

**The East London History Society**

*(founded 1952)*

The East London History Society exists to further interest in the history of East London, namely the London Boroughs of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets.

The annual programme includes monthly lectures in the winter, walks and visits in the summer.

Information about the Society can be obtained from:

The Membership Secretary, 39 Harbinger Road, London, E.14.



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## EAST LONDON RECORD

The East London History Society publishes the *East London Record* once a year. Original articles concerned with any aspect of the history of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets should be submitted to the Local History Librarian, Tower Hamlets Central Library, Bancroft Road, London E1 4DQ (01-980 4366) for consideration by the editors.

Articles may be based on personal reminiscences or research. Contributions should not normally exceed 5,000 words and shorter items would be welcomed. The editors will be pleased to discuss plans for projected articles and work in progress.

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Cover illustration: Welcome to the Coronation festivities in Poplar 1937 (a detail — for the rest of the picture see p17 below).

Photograph by William Whiffin.

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## CONTENTS

- 2 Concertinas in the Commercial Road: the story of George Jones  
Frank E Butler
- 12 The camera's eye: photographing Tower Hamlets, 1855-1939  
Bernard Nurse
- 22 17th century lifestyle: inventories from Hackney and Shoreditch  
Jean Wait
- 29 Achievers in the ghetto  
Irving Osborne
- 32 A Poplar childhood  
Lillian Hine
- 44 Book reviews
- 48 Recent local history studies of Tower Hamlets and Hackney

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**CONCERTINAS IN THE COMMERCIAL ROAD:**  
the story of George Jones by Frank E. Butler



THROUGHOUT much of Queen Victoria's reign, Stepney was an important centre in the music world. It was the home of George Jones's concertina factory.

George Smith Jones was born in Spencer Street, Commercial Road, on February 29, 1832 (he never let the family forget the date, protesting that he was only entitled to a present every fourth year), the eldest surviving child of Robert Jones, carpenter, and Sarah Swan Barnes, who married at St Botolph's, Aldgate, in 1830. There is no record of his education, but he must have been an instinctive scholar for he read widely, was good at figures, a fluent correspondent and an astute man of business. According to his memoir<sup>1</sup> he started work at the age of twelve, going straight into the trade of concertina-making. From then on the story of his life is inseparable from the history of the concertina.

Charles Wheatstone the physicist had invented this new "Wind Musical Instrument" in 1827. His patent of 1829 was for the "Symphonium"<sup>2</sup> in a variety of forms, one of them, an instrument with 24 keys and a four-fold bellows, was certainly a concertina, though the name was not adopted for several years. In 1844 his new patent for "Concertinas and other Musical Instruments" included the concertina as we know it today.

It was an immediate success, commercially and artistically. It featured in classical concerts (Chopin was once annoyed to find he had to share the stage with one) and was much in demand for "at homes". The Wheatstone firm had to abandon their other musical ventures and concentrate on making concertinas and publishing concertina music. In the beginning purchasers were mostly well-to-do; one in ten were from titled families. But later in the century the concertina became a working-class instrument, the delight of buskers and amateur musicians.

#### Small-scale Manufacturer

Concertina manufacture at first was carried on chiefly by outwork, that is, workmen made the components, or did partial assembly, at home, and took the results to Wheatstone and Co. for completion. Inevitably, where two or more could combine their skills, they did so and set up on their own — not much attention was paid to the Wheatstone patents<sup>3</sup>. From 1830 to 1850 there were rapid and surprising changes of loyalty, with the establishment of short-lived businesses.

George Jones began work in 1844, with Jabez Austin, who made 'pans' for Wheatstone at their West End headquarters off Regent Street. A few years later Austin and Jones transferred to the firm of Joseph Scates in Frith Street, Soho, "Mr Austin attending to the woodwork and myself looking after note

fixing, reducing and voicing” he notes in his memoir. “Very shortly... Mr Austin also started manufacturing on his own, and as I went with him I was able to learn every branch of the business”. Austin’s striking out on his own, with Jones’s eager support, may have been in 1850, for that is the date Jones later used in advertising. *GEORGE JONES & CO. ESTABLISHED 1850*, the signboard above his shop proclaimed.

While working with Austin, the young manufacturer undertook repairs on his own account. Within a few years he had also bought and taught himself to play a ‘French’ accordion and a ‘German’ concertina, which sounded adjacent notes of the scale on the press-and-draw of the bellows. The latter he soon replaced with an improved model designed and made by himself.

In 1852, when he was 20, he felt enough confidence in the future to marry. His bride was Caroline Chard, aged 18, of Brick Lane, Bethnal Green, the daughter of a mariner. Jones’s own address is given on the marriage certificate as James Street, Bethnal Green, and his trade that of “musical instrument maker”.

#### Versatile Young Man

The 1850s were boom years for the music hall. With two brand-new musical instruments at his command, plus an agreeable light tenor voice, Jones was tempted away from his workshop to the music hall stage. How long he continued there is not known, but it was long enough to justify his later claim to have been the first performer in public on the two instruments. The livelihood of a music-hall artiste was precarious, however. Conditions were primitive and sometimes sordid, so Jones “tired of the life of the Music Halls”. Perhaps he began to think the life of a singer/concertina-player undignified for a family man.

On leaving the music halls he worked with John Nickolds, another former employee of Wheatstone who had set up his own factory in Woodbridge Street, Clerkenwell. This firm later became Nickolds and Crabb, which under the name Harry Crabb and Son are the only concertina makers in existence today.

Jones did not stay long in Clerkenwell, for Jabez Austin, “my first master, invited me to manage his new premises in Commercial Road, teaching, managing the shop and supervising the workshop”. This was at 3, Crombies Row on the north side of Commercial Road, next to Jubilee Street. Jones goes on to say “the business made money fast, too fast for Mr Austin, who spent liberally on drink and being taken ill, died soon after.” This was in 1857<sup>4</sup> and presumably Austin had no heir, for apparently Jones took over the business without any formalities and he enjoyed an interval of growing prosperity.

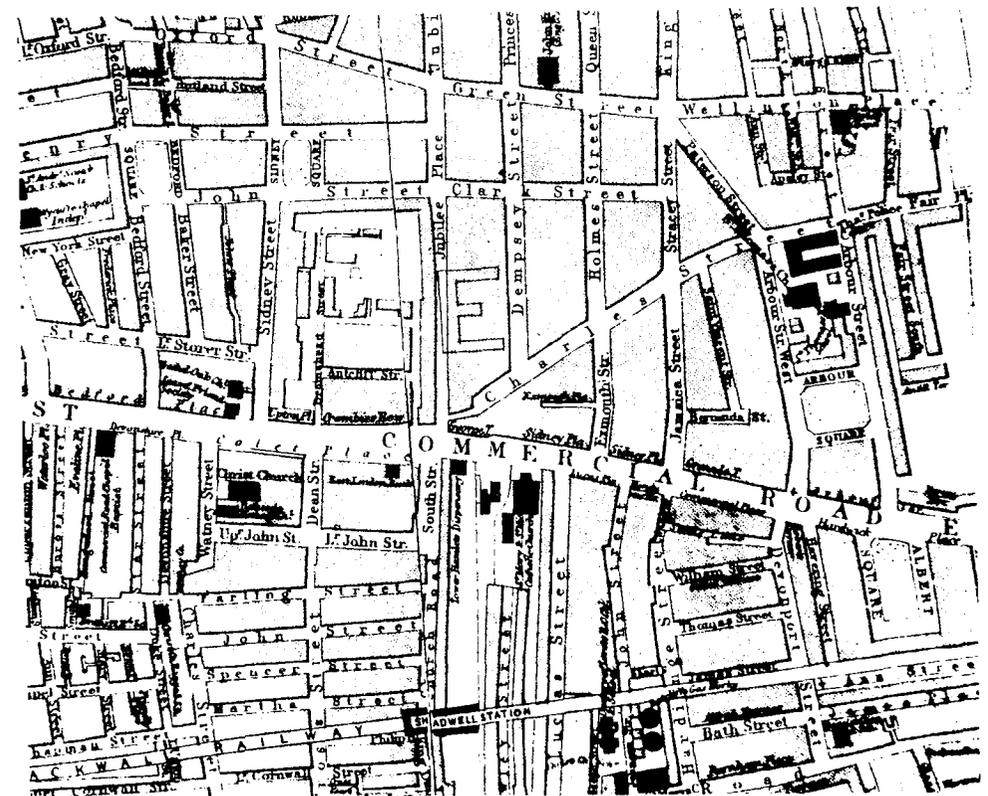
The business expanded and sales in the music shop were brisk, while on the domestic scene three daughters made their appearance. But about 1861 catastrophe struck — the premises in Commercial Road caught fire and burned to the ground. George and Caroline escaped with their three girls, Jeanette, Margaret and baby Caroline. Following the practice of the time, Mrs Jones was careful to rescue her “marriage lines”, and the charred document still exists. Also saved from the shop window, for some reason, was a miniature banjo no more than four inches long. This relic disintegrated a few years ago. It bore marks of the fire and was brought out many times on the

telling of the story over the following seventy years.

Among the crowd at the scene of the fire were James Welsh, and his daughter Mary Matilda, of White Horse Place not far away. Mary Matilda used to tell how she saw the rescue of the family, who were strangers to her, never thinking at the time that within twelve months she would be the new Mrs Jones. For although unhurt, Caroline did not long survive the fire, and on June 28, 1862, George and Mary were married at St Peter’s Cephax Street, Mile End and at the age of twenty-two Mary became step-mother to the three girls.

Soon after the fire Jones moved into new premises at 2, Lucas Place, a terrace on the other side of Commercial Road<sup>5</sup>. There he started production of the “Anglo” concertina after receiving a large order from Dublin from his former employer Scates who had settled there. The “Anglo”, short for Anglo-German, was a challenge to cheap concertinas made in Germany from inferior

*Crombies Row and Lucas Place in Commercial Road, from Weekly Despatch map of London c. 1862*



materials and sold for as little as 3s 6d compared with Wheatstone's original "English" type<sup>6</sup> which cost £2. Today it is still possible to obtain a German concertina for £16, while the superior English-made Anglo costs £200.

Jones recorded in his memoir that about this time he was joined by a Mr Shaller who had been toolmaker at Louis Lachenal's concertina factory in Bedford Row, Bloomsbury. With his aid Jones not only made both Anglo and English concertinas. He began making reeds for the harmonium, to sell at five guineas each. With the working-man's wages at £1 per week or less, Jones's customers for the harmonium were no doubt mission halls, "gentlemen's families", and a few better-off artisans. He evolved the first portable harmonium, with sides, pedals and base all hinged to fold under the windchest, and permit the closed instrument to be carried by a strap across the shoulder. For a long time it was much in demand for outdoor religious meetings, but is rarely seen today<sup>7</sup>.

### Family Arrangements

Jones's second wife Mary Matilda bore three sons and three daughters; and at one stage father, mother and all the children were all involved in the concertina business. When she could be freed from housework Mother became responsible for the shop and retail sales, not only of all types of instruments but a great deal of sheet music. She could play a scale or chord on almost any instrument in the shop, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of sheet music, including composer, publisher and price and, equally important, the collecting houses and trade terms.

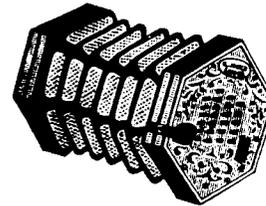
As the years went on the business was extended to supply all the instruments of orchestras and military and brass bands, a profitable line since owners of big factories often gave financial and practical assistance to workers to found works bands. The Jones catalogue has tables of the instruments required to establish bands of different sizes. There was a considerable trade in pianos, often made by the firm of Broadwood, White, but with the Jones label, which sold at £10 each. Banjos were listed as "own make" at prices from 6s 6d and the purchaser could also buy a *Tutor* for it, written by George Jones. He also wrote and published a *Tutor* for the Anglo Concertina. At that time, in 1876, it was the only one available, and remained so for many years. It was published by Wheatstone after the closure of the Jones business, and was still available unaltered until 1960.

