



**Alfred Henry French M.B.E.**  
8th May 1917 – 26th July 2003

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**Editorial Note:**

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The Newsletter is edited, typeset and produced by Rosemary Taylor and Philip Mernick with the assistance of an editorial team comprising, Doreen Kendall, Doreen Osborne and David Behr.

Letters and articles on East End history and reminiscences are always welcome and we make every effort to publish suitable material. Whilst hand-written articles are acceptable, items of interest that are typewritten or even better still, on disk will get priority!!

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Check out the History Society's website at [www.eastlondonhistory.org.uk](http://www.eastlondonhistory.org.uk).

The present committee are: Philip Mernick, Chairman, Doreen Kendall, Secretary, Harold Mernick, Membership, David Behr, Programme, Ann Sansom, Doreen Osborne, Bob Dunn, and Rosemary Taylor.

**Season's Greetings to all our Members!**



St Matthias Church, Poplar.

**Alfred Henry French M.B.E.**

8<sup>th</sup> May 1917 – 26<sup>th</sup> July 2003

It is with deep regret that we inform our members of the death of the President of our Society, Mr Alfred French. Many of you will remember his informative talks and walks, which he conducted for many years. Mr French was Newsletter Editor of the East London History Society for many years from 1967, and was a regular contributor to the Record. He was Chairman during the 1970s, and held the honorary position of President until his death.

He was born and grew up on the Isle of Dogs. He was the youngest of five sons and had a younger sister, Lily with whom he lived, in Woodford, for many years. He went to the Hamlet of Ratcliffe School and was exemplary in all aspects of his studies. He started and ran the first Boy Scouts group in China Town in Limehouse, where, to help things along, he began the study of the Cantonese language. It was the beginning of numerous close ties and friendships in the Chinese community.

He served throughout the war in the Medical Corp rising to be a Warrant Officer. He served with the Eighth Army throughout their campaigns in Africa and Europe and received the Africa Star and the Italian Star. He was mentioned in dispatches several times and was awarded the M.B.E., recommended by Field Marshal Montgomery himself.

After the war he was a Marine Engineer for the Euxine Shipping Company and travelled to almost every country in the world. The travelling did not, however, limit his interest in history. He wrote many articles on East London and lectured on various subjects. He contributed many items to our own publications including (in the Winter 1978 Newsletter) his own experiences in the 1928 flooding of the Isle of Dogs. He was also much involved in Freemasonry and became President of the Benevolentia Lodge. If that was not enough he was also an active member of the Territorial Army, parachuting out of planes many weekends.

The funeral took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2003 at the City of London Cemetery.

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## Walthamstow and the Marshes

### A Lecture given by Alfred French

The history of Walthamstow is very much bound up with what were up to a century or so ago, its surrounding marshes, the marshes of the Lea and to a lesser extent, the marshes of the Thames. Indeed, Walthamstow itself bounded on the east by the Forest and on the west by the River Lea, was for many years somewhat isolated and one might imagine it would have been little affected by the historical turbulences and sociological movements of growing London. A century ago, and even within living memory, few East Londoners (for that is the name given to the people of the Thames marshes) could direct you to Walthamstow – it might as well be in a remote part of Essex. It is therefore an interesting project to ascertain how much Walthamstow was in fact affected by the development of the Thames marshes, that is Stepney Marsh, Bromley Marsh and the Marshes of the Hams, as well as the Lea Marshes of Hackney, Stratford and Leyton. These marshes cover the area known as East London and, in fact, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century there has been an increasing tendency to include Walthamstow and Leytonstone in East London. In search of this quest, I approached the Librarians of the three East London boroughs, to find that they had far more material on Enfield, Hammersmith and Southwark than they had on Walthamstow. One actually said that in all his experience in East London he did not remember anyone asking for information on Walthamstow.

But as one reflects on the great history of East London, it becomes clear how this is closely and continuously interwoven into the history of Walthamstow. The Vikings in their plundering raids were attacked along the marshy banks of the Lea that is Bromley Marsh, and Stratford and Walthamstow marshes, all of which have yielded evidence of

Viking equipment and of the vessels which tried to penetrate along the Lea. King Alfred appears to have tried diverting the Lea in places with the object of leaving the Viking boats high and dry, and attempts at diversion can be seen by Stratford. This seems to have met with some success. So here we have the people of the marshes (such as they were) uniting to repel a common enemy.

There is no doubt that the road from London to Waltham Abbey saw much coming and going, and it is said that King Harold passed through Walthamstow on his way north to south. The population of Walthamstow at that time, as also the population of East London's marshes, would be sparse and largely of peasant stock. The only non-peasants apart from the landowners and the occasional vagrant, would be those around the City Wall who earned their living by working in some way connected with the City. For a moment, I want to refer to this City Wall area of East London. In 1108 the great Priory of Holy Trinity, sometimes known as Christchurch, was founded under the patronage of Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I. For 400 years it dominated the East London scene and indeed as it grew in wealth and influence, it owned a considerable part of East London as it was then. Its massive towers could be seen on a clear day from Walthamstow and scarcely an hour of the day passed without its bells tolling for some divine office or other, an activity which gradually dwindled and ultimately ceased when it became the first of the great religious houses up and down the country to be dissolved, largely at its own instigation. What has this Priory to do with Walthamstow? Soon after the consecration of the Priory, the widow of Ralph de Toni, of Walthamstow, gave the church of St Mary, Walthamstow, with its tithes, meadows and lands to the Priory for the salvation of the soul of her husband and probably her other ancestors. This gift came about the time when the Knightengeld, a society of retainers of the City of London, holding the jurisdiction of the Portsoken, the area around Aldgate and St.

