are free to Senior Citizens and non-earning residents of Tower Hamlets. Others pay 2.00 per session.

The Summer Term runs from 25 April to 4 July, with a break for half term.

The End of the War

I was a boy of 11 when the Second World War began, and I was a youth of 16 when it ended, so I had been too young to serve in the armed forces.

My sister, brother and I were all evacuees in the town of Wellingborough, but they were still children and stayed, whereas I had changed from schoolboy to working man, and came home to make a start when I was 14.

My father had gone into the army leaving my mother to run our tobacconist shop single-handed, so my return to London was timely.

It was ironic that my mother and I survived the Blitz and the flying bombs (the V1s or doodlebugs) only to be devastated during the last few months of the war when a V2 rocket destroyed the houses and shops in our section of Campbell Road.

The living quarters were all but destroyed, so we lived in what was left. My mother said, "This is my husband's business, I'm not moving from here!" Neither did we, and the shop stood there all by itself as a monument to her loyalty and tenacity until it was finally demolished in 1976.

My father came home on compassionate leave, and a few months later came home for good, demobilised and demoralised. He couldn't make any sense of the fact that he had been defending his country in Belgium while his wife and firstborn were being bombed in London.

There were strong indications that the war was over weeks before VE Day was

announced for 8th May 1945, and there were rumours, counter-rumours and general frustration. Those of us on what was called "The Home Front" (because civilians were under fire too), were as weary of it all as those fighting. Apart from death, injury, loneliness and separation, they were also weary of bureaucracy, official insensitivity, black-outs and rationing.

"The people are fed up with being pushed and shoved around!" said my father.

By the time that the war was declared officially over, everybody knew that it was, so the "Great Day" was something of an anti-climax for me and for many others, although I did spend the evening celebrating with my colleagues in Trafalgar Square. Subsequently there were many more celebrations with friends and relatives at numerous street parties that took place during the summer.

Perhaps the celebrations were somewhat marred by the fact that the war in the Far East was still going on. VE Day after all meant "Victory in Europe Day".

Meanwhile in Britain, a General Election was called, and a bitterly disappointed Winston Churchill stood down to make way for Clement Attlee's new Labour Government which had been elected by a massive majority. "We are the masters now," growled the new Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin.

I feel even after all these years that this was an ill-advised thing to say, but it was in tune with popular sentiment: Away with the old order! A better world had to be made.

The United Nations was created, and the Soviet Union joined in the war against Japan, which finally capitulated after the deployment of the first nuclear weapons on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the 6th and 9th August 1945.

I wonder if VJ Day (Victory in Japan) will be celebrated in this fiftieth anniversary year of the end of the war? I have seen no mention of it so far, but perhaps, like me, most people have forgotten when it was, although I do know that it was soon after the Japanese surrender. It is important because not until that day had the war really ended. Only then could we get on with creating the Utopia for which we were all yearning.

Robert Dunn

The Final Days

Tuesday 1 May:

Prime Minister Winston Churchill announces in the House of Commons that victory in Europe may well be imminent.

Hamburg Radio broadcasts the news that Hitler was dead. The Fuhrer had killed himself and his mistress, Eva Braun on 30th April.

Wednesday 2 May:

Air raid warning sirens cease to operate from mid-day, and black out restrictions lifted. Evacuees start returning to London.

'Twas a Famous Victory

The screaming wail of the sirens has ceased and once more the street lamps of the East End send out their welcoming light, no more will the screech of bombs and the crash of the guns have to be endured. The crowds are out in the streets and there is singing and dancing, this is their day. The war is over.

Soon there will be parties with the bunting and flags stretched across these back streets of the East End, the tables will be set up in the middle of the road, the teapots will appear and what goodies in the way of food will grace the spotless tablecloths for all to enjoy.

Many of the old folk will be singing and dancing, some with tears in their eyes as they recall the terror and the bombing, the lost friends, the dreadful V1s and V2s that had been launched against them bringing trial and ordeal for a tired people who after the Blitz had thought their ordeal was over.