The range of concertinas made by Jones was immense. He catalogued more than fifty variants of the Anglo, including an "organ-tone" Anglo, with reeds playing in octaves, and his so-called "Perfect" Anglo, patented in 1884, which was fully chromatic. He made eleven different styles of English concertina, in addition to piccolo, tenor, baritone and bass instruments, which if used in conjunction with the treble made it possible to play very ambitious works, especially string quartet music. There was also an "organ-tone" English concertina, and a piano concertina which had the studs coloured black and white and grouped as on the piano. All were available in qualities "A", "B", "C" and there was plenty of plating and gilt inlay on the more expensive models.

He also adopted "Celestial" as his trade name, and fitted his concertinas with specially designed "broad steel reeds", advertised as "never wear out,

2. George Jones & Sons, Manufacturers & Importers,

## ENGLISH CONCERTINAS.



Forty-eight Keys, Double Action, Screwed Notes, Improved Riveted Levers, Compress from G below the Stave to second C above.

1. Mahogany, four-fold purple bellows, flush with frames, in covered case with lock and key ... £2 2 0
2. Rosewood, superior four-fold green bellows, with nuts, in frames, and brass screws to tops, in mahogany case ... 2 12 6
3. Rosewood, five-fold bellows, brass straws and nuts, in mahogany case ... 3 5 0
4. Rosewood, moulded tops, bushed holes, five-fold morocco bound bellows, in rosewood case ... 5 0 0
5. Rosewood, moulded tops, bushed holes, extra fret, German silver studs, five-fold morocco bellows, in rosewood case ... 6 0 0
6. Rosewood, moulded tops, extra finish, with silver studs, gilt morocco bellows, in rosewood case ... 7 0 0
7. Same as No. 4, but with steel reeds ... 8 0 0
8. Rosewood, extended fret, German silver studs, morocco bellows, steel reeds, in rosewood case ... 10 0 0
9. Ebony, extra open fret, inlaid corners, silver or glass studs, German silver screws, plated finger rests, steel reeds, gilt bellows, in ebony case ... 12 12 0
10. Amboyna, same as No. 9, in Amboyna case ... 13 13 0
11. Ebony, with nickel plated centre to tops (new model), ivory studs, and best finish throughout, in ebony or leather case ... 14 14 0

350, Commercial Road, London, E. 3

## ENGLISH BARITONE CONCERTINAS.

- Bounding One Octave below Treble.
1. Rosewood, moulded tops, ivory studs, forty-eight keys, bushed holes, metal reeds, five-fold morocco bound bellows, in rosewood case ... £10 0 0
  2. Ebony, superior bush steel reeds, silver studs, six-fold morocco bound morocco bellows, in rosewood case ... 15 0 0

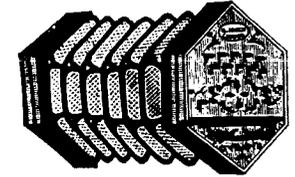
## ENGLISH BASS CONCERTINAS.

- Bounding Two Octaves below Treble.
- Rosewood, single action, forty-eight keys, silver studs, bushed holes, steel reeds, six-fold morocco bellows, in rosewood case ... 14 0 0

## ENGLISH PICCOLO CONCERTINAS.

- Bounding One Octave above Treble.
- Forty-three keys, bushed as No. 5, with steel reeds ... 8 8 0
- Instruction Books, 1s., 6s., and 10s. 6d.

## ANGLO-GERMAN CONCERTINAS.



Each instrument is Stamped on the Right Hand Strap Rail with the

Trade Mark.

### CLASS "A."

The bottom angle of the right hand side of each instrument in this Class bears a Stamp indicating whether Steel or Metal Reeds.

MAHOGANY TOPS, double screwed notes, five-fold bellows (flush with frames), in covered case, with lock and key.

20 keys. 22 keys. 24 keys. 26 keys. 28 keys. 30 keys.

Metal Reeds ... £1 2 6 1 5 0 1 7 0 1 10 0 1 12 0 1 15 0

Steel ... 1 10 0 1 13 6 1 17 0 1 2 0 1 3 6 1 7 0

ROSEWOOD —

Metal Reeds ... £1 6 0 1 9 0 1 11 6 1 14 0 1 16 6 1 2 0 0

Steel ... 1 14 0 1 17 6 1 2 1 0 1 2 4 0 1 3 7 6 1 2 11 0

SPECIAL CHEAP LINE, steel reeds, nickel silver tops — 30 keys. 31 keys

£3 3 0 1 3 7 6

*Concertinas, English and Anglo-German, ranging from 'special cheap line' to 'superior finish', in Jones's catalogue c. 1890*

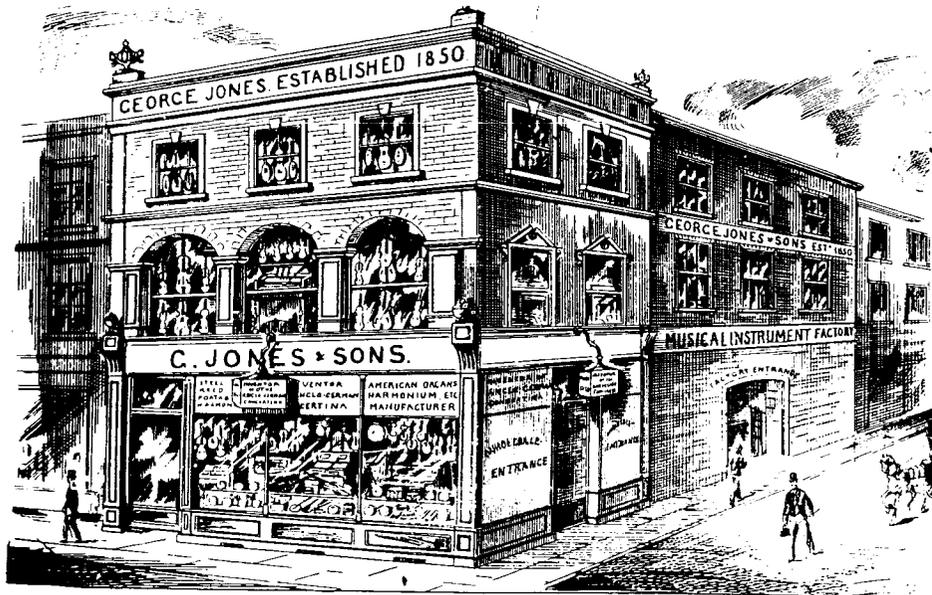
never go out of tune". He had to enlarge the instrument to take them, but it enabled him to offer the most powerful concertina made.

The Salvation Army was a major customer for fifteen years. General Booth himself placed the orders, chiefly for Anglos, which had to be in the same pitch as the brass-band instruments of the Salvationists<sup>8</sup>.

It was an invariable requirement that the letters "S.A." should be incorporated in the fretted design of the end-plates. Jones always told the story of being asked by General Booth to don Salvation Army uniform when calling for orders, and of being reproved for his bad language when he refused what he thought was an impudent request. But it did not deprive Jones of the order.

By 1879 Jones's "Celestial" concertinas were stocked by leading dealers throughout the country, and he also used the trade-name for melodions and harmoniums of his own manufacture, the latter being called "English" organs.

His premises were commodious, judging by the illustration on the back page of his catalogue. There were three storeys, with separate retail, trade and factory entrances, and there was, at times, some living accommodation.



All under one roof: the premises in Commercial Road c. 1890

About fifteen people were employed in the factory, and others in the shop, and there was at least one traveller. The one was always remembered because he pawned his samples in a moment of financial stress, and lost his employment. He was a cheerful rogue, and succeeded in remaining on good terms with the family. Jones does not appear to have used outworkers at this later stage of the business. "I have had fifteen apprentices, most of whom have later done very well in the trade", he said.

How this venerable Victorian found time to teach is a marvel, but in his catalogue he claims some notable pupils among music hall artists and members of the six minstrel troupes then popular. A long testimonial is included from George Seddon, of the City of London Orchestral Union, which says that Jones "elevated the Concertina from being an obscure musical toy to a valuable adjunct to instrumental music".

Jones was particularly proud of having taught the Brothers Webb, musical clowns of international fame who combined their clowning with musicianship of very high order, and used treble and baritone concertinas in a performance of standard classical works.

Although the shop included living accommodation, both the needs of the family and Jones' standing as a local tradesman called for his removal to a separate and better dwelling. He moved first to 3, Oriental Street, East India Dock Road, Poplar. An opportunity arose to buy No. 1, and he did so in about 1887 with the intention of altering it. But while the builders were at work, he moved the family to Jessamine Villa, Fairlop Road, Leytonstone. This address would have been quite convenient for travel to and from Commercial Road, since Leytonstone and Stepney East Stations were on the Great Eastern Railway route from Fenchurch Street to Loughton, which opened in 1854.

#### Putting the Children to Work

All George Jones's children had to work in his factory, the girls making the bellows, or "bellass" as they are known in the trade to this day. There is no doubt that Jones pinned his hopes for the future on his eldest son Willie who was given the best education and musical training of them all, and for whose benefit a pipe organ was erected in the factory. He became organist at St Michael's Paternoster Royal but unfortunately died suddenly at the age of 27, a loss not only to the family and the business, but to the many street musicians whose instruments he used to repair free of charge.

It is a strange fact that of the seven surviving children (Jeannette as well as Willie died young) who worked in the business, none emerged as a good concertina player, and the girls never played the instrument at all.

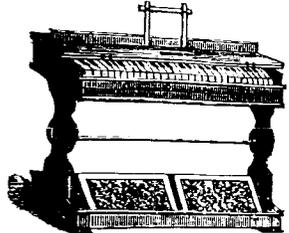
The only clue we have about Jones' relations with other employees is that he seems to have been able to retain their services, and some remained in communication with him after many years. For several years he took a house at Margate in the summer and gave the unmarried hands the opportunity of a holiday there also. Presumably, as in Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*, Margate was only considered suitable for tradesmen like George Jones, the better class folk going to Ramsgate. Mrs Jones remained in Margate for the summer months, while her husband travelled to and from London on the Granville Express. He must have made an early start from Margate to be able to spend in Stepney the four or five hours he always claimed to have devoted to the business at that time, for the afternoon train left Victoria at 3.15.

Jones extended his interest in property, owning houses in Manchester Road, Cubitt Town and Swanscombe Street, Canning Town, and others off Burdett Road, Limehouse. He lent money on mortgage, mostly at 5%. He had money in Consols, and the Stepney Building Society, of which he was reputedly a founder member. He retired in 1899, leaving his two remaining sons to succeed him in a highly prosperous business. But they lacked their father's devotion to the trade, and possibly did not make a good partnership. Within a few years the concern began to fail, and George Jones returned to sell up and pay off the creditors, at some loss to himself, before settling down to a decade of peaceful retirement. In his declining years he was a stern grandparent, more respected than loved by his grandchildren, and always

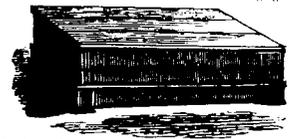
**PORTABLE HARMONIUMS.**

**GEORGE JONES,**  
*Manufacturer of the Newly Improved*  
**FOLDING HARMONIUM.**

The lightest and most portable yet introduced. Compass, four staves from F<sub>2</sub>, wide scale of keys. In polished walnut case. Height, when open, 2ft. 8in.; length, 2ft. 3in.; width, 14in.; weighing three-two pounds. Expressly adapted for the profession and mission work.



When closed, length, 2ft. 3in.; width, 12in.; depth, 10in. May be carried by a strap as easily as a portmanteau, without fear of damaging.

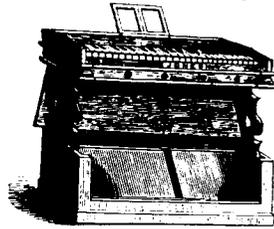


- |   |         |
|---|---------|
| 1. Two sets metal reeds, one stop       | £6 6 0  |
| 2. Extra finish, ditto, ditto           | 7 7 0   |
| 3. Five stops, ditto, ditto             | 7 10 0  |
| 4. Extra finish, powerful tone          | 8 8 0   |
| 5. Two sets steel reeds, one stop       | 9 10 0  |
| 6. Extra finish, ditto, ditto           | 10 10 0 |
| 7. Five stops, ditto, ditto             | 11 0 0  |
| 8. Extra powerful, made for concert use | 13 0 0  |

350, Commercial Road, London, E.

