

EAST LONDON HISTORY SOCIETY

WINTER NEWSLETTER : JANUARY 1985

PROGRAMME

On the 23rd January 1985, we have a visit from the Chief Engineer of the C.L.C. Mr.R.W.Horner played a considerable part in the construction of the new Thames Barrier on which he will give an illustrated talk. Dr.John Archer, already known to members, will be coming on the 21st February to talk on Sam Elsbury, an East London Jewish tailor who played an interesting part in the area. We have had talks on a number of religious institutions in East London and Mr.French will be talking on local Methodism on the 20th March. There will be a walk along some of the back waterways of Bow on the 30th March, meeting outside Bromley-by-Bow Station at 2.30 p.m. Dr.Carr, of the North East London Polytechnic, will be talking to us on the Industrial Archaeology of London's Docklands on the 24th April. These talks will all be at Queen Mary College. On the 9th May, we will be having our annual Hackney meeting at the Rose Lipman Library, De Beauvoir Road. Jon Newman will give us an insight into 19th Century Photography in Hackney, and this will be followed on the 20th June by a walk through Hackney led by Miss J.Wait, the Archivist, meeting outside the Geffrye Museum at 6.30 p.m.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Our friends at the West Essex Archaeological Group have an interesting evening on the 15th April 1985 when Dr.John Alexander will give his Presidential address. This will take the form of an illustrated lecture on activities in the area. It will be at Harrow Green Library, Cathall Road, E.11. They will also be having an illustrated lecture on "Recent work at the Tower of London" by Elizabeth Eames on the 13th May 1985, and an illustrated talk by Mike Stone on "Current local Excavations" on the 10th June 1985. These talks will all be at Harrow Green Library, at 7.45 p.m. and members of the E.L.H.S. are cordially invited.

In January (until the 26th) there will be an Exhibition of archive photographs to contemporary work entitled "Staying on - an historical survey of immigrant communities in London", and until January until the 19th, an exhibition of photographs on the black immigrant experience in Birmingham. These will be at "Photographers" (5/8 Great Newport St. WC2) Tues/Sat.11.00-7.00.

The Kingsley Hall has been refurbished and there will be a re-opening week of events at the end of January 1985.

1985 is Huguenot Heritage Year and there will be a Conference held by the Huguenot Society of London on the 24th & 25th September. The Museum of London Huguenot Exhibition will open in May 1985.

The Jewish Historical Society are having a lecture by David Feldman on "London's Jewish East End, 1880-1920" at Florence Michael's Hall, St.John's Wood Synagogue, Grove End Road, London NW8. Apply for ticket to Jewish Historical Society of England at University College, Gower St. W.1.

The Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society are giving a lecture on "A history of tunnelling" on the 20th February 1985 by D.G.Jobling. He will talk on Brunel's Thames Tunnel to the underground network. This will be at the Lecture Theatre, City and St London College, Bunhill Row, EC1. at 6:30 p.m. Further details 692 8512.

THE WOOLWICH STATION MUSEUM

The North Woolwich Station building has been painstakingly restored and now houses a fascinating collection of photographs, models, documents and relics of the Great Eastern Railway. It is open every day Mon-Sat 10.00-17.00, Sundays 1400-1700. Trains

from Camden Road to North Woolwich BR Service, Buses 101 from Wanstead and East Ham, 69 from Chingford, Walthamstow, Leyton & Stratford, 50 from Forest Gate & Plaistow. Situated on the A117 North Circular Road next to free ferry.