Unfortunately, I was not in attendance at these celebrations as I was in Germany with the army, but I well remember the beginning of the Blitz in late August 1940.

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon and I was playing on a pinball machine in Yobis sweet shop at the corner of Clayhall Road and Old Ford Road in Bow. It was early afternoon when the air was filled with the noise of approaching aircraft, my friends and I went outside to look, and the sky was full of German bombers which although being buzzed by Hurricanes and Spitfires were on course for the docks. It wasn't long before the bombs started to fall and black smoke started to appear over the London Docks, a bomb crashed down in Old Ford Road

almost hitting the main line bridge by Bryant and Mays match factory, there were no casualties here, but it soon became apparent that the docks were being destroyed. As far as the eye could see fires were burning and bombs exploding and this continued for some time.

Eventually the all clear sounded and there was a short break until darkness fell, only then could we see how vast the area of conflagration was. About nine o'clock the sirens wailed again and everybody quickly sought shelter, bombs soon began to fall and continued throughout the night.

I was sheltering with my family in an Anderson shelter in our garden and when the all clear sounded it was nearly dawn. Acrid smoke hung in the air and there was the smell of burnt wood and although it was late summer a mist was over the streets. Fire engines, ambulances, stretcher parties and heavy rescue squads were flying about to various incidents.

I lived in Tredegar Road Bow and a bomb had fallen on a brick shelter which was in the middle of Sutherland Road. Some thirty poor souls had perished and the irony was that they were people who had fled from the docklands that afternoon to escape the bombing.

As the Blitz continued through September one became accustomed to the long queues of people who stood waiting outside the shelters, the screaming of the sirens and the booming guns accompanied by the dull thud of bombs, the ringing of fire engine bells as they dashed along on their various missions of mercy. People would be turned out in the middle of the night, being allowed only minutes to dress and take shelter. To me one

of the most frightening occurrences was suddenly to be awakened in the middle of the night by the shattering crash of gunfire followed by the drone of the German bombers and the shrill whistle of the falling bombs.

When you walked around the damaged areas after a raid you saw houses with no fronts, with pictures still hanging on the walls and perhaps a bed in the corner, or curtains blowing through windows that had no glass, and on one occasion I saw a piano balancing precariously on the edge of a first floor room. The damaged shops had signs outside saying "business as usual" which was their motto.

I remember entering St Stephens Church in Tredegar Road and witnessing men and women kneeling in silent prayer, how hard it must have been for them to believe in God with all this death and destruction around them. Further up the road rescue parties and stretcher bearers were attending an incident where a land mine has demolished several houses. Ropes were put around the area as there was escaping gas.

Later I spoke to an AFS Fireman, one of those gallant body of men who gave so much during the Blitz and risked their lives every night amidst the smouldering ruins and red hot rubble. He told me the taste of smoke never left their mouths.

All around us in London we could see park railings being torn up, while demolition squads pulled down buildings, leaving piles of bricks and debris. Huge craters and roped off areas with forbidding notices warned of unexploded bombs.

Down in the docklands which ran from Silvertown to Gardiners Corner in Aldgate one could see the Salvation Army Canteens where people were served welcome cups of tea and would talk of the previous night's raid. The Blitz eased up come 1941 but the rockets and V1s were to follow in 1944.

On VE Day I was on the outskirts of Berlin, our advance had slowed down and we were camped in the centre of a small village. There had been little activity the night before, some spasmodic gunfire and the drone of aircraft overhead. Wednesday morning dawned bright and sunny and there were many rumours about and at midday the CO announced that hostilities had ceased.

Small groups of German children had gathered around our tanks and although fraternisation was prohibited we distributed chocolates, sweets and chewing gum among them. Hundreds of prisoners were now filtering through bedraggled, demoralised, bereft of all equipment and their spirit broken, there were however some SS who arrogantly put on a brave face and glared at us with hate and malevolence. I had very little sympathy for them, for I had been on the advance up from Normandy and had seen the atrocities committed by them in the name of Nazism.

In the evening we went to a party given by another company and after much wining and dining I walked out into the quiet night. My thoughts turned to the future and the home where I hoped soon to be returning.