**PORTABLE HARMONIUMS.**

To hold up music, 14in. high, suitable for travelling. French make.



- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| 1. Three octaves, polished rosewood or walnut case, two sets of reeds, five stops | £12 12 0 |
| 2. Three and half octaves, ditto  | 12 12 0  |
| 3. Four octaves, seven stops  | 12 12 0  |

**COTTAGE HARMONIUM.**



Gothic design, polished walnut case; broad reeds, five octaves, with knee swell; height 3ft. 3in.; width 21in.; length 3ft. 2in.; cheapest in the trade.  
 £7 7s.

*Portable and 'Cottage' harmoniums advertised in Jones's catalogue*

addressed with Victorian formality by his children.

He moved to Brixton in about 1904, where he gathered new friends. But he never lost touch with his old pupils, the Brothers Webb, who invariably sought his counsel. He kept a very good table and cellar, and over meals would pour out jokes at which the dutiful offspring laughed. All admired his poetry, much of which still exists in manuscript, and is in fact fearful doggerel. He became stone deaf, but would occasionally bring out a small concertina and play "Ecoutez Moi" on it, a drawing-room solo of the Victorian era. He would visit the band performances in the London parks, and often the conductor and bandsmen would come and talk to him in the interval. *The Musical Opinion* printed a biography of him in 1885, and a long notice of his retirement in 1899.

The 1914-18 war brought out his patriotism, and he wrote a number of jingoistic ballads. At the age of 85 he defended his house against looters while the one next door was burning from an incendiary bomb. George Jones died

in 1919 and is little remembered now. His last instruments would be eighty years old and are practically museum pieces. As far as is known none of his descendants is in the trade, and only the author of this article (a grandson) is a concertina player, teacher and composer. There are two male descendants in the direct line, with considerable mechanical ability and some musical talent, but quite unconnected with concertinas.

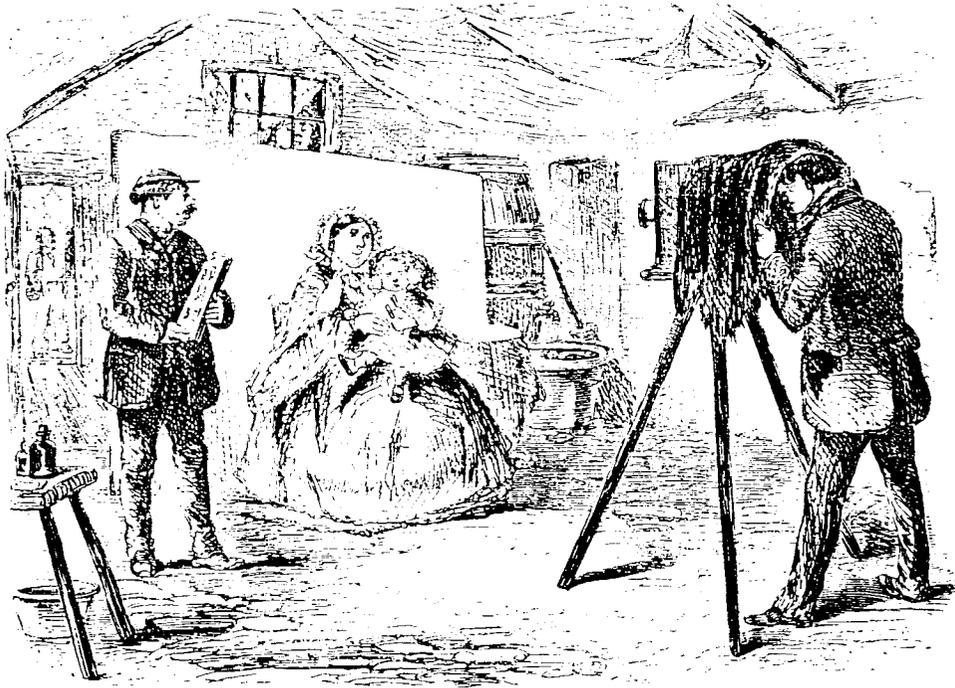
Most concertina makers closed between the wars. Wheatstones survived in the Boosey and Hawkes group, but have discontinued production and sold the plant, so now there is only the family firm of Harry Crabb and Son with the expertise to make concertinas for the current modest revival.

*I am particularly indebted to Carolyn Merion for considerable help with this article.*

**NOTES**

- (1) Manuscript published in *Free Reed*, the Concertina Newsletter, No.16, November 1973.
- (2) Illustrated in *Sir Charles Wheatstone*, by Brian Bowers, Science Museum, HMSO, 1975.
- (3) Wheatstone's patents seem to have been ignored by his competitors long before the expiration of the statutory period of protection — the same can be said of Jones's patents later on.
- (4) Index of deaths at General Register Office, St Catherine's House, Aldwych, London, WC2, September quarter 1857, Stepney.
- (5) The earliest of his concertinas known to survive, number 4996, bears a Lucas Place label and is thought to date from after the fire. The name Lucas Place was abolished by the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1874, the music shop premises being re-numbered as 350 Commercial Road.
- (6) The English concertina, in frequent use in genteel circles at mid-century, is the instrument suited to classical music, although there is also a "Duet" concertina, with treble and bass on opposite sides, the type favoured by Alexander Prince, a virtuoso who could play even the Tannhauser overture on it. At no time did Jones make Duet concertinas, to which he had a marked aversion.
- (7) The rapid pedalling necessary to maintain the air supply was often a matter of ridicule. John Alvey Turner of Cheapside sponsored this development, and was the principal distributor. But Jones was quite unable to keep up with the demand, and it was ultimately met by a manufacturer in France, probably Bresson, who improved the design and also brought out a "lap-organ".
- (8) An international pitch was only agreed in 1939.
- (9) An interesting short piece on this firm today is to be found in *Handmade in London* by Andrew Lawson. Cassell 1978.

**THE CAMERA'S EYE: photographing Tower Hamlets,  
1855 — 1939** by Bernard Nurse



*The new art finds willing models: cartoon of an 'East End Photographic Saloon' published in London Labour and the London Poor 1861*

PHOTOGRAPHY became a popular craze in the 1850's and a street photographer in East London claimed at the time

People seem to think that the camera will do anything. We actually persuade them that it will mesmerise them. After their portrait is taken we ask them if they would like to be mesmerised by the camera, and the charge is only 2d.

This game was introduced by the photographer's assistant when business was dull. He also passed off pictures of other people on unsuspecting customers.

Once a sailor came in, and as he was in haste, I shoved onto him the picture of a carpenter, who was to call in the afternoon for his portrait. The jacket was dark, but there was a white waistcoat: still I persuaded him that it was his blue Guernsey which had come up very light, and he was so pleased that he gave us 9d instead of 6d. The fact is that people

don't know their own faces. Half of 'em have never looked in a glass half a dozen times in their life, and directly they see a pair of eyes and a nose, they fancy they are their own.<sup>1</sup>

The photographer claimed to have done well in Whitechapel, taking on average 60 to 100 photographs a day, mostly shilling ones. Rather, his "governor" did well, making £8 a week clear profit from one shop and owning at least 11 others. In 1891, forty years later, a writer for *Strand Magazine* spent a day with a photographer near the docks who was not so prosperous. The shop also sold coal, firewood, potatoes, sweets and ginger beer in an attempt to make ends meet in the winter. Only on a good day would his turnover exceed £2.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the popular belief that the camera could do anything, in the early days its usefulness was severely restricted by its size, slow shutter-speed and need for strong light. Even the illustration of a "photographic saloon, East End of London" in Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) was taken from a sketch. Richard Beard took several daguerrotypes for Mayhew's work, the earliest photographs recorded of London street life, but they were reproduced as wood engravings and the originals have not survived. So apart from isolated views of Whitechapel High Street c1859, cottages in Poplar c1860 and wharves in Wapping about the same time, the earliest photographs known of this area are industrial views of shipyards.

#### Shipbuilders at work

The recording of the building and launch of the *Great Eastern* from Scott Russell's yard on the Isle of Dogs between 1855 and 1858 provides the first and best known examples, including Robert Howlett's masterpiece of Isambard K Brunel in front of the anchor chains. The Isle of Dogs was then one of the largest centres for shipbuilding in Europe, and four of its shipyards were photographed for John Barry's *Dockyard Economy and Naval Power* (1863). So unhappy was Barry with some of the photographs of the Millwall Company that others were taken and published in all but a few early copies of the book.<sup>3</sup> In his *Photographic Preface* Barry described the difficulty of taking interior photography with the equipment available to him.

Photography is to blame for the bad views, and to be praised for the good views that appear in this volume. The perfection and the imperfection of the art are given side by side. True, the fogs of November obscure or deny the light that is the chief condition of the artist's success, but even in the worst of all English months there are occasional blinks of sunshine, and something like sameness of result might for that reason have been looked for. But no, it has been impossible. They who want uniformly good photographic views, particularly of dark or overlighted workshops, must wait patiently in the hope of accident according to which the best chemicals and most skilful handling cannot yet command. The time, no doubt, will come, when it will be otherwise. It is however, still apparently remote.

Over twenty years later the inability of the Victorian camera to cope with poor lighting conditions prevented the London Stereoscopic Company from photographing successfully the ceremony of laying the memorial stone at Tower Bridge in June 1886. The photographs commissioned by the City of London Corporation were a complete failure, the Company complaining of

“insurmountable difficulties in the way of our taking better pictures, the day being so dull, and the tent dark, and the crowding of people being so great”.<sup>4</sup>

The first photographs of the poor in East London were probably those taken in the 1870s by a local photographer, Thomas Barnes, whose studio was at 422, Mile End Road. Barnes worked on behalf of Dr Barnardo, taking “before” and “after” pictures of the homeless and destitute children in Dr Barnardo’s “homes”, and possibly also for the Methodist Children’s Home in Bethnal Green, to publicise their work. In 1874 Dr Barnardo established a studio in his headquarters at Stepney Causeway. Besides “advocating the claims of our institution” he wanted

to obtain and retain an exact likeness of each child and enable them, when it is attached to his history, to trace the child’s future career.... By means of likenesses children absconding from our Homes are often recovered and brought back, and in not a few instances, juveniles who have stolen from their parents or guardians or were tempted by evil companions to leave home, at last, after wandering for a while on the streets, found their way to our Institution, have been recognised by parents of friends and finally restored to their care.<sup>5</sup>

However, following a complaint by a local Baptist minister that Dr Barnardo “is not satisfied with taking them as they really are, but he tears their clothes, so as to make them appear worse than they really are”, the Arbitration Court ruled in 1877 that one of his published photographs was “artistic fiction”. From then on the studio concentrated on producing “identity” photographs, and by the time of Dr Barnardo’s death in 1905 had taken about 5,000.

John Thomson attempted to photograph the poor in their usual surroundings for *Street Life in London* (1877-78), but working in the tradition of former illustrators of “street cries of London” the choice of subject was restricted to individual street sellers and few pictures were taken in the East End of London. It was only later in the century that conditions in the East End were thought to be particularly worse than in any other part of London and more substantial photographic records of slum life in the area appear.

London south of the river was better served in the 1890s by Paul Martin’s superb quality “snapshots” of street scenes. By contrast, Henry T Malby’s 30 to 40 photographs of “East London Slum Life” for the National Photographic Record in 1899 and 1904 are disappointing, although he knew the area as a resident of Limehouse in the 1880s and was a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society.<sup>6</sup> However, some of the scenes he photographed and their detailed, if sometimes prejudiced, captions are of interest. One series shows “young hooligans” in Bethnal Green, for example. Another photograph shows “Twine Court, Shadwell (in fact, Newton’s Rents), a court within a court. The only access being by a passage 30 inches wide between the end house and the boundary wall. Each house consists of one small room only, no outlet at the rear”. The houses were still in use, and still being photographed in the 1930s.