Katharine's the only area which at that time could appropriately be known as East London, gave their jurisdiction and lands to the Priory in return for certain privileges. So Walthamstow and East London were administered under the one roof of this great edifice, for a brief period until the growth of East London and arguments regarding tithes and holdings gradually released them. Clay Street (now incorporated in Forest Road) was originally named Priors Streete after the connection with the Priory. This was also the time when Hoe Street was the main link between Waltham Abbey and Stratford Langthorne and undoubtedly in their more affluent days the Abbots of both houses (for Stratford Langthorne owned lands in Woodford around the Monkams area) met frequently in the area during their hunting forays, often accompanied by the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's. Anyone who interfered with these hunting expeditions ran the risk of excommunication. A John Danyell of Stratford did in fact obstruct the hunting party on one occasion when the Mayor of London was among the party. He apparently got away with a mere apology. This road (Hoe Street) is also reported to have been used by King John of Magna Carta fame in 1209; this is quite possible as he had royal apartments at Old Ford and Stepney.

In 1299, the nobles of Essex, including the Sheriff of Essex, the Earl of Dunmow, made their way through the Forest accompanied by a motley throng of local inhabitants whose numbers grew en route, to Stepney Green where, in the Great Place, a large house opposite St. Dunstan's Church, Henry le Waleys lived. Here in East London, Parliament met, their usual Meeting place at Westminster having been burnt down, to ensure that Edward I ratified the Great Charter which King John had signed in 1215 but had no intention of carrying out. It was here that the King attended and personally acknowledged the terms of the Charter (and with it the Charters of the Forest) and ordered it to be placed on the Statute roll. Around this period

(14<sup>th</sup> century) would be the scene of the Abbot and monks of Waltham Abbey journeying in state to Stratford where they would meet the Abbot and monks of Stratford Langthorne, the Abbess and nuns from Barking Abbey and Bromley Priory, and a whole host of nobles and peasants making an annual procession in honour of Our Lady to the Church of St. Peter, Westminster, that is Westminster Abbey. This rather colourful affair appears to have continued for over a century.

There was a further assembly on Stratford Green in the Peasants Revolt of 1381. The peasants and yeomen from various parts of Essex assembled there and proceeded to London under the leadership of Thomas Faringdon, a Londoner. They stormed into the City at Aldgate and spent the night at St Katharine's Wharf. They were persuaded to return to Mile End Green together with their counterparts from Kent under Wat Tyler. King Richard came out to meet them and agreed to redress their grievances. You remember that subsequently Wat Tyler was killed by the Mayor of London and the bands dispersed. Many dispirited people passed through Stratford that night and well might they have been so, for the King seized the initiative once he had rallied support and rode through Stratford to Colchester where he hanged the Essex ringleaders outside the City wall. It seems clear that the aggrieved peasants came from all over Essex and East London, and it is reasonable to assume that some from Walthamstow, who had suffered so much from the Forest Laws, were among them.

Life on the whole in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries appears to have been comparatively quiet and uneventful both in East London and Walthamstow. It must be remembered that population was still sparse and disease, particularly plague, was a deterrent to population growth. Going about their work, people would see Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick and Lord of Walthamstow Toni, on his way to the jousting courts on Tower Hill and at Smithfield. The Earls of Warwick

held land in both areas – possibly Warwick Secondary School is significant in this regard. Brooke House, Clapton, was held as part of the former manor of Kingshold under the Warwick family and remained part of the manor until at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the family of Dr Munro used it for an asylum for the insane.

Sir George Monoux, who is so well known to you, appears to have had little connection with East London, except that he owned the Manor of Aldersbrook, which he sold to King Henry VIII. He must have travelled in the area considerably, having contributed substantially towards the maintenance of the highway. Incidentally, the Manor of Aldersbrook was granted by Henry VIII, in about 1520, to Sir John Heron, another Walthamstow man, whose son Giles forfeited it under the religious oppression of the time, being executed in 1540. When I think of these oppressions, I think of Sir Thomas More, one of whose daughters married Giles Heron, and his family who owned land on the Walthamstow/Leyton perimeter, also in the Minories, and who suffered so much as recusants. The Consistory Court of the Bishop of London met at Stratford in 1601 to try Sir Thomas More, grandson of Sir Thomas, for refusing to come to the Parish Church to hear prayer and receive the sacraments 'having refused to come these 10 or 12 years at least.'