Back in the East End the parties would be coming to a close, my family and friends would be returning to their homes. Mrs Jones and Mrs Brown could now put their children to bed safe in the knowledge that they would sleep undisturbed. No more

sirens, no more evacuations to far off places, instead it was back to school and peaceful days.

Billy Scotchmer

DOWN STEPNEY WAY

REJOICINGS IN SIGHT OF WRECKED HOMES

The celebration of peace in what should and will be regarded as the eastern citadel of the capital had its own particular character. It was essentially a community affair.

These heroes and heroines of the Battle of London, whose unconquerable resolution and humour survived the worst the enemy could do, found their strength in unity. It is a bond which will not be broken. To be a citizen of Poplar, Canning Town, or Stepney is to be a member of a legion of honour. If you think differently you will not be popular down east. They sang and they laughed and they danced when the bombs were blasting their homes. They remained unafraid. They determined that on the day of triumph there would be flags and song and light and laughter. They showed their pride in their fortress by an amazing display of flags and bunting.

There was no set programme of celebrations, but when Mr Churchill was telling the official story of the German surrender they were dancing in the streets under the fluttering pennons and in sight of wrecked houses, some of which had been given a Union Jack as an honour.

An old man watching the dancers said: "I've been bombed out of three houses, but I wouldn't live anywhere else than in Poplar. We showed 'em we couldn't be beaten."

Article in *THE TIMES*,
Wednesday May 9 1945

The Way We Saw It

The following contributions come from members of the East London History Society, and friends of the Society, recalling where they were, what they were doing and their responses on hearing that the War was over, and Victory in Europe Day was to be celebrated on 8 May:

When I was 3 years old we lived in a stone house that had once been the lodge of gatehouse to a landed estate but was at this time (1945) the property of the Irish Forestry commission, my late father's employer. We were the only family in the neighbourhood to possess a radio (we called it a wireless). One day my mother called me indoors and said she an important job for me to do. I was to go down the lane to Mrs Flynn to tell her the war was over. Mrs Flynn lived half a mile off the 'tar' road and I set off down the lane to bring her the good news.

I can recall reaching the Flynn's farmyard and not being able to find anyone. Eventually Mrs Flynn appeared from behind a shed door with a bucket in her hand.

"What in the name of God are you doing here?" she asked.

"Me mother sent me down to say the war is over," I said.

"Did she now?" she said, and carried on with her work.

I remember following her around for a bit but can't recall if I walked home on my own or if she came with me.

Two things strike me about the event. The first is that it is hard to imagine a three year old being given a similar assignment today, even in the Irish countryside. The risks of allowing a child so young to walk so far alone would make it unthinkable today. The second concerns Mrs Flynn's response to my message. Young as I was I noticed she had no particular interest in the news my mother had, in entrusting me with the message, made me feel was so important. I later learned that her son in the merchant navy had been killed when his ship was sunk by enemy action early in the war. Presumably, for her, the progress of the war had no interest to her from then on and my message about its ending would not bring back her son.

Colm Kerrigan

My memories of May 1945 are indeed very clear, the family at that time were residing in the village of Stotfold in Bedfordshire.

Four years previously we were in the thick of the Blitz in Bethnal Green but fortunately moved out of London after enduring many nights in the shelters.

Of course with radio broadcasts we were well informed about the impending cessation of hostilities, when the news finally came over the air waves everybody was jubilant.

My father and I got on our cycles and went round the village just to chat to anyone who came along.

As day turned into night many bonfires were lit in the local fields, thunder flashes were let off amidst great cheering, we ended up in a local pub singing and doing the knees up.

But a sobering thought came to us on the following day, despite our survival from 1939 to 1945, there were many millions that did not and on reflection it is a good thing to remind our children and grandchildren that those who sacrificed their lives did not die in vain.

Sam Vincent

When peace was declared in 1945 I was serving on Headquarters, Eighth Army, proceeding along Italy to Austria. We knew the German army was in a state of collapse and it was obvious that an Armistice was imminent.