Better-quality photographs were taken by John Galt, a London City Missionary, around 1900. They are especially valuable for depicting home industries in Bethnal Green: stuffing mattresses, chopping firewood and



*In 1895 William Bartier made the frozen Thames the subject of a series of splendid photographs: this one was taken from Ratcliff Cross Stairs looking along Free Trade Wharf to the coal depot at Shadwell*

assembling matchboxes (at 2 1/2d a gross).<sup>7</sup> A few years later, the Rev George Hanks, Rector of Whitechapel from 1908 to 1916, collected a series of lantern slides to show conditions in his parish and the work of his clergy, for use in lecture tours when he was appealing for funds. Some of the slides clearly date from an earlier period, including those of the Whitechapel Parish Church destroyed in 1880, a shop in Brick Lane c.1890 and Whitechapel High Street c.1900. Many of the courts and alleys depicted have not yet been identified.

The Bedford Institute Association, formed by a group of Quakers, used photographs to illustrate their annual reports, and in 1912 purchased thirty from Horace Warner, one of their trustees. He photographed children in Spitalfields, barefooted and in rags, posed in front of their houses. Except for the outdoor settings, they look remarkably like the “before” photographs taken forty years earlier for Dr Barnardo.<sup>9</sup>

The same year, scenes in the same area were taken by C A Mathew, a professional photographer with a studio in Brightlingsea, Essex. It has been suggested that one Saturday morning he wandered around the streets of Spitalfields before catching his train back to Brightlingsea. As it was the Jewish Sabbath, the families and children were wearing shoes and their best clothes, and a completely different impression of the area is given from that provided by Horace Warner.<sup>10</sup>

A dramatic increase in the variety of different scenes photographed occurred in the first years of the 20th century with the development of the cheaply printed picture postcard. Hundreds of local scenes were published of hospitals, markets, shops, churches, schools and streets. From the 1890s, half-tone illustrations could also be reproduced economically and effectively in books; some of the earliest photographs of the immigrant communities, for example, appear in George Sims' *Living London* (1902-3).

#### Poplar's Own Photographers

The best-known photographer in Poplar at this time was William E Bartier. Described in the London commercial directories as "artist, portrait painter and photographer", Bartier had a shop in the East India Dock Road from about 1874. The Library Commissioners invited him to attend the opening of the new Poplar Library in 1894; he recorded a series of photographs in 1895 showing the Thames frozen over, and events such as the opening of the Blackwall Tunnel in 1897 and a balloon ascent from Poplar Recreation Ground in 1905. Enthusiasm for photography caused his tragic death in 1915. Accompanied by his son, Bartier went to the East India Docks in the early morning to photograph a damaged ship. While waiting for the light to improve, he slipped and fell into the hold.<sup>11</sup> The business was carried on by his son until the shop was bombed during the Second World War.

News stories were not generally illustrated with photographs until the press and magazines developed the ability to reproduce them satisfactorily shortly before the First World War. Earlier than this, portraits of the leaders of the Matchgirls' Union and some of the matchgirls taken during the 1888 strike were published in Annie Besant's *Autobiography* (1893). The gruesome mortuary photographs of Jack the Ripper's victims (1888) are on police files, and a few photographs of the 1889 dock strike have survived.

Far more news photographs were published after 1910. Norah Smyth, Sylvia Pankhurst's "second-in-command", photographed the activities of the East London Federation of Suffragettes (1914-16) in Old Ford, including the "cost-price" restaurant, the mother and baby clinic at the "Mothers' Arms" and the toy factory. Some of the photographs were published in the *Woman's Dreadnought* and in Sylvia Pankhurst's book *The Home Front* (1931). In 1921, when most of Poplar Borough Council were imprisoned for refusing to levy the LCC rate, the press photographed the demonstrations, the arrest and subsequent release of the councillors. An album of photographs was compiled to commemorate their successful fight to secure a greater degree of equalisation of the rates between the Metropolitan Boroughs.



Open-air Health Clinic for Poplar mothers and their babies run by the suffragettes, 1915, photo by Norah Smyth; Coronation party in Poplar, 1937, by William Whiffin



Orphans at Children's Home, Bethnal Green, 1870s, photographer unknown; Councillor J E Oakes spreading the word that warrants for the Poplar councillors' arrest are out, 1921, photo by William Whiffin; Harry Francis of Stepney ready to do "Wakey, wakey" on a September morning, 1936, by PC John Topham (courtesy John Topham Picture Library); Fish seller in Petticoat Lane, 1936, by L. Moholy-Nagy

Five years later, the General Strike closed the docks, and local photographer, William T Whiffin, photographed the crowds, the food convoys and the troops from the first-floor window of his shop in the East India Dock Road. The 1936 fascist riots and the "Battle of Cable Street" were well covered by the photograph agencies: Mosley inspecting the "blackshirts" in Royal Mint Street (Central Press), police action against demonstrators at Gardiners' Corner (Associated Press) and against the barricades in Cable Street and later demonstrations in Hackney and Bethnal Green (Fox Photos). Numerous other photographs were taken at the time. One event at least, the smashing of a window in Mile End Road, appears to have been re-enacted for the benefit of a press photographer.<sup>12</sup>

#### Unwonted Intrusion

The appetite of newspapers and newsreels for photographs could prove embarrassing. A celebrated case arose in 1922 on the issue of the privacy of religious worship. Pathé made a brief newsreel of the Jewish New Year celebrations by the Bow and Bromley Talmud Torah at the Mile End Palladium, and a few days later a photograph of the service at the Philpot Street Synagogue on the Day of Atonement was published in several newspapers. The *Jewish Chronicle* denounced both synagogues for "desecrating the holy days" by permitting such a "scandalous happening ... for the mere love of publicity". Three editorials and a number of letters were published on the issue over the following six weeks.<sup>13</sup>

News photographers could take better action-shots in the 1920's and 1930's because of the development of the "miniature" camera. For the first time photographers were able to capture informal, lively scenes with comparative ease and on good quality prints. The new freedom given to them can be seen in L Moholy-Nagy's work for the study by Mary Benedetta, *The Street Markets of London* (1936). The largest group of photographs was of Petticoat Lane. Moholy-Nagy set out his intentions in "The Photographer's Foreword". He aimed to provide a "pictorial record of modern city life ... by means of literary and impressionistic photo-reportage". He wanted to change people's views of a street market with its romantic associations of "showmen, unorganised trade, bargains and the sale of stolen goods". In his view markets were "a social necessity, the shopping centres, in fact, for a large part of the working class". He preferred to work with a large camera

in order to obtain the minutely graded black — white — grey photo values of the contact print, impossible to achieve in enlargements. But unfortunately the large camera is much too clumsy for taking rapid shots without being observed. The whole street immediately crowds round the photographer, the natural life of the scene is paralysed and the characteristic features of the traders, with their happy-go-lucky behaviour, their elementary actors' skill, their impetuosity, are lost. Thus after several attempts with a large camera I always returned to the Leica, with which one can work rapidly, unobserved and even in the London atmosphere, or in interiors with a reliable degree of precision.

Moholy-Nagy's statement of his intentions was directed against the prevailing belief in the aesthetic principle of pictorial composition, which encouraged photographers to produce soft outlines and hazy tones on their prints, such as those provided by Charles Tomlinson for his father H M Tomlinson's book, *Below London Bridge* (1934). Moholy-Nagy was convinced that "the days of the merely 'beautiful' photograph are numbered and that we shall become increasingly interested in providing a truthful record of objectively determined fact". This view was shared by an increasing number of photographers in the late 1930's, such as those working for *Picture Post* and *Mass Observation*. The work then of Humphrey Spender and Cyril Arapoff in East London shows considerable artistic merit as well as providing a valuable record of slum interiors at the time.

#### Wigan not Whitechapel

The feeling that photographs should provide a truthful record of social conditions explains George Orwell's criticisms of the illustrations placed by the publisher in the Left Book Club edition of his *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). Many had been taken by a press photographer in the East End of London and so could hardly be said to portray a "truthful record" of the North of England.<sup>14</sup>

The most natural and vivid pictures of life in East London between the wars were taken by the local photographer William T Whiffin (1879-1957), whose work had been unjustifiably neglected until Liberation Films used many of his photographs for their film and book, *Fly a Flag for Poplar* (1975). Whiffin's uncle, W Wright, owned several studios between 1880 and 1912. In 1891 he had five, including the former shop of Dr Barnardo's photographer, Thomas Barnes. Whiffin's father had also been a professional photographer who ran four studios during the First World War.

Whiffin was well known in Poplar. He would photograph local people's weddings, their families, their street parties and their processions. As a result, his pictures convey an impression of the vitality of life in the East End that is entirely absent from earlier views of slum scenes, streets and buildings.<sup>15</sup>

By 1914 photographs were considerably cheaper than twenty years earlier, but they were still a luxury for many in the East End. People contributed sixpence a week to a club and could sell their ticket to a neighbour if they were hard up. Whiffin's price list offered club members "one beautiful enlargement, mounted and framed complete, size 23 inches x 18 inches, this portrait is the talk of Poplar" for 3s 6d. Six enamelled postcards could be bought for a shilling.

William Whiffin carried out work for Poplar Borough Council for over thirty years from about 1916 when his offer to provide "enlarged photographs of any places of interest in the Borough, a record of which it is desired to preserve" was accepted. Because he was anxious to record the events around him Whiffin always seized the opportunity to photograph what was happening outside his window, whether it was a demonstration, an incident during the General Strike, a steam wagon breaking down or children



*Candid camera: Will Crooks MP, Poplar's veteran Labour leader, has a quiet word with W E Nicholls, deputy town clerk, summer 1917, William Whiffin*

playing on a motor car opposite. He had two offers of jobs from the press but did not think he was good enough to accept, although his photographs were often published in newspapers and books. Several thousand photographs were given to Poplar libraries in his lifetime and over two thousand negatives were given to the London County Council after his death.

#### NOTES

- 1 Henry Mayhew *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) vol. III p. 204-210.
- 2 "A day with an East End Photographer" *Strand Magazine* (1891) p. 458-465.
- 3 According to slip inserted into a copy in Tower Hamlets Local History Library.
- 4 From the Bridge House Committee Papers quoted in exhibition catalogue *To God and the Bridge*, Guildhall Art Gallery (1972).

- 5 Statement to the Arbitration Court, 1877, quoted in Gillian Wagner and Valerie Lloyd's *The Camera and Dr Barnardo* (1974).
- 6 The Post Office *London Directories* 1883-88, Court Section, give his address as 270, Burdett Road, Limehouse. I am indebted to the Secretary of the Royal Photographic Society for details of his membership (1898-1914). The photographs are in the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings, National Photographic Record, boxes 32 and 35. Copies of some of them may be seen in Tower Hamlets Local History Library.
- 7 The Galt collection is in the Museum of London. I am indebted to Oliver Green and Chris Ellmers of the Museum of London for bringing this collection to my attention.
- 8 Sixty-six of the Rev Hanks' lantern slides passed into the possession of his daughter, with notes on his experiences in Whitechapel. They were deposited in Tower Hamlets Local History Library in 1975 by Prebendary Arthur Royall. Some have been published with extracts from the notes in the *East London Record* vol.1 no. 1 (1978).
- 9 Bedford Institute Association *Spitalfields Nippers* (1975).
- 10 David Webb and Alison Carpenter *The Eastern Fringe of the City* (1974).
- 11 *East London Advertiser* February 27, 1915. Photographs and cuttings in Tower Hamlets Local History Library.
- 12 Compare the picture of a youth smashing the window of a Jewish shop with a brick in the *Daily Sketch* October 12, 1936, with the same scene in the *Daily Express* without the brick faked in but other details added.
- 13 *Jewish Chronicle* October 6, November 3, and November 24, 1922. The editor declared "It is manifest that no photographer could have obtained a flashlight of the service without those in authority being made aware of what was on foot by the necessary preparations involved. The same has to be said of the film that was taken of the *Rosh Hashanah* service of the Bow and Bromley Talmud Torah. The excuses and explanations that have been offered in both cases have been of the very weakest and most transparent description. And we are bound to say that there seems to be much practical ground for the suggestion that has been ventured that the Beth Din should investigate what occurred at these places of worship".
- 14 Arts Council's catalogue *The Real Thing, an anthology of British Photographs 1840-1950* (1975) p33.
- 15 An interview with William Whiffin's daughter, Gladys, was published in Geoff Richman *Fly a Flag for Poplar* (1975) pp. 58-61. She recalled that "the whole of the street always knew each other but Dad would have known quite a few because he went round to occasions. More people knew him than he knew them ... they'd say 'I've got one of your Dad's photos' ... I often think he didn't get enough recognition: he was too modest and didn't like the limelight".