3. MUSEUM IN DOCKLANDS PROJECT : MUSEUM OF LONDON

The following meetings will be held at 5.30 p.m. in Room C, Education Department, Museum of London, London Wall, E.C.2.-

- Wed. 6 Feb. "A Personal Photographic Record of London's Docks in the 1950's and 60's" - Colin Sorensen
- Wed. 6 Mar. "London's Fishing Industry" - Chris Ellmers
- Wed. 3 Apr. "The Royal Victoria Dock" - Alex Warner
- Wed. 1 May. "Thames Sailing Barges" - David Wood (Spiritsail Research)
- Wed. 5 Jun. "The Historical Development of the London Docks, Wapping" - Edward Sargent (L.D.D.C.)
- Wed. 3 July. "Cargo handling in London's Docks" - George Adams.
- Wed. 7 Aug. "Poplar & Blackwall" - Tom Stothard.
- Wed. 4 Sept. A visit to the PLA Library & Archives/Museum at the West India Docks. As well as the Library and embryonic museum displays there will be one or two historic films. Anyone wishing to join this visit should contact Chris Ellmer, Museum in Docklands Project (600-3699 or 538-0209)

4. EAST END BOOK BOOM

I have been astonished in recent months by the large number of books published about East London, especially those produced by small publishers. Jim Connor, who gave a talk at the September meeting, set up his own publishing company - Connor and Butler, who have produced three excellent books. "Stepney's own Railway" - a history of the London & Blackwell Railway (£2.95), "Palaces of the Poor" (£1.25) deals with philanthropic housing e.g. Burdett-Coutts and Waterlow, "The Red Cliffs of Stepney" - a history of the East End Dwellings Organisation (£1.25). Newham Parents Centre have produced a third local history "A West Ham Life - an autobiography" being a fascinating account of early life around Abbey Lane, West Ham, and working in the City during World War II when he rescued the Town Clerk's wig and gown from the Guildhall fire.

I have edited for Tower Hamlets Arts Project a book about memories of the first day of the blitz "Black Saturday" which coincides with two musical plays produced by Inner City Theatre Company which is currently touring around London.

All books are available from THAP Books Ltd., 178 Whitechapel Road, London E.1. (Tel : 247 0216)

Howard Bloch

5. COACH TRIP : Saturday, May 11th 1985

This will be to Charing, Wye and Chilham in Kent.

Charing is a delightful village, with a long village street lined with old houses. There is a fine church, and next to it the remains of a palace which belonged to the Archbishop of Canterbury but has been turned into a farm and two cottages. We shall go here in the morning and then on to Wye for lunch and a look round.

Wye is a little bigger, more a small town, and also has a fine church and a good church. There are cafes and pubs where you can get lunch and bring a picnic. Then we shall go on to Chilham, where we shall look round Chilham Castle Gardens. These are very attractive and were originally laid out by Tradescant, and later Capability Brown. There will be a demonstration of falconry during the afternoon. The village of Chilham is also attractive.

The Coach ticket will be £3.60, pick-up Mile End opposite the station, 9.30 a.m. Entrance to the gardens is £1.40 adults, 70p children. There is an extra charge to look round the Norman Keep, 50p adults, 25p children.

Please send bookings (coach fare only) to Miss A. Sansom, 18 Hawkdens, London E4 7PF on the form at the end. Entrance fees to the gardens will be collected on the coach.

Tea will be arranged at Chilham Castle.

THE CONSERVATION ADVISORY GROUP

This is a sort of sub-sub-committee of Tower Hamlets Council. I sit on it as a representative of the East London History Society - Carolyn Merion is also a member, and there are people from bodies like the Victorian Society and the Georgian Group, as well as council Officers. It meets once a month in the Poplar Town Hall, and gives advice on applications for developments in Conservation Areas, or which affect listed buildings elsewhere.

In recent meetings, we have heard proposals to demolish some of the buildings on the Royal Mint Site, and the remains of the mediaeval Abbey of St. Mary Graces which were uncovered during a trial archaeological dig there - about proposed extensions to Bethnal Green Museum - new railings for Bow churchyard - a new office block in Spitalfields adjoining St. Botolph's Hall - and many smaller schemes for extensions of existing houses or new buildings.