The news came as no surprise therefore, but when the signal of confirmation was received, as Mess President I ordered a free supply of vino (cheap Italian wine) to be distributed. We were then situated close to the border of the River Po near Venice, and through the Allied Military Government (AMGOT) I was able to organise a supply of bread from Italian bakers in Ferrara. This was received as joyfully as the news of the end of the war, as most of us had not tasted bread for several months. Whilst we were tucking into this with a liberal supply of tinned cheese, orders came through for an immediate move to Mestre close to the Austrian border. There were still pockets of resistance so the army could not relax.

There cannot be many who had a bread and cheese celebration!

A H French

When I went for a medical before being called up, I was told that I was A1 and educated enough to train as a fighter pilot. I

said, No thanks, and said that, as I was employed in wholesale food distribution, the best place for me would be in the RASC. They agreed that I was right, so a few months later I was called up for the Royal Corps of signals, where I trained to be a Wireless Operator!

After 3 months I qualified as proficient and was posted to Bletchley to join a special communications unit. In that capacity I spent most of the war in the Middle East and landed at San Tropez on the French Riviera on the way to enter Germany.

When we reached Heidelberg and the war was nearing its end, I got my first leave for 3 years - 4 weeks home leave. I returned to Paris on May 8th 1945 - VE Day, so the crowds and excitement was terrific. I went on to Versailles to report to my unit and eventually to the Sergeant's Mess to celebrate.

At midnight the official time of the cessation of hostilities, the RSM called us to our feet and made the following announcement:

"Gentlemen, charge your glasses. The war is over. God Save the King." That is a phrase that I have never forgotten.

Shortly afterwards I was posted back to Germany for occupational purposes and was there when Japan surrendered. In April 1946 I returned to England for demob.

Ex Sergeant G A Coulson

In May 1945 I was a Lance Corporal in the Royal Armoured Corps Training Regiment, stationed at Barnard Castle, County Durham,

and looking after officers' affairs in the Regimental Office.

I remember celebrating the declaration of peace by visiting one of the several public houses for a quiet drink and game of darts, with a few other lads. Transport to the village was not very frequent and it happened that as I and a chum were making our way to the Guardhouse to sign out, a bus could be seen approaching the camp. We foolishly ran for the bus, ignoring the Guardhouse.

On our return we were collared by the Provost Sergeant, just as we were trying to quietly slip into camp, and told to go and 'book in'.

It's strange what a drink or two can do. When asked my name and booking out number, I became a Lance-Corporal Smith and that did not agree with a fictitious number conjured up. The result was that we were placed on a charge of 'breaking in and out of barracks and expressing a falsehood,' and next day given 7 days jankers.

Apparently we were the first of those employed in Regimental Office ever to have been placed on a charge and our fall from grace caused quite a stir. We peeled potatoes for officers' meals, washed the floor in their dining mess, and carried out various odd jobs. That is why I remember May 1945. Incidentally our tank gunnery practice was supervised by a Sergeant Harry Allen, who had a second job as "Pierrepoint" the hangman. The troop I was in spent two days with him on the firing range, and at night we were entertained with stories about some of his customers.

Arthur J L Hellicar

A street party for VE Day celebration was held in our street, Carlyle Road Manor Road. I went dressed as a pirate, with my mother's scarf for a head dress, and cocoa powder to give me a tan. I was very proud for I won first prize. The electric light company gave us packing cases to make a stage, and also provided the lighting from their big warehouse.

Brian Hall

Our School, Upton Cross, Plaistow, had a fancy dress party, and my mother made me a nurse's uniform of pinny and head dress with a red cross on and underneath I wore my blue frock. My friend Lil Turner went as Carmen Miranda with apples in her head dress from Green Street Market. She won first prize.

Hilda Godfrey

On VE Day I was working in the plastic surgery operating theatre of the Burns Unit at Park Prewitt Hospital. We were busy all day with skin graft operations for severe burns and bone grafts to injured faces.