### Further Reading

Two recent books contain a large number of old photographs of Tower Hamlets:  
 William Fishman *The Streets of East London* (Duckworth, 1979).  
*Tower Hamlets in Photographs 1914-1939* (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 1980).

### Appendix

Major collections of photographs of Tower Hamlets before 1939:  
 British Museum, (Department of Prints and Drawings), Bloomsbury, London WC1.

H T Malby's photographs of East End slum life, 1899, 1904 for the National Photographic Record.

Dr Barnardo's (Photographic Department), The Village, Barkingside, Essex.

Homes and children c1870 onwards.

Greater London Record Office, (Photograph Library), County Hall, London SE 1.

Especially streets and buildings, schools, Whiffin negatives.

Guildhall Library, (Department of Prints and Drawings), Aldermanbury, London EC2

General collection.

John Topham Picture Library, Edells, Markbeach, Cowden near Edenbridge, Kent.

Stepney c1928-1934.

Museum of London, (Photographic Department), 150 London Wall, London EC 2.

Especially Port of London Authority collection and Galt collection.

Humphrey Spender and Cyril Arapoff photos.

National Monuments Record, (Photograph Library), 23, Savile Row, London W 1.

Streets and buildings.

Tower Hamlets Local History Library, Central Library, Bancroft Road, London E 1.

Large general collection including copies of photographs in other collections.

In addition, the longer established commercial photograph agencies such as Associated Press, Central Press, Daily Herald Picture Library (deposited in the National Portrait Gallery), Fox, Keystone, and the Radio Times Hulton Picture Library contain many photographs of events, personalities and street scenes relating to East London.

## 17th CENTURY LIFESTYLE: Two probate inventories

from Hackney and Shoreditch By Jean Wait

The following inventories offer clues to the life-style of our seventeenth century ancestors, not only by listing the goods they owned when they died, but how their houses were arranged, what sort of rooms they lived in and what their wealth consisted of. They are typical inventories of their time. (See note).

The first lists the goods of Joseph Brooke of Shoreditch, who was buried on September 22, 1667. The southern part of Shoreditch was already a suburb of London though outside the city limits. We can see that Brooke's house was small but cosy and that he was moderately well off. His occupation is not known. No tools or stock in trade are listed, though the armour mentioned in the last section suggests that he had been a soldier, perhaps during the Civil War. His house evidently consisted of two rooms downstairs, two upstairs and a garret. It looks as though the main living room was on the first floor (the "room over the kitching"). This arrangement was to become common in town houses in the eighteenth century.

An inventory of all the goods Chattels and debts of Joseph Brooke late of the Parrysh of St Leonards Shoreditch in the County of Middlesex, deceased; appraised by us whose names are hereunder written, the first day of October in the year of our Lord 1667; John Daner, Lancelott Girlington, as followeth:

	£	s.	d.
<b>In the Kitching</b>			
Imprimis a smale iron grate, a paire of Andirons, a paire of tongs, fireshovell & forke, five smale spitts & a pulley Jack, all att	0	16	6
Item in Pewter threescore & eight pounds att 9d per pound valued att	2	11	0
Item one smale Iron dripping pann, eight peeces of Tinn, two old warming panns, six smale brasse Candlesticks, one smale brass mortar and pestle, valued att	0	11	0

Item One old settlebed, a flock bedd & boulder, one old Rugg, two old blancketts, one old Cupboard, one old table, foure old Joyned stooles, three old Chaires with other Lumber	0	17	6
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Item three smale brasse Kettles, one brasse skillet, two smale Iron potts att	0	7	0
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### In the Low Roome next the feilds

Item three old Leather Chaires, two old Tables, one forme & a paire of old fire Irons att	0	6	8
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### In the Roome over the Kitching

Item Nyne Leather Chaires, six low Chaires, one drawing Table, one old striped Carpett, six smale Pictures & one old Chest valued att	1	8	0
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### In the Chamber one paire of Staires forwards

Item one old bedstead, Matt & Coard, one feather bedd and boulder, two pillows, two old ruggs, two old blancketts, old Curtains and vallance of Perpetuana, three old Chaires, two smale chests, one old desque, a paire of Creepers, fireshovell & Tongs att	2	10	0
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Item a Parcell of old books	1	0	0
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Item foure paire of old sheets, three Table Cloaths, two doozen of old naptkins, six old Towells valued att	1	10	0
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Item the deceased his wearing apparrell wollen & linnen, one old Musqket, one old halebert, a sword & a headpeece of him all valued att	2	10	0
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### In the Garrett

Item one Trundle beddsteed, matt & Coard, one flock-bedd & boulder, one Rugg and two blancketts valued att	0	12	0
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Item In Ready Money	0	15	4
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(Ms 9898/2)	£	16	0	0
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Unlike Joseph Brooke, Katherine Barnes, whose goods were appraised in July 1663, was a countrywoman and a very prosperous one. We know from the parish register that she was a widow from Clapton, a rural village beyond Hackney, who was buried on June 22, 1663, and her inventory shows that her Clapton farmhouse was comfortable and well-furnished. It consisted of three rooms downstairs and two up. The kitchen may have been attached to the back or side, and had no room above it. Joseph Brooke's "low room next the field" was probably similarly attached. Katherine's "Milkhouse" may have been another 'penthouse', but it could have been a separate building.

The bed in the parlour was usual at this time in country houses. The "chambers", or upstairs rooms, were originally used for storage only. Even when they were taken over for sleeping, the best bed normally remained downstairs in the parlour.

The amount of ready money left by Katherine Barnes is surprisingly high. Her clothes would only account for a few pounds out of the £160.

An inventory of the goods, chattles and Debts of Katherine Barnes late of Hackney in the county of Middlesex, deceased, made & appraised by Edward Holford and Robert Nabor this eleventh day of July 1663.

	£	s.	d.
<b>In the Hall</b>			
Imprimis one payre of fire irons, two paire of Andirons, one paire of tongs, 4 chayres, 3 stooles, two tables, one presse and one little cupbord.	1	10	0
<b>In the Parlour</b>			
Item one standing Bedstead with furniture	6	0	0
Item two Carpetts, six Cushions, one chest of drawers, one court cupbord, one chest, one Table, tenne chaires and one box	3	15	0

Item in the Kitchin seventeen Kettles, a brasse pot, a Skimmer, a chafeing dish, a warming panne and other Lumber	6	0	0
Item in the milkehouse one lead and some other things	2	0	0
Item severall peices of pewter	5	0	0
Item in the Chamber over the Parlour one standing Bedstead with furniture, seven chaires and one chest	3	0	0
Item severall parcellis of Linnen	4	0	0
Item severall peices of plate	10	0	0
Item in the Chamber over the Hall one standing bedstead with furniture, seven chaires, one paire of creepers and other Lumber	2	15	0
Item in the Yard sixteen Cowes and a Bull	68	0	0
Item two horses	8	0	0
Item two hogges	2	1	0
Item in the field one peice of wheat	10	0	0
Item the Dung, Faggots, hey and other Lumber	3	0	0
Item her wearing apparrell and ready money	160	0	0
	£ 295	1	0

(Ms 9174/3)

## GLOSSARY

- Andirons, creepers:** metal supports which stood in the fireplace to hold the burning logs. Creepers were small andirons.
- Carpet:** by this date, the carpet would have been a covering for the floor rather than the table.
- Chafing dish:** a vessel holding burning charcoal on which dishes could be kept hot.
- Court cupboard:** a moveable cupboard for displaying plate.
- Drawing (table):** extending.
- Fire irons:** poker, tongs etc.
- Flock bed:** Mattress made from woollen waste.
- Furniture (of a bed):** bedclothes, and bed-curtains.
- Halebert:** halberd, a type of battleaxe.
- Headpiece:** Helmet.
- Jack:** mechanism for turning the spit in roasting meat.
- Joined (stools):** made by proper joiner's methods, not just hammered together.
- Kettles:** large cooking pots.
- Lead:** a leaden milk-pan.
- Lumber:** odds and ends.
- Mat and cord:** the mattress and the cord which tied it to the bed.
- One pair of stairs forward:** first floor front.
- Perpetuana:** a durable woollen fabric.
- Piece of (wheat):** a plot or patch of land.
- Press:** a large cupboard with shelves.
- Settlebed:** a settle (wooden bench with back and arms) which could also be used as a bed.
- Skillet:** saucepan.
- Trundle bedstead,**
- Standing bedstead:** a trundle or truckle bed was low and fitted with castors, so that it could be kept under the high "standing bedstead" when not in use.

## NOTE:

It was customary at that period for an inventory to be made of the deceased person's goods when a will was to be proved, or letters of administration to be granted for someone who did not leave a will. These inventories were produced at the probate court and filed with the court's records. Probate was a function of church courts; these were numerous and there were eight which had jurisdiction in London and Middlesex. The inventories above both come from the Department of Manuscripts, Guildhall Library. I am grateful to the Keeper and his staff for their help.

## ACHIEVERS IN THE GHETTO by Irving Osborne

*In 1900 a reporter for the Windsor Magazine figuratively threw up his hands in horror at the prospect of trying to educate the Jewish immigrant children of the East End — "ignorant of their own names, poverty-stricken, scarcely robust and so accustomed to ill-usage in the lands of their birth that they cannot at first understand kindness". The very idea of "training them to adopt English methods of thought and life, and freeing them from superstition, while preserving and cultivating religious beliefs, is (a task) of such magnitude that neither masters" nor anybody else concerned "can for one moment cease from their labours".*

*Jewish parents were so conscious of the importance of education that Jewish schools like the one at Stepney Green (a group of whose pupils appear in the photograph below, taken about 1910) were practically mobbed every year on the days when they admitted new pupils.*



*With a grant from the University's Central Research Fund Irving Osborne is currently researching at the University of London Institute of Education in the education of Jewish immigrants' children in Tower Hamlets between 1870 and 1914 and in particular, of a group of some 1,600 children whose names appear in the lists of Junior County awards for places at secondary grammar schools made by the former London County Council Education Committee between 1893 and 1914. This is an abridged account of some of his findings so far. If any readers have personal reminiscences or information which could help in this research, Mr Osborne would be grateful if they could contact him through the East London Record.*

TOWER Hamlets at the turn of the century had among its 90 elementary schools some which were totally Jewish, like the Jews' Free School and Stepney Jewish. Others had few, if any, Jewish pupils. Some, notably Malmesbury Road, Bow and Wood Close, Bethnal Green, became so "saturated" with Jewish pupils that they had to apply to the London County Council Education Committee to become "Jewish Schools" to avoid disruption on Jewish High Holydays or early Sabbaths in midwinter when their attendance records were seriously decimated. Many head teachers complained bitterly in their log-books about the low attendance figures and some refer to Jewish absences as being the cause. Unwittingly, these worried and conscientious heads have assisted the present-day investigator by leaving this valuable evidence and data.<sup>1</sup>

There appear to be varying degrees of Jewish saturation over the years in many schools. Those records which are sufficiently complete illustrate this. For example, Mowlem Street Boys' School, Bethnal Green, opened in 1887 and had no Jewish references for about a decade. While Christian Street Girls' School, off Commercial Road, opened in 1901, and met with "great difficulty" due "almost entirely" to Jewish children, many of whom were "unable to speak English and understand when spoken to". This relates closely with the phases of Jewish immigration into England — or into Bethnal Green and the Commercial Road area at least — at these times.