The history of Walthamstow would be incomplete without mention of Robert Thorne. I find him a most intriguing character. As you know, the southern aisle of St Mary's Church was rebuilt by Robert Thorne, or rather by money entrusted by him to Paul Withypole for charitable use. Although Walthamstow owes much to him there appears to be no evidence of his having been here. He was a native of Bristol, an explorer and adventurer, a bachelor who lived for a considerable time in Seville, Spain. He was one of those who urged short cuts to the Indies, and some of his letters are still preserved in the British Museum. Yet I believe he did come to Walthamstow. Firstly,

he was a Merchant Tailor of sufficient importance to become Lord Mayor of London in 1575. He would therefore spend some of his time at the Merchant Tailor's Headquarters in the Minories, part of the East End area. Secondly, through his Company, he helped finance and fit out the Spanish voyage of John and Sebastian Cabot from Blackwall in 1526. One can imagine him joining the Cabots at Blackwall Stairs to see how preparations were going. He was thus frequently around the perimeter of the area. Thirdly, he enjoyed a relationship with Paul Withypole of Walthamstow, who he made his executor. Withypole was closely associated with St Mary's and it seems highly probable that Robert Thorne visited him here. Incidentally, Sir George Monoux himself apparently assisted in the fitting out of one of the Cabot's ships, the 'Matthew' of Bristol. So he and Thorne also had a great deal in common.

The middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw the Civil War. A force of Royalist soldiers crossed the River from Greenwich expecting to land eastwards and proceed to Colchester. They landed near the West Ham area where there was a considerable force of Cromwell's sympathisers who gave them a beating. Cromwell kept his Navy at Ham Creek, which ran from the present Pumping Station to Boleyn Castle grounds. The survivors of this encounter spent the night camping on Stratford Green and then went on to Colchester where they fared badly in a siege which, among other things, dealt a heavy blow to the cloth industry. One wonders how things might have changed if they had landed at the right place. One of the more successful Royalists was Sir Thomas Merry who lived in Forest Road. His tomb is in St Mary's Church, carved, I believe, by the famous sculptor Nicholas Stone, some of whose work can still be seen at the Guildhall and in West Ham Church providing an artistic link, if you like, with East London.

**EAST LONDON  
HISTORY SOCIETY  
PROGRAMME Jan-May 2004**

**Thursday 29 January**

The Tentergrounds of East London  
Speaker: David Sames

**Thursday 19 February**

Builders of Repute: the story of  
Renders Bros.  
Speaker: Josephine Boyle

**Thursday 11 March**

The Cows are Coming!  
(The story of the East End  
cowkeepers 1850-1952)  
Speaker: Nigel Winfield

**Thursday 15 April**

Brunel and the Great Eastern  
Speaker: Clive Chambers

**Saturday 1 May 2004**

**Spring Coach Trip to  
Charleston, Alfriston, and  
Berwick Church**

Coach Trip Organiser:

Ann Sansom (Tel 020 8524 4506)  
(See back cover for details and booking  
form)

**Thursday 13 May**

**Open Meeting**

How we entertained ourselves:  
Children's Games to Street Parties

**Note:**

The lectures are held on Thursday evenings  
at 7.30 pm in the Latimer Congregational  
Church Hall, Ernest Street, E1. Ernest  
Street is between Harford Street and  
Whitehorse Lane, off Mile End Road  
(Opposite Queen Mary and Westfield  
College). The nearest Underground Stations  
are Mile End and Stepney Green.  
Bus No. 25.

**The Programme**

Suggestions and ideas for future topics and/or  
speakers for our Lecture Programme are  
always welcomed. If you can suggest someone  
or indeed if you would like to give a talk  
yourself, please do come along to the Open  
Evening in May, and meet David Behr, our  
Programme co-ordinator.

Alternatively, email our Chairman Philip  
Mernick at [phil@mernicks.com](mailto:phil@mernicks.com) with your  
comments and suggestions.

## CORRESPONDENCE

**Iris Hay, 17 Poplar Close, Uppingham, Rutland, LE15 9RQ writes:**

We have again had an enjoyable read of Summer 2003 Newsletter, and of particular interest to me was the item about rubble containing broken clay-pipe pieces found in Tower Hamlets Cemetery. In Vol. 1 Issue 14 of Spring 1998 you printed my childhood story of my family being clay-pipe makers; therefore I would be most interested if it is possible, to receive a copy of names of other makers in Bow, Mile end etc. Also, is another copy of this summer (2003) edition available, as the one we send to America has gone astray? Whatever the cost is I will recompense. Note: Family name: Hawley.

*Editor's reply: It always gives me a great deal of pleasure when someone makes a personal connection with an item in the newsletter. Doreen Kendall sent Mrs Hay a list of clay-pipe makers, and the extra newsletter, both much appreciated.*

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### Victoria Park Connections English and Lough Families

The following correspondence between George English and Philip Mernick via email is a great example of how the interests of our members can prove to be so valuable in aiding research. Philip with his wonderful collection of postcards of East London and Doreen Kendall who lives in the vicinity of Victoria Park and had done so much research into origins and development of the Park, got together and compiled the excellent pictorial publication on Victoria Park.