After the theatre was cleaned at the end of the day, I hurried to change. The large dining hall was cleared, the walls hung with old Christmas decorations and everyone, doctors, orderlies and nurses enjoyed a huge party to celebrate the end of the war in Europe.

Betty Thompson

On VE Day I celebrated by having a drink with the Russians, some of these soldiers were as young as 15 years. My unit of 60 soldiers on land craft had met up with them from the opposite direction at a pontoon bridge at Essen on the Rhine in Germany. It was a great night as the following morning we were ordered to travel back to Brussels Airfield, to leave for Norway. I had been part of the 52nd (Lowland Division and 1st Airborne Division) commanded by Major General Urquhart to land at Arnhem to take the bridge Neder Rijn. The bridge was not taken and we were forced back to Oosterbeek. I lay under cover and watched as men were shot as they parachuted down. Over 1,200 paratroopers were killed and 3,000 taken prisoner over those three days. I was nineteen at the time. I was demobbed in February 1947 in South Africa, a long way from my birth place of Kreeth, 20 miles from Perth.

Albert Williamson
Border Scot Fusiliers

I celebrated VE Day as a 17 year old at the Morpeth Street party with flags, music and lots of food, which was great. Then with my mates we all went up west to join in all the fun around Trafalgar Square. I was on urgent war time work at Howard Wards in Hackney Road making hooks for barges, paratroop curtain hooks (used to release men from planes) and Eveready razor blades. My mate Fred Casey was with me.

Len Plumb

I celebrated VE Day with Len Plumb as we worked together at Howard Wards. This was essential war work and exempt from call up. I did voluntary work on the AA guns in

Victoria Park after work. After one very bad night of raids I was fifteen minutes late for work and was called into the manager's office and told "If this happens again you will be sacked," a very serious offence in war time.

Fred Casey

Ed. Note: Len and Fred are still friends today and we are delighted that through their friendship we have been able to pin point the exact location of the AA guns in Victoria Park and how they operated.

St Peters Avenue and Warner Place made a celebration of VE Day by lighting a huge bonfire in the evening, in the little street between called Bemton Street. We young boys helped to keep the bonfire alight by dragging a workman's wooden hut all the way from Kay Street and adding it to the fire. It was great fun.

John Kendall

My memories of when peace was declared - I was nine at the time and lived in Aylin Street off Hackney Road by the Odeon cinema. I do not remember much about the party, it was going on from early evening into the early hours of the morning. Everyone was dancing and singing. I got up and sang a little ditty about Hitler, whose words I can still remember to this day. The food was terrific, everyone who had anything in their cupboards brought it out, as everything was on ration. The tables were decorated with Union Jacks as were the houses. It was brilliant.

Dolly Cray

All I can remember is two days off from school, a lovely sunny day, church bells ringing, ships' hooters sounding, and a dance in the school playground to the local dance band in the evening, with lots of lights showing and the singing as we made our way home.

Doreen Kendall

Peace in Europe was to me a time of great sadness. My husband, a Radio Officer was drowned when his ship, the destroyer HMS Harvester was torpedoed in 1943 by the last submarine active in the English Channel. Ted was awarded the DSO for bravery. He continued to send our morse signals until the ship finally sank. I was left with two small children to bring up. I remember the prayers, the speeches and the hopes for the future.

Ruby Severs (87 years)

My brother and I were taken up to the West End to see the celebrations. My mother was not up to celebrating as my Dad had been lost at sea at the beginning of the war. I do not remember attending a street party.

Betty Osborne

During the Second World War when I was sixteen, I would go up to the West End after work to do voluntary hostessing at the Nuffield Centre, serving teas and food to the Forces who were on leave. These were always lively evenings with musicians playing and we would dance for the last hour, even when the bombs were dropping, we would never take to the shelters.

Sometimes we would go to the Covent Garden Opera House to dance. Here I met a

charming American Air Force Officer from Oklahoma who made me laugh. Whilst walking to the station he tossed his hat into the air and it fell into a large concrete water trough. After great merriment he retrieved his hat and placed it on his head soaking wet. I had a lovely letter from him thanking me for such a lovely evening.