It is interesting to compare the varying attitudes of the school heads. At Malmesbury Road the school opened on 11th May, 1885 with Mr Samuel J Cross as head teacher. He came from Wales and had had little contact with Jewish people. On 20th May, he records in his log that the "Jews' Whitsun Holiday commenced last night, consequently... whole of them — about 12 — absent today". He was obviously referring to Shavuot<sup>2</sup>. He seems to have been a good, well-meaning Christian gentleman who showed concern about all his pupils, Jewish or otherwise. Later, he appears to have learned the correct names for Jewish Holydays. On 9th October, 1905 he refers to "Yom Kippur".

In 1892, he unsuccessfully applied to the LCC for his school to become recognised as a "Jewish School". Scholarship examinations were usually held on Saturdays, and he, like many other heads, had to make arrangements for Jewish children to sit on another day, usually Monday. The school progressed from an ordinary elementary school to become recognised as a "Higher Grade" school in 1899 and as a "Higher Elementary" in 1906. In 1913 it became a Central School with consequent benefit to the prospects of its pupils. Central Schools offered able pupils entry into courses leading to

clerical and skilled occupations, also to grammar schools and the professions.

Some head teachers could be quite amusing in their choice of words. On 6th June, 1906, the head of Dempsey Street Girls' School, Stepney, says: "Pentecost answerable for the loss of 346 attendances last week". The annual report of Dempsey Street School for 1912 refers to the necessity to "train a large number of foreign girls to use, with fair facility, the language of the country in which they live". It also refers to the school "passing through a period of transition. Until comparatively recently the great majority of the children who attended were of English parentage ... Now there is a large foreign element in the school, and it has consequently become necessary to devote considerably more attention to the teaching of English. Many children enter the school ignorant of English". Perhaps teachers in multi-ethnic schools and Remedial Departments today will be familiar with these words. It is interesting to see the recommendation for remedial work in order to combat linguistic difficulties made as far back as 1912.

Many Admissions Registers record children arriving from Russia with little or no English. Sometimes an impatient teacher would mistake linguistic strangeness and culture-shock for lack of intelligence. Sometimes worried or frustrated teachers would condemn their Jewish children out of hand. The head of Dempsey Street Girls' School reports on September 9, 1904, that the nurse examined the children's heads for vermin. Because of the "Black Fast" the nurse "would have to return next day to examine the Jewesses — the great offenders".

Out of some 2,400 children who gained Technical Education Board and LCC awards at 11-plus in Tower Hamlets schools between 1893 and 1914, some 1,060 seem to have been Jewish, many probably the children of East European immigrants.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these Jewish children would not have gone to secondary education. Many award winners had been at non-Jewish schools where they had to overcome difficulties in trying, if not hostile, circumstances. How is it that those who gained awards did so despite these difficulties? What provision was there for such children to succeed? How did the children, their communities, schools and education authorities react or cope with the problem? What was different in the case of the successful children which allowed them to succeed? These and other questions will be posed — and, it is hoped, answered — during the course of this study.

## NOTES

- (1) See, for example, the log book of Malmesbury Road Boys' School for 29th September 1886, and 17th November 1890: Vol. 1885-1896, in the Greater London Record Office, County Hall.
- (2) Pentecost.
- (3) Chaim Bermant, *Point of arrival, a study of London's East End*. Eyre Methuen. 1975. p 202. Lawson, J. and Silver, H.: *A Social History of Education in England*, London. Methuen. 1973. p.376.



Looming up on a dark winter morning — the clock on East India Dock Gate, Poplar, says 20 minutes to 5 o'clock — this is not a GHOST TRAM but the real solid No 65, Workmen's Car, on its way from East Ham to Limehouse and beyond. It has just passed Poplar Hospital and J Lyons and Co teashop, left (courtesy Central Press Photos Ltd.)

## A POPLAR CHILDHOOD by Lillian Hine

THERE were eleven children altogether in our family the Griffiths: ten girls and one boy. John — or Jack, as we always called him — was the eldest, which was rather hard on him as he was the one that always had to look after the rest of us when Mum was busy. Then came Clara, Florence, Charlotte, Lillian (me), Alice, Rose, Lucy, Gladys (Bubbles), Eileen and Kathy. We lived in St. Leonard's Avenue, a little turning off St. Leonard's Road, at number thirteen — a lucky number for us because it coincided with the number in our family group, eleven children and Mum and Dad.

The house we lived in was very small. It had three bedrooms upstairs, three rooms downstairs, a scullery and a tiny garden. In the biggest bedroom Mum had two large beds for the older girls who slept three to a bed. The younger girls slept in the second biggest bedroom, leaving the tiny third bedroom at the back of the house for Jack.

The turning we lived in was very narrow and — quite conveniently for those times — had a pawnshop on one corner and a pub on the other. Mum got on well with the Irish families in the neighbourhood. Many had even more children than her, and the wives often had to earn money by scrubbing ships' decks in the nearby East India docks, a punishing way to feed a family. One family who lived opposite us had thirteen children. Mum used to make huge bread puddings and give them to the kids, who used to sit in the kerb outside their house, looking filthy and unhappy.

Perhaps because of her own large brood, Mum was always sympathetic to other people's problems. She was on constant call for confinements and would think nothing of looking after other children if their parents were in trouble. One Irishman was taken away regularly to dry out after attacks of *delirium tremens* — the DTs we called it. Mum would mind his children while his wife scrubbed decks in the docks until her man was fit for work again.

Our youngest sister Kathy was taken into the family by Mum when she was three years old. Her parents were hard drinkers and never had the money to feed her properly. When they were drunk they would often ill-treat her. They died from too much drink eventually, and Mum — being the angel she was — decided to look after her. We never regarded Kathy as anything else but our sister.

Work was a constant source of worry to many families in those days. If you were out of work you could look to no one for help except the pawnbroker. If anyone was desperate enough to seek State aid, they received a visit from "The Men" (means-test investigators from the Welfare Board), who would make an inventory of all your possessions and suggest you sold the lot before bothering them again. Every Monday morning the pawnshop

at the corner of the street was filled with people bartering for a few coppers to get them through another week. Many of those coppers went over the bar at the pub opposite for a pint glass, in an effort to forget their poverty. When the money was spent, the fighting would start. All children would run and hide as the drunks weaved their way down the street, shouting, singing and cursing each other and the world at large. But shouting was never enough to relieve the bitterness they felt at a world that offered them no hope of self-respect or even a little happiness. Fighting was the only way the men — and sometimes the women — could assert themselves. There were no rules, only brutality.

Fortunately our family was a happy one. Mum and Dad were proud and independent. They were afraid of no one. Mum especially could change dramatically to a wrathful spitfire if she was offended, as I knew to my cost. But they were wonderful to us. I still do not know how they managed. My dad worked for one of the tram companies, working the points in the road. He started work regularly every morning at four o'clock, rain or shine. In those days if you didn't work, you didn't get paid, so Dad tried never to miss a day even when he was ill. He couldn't let his family starve. Despite everything he was always merry and bright, and loved to entertain us and his friends by playing a very small concertina. He used to play for hours, it was lovely.

#### A Penny in Your Pocket

Every Friday when Dad came home with his pay we would all line up for our pocket money, a penny. This was a lot of money in those days, and we made it last the week, through to the next Friday. You could buy a large bag of boiled sweets for a farthing. When Mum's birthday was due, we would all save our pennies to buy her a nice bunch of lavender. The flower sellers would come round once a week shouting out "who will buy my sweet lavender, 16 branches for 1 penny". Mum always used the lavender to put on her linen in the "chesterdraws" as they were called. It made it smell lovely and fresh.

We were so poor sometimes, when Dad couldn't work owing to illness. He used to suffer from a very bad back which Mum always blamed on his younger days. Before he worked on the trams, he worked on the railway, carrying large sacks of coal on his back in all weathers. It nearly killed him, but he had no choice, as nobody could afford to be on the breadline. But even when Dad was ill we never starved and never went without a meal, thanks to my wonderful parents.

With so many people in one house, Mum had to work to a strict routine every day. Our kitchener, a big kitchen range, was always going day and night as this was the only means of keeping us warm. There were no gas ovens then or electricity. The hob always had a kettle on the boil, and in the winter months a big iron saucepan would keep it company, forever boiling away with soups and stews. Everthing went into the pot — carrots, onions, turnips, lentils, haricot beans, celery, pearl barley, with a big marrow bone chopped — very nourishing. It was always kept on top of the kitchener to keep it hot and the smell of cooking when you came in from the bitter cold was wonderful. In the oven on the side would be bread pudding, batter pudding, cakes or tarts, or baked potatoes. Mum made her own jams, rhubarb mostly, as it was cheaper.

A treat we had on a Friday night was to help Dad finish his evening meal. He always had fish, usually haddock, and we used to wait our turn to wipe the buttery juices from his plate with a piece of bread. This may not seem much of a luxury by present-day standards but to us it made a welcome break from Mum's rhubarb jam.

Friday was also Mum's shopping day. At night she would take us with her to Chrisp Street Market. The shops we went to included Anderson's fish shop, Goldstein's coat and dress shop, Coppen's — their lovely meat pies, so cheap, were made with real steak and kidney, Pike's, a cheap butchers which used to auction meat at weekends, especially 'aitch bone and Mum would cut rump steaks off them for Sunday breakfasts, a treat once a year at Christmas and Bramley's, a family affair with three big stalls, noted for their fruit and vegetables.

What a lovely atmosphere it was to go shopping in Chrisp Street them days, everybody knew each other. The coster-mongers were really great people. Often they were owed money, but took pity on anyone in poor circumstances. On the stall where they sold lovely home-made sweets, they must have lost lots of profits because they were always giving them away. The weather never seemed to worry them at all, and it could be very cold with frost and fog. They always had a coke basket alight and us children would stand round the fires warming our hands on the way to school and back.

*"What a lovely atmosphere it was" in Chrisp Street, a postcard view c. 1904*



Oxenham's was a huge haberdashery store, where the staff lived over the shop, and Bach's was noted for cheap eggs and bacon, especially their cracked eggs and on Saturdays great crowds lined up for them. Cloughton's, the rabbit stall, was noted for their lovely English rabbits. You picked them out and they would skin and clean them while you waited. The whole family worked on this stall, parents and children. They always looked so healthy, the women were huge and it fascinated anyone watching them work, they were so quick.

Nasti's were noted for their lovely Italian ice-cream and iced lemon. They lived just round the corner to us, and also sold wood, coke and coal. We children used to line up, taking turns to get our coke and coal weighed, a hundredweight at a time. Mum had an old barrow, which we used to bring it home in.

As for their ice-cream and lemon ice, or Hokey Pokey as it was called, they would come round on a Saturday in the summer with a barrow, shouting,

"Hokey Pokey, a penny a lump,

The more you eat, the more you jump".

We would take a big jug and get it filled up. It was delicious, out of this world, marvellous.

The stalls I have mentioned were both sides of Chrisp Street Market, not like it is now. The big shops were inside the market itself. Fresh herrings were 3d a pound, potatoes 4 lb for 2d. On Saturdays after 6pm all meat joints were 6d a pound off. Shops used to be open until 11 or 12 on Friday and Saturday nights.

In the summer-time there was always a watercart spraying out water around the streets of Poplar to keep them clean and healthy. We could never resist running behind them, being splashed with ice-cold water. It was heavenly on a hot summer day. I'm sad to say that when we got home we were punished for getting our clothes wet, but it was worth it. All the roads were kept in good condition by gangs of Italian men. Us kids used to always watch this procedure. They would tar all the roads and kneel down on knee-pads to smooth out the tar with great big pads. It was all done by hand. We were always told to inhale the lovely smelling tar, as it would be good for your chest, especially if you had whooping-cough. There were so many diseases them days, like scarlet fever, which was very contagious. Antibiotics were not available.

If you caught anything you were taken away in a hospital van to an Isolation Hospital. It was very frightening, as all the neighbours used to crowd round the house to see who was being taken away. Your house was visited by health inspectors, who fumigated the house with disinfectant. All bed linen was taken away for fumigation; it must have been a terrible time for families when this happened.