**George English wrote:**

I've come across a book 'A Pictorial History of Victoria Park London E2' which has been produced by yourselves. It features a postcard

VICTORIA PARK THE LAWN TENNIS COURT; the players are my grandparents, relatives and friend. I probably have information that will be of interest to whoever wrote the book, and vice versa.

Background is that my mother died last February which has sparked a lot of family activity when we realised how little we knew about our parents when they were younger, their parents etc. I'm not sure I could have told you where Victoria Park was then. The connection is through my father, Derick English. His father, Fred English lived at 8 Gore Road and married Gertie Lough who lived at 45 Gore Road - both are in the photo. Fred was one of 12 children, Gertie one of 11.

**Philip Mernick responded:**

I was one of the co-authors of the Victoria Park book. I would be very interested to hear how you know your grand parents appear on the Tennis Courts post card. I would assume the original photograph was taken about 1910.

**George replied:**

The postcard is held by my father's cousin, Mavis Swenarton, a niece of Gertie; she has the names on the back which are included in the attached. I'm interested in how you got hold of the postcard; was it on sale? This Family thing has just taken off; to such an extent that we are going to hold a Lough reunion next July at Victoria Park with family from USA, Germany and Norway coming over. You can understand why I'm interested in anything you can add to our knowledge, for instance, we were wondering where they might have gone to school. And if I can give you some more flavour of a family that lived there in those days, then I would be happy to do so.

**Letter from Mavis Swenarton (nee Simmons) to Christine Gilbert (nee Macve) 10/6/1999**

Some years ago Mark and I visited the area and looked at the 'local landmarks'. As you can see, the houses in Gore Road, where the Simmons and Loughs lived overlooked

Victoria Park. The Berseys were great friends of Gran and Grandpa Simmons and Fred Bersey was my godfather; his wife 'Auntie Lena' was one of my godmothers.

Also enclosed is a photocopy of the postcard of VICTORIA PARK THE LAWN TENNIS COURT. I have written on the back the names as Grandpa has written on the postcard (Gertrude English, Arthur Lough; sitting – Victor Lough, Lily Lough, Fred English, Sammy Walker). He reckoned that it was probably taken about 1909-1911. I recall him mentioning Sammy Walker as one of his friends.

**(George continues his message:)** It crossed my mind after I'd sent the e-mail that you might be interested in what happened to the people in the photo. One thing I've become increasingly keen on as we've found out more about our family is bringing them to life.

Victor was the oldest of the 11 Loughs and became Head of the Indian Patent Office in Calcutta; his wife Ressa lived to the age of 102. Lily married Harold Simmons whose family also lived in Gore Road. Mavis Swenarton, their younger daughter, was born exactly one week after the outbreak of WWI. She is the one who has the postcard, presumably given to her by Lily. She did a lot of work on the Family Tree and is still alive though has recently had to go into a nursing home. Fred English and Gertie Lough, my grandparents, had married in 1907. Fred was killed in WWI in 1916. So Gertie and her only son, my father Derick, ended up spending a couple of years in the early 1920s sharing a house in Anerley with her cousin Arthur Lough, with whom she is playing tennis in the picture!

We keep turning up more and more addresses where the parents lived or where families that other brothers and sisters married into lived. What I didn't mention in the e-mail is that we are writing a Family History. This was sparked by the 91 year old daughter of Fred Lough

(another brother) who has lived in USA for the last 75 years, saying when contacted "I'd always had in mind to write down my memories". So we now have details and anecdotes about all the brothers and sisters.

**Philip Mernick replied:**

Unfortunately I don't have an example of this particular post card. When we were creating the book I approached a number of dealer/collectors and borrowed items that I didn't have in my collection. This was one of them. I think it must be quite scarce as I have never seen another example. I have copied this reply to Doreen Kendall the co-author of the book. She lives very near to Victoria Park and might be able to give you some idea of the nearest schools.

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## NOTES AND NEWS

### Exhibitions

Two excellent exhibitions have just opened in London. At the Museum of London is "The 1920's: The Decade that Changed London." This is located in the newly created 'Linbury Gallery' and runs until July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

Included in the exhibits is a small section devoted to the 'Kingsley Hall Settlement' in Bow, founded by Doris and Muriel Lester. Items on show include a brochure and photo of the Children's House, which opened in Bow in 1923 as London's first purpose-built nursery school, and was run by Kingsley Hall. Another photo, taken in 1929, shows George Lansbury planting a tree at Kingsley Hall.

In 1931 Gandhi stayed there whilst in London to discuss the terms of India's independence. He had met Muriel Lester in 1926, and he decided to stay at the Hall rather than in the West End, 'because there I shall be among the sort of people as those to whom I have devoted my life.' He had brought with him a small spinning wheel which, on his departure, he left as a gift to the Hall – this is on show as is a letter sent from Gandhi to Muriel Lester.