Sometimes we are able to influence the schemes, and get a more acceptable one, as in the case of the Spitalfields Office block, which is now to be lower, and have a mirror glass casing so as to appear less massive. St. Botolph's Hall, which they had been given permission to demolish, is now to be retained and repaired.

However, we did not succeed in saving the women's Hostel in Providence Row, Spitalfields, adjoining the convent. This was not listed, but was a striking Victorian building. However, it was designed with such large rooms and high ceilings, that it was not suitable for conversion when the nuns wanted to modernise the Hostel and provide single rooms and flatlets.

The Royal Mint site was one of the most interesting to come before us. The main building of the Mint is to be preserved, and also the gatehouses. However, the developers want to demolish two other buildings of interest - the Seamen's Registry, which was part of the original design, and the Mechanics's workshop, which is later but interesting. There seems to be some hope that these might be saved. There was also the archaeological interest - the Cistercian Abbey of St. Mary Graces was once one of the most important in the country and substantial remains were uncovered in a trial dig. There was also a Black Death cemetery on the site. We would like to see the Abbey remains preserved and uncovered but what exactly will happen is still uncertain.

Ann Sansom.

THE IMPRISONMENT OF THE POPLAR COUNCILLORS : 1921

From the "East London Observer" Saturday, Sept. 17th 1921)

"The Mayor, Councillor J.J. Cahill J.P., reported to an extraordinary meeting of Stepney Borough Council "the distressing circumstances of his visit to Brixton Prison on Monday morning..... (cause) his fellow-Mayor and colleagues of Poplar..... were being treated like ordinary criminals..... " He determined to do what he could to help them, and knowing Mr. W.F. Laing, J.P., the estate agent Whitechapel, who was Chairman of the Mitcham Urban Council, and for his Vice-Chairman a Visiting Justice of Brixton Prison, he sought the aid of that gentleman, who himself visited (sic) the prison on Wednesday, and they both went again on Wednesday evening...

They saw the Governor, and were most courteously received. The office who had been so insulting on the Monday had been suspended from gate duty. The cell doors had been opened and the prisoners could visit each other whenever they liked, wear their own clothes, and so on. The Mayor could not drink the sloppy tea and had been put on a hot milk diet..... They had seen Mr. Lansbury also, he had his badge on, C 25, and seemed to be very proud of it. (Mr. Lansbury urged all London Borough Councils to support the Poplar Councillors being placed in the First Division while in prison). This would enable them to have writing materials and, while detained, Mr. Lansbury could write up his autobiography."

D. Behr.

8. COURTAULD'S SILK FACTORY

While researching the local history of Braintree, Essex, I found a link with East London which will be of interest to members.

George Courtauld, a great grandson of a French Protestant Huguenot refugee, became an apprentice to a Spitalfield silk throwster in the 18th century. In time George became a hard working manager for a Spitalfields business and set up, on their behalf, a water-powered silk mill, in the year 1799, at Pebmarsh which is some 12 miles from Braintree. Ten years later he took upon himself the ownership, in Braintree, of an old flour mill and converted it to the production of silk. He obtained the raw silk from China and Bengal, via the London Docks, and processed it into black crepe, upon which the family fortune was made in later years.

The 1851 Census gives a glimpse of the small communities that clustered around the silk industry of Braintree. In Martins Yard, for example, within a group of small cottages of 14 households there were 19 silk workers. One of these was Thomas Owen, formerly of Spitalfields, a 61 year old hand-loom weaver. His wife was a silk-winder with the same employer.

The nearby town of Bocking saw, in 1859, the commencement of Courtauld's new silk factory there-by introducing the factory system into an area that formerly relied upon cottage industry. Having a monopoly of employment in the area, the Courtaulds took advantage of hard times to keep wages low. They also ignored the "Ten-hour Act" 1847, making women and children work a 60-hour week, and took children from London workhouses as cheap labour. In later years, however, they realised that industry would be better served with a workforce that could read and write. Courtaulds endowed the town with schools and reading rooms, and also provided houses and a hospital.