Sadly, Carl William Ramy was reported missing over Germany in 1941.

I spent VE Day celebrating in the Mall. We waved to the King and Queen and I danced holes in the soles of my shoes.

Sylvia Mostkowska

VE Day in Dunoon

In 1944, my father borrowed some money and bought a small hotel in a popular seaside resort on the Clyde coast. The influx of evacuees meant that the local school was overflowing with children. This meant that I had to do my reading, writing and 'rithmetic sitting on wooden pews in a requisitioned church. But by June, 1945, space had been found for my class in the main school buildings.

On the afternoon of VE Day, all the classes in my year were marched past the glass cases in the corridors, which were stuffed with wild life victims of the taxidermist's art, to a large room with the wood and iron desks in neat rows, facing the front in tiers. Framed in front of the blackboard and cut off from their pupils by a giant-sized wooden demonstration bench, they and we awaited the Headmaster's presence and a short speech welcoming the great victory. His words were followed by the distribution of a

bag of cakes. The bag was brown, and the contents, stale. Accustomed to tasty dinners cooked by a chef who served his apprenticeship in LMS hotels (the Great Recession had meant that out of the 3 Bs - Bread, Beer and Burial, he had chosen the middle option) I was not impressed.

Outside, along the little prom, with its magnificent view of shipping convoys and the giant boom that was only opened when the necessary signal was given, red, white and blue bunting fluttered - rescued from five years of dark oblivion. Like everyone else, I looked forward to the peacetime, of which my parents had spoken with such nostalgia and enthusiasm. "No sweetie coupons," I thought, longing for the day. Ahead lay the nuclear age, and the future that is now our past.

Sylvia Ayling

Memories from the Far East

My parents were on the point of departure from Bombay, heading home to Thackley in Yorkshire, when my father was recalled to his regiment in Allahabad. War had been declared.

Shortly after I was born, my father, a sergeant in the Ordnance Corps was posted to Maymyo, a garrison town near Rangoon in Burma. Two years on, my sister's birth coincided with the fall of Rangoon and the evacuation of the population. The luckier ones were airlifted by the Americans to Assam, the less lucky scrambled aboard trucks and lorries heading northwards in retreat. The unfortunate ones trekked their way out of Burma. We were taken by lorry on the first leg of our journey, and then

airlifted to Imphal. I arrived in India, scruffy, unwashed and minus a shoe. A long train journey to Poona followed.

We were welcomed by my grandmother, who was soon convinced that I was dumb, as apparently I didn't utter a word for several weeks. Incidentally, my grandmother, Florence Hibbert, lived next door to Mrs Kettleband, Spike Milligan's grandmother, and my mother and aunt went to the same Convent School as Spike, and I followed in 1943!

My earliest recollections of the events of the war was hearing of my father's death in the jungles of Burma. He was one of those intrepid soldiers left to blow up the bridges behind the retreating British Army, as so graphically recalled in *The Bridge over the River Kwai*, and trapped between opposing forces, he and his mates succumbed to the jungle.

The end of the war in Europe came home to us with the arrival of my aunt from England. Left a widow with 4 children and weary of the hardship and struggle to survive in war-torn Liverpool, she escaped to the sunshine and ration-free life on the first available passage to India.

I can vividly recall us children sitting around wide-eyed, listening to her accounts of the bombing and suffering they endured during the war years. It all sounded quite dreadful and I can still remember thinking how lucky we were to be living in India.

Rosemary Taylor

After a spell in the Atlantic during which our ship came under heavy fire from German U Boats, and I saw ships, some with friends on board, go down I returned to Poplar and stayed at the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest in Poplar.

After a late night out, I returned to the Queen Vic, during a bombing raid. We were going up to our rooms when I heard a plane coming, but it was much too low, I thought. All of a sudden the engine cut out, I heard an almighty bang which knocked me right down the stairs.

I ran out to see what had happened. All I could see was that the terraced houses were down, the Wade's Arms Pub was down and the house where my friends lived was down. I went over and started pulling the wood and rubble away, then the ARP and fire engines arrived.