At Hackney Museum (in the new Hackney Technology and Learning Centre, near the Town Hall) is the exhibition, "Peculiar Portraits." This runs until February 7<sup>th</sup> 2004. On show is a sample of portrait photographs from a collection of some 2,000 glass plates taken between 1880-1890 by the Victorian photographer Arthur Eason at his studio in Dalston Lane. (The boxes containing the original glass plates have recently been discovered in a Dalston cellar, where they had laid hidden for around 120 years.)

The portraits, some named, but some unknown, are of family groups, children, music-hall artistes, Salvation Army members,

Asian people etc, etc, reflecting the diverse inhabitants and visitors to the area.

The Museum is anxious to identify many of the subjects of the portraits and is hoping that some visitors to the exhibition may recognise ancestors or family friends etc.

### Doreen Osborne

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### Church Celebrations

The Church of St. John on Bethnal Green was built in 1825-8 to the design of Sir John Soane, with a large square tower with a clock. It was gutted by a fire in 1870 and after extensive rebuilding, reopened on March 25<sup>th</sup> 1871. It suffered bomb damage in the Second World War, when the vicarage and houses on the Bethnal Green estate opposite were destroyed. The crypt supports are of huge circular brick which gives the area a really magnificent feel. Today the crypt is home to artists' workshops, where exhibitions are held. The Church stands almost in the centre of the old Borough of Bethnal Green, surrounded by Bethnal Green Gardens.

The 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church was celebrated by music recitals and an exhibition of Roman Road by the East London History Society, consisting of photos taken in 1963 by Ken Claisee and in 1993 by Diane Kendall. A future exhibition is planned with the road again photographed by Stewart Raymond, showing the many changes in the area, which we do not notice on a day-to-day walk along the road.

The exhibition, originally planned for four days had to be extended to the following weekend, as so much interest was shown, including a local man who informed us that in the 1950s he attended a school in the crypt run by Bethnal Green Borough for truant boys and he had helped at the time to paint it. The granddaughter of the Mayor of Bethnal Green (Albert Turpin 1945-46) visited and said her grandfather had been a prolific water colour

painter and she was helping to index and photograph to disk all his paintings of Bethnal Green.

**Doreen Kendal**

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## Flooding on the Isle of Dogs

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**Alfred French**

On January 28, 1928, I and the rest of my family were awakened about 2 am amidst considerable noise and bustle and packed off upstairs. The people living there were already awake and accommodated we children in their front room.

We had heard of high tides during the past few days and of water almost overlapping the dock wall, but now it was really happening. The neighbours were hastily drilling holes in floorboards as water ran down the West Ferry Road and over the doorsteps. Some were nailing boards to their doorways but all to no avail. Carpets were rolled up and in the time available such items on floor level as could be retrieved were placed on top of beds and cupboards. The water came higher, everything smelling of oil as barrels from the Oil Wharf nearby floated past the door. I looked out of the upstairs window in the darkness – a table floated past the house with a cat perched on it. The water was now 3-4 feet deep.

As daylight broke, the water slowly began to go down carrying with it an enormous amount of rubbish from the factories and docks. This blocked the sewers as they became exposed and people with rubber boots or turned-up trousers tried hard to clear them. As the water receded from each house, under-floor water was baled out and buckets of tap water used to clear the offensive deposit. A fire tender did its best to clear the roads of slime – only one could be spared as others were in other parts of the island. Then came the great ‘clean up’ – all

doors and windows were opened and many floor-boards lifted to allow the rooms and foundations to dry out. The whole place reeked like Venice on a hot day!

By noon, the ‘outside world’ had heard of the disaster and help was beginning to arrive. The local policeman went round with a megaphone urging people to refrain from drinking tap-water as it was contaminated. In the early afternoon, horse-drawn water tankers arrived to supply drinking water. Hand pumps and fire tenders from many districts arrived to pump out basements etc, whilst refuse carts, taken off their normal task, were used to clear the streets of rubbish, particularly piles of sodden books and clothing, and to sprinkle disinfectant in all the houses. Carpets, mattresses, bed-linen and clothing, were spread over fences, walls, lines etc., to dry out. What a blessing it did not rain that day! Ultimately, the Council took away all mattresses and bed-linen for cleaning and disinfecting. Meanwhile, volunteers stationed themselves at various points along the River to watch for the next high tide, but fortunately there was no overflow.

Ten years later, the Island still talked of its flood and when houses were left closed for a time, the ‘waterlogged’ smell still persisted. Even now, fifty years later, the oil marks can still be seen in some parts of the Island where the water reached its height.

*The above article has been reproduced from the Winter 1978 Newsletter:*

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BOOK REVIEWS



**The East End I knew by Allan Young**, published by the East London History Society. ISBN 0 950625 84 1. A4 paperback. Price £7.50. Enquiries to Philip Mernick (see inside front cover for contact details)

Following on from the success of the Victoria Park and Mile End books, the ELHS has produced another winner, this time the personal recollections of Allan Young, who spent the first ten years of his life up to 1940, at No.69 Salmon Lane, Stepney. They later moved to Grove Road, Mile End, where the author lived for twenty years.