As Dad was up at four o'clock every morning, rain or shine, he used to wake our neighbours up by banging on the windows with a big long pole. If you were ever late, you would get the sack. You always recognised the workmen in those days by their lunches tied up with red spotted handkerchiefs which contained bread and cheese and a Spanish onion eaten raw.



*Everybody including the baby, top right, in summer togs at Victoria Park Boating Lake, 1900*

Gas mantles were used all over the house, and woe betide anyone who broke them, it was such a job to be without a light. We had to save up our pocket money to replace them, if it was our fault. Lamps were lighted every night in our streets by the lamplighters, as we called them, who had long poles to reach the lamps.

Every morning we would be up at seven o'clock ready to meet Dad when he came home to breakfast at eight. We all did this regularly until we left school, and that is probably why we were so well-known to our neighbours. The sight of ten little girls all dressed alike, crowding around our Dad, could not really be missed.

#### Early to Bed

At night we went to bed at about six o'clock. It seems very early now, but thinking back it must have been heaven to Mum and Dad when we were safely tucked away for the night. After our tea in the evening we used to wash in the scullery. Then Mum would dress our hair ready for school the next morning. We were never allowed to wear our hair loose. It was braided into two plaits and then tied back. Every night we had to tooth-comb and brush our hair. Mum had a constant fear that our beautiful hair might get infested

with nits, very common among schoolchildren then. We had to kneel in front of her and comb out our hair onto a sheet of newspaper in her lap.

Once we were upstairs we never went to sleep right away. Perhaps we would play truant and romp on each others' beds. Sometimes the romp would end in an all-out fight. We certainly were not little angels by a long chalk. If the noise and turmoil got too bad, Dad would march up the stairs with a leather strap. He never used it, but no one would dare disobey him. With such a large brood he had to be strict, but he was very kind to us, and always fair.

To pass the time until we were ready for sleep we would play guessing games or test each other's spelling. Sometimes I would offer to sing. There was one song I still think of today. It was called 'Excelsior'. It was quite a long tune with lots of verses and a chorus. I had only to mention that I was about to sing that song to arouse a back-up chorus of snores and faked sleep noises from my audience. At the time I thought their lack of artistic appreciation was terrible. But my goodness, I now realise how boring it must have been to hear my voice droning on and on, especially as I could never reach the top note.

For washing day the copper was laid overnight ready for the next morning. Mum would get Dad off to work then start boiling up the water. The whites were done first on a scrubbing board, then put in the copper for boiling up. Then they came out for rinsing in Reckitts Blue, and believe me that washing was lovely and white. It was put on the lines to dry in summer and in winter round the guard in front of the fire. But first it used to be put through the wringer until nearly dry — very hard work. Then the colours were done in the same way. Dad's dungarees, which were very greasy, were scrubbed down with soft soap and rinsed, and still my mother got us all off to school after a good breakfast.

In the afternoons the ironing was done. Mum used Goffering irons (pleating irons) for all our pinafores and petticoats. She was a wonderful ironer, so quick, as she worked as a finery ironer for ladies, which was a good job those days. Curtains and lace from all over the house were washed and ironed every four weeks.

Our shoe leather was always wearing out quickly, so Dad mended all our boots in the old garden shed. Mum bought the leather, which was soaked in water to soften it. After our boots were mended, Dad always put Blakeys on top of the leather to save it. They were like steel tips, very slidy and dangerous really, but they saved our parents a lot of money on shoes and boots. It didn't matter how old our clothes were, we never went about ragged. Mum darned all our stockings and patched all our clothes. She was so very proud of all of us and kept us looking neat and tidy as much as possible.

Friday was bath night and we would take turns to light the copper for hot water. Mum got out a long tin bath, which used to hang outside in the shed, and put it in the scullery. All took turns to bathe, emptying the bath at intervals for each other, and filling it up with clean water. Primrose soap was used, not scented, and a scrubber. Our hair was washed with borax to make it shiny and soft, then dried in front of the kitchener and brushed till it shone. Our night attire was always put round the guard to get warm, red flannellette pyjamas which Mum made by hand. Then we all had to wait our turn for our hair to be curled up in strips of rags. We used to hold all the strips and give

them to our Mum one by one as she curled our hair round the strips down to the bottom and up again to be tied at the top. There was usually about ten or twelve curls in all but if our hair was long there would be more. I could sit on my hair, it was so long and it must have been hard work.

#### Weekly Celebrations

Anyway, on Saturday we still had our hair in curlers and Sunday was the big day, up early, washed and all our Sunday clothes put on. This was the custom those days — Sunday best, and always put away for the following Sundays. Our hair was brushed and combed till it shone like silk. We always had a beautiful bow of green ribbon on our hair, to go with our port-wine velvet dresses with white starched pinafores over the top and green socks to match. We felt on top of the world. After breakfast, it was off to Sunday school. We went morning and afternoon, which must have given my parents a much-needed rest. Only on Sundays we were allowed, when we came home, to use our front parlour, as it was called. We used to feel so honoured by this treat, as Mum and Dad worked so hard to keep this one room looking so nice. Also, any visitors, relations or friends who came down to see us were always taken into the front parlour.

*Girls dancing in the open air at Poplar Recreation Ground, 1919 (William Whiffin)*



I suppose in the winter it saved fuel, to use the kitchen every day, as it was warm there from the fire. I can see the kitchen now, the "Home, Sweet Home" brass fender, which shone when the firelight was on it. The kitchener also shone, it was cleaned once a week with emery paper and Blacklead. Our kitchen table, which was made of whitewood, was scrubbed white as milk every day. There were no table cloths them days.

Being part of a large family had its disadvantages as far as we were concerned when we were young — the little household chores we all had to do. I realise now of course, that Mum would have been a complete wreck without help.

Every Saturday morning two girls were deputised to take an old pram out to collect the free disinfectant that was given away then in a big plastic carton. I used to hate this job as it was such a long journey to the collection point in Violet Street and the pram was heavy to push home again. The girls who weren't getting the disinfectant were given other tasks while my mother got the week-end shopping. My brother Jack was put in charge of operations: the cleaning of all the cutlery and the kitchen fender with a whitening stone and emery paper. Jack did the fender himself. The "Home, Sweet Home" on it had to be cleaned with emery paper until it shone so brightly that you could use it as a mirror. It was very hard work.

Times were very hard during the 1914-18 war. Food was rationed and in short supply. Every morning before we went to school we had to take turns in lining up for vegetables. We were only allowed 1 lb at a time to feed our whole family, and if you were late in the queue, you very often didn't get anything at all. It was terrible.

Because we lived near the docks, we were a prime target for bombing. During the air-raids Mum used to take us all down the Blackwall Tunnel, sometimes every night of the week. Dad and Jack would stop behind to make cocoa and sandwiches and then follow us carrying our blankets and bedding. The pavements down Blackwall Tunnel were so narrow those days, we could just about sit one by one, against the walls. It was very frightening, as the big shire horses, which were used them days to carry all the freights, would keep going, backwards and forwards to their destinations. I was terrified of those horses, in case they came onto the pavement. The morning after the raids, we carried on as usual, going home so glad to be alive.

My Dad carried on his work, starting early every morning on the trams, we still went off to school after a good wash and breakfast. If we couldn't make it down Blackwall Tunnel, Mum used to put all of us under the stairs, I don't know why. She was told it was much safer for us, if the house was bombed. We used to shiver with fright every time we heard the enemy aeroplanes coming over, but thank goodness we survived it all. The only really bad damage that was done to us came from the Silvertown explosion, when the blast broke every window in our house. We didn't know then that later on there would be another war, worse than the first one.

#### Gifts from the Midwife

While all this was going on, Mum was still having her babies. Every time a baby was born, my father would be pacing up and down, waiting



*"The streets were always alive with people" — Blackwall Tunnel entrance and the Grand Palace Picture Theatre, postcard view, 1914*

anxiously to see if it was going to be another girl or a boy. Since his female brood eventually outnumbered his son ten to one, I think he was always a bit disappointed.

We all used to wait outside our house, watching for the nurse to arrive with her little black bag. I always thought the baby was in that little bag as every time she came and went we heard the baby crying. We used to be allowed into Mum's room afterwards to see our new baby. I have lovely memories of this: Mum sitting up in bed holding the baby for us to see and the bedroom smelling so nicely of talcum and soap.

In those days the neighbours would help each other in times of crisis. No one ever went without any help, especially when they were having their babies. They would pop into each other's houses, helping the midwife, preparing all the things that were needed, getting the children off to school and feeding them. If the children were absent from school you had to make a good excuse to the School Board Man as he was called then. He was very strict.

When the babies were born what a fuss was made of them. After the christening the baby was taken in to see all the neighbours. It didn't matter how poor you were, the baby always had something silver put into the palm of its hand for luck.

In the school holidays we sometimes used to go on Sunday School outings in a horse and brake to the Essex countryside, usually Loughton.

Sometimes Mum would pack us a lunch, give us a bottle of water or lemonade, and put us in the charge of our big brother Jack who would take us to Blackheath for a whole day. To get there and back we had to walk through Blackwall Tunnel under the Thames. We kept up a constant chorus of songs, shouts and war-whoops just to hear our voices echo through the length of the tunnel.

The streets off East India Dock Road were always alive with people then, how different to today. We had Blackwall Pier as well as Blackwall Tunnel, and Tunnel Gardens, by the Docks. I remember Blackwall Pier so vividly. We children were taken down there as it was so healthy. It was like a sea-side for us, as we never saw the sea until we were grown up. Nearly every day in the summer, as it seems to me now, Jack took us to Poplar Recreation Ground in East India Dock Road. There was always a park-keeper there (usually a woman) to see we behaved ourselves.

#### Hop-picking Holidays

Every year we all went hop-picking in Canterbury for six weeks. This used to be our holiday. Dad used to be the pole-puller, pulling down the hops branches for the people to pick. Mum used to take all the necessary things with her like bedding, curtains, cooking pots, and our clothes. Mum would start cooking our dinner and also heat a big tub of water for all our washing, ourselves included. Our hut looked just like home, the curtains were put up for privacy. The farmers left us bales of hay to be made up for beds on trestles. There were big logs for the fire left every day by the farmer outside each hut. Big fires used to be lighted on iron trestles to hang cooking pots on. We always had blackberry and apple pudding and stew. The meat puddings used to smell lovely, we were always hungry and ate it all up.

We were out in the hop fields at about 5 o'clock in the morning. All the dew was on the hops, and it was very cold, but we got used to it. We had to pick all the hop flowers off the branches and at the end of the day they were weighed, and you got paid by how many bins you picked. We all worked very hard, but it was worth it. We all became very healthy in the lovely Canterbury air. We would finish early in the afternoon and Mum would bring drinks and sandwiches. They always tasted bitter, owing to the hops which would get on our hands. It didn't hurt us, the farmer used to say it was good for you. Then we would all pack up and go home, walking to our huts, where we stayed for the night. Then we would all gather round for a sing-song or play games, then off to bed early and early to rise again.

We always had our weekends free, and used to go for lovely walks round Canterbury. It was such a lovely sight for us children. At the end of six weeks we were brown and healthy, as the weather was always wonderful in September. Being a big family, we earned a nice sum of money, which was always spent on the family — velveteen dresses, pinafores, brown button-up boots and underclothes.

As children we all attended St Frideswide's Church in St Leonard's Road. I was fascinated by the swinging of the incense, as the choir-boys walked around the aisles. The smell of incense was lovely. Poplar Church (All Saints) is a most beautiful church where everyone thought it an honour to be

married. I was one of the lucky ones, and so were all my sisters.

It also used to fascinate us children to go for walks past Poplar Hospital, to see and wave to all the patients on the balconies. They always wore red dressing gowns, the vivid colour could be seen a long way off. The hospital was opposite East India Docks and the patients could watch the boats all day.