Today the Courtauld factory is empty. Man-made fibres made the firm's name known throughout the world but the black crepe of former years was perhaps symbolic of the eventual demise of an interesting industry.

Bob Vickers.

9. THE GRAVE MAURICE

There is right next to Whitechapel Underground, or opposite the London Hospital, a pub with an unusual name, although not outstanding in other ways. It is comfortable inside - a Victorian building, for high-up outside there is engraved "Re-built 1874". It is the "Grave Maurice" named not from a man called Maurice who was very grave or serious, but from a corruption in English of the German word "Graf" prince, possibly because someone in the East End was royalist in sentiment. Not all East Enders were necessarily for Parliament.

Graf Maurice of the Rhine was born in 1620 and at the age of 22 fought as a General against the Roundheads, and for Charles 1st.

After the surrender at Oxford in 1646 both he and his brother Rupert, nephews of Charles I through the marriage of his sister Elizabeth to Frederick Elector Palatine and briefly King of Bohemia, were banished from England by Parliamentary decree, never to return.

Two years later Prince Maurice embarked on a career as a pirate in the English Channel, and then in 1649 set forth with his brother on a voyage of adventure to the New World, sailing to Portugal, the Cape Verde Islands, and the Gambia River in West Africa, where they captured an English ship, the "Friendship". They then set sail for the West Indies, but Maurice was drowned at sea in September 1652 at the age of 32, when three of the ships foundered in a storm.

It's a very cosy, homely pub, well worth a visit. Quiet and peaceful much frequented by the doctors and nurses of the London Hospital. The tape recorded music is not loud and on occasions can include some classical music (on my visit they were playing softly one of Bach's great Brandenburg Concertos; - almost unique for a pub in the whole of London! It's not always so - that is the Manager's taste. Sometimes the taste of his wife or one of the barmaids prevails, and then the music is more popular.

The Manager is most friendly - quite a fan for local history in an amateurish way. He has a collection of maps, and in the small dining room section he has a magnificent round Victorian mahogany table, with matching chairs, which he polishes lovingly every day.

Alan Searle

LOCAL HISTORY

"The main framework of the Survey (Stow's) was based on a perambulation of the several wards of the City.... every church was visited, and all noteworthy monuments carefully described.... He did not scorn to question the oldest inhabitant on the history of a forgotten or nameless grave, or to cross-examine the host and his ostler for the story of Gerard the Giant, and went to great pains to measure the length of the pole and its thickness, to examine the ladder and its size in relation to the pole and the roof; and to look up the "Chronicles" quoted by 'Mine Host' for further verification."

(Stow's Survey 1908 by C.L.Kingsford. P.348)

"If men loved Pimlico, as mothers love children, arbitrarily because it is theirs, Pimlico in a year or two might be fairer than Florence. Some will say that this is mere fantasy. I answer that this is the actual history of mankind. This, as a fact, is how cities grow great. Go back to the darkest roots of civilisation and you will find men knotted round some sacred stone, or encircling some sacred well. People first paid honour to a spot, and afterwards gained glory for it. Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her."

(G.K.Chesterton, "Orthodoxy").

To take the map of a given date and walk through the streets it depicts, and to note the remains of the picturesque and the historic, is a delight which only those who have tried to accomplish it can understand. It makes one love strange routes and strange places. Not only the side-streets, but the backs of houses should receive attention."

(G.L.Gomme - "The story of London Maps". Geog.Journal 1908)

I am painfully aware of my defects as a technical historian, nor can it be expected that this reconstruction of local history, which has been to me the hobby of a very busy life, can have the same appeal to others that it has to myself. I am, however, not without hope that some few of the many thousands of dwellers in the vast wilderness of poor streets,

which in its time has looked on so many stirring scenes of action and adventure, may find in this attempt to make the past live, something that will awaken in them a sense that they are citizens of no mean city, and so give new breadth and depth and colour to their lives"
(H.Llewellyn Smith)

"The regard that the majority of men and women have for a particular locality is largely due to their personal association with it; by birth, by living there, or by having been drawn thither in the course of their daily employment.