Besides being an excellent storyteller, Allan Young was able to do what most of us would like to have done – in 1950 he made a photographic study of the area he knew from his childhood and youth. Post war Stepney still had the ambience of the pre-war era, and it would be years before the debris of bombed and gutted buildings would be replaced by new developments. In the course of compiling this publication, Allan Young returned to the streets of his youth, and made a further comparative study. The result is a valuable piece of social history, which captures the spirit of pre-war Stepney.

Not surprisingly, Allan’s earliest memories are tied up with playing games with his friends, the sights and sounds of the street, and he begins with these descriptions. He follows on with the story of his family life at No. 69 Salmon Lane, then he takes us on a tour of the neighbourhood. School days are another topic, and Sunday markets in Club Row, which his

father frequented in search of bits and pieces for his various DIY projects. Allan’s father took a keen interest in photography, and encouraged his son’s talent from an early age. The photographs are of a high quality and many have been taken on the spur of the moment, simply because something caught his eye, and his attention.

On a personal level, as someone who has compiled several pictorial books on the East End, I can only look at some of them and think what I would have given to have had these to add to my compilations! I’m sure our history society members will agree with me when I say that this book is an essential addition to our East End library.

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**The London Compendium** by Ed Glinert, published by Penguin, ISBN0713 996889, hardcover £25.

Inspired by such diverse characters as Lord Macaulay, the early Victorian historian, who claimed to have walked down every street in London, Charles Dickens’s character Sam Weller, who had a knowledge of London ‘both extensive and peculiar’, and Sherlock Holmes, who had ‘an exact knowledge of London’, the writer Ed Glinert walked the streets of London, making literary connections and setting the scene for historical facts, figures and faces, not in any chronological order but simply giving them a sense of place. The East End plays a major part, and the encyclopaedic tour of the streets guides you through the area, with chapters broken down into E1, E2, E3 and E13. The remaining chapters cover central London, the City, the West End, Whitehall and Westminster, the River Thames, North London, North West, South East, South West and West London. The book has an excellent index, and ties the whole of London together into a sprawling, complex but expertly organised whole.

**Rosemary Taylor**

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## My Memories of the East End

### Ermine Desmond

The Second World War had been over for some time when I arrived in London to teach although there were still 'bomb sites' everywhere to be seen. My bus dropped me in Hackney Road and I walked through fairly recently erected single storey 'pre-fabs' to Columbia Road where the many carpenters' shops were already busy. Round and about, there were still many lovely Victorian terraces intact – the high-rise monstrosities had only recently begun to replace them. I would soon become aware of a steady exodus to Hemel Hempstead or Milton Keynes.

The Infants' Department of the grim looking Columbia Road School was on the first floor – cheerful and bright. It's Head Mistress, Miss Robb, was a dour but kindly Scots woman. Once a week, she would dine with the six members of staff and I remember her description of the sad stoicism with which her generation met almost inevitable spinster-hood – any possible husbands having been killed in the First World War. She still used the euphemism 'leaving the room' for going to the lavatory and we whooped with delight when in a shocked voice, one day, she said, 'What do you think I have just seen? Johnny Morris leaving the room in a milk bottle!'

Miss Robb always arrived extremely early in order to take in the shivering children whose mothers had gone 'office cleaning' in the City, to place them before a roaring fire which Mr Evans the caretaker had taken great care to have ready. He always took great care too of our spotlessly clean building. Mrs Evans, who would have made an excellent teacher, 'heard' reading groups regularly. This was an enormous help to us battling with hideously large classes. The only time I taught to my satisfaction was when the majority had

chicken pox and I taught the same sixteen children for two weeks – bliss.

The Cockney accent, at first, gave me great difficulty. It took me a while to translate 'Coomis I flot!' into 'Oh, Miss! I feel hot!' and when children yelled for 'Me Shoes' Miss Hughes did not always respond appropriately.

The staff were most able and diligent. Joyce Coomber and May Colecott were excellent musicians. Phyllis Bartlett was not only a superb teacher but an artist whose flair was demonstrated each Christmas when she transformed the hall magically. On top of all that, she always wrote an excellent Christmas play which invariably used every child in the school. The deputy head, Nell, was responsible for teaching the words of hymns and carols. She worked, she slaved, to improve their diction for 'Good Old England' only to hear them singing lustily on the day 'Goo-Dole-Dinglan.' I came to hate 'Mornin has brokin like the first mornin'. We taught with all our might and reached a very good standard although the idea of further or university education was totally alien to most parents' minds.

Children were very clean and well nourished except among a neglected handful where conjunctivitis, scabies and runny noses were fairly common. One child's head apparently turned silver overnight – on closer inspection it was found to be nits – a truly incredible sight. The 'health visitor' dispensed the necessary treatment. That child was so badly nourished that he was sent away to recuperate and when he returned, plump bronzed and bright-eyed, dressed immaculately in a grey suit, collar and tie and polished black shoes, I simply did not recognize him. He had always been considered unteachable but I taught him to read (I think it took him a week to master the one word 'of'). I wonder whether he still reads now and what he does for a living.