Mum was always a good saver. All year, her spare pennies went into a jar, and then as Christmas drew near she would take down the jar and go down to Crisp Street Market to buy pink winceyette material as cheaply as she could. Then she used to cut out and sew by hand all our nightgowns and put them away till Christmas Eve. We would put them on after we had bathed and had our hair washed and curled, all ready for Christmas morning. Freshly scrubbed and dressed in our new nightgowns, we lined up to be given our Christmas stockings. The atmosphere was charged with excitement as we hung up our stockings wondering what Father Christmas would put in them while we slept. It was many years before we realised who Father Christmas really was, but even then the older ones kept quiet, not wishing to spoil the excitement for the younger children. We all kept to the ritual of taking turns to shout our requests for presents up the chimney, hoping that Father Christmas would hear. Eventually, of course, we did get to sleep, but not for long. We were awake again at five o'clock, reaching for the stockings laid out by our beds, now pleasantly full and heavy.

Oh! I can still remember the shivery thrill of thrusting a tiny hand deep into a Christmas stocking, trying to guess by feel what was inside. Usually at the bottom we would find an orange, apples, nuts and sweets. The individual presents could be a rag doll that Mum had made, perhaps a pair of tin scales and there was holly, mistletoe — a host of things that gave us pleasure and delight. Poor Mum and Dad. They must have been up all night getting those eleven stockings ready. And then, at five o'clock in the morning we would all burst into their bedroom, emptying our treasures out in front of them so that they would know what Father Christmas had brought. Yet they always smiled and were pleased to see us.

For Christmas dinner we would always have a chicken or rabbits, as Dad used to rear them in our back garden. Neighbours would buy rabbits from Dad and all the new-laid eggs from the hens were sold and the money put into an old brown tea-pot on our dresser "for rainy days" as Mum used to say. We made all our Christmas decorations, usually paper chains and Chinese lanterns, and always had a Christmas tree in the front parlour. All our relatives would be invited. Dad would play his concertina and everyone would be in a merry mood. I can still remember an instance clearly, on Boxing Day. A man used to come round the houses selling comics from the barrow. My Dad, always kind, bought the lot of him and distributed them to all the kids in the street. They thought it was wonderful. For some it was probably the only present they got that Christmas.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Annie Barnes. **Tough Annie: from suffragette to Stepney councillor.** Stepney Books (c/o 19, Tomlins Grove, E3) 1980 £1.50.

Joe Bloomberg. **Looking Back: a docker's life.** Stepney Books, 1979. £1.00.

Phyllis Barber and others. **"Where's your horns?" people of Spitalfields talk about the evacuation.** Spitalfields Books (192, Hanbury Street, E1) 1979. 75 pence.

THE variety of life and speed of change in Stepney this century ensure that memories of Stepney past provide an endless source of inspiration for writers. Three recent publications by local groups illustrate this. The two latest from Stepney Books maintain their high standard of presentation and show the lives of two people brought up in very different parts of Stepney.

Joe Bloomberg, a docker from Shadwell, puts his side of the numerous disputes with the dock employers after the Second World War. Annie Barnes, introduced to politics by Sylvia Pankhurst and the suffragettes, used her considerable energies in the 1920s and 1930s in the service of the local Labour party, first becoming a councillor in the landslide Labour victory of 1934. Her efforts to improve the terrible conditions of housing and public health in Stepney between the wars are vividly illustrated by stories from the many cases in which she was involved.

Annie's tale of tireless dedication to the interests of the people around her only came into print because of the persistence of Kate Harding and Caroline Gibbs who tape-recorded her memories and prepared the text for publication. Similarly, Spitalfields Books' first publication owes its existence to the work of Barbara Powis in taping the varied experiences of war-time evacuation of six present day residents of Spitalfields. Most are Jewish and recount with typical humour their enforced reception into other people's homes. Two of those who looked after the children became so fond of their new charges that they wanted to adopt them. "She wrote my mum a letter and said you've got fourteen — you won't miss one". Others were not so pleased to receive them. The booklet is not only entertaining, but also gives a rare insight into the extraordinary lives of evacuees. May this attractive publication be the first of many by Spitalfields Books.

Bernard Nurse

Noreen Branson. **Poplarism, 1919-1925. George Lansbury and the councillors' revolt.** Lawrence and Wishart, 1979. £7.50. Paperback £2.95.



NOREEN Branson's book appears at an ideal moment. Many of those who remember the 1920s are still alive, and what the Poplar Borough Council and the Board of Guardians did can be analysed before it becomes a legend of the dim past. What is or was Poplarism? The author does not answer the question with abstract definitions but shows us Poplarism in action. With scholarly accuracy — and more than scholarly clarity — she follows the course George Lansbury and his colleagues took through the thickets of bureaucratic muddle, and a legal system designed to keep the poor in the social sphere to which they "belonged". A new sense of purpose was alive in the Poplar air, despite factory smoke and grime. Working-class people were beginning to think for themselves and reject the conventional platitudes about poverty being their own fault. "In Poplar it is well understood", a Board of Guardians leaflet declared, "that the poor are poor because they are robbed, and are robbed because they are poor" (*Guilty and Proud of It!* 1922).

"Poplarism is an infectious disease" the Minister of Health, Sir William Joynson-Hicks, told the Cabinet, "the infection is already obvious ... in Bermondsey and West Ham". It was infectious, that was the trouble from the point of view of an Establishment which did not want to be constantly reminded that the poor were starving by a Borough Council which had gone to prison to make the point. But Poplarism was not a disease. Everyone who saw the glad faces of the councillors, especially the women, as they were carried off to prison, or heard the cheering and singing nightly outside the walls of Brixton and Holloway could testify to that. So could the government ministers and judges who had to find ways of out-manoeuvring them or at least quiet the public conscience which had been aroused.

"I am quite certain", said Joynson-Hicks, "that any step I take will involve a very serious conflict with the Poplar Board of Guardians, they will be fighting for a principle." And fight they did, till their principles were accepted. It was a long hard struggle and, as Noreen Branson seems to suggest in her last chapter, "In Retrospect", perhaps it is not over yet, while things still seem to work, here and abroad, to "the disadvantage of the underprivileged".

The local historian is bound to hope that the splendid initiative taken in this book will be followed up by other studies. The political and social history of the East End in this century is virtually unknown territory — even George Lansbury is still waiting for a biographer despite the spirited attempt by his son-in-law Raymond Postgate in 1951.

Carolyn Merion

Henry C Wilks. **George Green School 1828-1978. A History.**  
Edward Arnold, 1979. £4.95.

J S Hurt. **Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes 1860-1918.**  
Routledge & Kegan Paul, £6.95.

THE "working classes" in the title of Hurt's book draws attention to the "diversity of practice and belief" that is concealed by the term. He is referring to an age long past, but the distinction is still a valid one today, and it is equally important to bear it in mind whether discussing the effects of the Education Act of 1870, heralding elementary education for all, or that of 1944, establishing secondary education as every child's right. In a sense the two books under review provide further evidence of the distinction, for while both are concerned with the provision of education for the children of working people, their concerns rarely overlap.

Hurt's book deals largely with the problems that the new schools after the 1870 Act presented to the poorer families. These are the families whose children never attended the voluntary schools, and whose income, with the advent of compulsory education, was to be doubly depleted by the loss of their children's earnings and the need to pay school fees. In this context the development of the school medical and welfare services is traced in an interesting and readable manner. Though the book looks at the country as a whole, there are many local references, one, concerning a curate of St George's in-the-East at the turn of the century, being of particular interest. He objected to the provision of school meals "as harmful to the morals of benefactor and recipient alike", (p.147) and thought his parishioners ought to save up for unseen disasters like sickness, despite the fact that they were among the most impoverished in London.

The children attending George Green's School were, for the most part, a far cry from the reluctant captives of the School Board for London. They were children of another working class whose attitudes, aspirations and ambitions for their children were different, but, above all, whose economic position was better. At a time when some of the underfed children in the Board Schools were receiving a frugal meal that cost a penny to prepare (Hurt p.117) we read of the pupils of George Green: "In 1884 temporary arrangements for dinners were made with a reliable local innkeeper at nine pence a time". (Wilks p.41). By this date, of course, schools founded by the generosity of people like George Green, the Blackwall shipbuilder, were devoting their resources almost completely to secondary education as elementary education was being provided by the state. From Wilks' account, it is clear that this school did an excellent job, educating many people who later became prominent in national and local life, John Scurr MP and Helena Roberts being two of the latter.

Wilks' book traces the history of the school (in which he was a teacher for 14 years) from its beginnings on the East India Dock Road to its present location in the Isle of Dogs, where it serves as a comprehensive school and community centre for the area. Histories of individual schools are usually hard going for those who are not past pupils or teachers of the school concerned. Wilks succeeds in making his account interesting and readable for three reasons. First, he has a good knowledge of the history and geography of the areas served by the school. Indeed, his own book, with its informative footnotes and appendices, will be a welcome addition to the small amount that has been written on Poplar and the Isle of Dogs. Secondly, he has an excellent understanding of educational policies, both past and present, and can explain some of ILEA's policies better than the Authority itself. Finally, he is not afraid to put his own strong point of view, which keeps the book alive through the 150 years journey.

Colm Kerrigan

## RECENT LOCAL HISTORY STUDIES OF TOWER HAMLETS AND HACKNEY

### Books and Pamphlets

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|----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Barber, Phyllis and others | "Where's your horns?" People of Spitalfields talk about the evacuation. Spitalfields Books (192 Hanbury Street, E1) 1979. | Metropolitan Police 'H' Division             | 'H' Division commemorative concert: 150th anniversary of the Metropolitan Police. James E James (Liverpool) Ltd., (History of the Division) 1979.  |
| Barnes, Annie              | Tough Annie: from suffragette to Stepney Councillor. Stepney Books (c/o Mrs. Jenny Smith, 19, Tomlins Grove, E3) 1980.    | National Railway Museum                      | North London Railway: a pictorial record. H.M.S.O. 1979.   |
| Barritt, Mary              | The Barritts of Wapping High Street. OO Publications (Mrs Gotman, 16, Garford Street, E 14), 1979.                        | Nurse, Bernard (compiler)                    | Tower Hamlets in Photographs, 1914-1939. London Borough of Tower Hamlets, (Central Library, 277 Bancroft Road, E1) 1980.                           |
| Beer, Reg                  | Matchgirls Strike 1888. National Museum of Labour History, 1979.  | Orens, John R.                               | The mass, the masses, and the music hall: Stewart Headlam's radical Anglicanism. Jubilee Group (c/o St. Matthew's Rectory, Hereford St., E2) 1979. |
| Bloomberg, Joe             | Looking back: a docker's life. Stepney Books (c/o Mrs Jenny Smith, 19 Tomlins Grove, E3) 1979.                            | Ramsay, Edith                                | A Christmas Letter, 1978. ILEA Course Support Unit, 1979. (Memories of Stepney since the 1920s).   |
| Branson, Noreen            | Poplarism. Lawrence and Wishart, 1979.  | Rubenstein, Helen and Helliwell, Christopher | Brownwood Ward, a study in housing. Polytechnic of North London.   |
| Burton, Neil               | The Geffrye Almshouses. Geffrye Museum, 1979.   | Society of Genealogists' Project Group       | St Anne, Limehouse, Middlesex: monumental inscriptions. Society of Genealogists, 1978.   |
| Cooke, Gordon              | William Larkins: etchings of the East End in the 1920's and other scenes. Robin Garton Gallery, 1979.                     | Spitalfields Travelling Exhibition Group     | The story of Spitalfields exhibition: catalogue. ILEA Centre for Learning Resources, 1979.   |
| Fishman, William           | The streets of East London. Duckworth, 1979.  | Thorne, Robert                               | Liverpool Street Station. Academy Editions, 1979.  |
| Manifold, Clare            | Feminist history in the East End: a walk. Rights of Woman, (374, Grays Inn Road, WC1) 1979.                               | Tower Hamlets, London Borough of             | Fournier Street outstanding conservation area. LBTH, 1979.   |
| Marcan, Peter              | An East End Directory. Peter Marcan (31 Rowcliff Road, High Wycombe, Bucks.) 1979.  | Wilks, Henry                                 | George Green's School, 1828-1978: a history. Arnold, 1979.   |
|                            |   | Wolveridge, Jim                              | He don't know 'A' from a bull's foot: Cockney slang of the thirties. Basement Writers, (178, Whitechapel Road, E1). 1978.                          |