We got my friend out, but he was dead. His stomach was full of glass. I don't know what happened to his wife. I then walked over to the flattened pub and told an ARP warden that there was a couple running the pub. They found the man alive, but the woman was dead. My fingers were red raw, and I was so tired. I made my way to an air raid shelter and slept there until well into the next day. After a much needed wash and brush up, I was informed that I was to travel to Liverpool to join a cargo boat.

Some months later we were sailing back to England from Italy with wounded troops on board. The ship stopped in the middle of the ocean, and the Captain told the crew that the war was over. We just stood there looking at one another, and some of us were crying. That night we all went to the ship's ballroom

and danced the night away with the ship's nurses..

Mr W P Jenkins

(Mr Jenkins was interviewed by the Hackney Gazette shortly before his death last summer. This is an extract.)

The Final Days

Saturday 5 May:

Field Marshall Montgomery accepts the surrender of the German Army in North Germany, Holland and Denmark.

Monday 7 May:

General Eisenhower accepts the unconditional surrender of German troops on all fronts.

Ships on the Thames at Poplar sound their sirens and church bells across the East End ring out the news. thanksgiving services are held in churches. Bonfires are lit in the streets. The Tower of London is floodlit and crowds turn out to sing and dance in Aldgate.

Out and About With the Society

Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park seems to have taken over the lives of the committee, with research on the ground and in the Greater London Record Office. They have spent hours searching through the undergrowth, clearing graves and deciphering headstones.

Rosemary was delighted when her efforts on the restoration of the grave of Will Crooks, champion of the people, and campaigner for workers' rights, finally came to fruition. A local monumental mason, Chris Brown, was engaged to work on a replacement plaque. On a very wet morning in March, the Mayor, Councillor Arthur Downes, laid a wreath on the newly restored grave.

The committee would like to place on record their thanks to everyone who supported their efforts in this venture, including Councillor Arthur Downes, Ian Orton, Sarah Wren and Tower Hamlets Unison.

We had standing room only when David Webb, the Archivist from Bishopsgate Institute, gave us a talk on East London Photographic Studios. David has been researching photographic studios for years around the City and East End and hopes one day will be produced. The lecture was illustrated with early slides showing daguerrotype, and how studios developed from little booths to studios run by husband and wife teams. The craze for cartes de visite and the information and drawings on the backs of these cards provide a wealth of information. The ELHS is very grateful to David for interrupting his holiday to give us a truly fascinating lecture.

Mr Alfred French, our President, gave us a very interesting talk on East London Sailors. He gave us detailed information on the many and varied characters and personalities who lived and worked in the East End and have made their mark in history. A truly impressive list and once more we have urged Mr French record his vast store of knowledge for the benefit of members of the Society who are unable to attend the lectures.

Isobel Watson gave us a lively and informative talk on the Asylums and Academies of Hackney, illustrated with slides, in a now and then format. Isobel had collected a truly remarkable amount of information on Hackney's mansions and the uses to which they were put. It seemed that if you were mentally ill, then Hackney was the place to be. There were also a large number of girls' schools, as noted by Pepys: "Went to Hackney to see the bright clean faces of the girls from the Academy at evening service."

The Ragged School Museum celebrated its fifth anniversary by a special event when the newly refurbished school bell was rung. Tom Ridge made an impassioned plea for support and funding for the refurbishment of the buildings, as the museum hopes to expand its work and its greatly in need of financial support.

The museum also launched its latest book, **Ragged Schools, Ragged Children**, by **Claire Seymour**, price 4.00 plus postage. Available from the Ragged School Museum Bookshop, Copperfield Road, London E3.

Doreen Kendall

Women's History Week

Once again we were invited to run a Women's History Week at the PDC in conjunction with Maggie Hewitt of Oxford House. Phoebe Hessel, of Stepney, was our choice this year, and our exhibition was based on the book, Phoebe Hessel, written for children by Chris Randall and Ruth Moorhouse, from Brighton, where Phoebe lived until her death in 1821 at the age of 108. See below for details on how you can acquire a copy of the book.