One event that still bothers me was the Queen's appearance in the East End the day

after the Coronation. All the teachers and children had obediently lined the streets for at least two hours. Then someone shouted, 'There she is!' 'Where? Where?' shouted the children. But she had gone – the car had whizzed past – they never saw her. Shameful!

An annual event I remember with intense pleasure was 'The Judging of the Nasturtiums.' A residually aristocratic frail lady of a very uncertain age, teetering on high heels and dressed in a crumpled but elegant lace dress and battered but yet beautiful large brimmed hat arrived to judge the children's efforts at growing nasturtiums. They varied from straggly, etiolated, greenfly infested, convolvulus-like specimens, to the odd (very odd) more sturdy examples that bore a loose resemblance to the seed packet. She would solemnly study each effort, however risible, while we waited with bated breath for the only possible decision. Then, having announced the winners, she would declare a half-day's holiday, which I always spent visiting an art gallery (oh, the riches of the National Gallery to a country girl!) and taking tea elegantly at Fullers in Regent Street. The children often did not realize that we teachers ever left the building. 'Where do you sleep?' an anxious little one once asked me.

I am so glad I did my first teaching among the 'East Enders' in Bethnal Green.



Columbia Market and surroundings, shortly before demolition, 1960s

## POET'S CORNER

**Blaise Moritz of Toronto, Canada, has contributed the following poem:**

### JACK DASH

It is the fashion for the modern concert hall to show its engineering plainly, sound baffles hung in place of chandeliers;

concrete, steel cables, all the new fabrics fundamental to the acoustics of the space exposed, with only scant gestures of trim, paint or plaster.

Imagine Festival Hall on London's South Bank built for the Festival of Britain, 1951, as such a place, a machine for listening,

and now imagine it under construction: the skeletons of walls before the cement's been poured; the dull and dusty look of those grey slabs

that have been cast but not yet polished; the wiring and ductwork tangled everywhere not yet drawn as taut and neat

as on the blueprints; and listen to the orchestra now resident: in place of strings, electric saws, for timpani, jackhammers, their score, those same blueprints.

This was the scene that Jack Dash entered visiting the site during one of the London dock strikes to appeal for funds and solidarity. He got both.

Audible within that chamber were the brogues and dialects of all the kingdom, despite the destructive interference: the design unfinished, waves crossed

at the wrong angles, the voices of labourers

whose efforts would gradually sweeten the sound of the room.

How many of them have enjoyed that sweetness,

wrote Jack, retired to his kitchen table, on big wide-ruled pages with a fat felt pen, reckoning the number of concert-goers

among the builders a spit in the Thames that flows beside the hall. I'm a thinner man than Jack, prefer fine-pointed pens and narrow

lines for my pages—"college-ruled," they're called—

but sitting at my kitchen table I dream as he did, as most working people do, of retirement.

"I dream of winning the Pools, retiring to the country, breeding dogs, painting, going for long walks and systematically visiting all the centres

"of London culture to contemplate and try to understand all the creative works of art created by man," wrote Jack. "In the future

"that I'm striving for, I look for a shorter working day and week which will give the working people the time

to stand and stare, and teach them how to use their leisure." For me, here is greatness: having known others

in their labour, not to see them as mere images of one's own wants but to wish freedom for them no less

sincerely than for oneself. Jack, may I never be a Tarry, never break rank or lose faith, never give you cause to refuse a seat beside me.

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## Memories of WWII 1939-1945

### Roy Hibberd

These are my memories of people and events of the war seen, heard and often felt by someone who was then a 5 year old child. I was the third and last child born to my parents, My sister was nearly 11 and an elder brother had died 12 days after my pregnant mum had attempted to stop a thief boarding a bus to escape, when caught in the act of breaking and entering. *The kick in the stomach she received* meant that the unborn child was born prematurely and in those days resulted in almost inevitable death. The culprit was a neighbour who knew that both my parents were out at work. The man was injured resisting arrest and received 18 months hard labour.

My parents moved to 3 Bradwell Street on 'The Island' (off Bancroft Road.) The Island was called thus because it was an enclave bordered by the LNER line to Liverpool Street, Bancroft Hospital and the Coal Wharf which was really a small 'inland' dock area on the Grand Union Canal. The wharf was used to despatch and receive bulk cargoes. Many coal merchants had depots there and coal rounds began their journeys there. Transport was mostly by horse and cart then. And if we played in the road there was usually ample time to get out of the way.

The house in Bradwell Street was shared with a large family named Brown. The sanitary arrangements were basic to say the least! The outside loo was shared by both families. The Browns had a weekly ritual. Every Sunday morning they bathed their brood in a galvanized bath. They all shared the same water and at the same time emptied the pots of urine. One Sunday morning disaster struck. Whilst Mr Brown and his brood were manoeuvring the over full receptacle downstairs to discharge it down the loo, a

calamity occurred. A handle broke and the filthy concoction cascaded down like Niagara Falls. It being summer the swarms of flies that descended on the 'feast' were a nuisance for weeks.

My father was a tobacco blender for the Imperial Tobacco Co. in Commercial Street, Aldgate. In 1929 there was a suspected smallpox outbreak in East London. Dad had been promoted to manage a brand new facility in Southampton. Our house, like many others was placed in quarantine, and nobody could enter or leave. My gran broke the rules and pushed 'essentials' through the letterbox. It was a false alarm, but too late, somebody else from an 'unaffected' area got the job instead.

At school my dad had proved to be a skilled carpenter and a baby's highchair had been exhibited in the 'Schoolboys Handicraft' exhibition held annually during the Christmas holiday period at the Agricultural Hall Islington. This skill, which sadly I did not inherit, stood him in good stead and his brother-in-law got him a job with a firm of builders who were making alterations at the printers where he worked. Dad remained with them until he retired in 1963.

I was born on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1934 in Bancroft Road Hospital. A Saturday night at 6.30 pm. That afternoon West Ham who I supported for 46 years had drawn 1-1 with Lincoln City. Other older and young men who made the news in the East end that year for different reasons were: Billy Forecast, who won the News of the World darts championship playing for the Duke of York pub in Antill Road, Bow, and another local young man John Stockwell, a cinema usher who was hanged for murdering his boss at the Eastern Palace, later the Regal Cinema, that stood opposite Bow Church.

One of my earliest memories is waving a paper streamer while being held up by my Mum in Green Street Bethnal Green, as King George V and Queen Mary came past on their Silver

Jubilee procession. And a late Christmas Eve trip down Bethnal Green Road to buy a cheap turkey. The butchers had sold them cheap as there were few fridges in the East End then! I started school at the age of 4 at Portman Place School in Morpeth Street. The school was a typical three storey building. Its roof top playground overlooked the LNER railway line.

The lessons were basic to say the least - mainly an exercise in bonding with other kids outside the family. The afternoons were spent lying on canvas beds for a nap, although few of us slept. But if you pretended to be asleep it seemed to please the teachers, and they rewarded you by placing a sweet beside you. It was boring beyond belief! One afternoon the tedium was at last relieved. A little girl wet herself and the liquid could not escape the canvas. I can still hear her bawling as she was admonished by the teachers much to the delight of us boys. Perhaps she really was asleep.

We had by now moved across the road to 9 Buckeridge Street. The family opposite, the Cartwrights, Mr Joe, Mrs Mary and their two sons, Joey and Ted were particular friends of our family. The men were fanatical fans of the then Clapton Orient and one Saturday during the 'phoney war' the period before the full 'blitz' began, they took me to see them play. We walked up Bancroft Road, Devonshire Street, through Meath Gardens, where at that time there was a small detachment of RAF personnel manning a barrage balloon site. They had a couple of tents for accommodation and a lorry to shift the whole lot elsewhere if required. They were pitched in a corner near the railway line. We walked up the rest of Green Street turning at the Aberdeen pub down Grove Road, and Antill Road to the railway station in Coborn Road and caught a train. I can't remember the score, but I have never forgotten that walk. Joey had been born in 1916 when his father was serving in France. As a teenager he had lost an eye in an accident but despite that, after the retreat at Dunkirk,



## SPRING COACH TRIP

SATURDAY 1<sup>ST</sup> MAY 2004

### CHARLESTON, ALFRETON & BERWICK CHURCH

**C**harleston was the Sussex home of Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant. Many other members of the Group visited them. They were artists, and decorated almost everything in the house. They even painted the sides of the bathtubs! It is a showcase of their art and design. The garden too was redesigned in Mediterranean style.

We shall be going to Charleston first, where we shall have a conducted tour. Coffee and biscuits will be provided. Afterwards we go to Alfriston for lunch and a look round.

Alfriston is an attractive village with plenty of pubs and cafes. It has a fine church and nearby there is the mediaeval Clergy House. This is a National Trust property, which illustrates 14<sup>th</sup> century building methods. A visit here is optional, only 40p is saved by booking a party, and some people may prefer to look round elsewhere. Entrance is £2.80, NT members free.

Afterwards we should be visiting Berwick Church (this has not been finalised). Here, the Bells and Duncan Grant got a commission to redecorate it, and covered the walls with paintings. The Nativity scene is set in a Sussex barn, with the Downs beyond, and shepherds with local crooks. Finally, we return to Alfriston for tea (own arrangements).

The coach fare is £8.25. Please send this to me with the booking slip below. Entrance to Charleston is £5.50. Coffee and biscuits are £1.50. I will collect this on the coach. Please make cheques out to the East London History Society.

The pick-up will be at the bus pull-in in Grove Road, round the corner from Mile End Station, at 9.00 am. Please note the earlier time.

**Please fill in the booking slip below and send to me, Ann Sansom, 18 Hawkdene, London E4 7PF. Tel. 020 8524 4506. (Photocopy it if you don't wish to spoil your newsletter.)**



#### SPRING COACH TRIP

Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004

I/We would like \_\_\_\_\_ seat/s for the coach trip.

NAME/S \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TEL NO. \_\_\_\_\_ I enclose a cheque/PO for £ \_\_\_\_\_

(Cheque made payable to the East London History Society.)