The project was a great success with the children, both boys and girls entered into the spirit, dressed up as little Phobes, imagined themselves disguised as soldiers, and enthusiastically produced drawings for banners which they took back to display to their school mates.

Women's History Week was also celebrated with two walks led by Rosemary. The first was around Tower Hamlets Cemetery, recalling the lives of the famous and not so famous East End women who lie buried here. The walkers viewed the graves of East End families in the war graves section, where poignant memories were evoked by the words engraved on these small headstones: Killed by enemy action.

The second walk also through the cemetery park and then along the Bow Road formed part of Amnesty International's Women's Week celebrations. The walkers were visitors from several countries, a very interested audience.

Doreen's Bookshelf

Phoebe Hessel, her story, by Chris Randall and Ruth Moorhouse, Price 1.50 is illustrated with drawings by Faye Marie Trussell and is a well researched book on the life of the Amazon of Stepney. It is available from the PDC in English Street, Eastside Bookshop in Whitechapel or Rosemary Taylor, 5 Pusey House, Saracen Street, Poplar, London E14 6HG.

St Ethelburga Church, published by the Ecclesiological Society, St Andrews by the Wardrobe, Queen Victoria Street, EC4V 5DE. Price 3.50 plus postage. Also available from East of London Family History Bookstall.

The past, present and future of this tiny church partially destroyed by a bomb on April 24th 1993. It has 48 pages, 11 of which are photographs depicting the history of this little Norman church and the bomb damage suffered.

1891 Census Index Series, Bethnal Green East Sub District, PRO piece RG 12/268. Editor Stephen Park. Price 3.00 plus postage. The East of London Family History Society members have indexed most parts of Tower Hamlets for the census years, all available from their bookstall in printed book form, or can be consulted at Bancroft History Library.

This index by Stephen is a tribute to his own family from his 3 x great grandparents who settled in the eastern area of Bethnal Green in 1843 and lived around the area of Type

Street. 72 pages listing names of 7,835 people in the census from Approach Road to Grove Road, north from the Regents Canal and south along Old Ford Road and Mace Street.

A Directory of London Photographers 1841-1908.

Researched by Michael Pritchard and privately published by him. Details from Photo Research, 38 Sutton Road, Watford, Herts, WD1 2QF, tel: 0923 468356 for price and other details.

Hard back 100 pages A4 size book lists over 2,500 studios in London area. This book is a must for all photographic historians, genealogists and anyone who wishes to date old photographs.

Canning Town. Editor Howard Bloch, Newham Local Studies. Price 7.99 plus postage. From East Side Bookshop or Newham Local Studies Library.

Howard has crammed more into this informative book than many local historians could fit into several volumes.

London's East End, Life and Traditions by Jane Cox, price 15.99.

A very readable, profusely illustrated hard back, which makes a useful addition to the East London bookshelf.

A Giant Amongst Giants, by Samuel Melnick. Price 10.75 + p & p from Eastside Bookshop, Whitechapel.

The author's grandfather Shmuel was the longest serving Rabbi at No. 19 Princelet Street, a Huguenot house dating back 270 years and which became one of the 116 synagogues in the East End for the 15,000 Jews who lived around Spitalfields. When Shmuel died in 1928, over 20,000 people watched his funeral procession along Commercial Road.

The synagogue at No. 19 closed in 1962 and plans for the future of the building include a Heritage Centre for Jewish East End history. Further information from Spitalfields Historic Housing Trust, Tel 0171 247 0971.

The Final Days

Wednesday 9 May:

Royal tour of Stepney and Poplar. Crowds sing the National Anthem as the King and Queen visit Hughes Mansions, where the last V2 rocket struck.

Loud Cheering greets the royal couple in Poplar as they visit the site of the V2 destruction in East India Dock Road, on the corner of Cotton Street and Bazely Street.

Victoria Park and King Edward VII Memorial Park in Shadwell were floodlit for dancing.

It was estimated that over the two days, 8 and 9 May, over 9,500 dancers celebrated the end of the war by dancing in Victoria Park.