Among children there is shown a remarkable curiosity concerning the history of their own neighbourhood. With their own eyes and ears they learn for themselves a good deal of the current events, and with a little play of the imagination, retain their impressions which are subject to distortion.

In after years they recall and relate them. They are the carriers of tradition, the unravelment of which lays open the core of history."

(Sidney Maddocks)

"Living and working in Stepney for well over half a century, my interest has been aroused in its local history, its people, and its many problems arising from their living and working together in a much-congested, multi-racial, riverside area which borders on the City of London. Its past distinguished history provides a source of inspiration, stimulation, and interest to the rising generation, a potent force with which we might break down the apathy in civic pride and social responsibility which, at times, appears to overtake the area. To this enlightened end of stimulating social significance and civic purpose, our studies (as teachers) in the local history of the Borough, and its neighbouring area, might be usefully and profitably turned."

(C.Truman)

5. A STRIKING SUCCESS : BRYANT & MAY TRAVELLING EXHIBITION.

One of the best known names in the match industry is undoubtedly Bryant and May, who first made safety matches in 1861 from their factory at Fairfield Road, Bow. The Company deposited their archives with Hackney Council's Archives Department, and these have now formed the basis of a travelling exhibition on the history of the firm produced by the Department. Entitled "A Striking Success", this traces the Company from its small beginnings in the early 1840's, when William Bryant and Francis May first went into partnership through to the present day. Using the fine series of photographs taken in the late 1890's, methods of production are shown and described, together with later changes begun in the 1920's, and taking the story up to date, a video of modern production technology. Significant events in the Company's history included the Match Girls Strike of 1888 and this receives full cover, as does the Company's reaction to the World War. From the 1890's the health of workers became a subject of increasing public concern and remedial action taken by the Company, as well as active social life of employees feature in the exhibition.

Advertising, the labels and match containers also feature, as well as promotional items such as a jigsaw, pages from the annual almanacs, and selections from the regular 'Fun with Matches' series. Bryant & May were early in the field of gift coupons with products and in their catalogue of 1913 the customer could make a selection: wind up gramophones, bicycles, sewing machines, dolls and even a w/ boy scout's uniform!

The exhibition opens at the Archives Department in the second

week of January 1985, and then goes to the National Museum of Labour History at Limehouse from 4 February to 29 March. It returns to the Archives Department in April and then leaves London, returning on 7 October to Plumstead Museum, Greenwich, where it will be on display until 2 November. It has been prepared with financial assistance from Bryant and May and with grant aid by the Area Museum Service for SE England.

D.M.

FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Membership is now approaching the 200 figure. There are still some outstanding subscriptions and it is hoped that this reminder will prompt those who haven't yet paid to do so.

Among our members, Derek Morris, of 21 Haddon Court, Shakespears Road, Harpenden, Herts, is interested in the Hamlet of Mile End Old Town about 1750. He is interested in contacting other members with the same interest.

Mrs. Elsie Burgess of 97 Roll Gardens, Ilford, Essex IG2 6TP, writes "... my father was a councillor (Liberal) at Bethnal Green for many years and his name was on the outside of the Town Hall. He always had his own business at that time in Church Street, Shoreditch, and his name was John William Ward. I wonder if there are any photographs or literature of same and does the Town Hall still exist? If so, I would be quite willing to remit postage and any other costs. I should imagine it would have been before 1910".

Mr. John Blake, of 3 Gerald Road, Dagenham, Essex RM8 1TP, tells us he is 84 years of age and retains wonderful memories of life in Poplar and the East End. He is also the author of a booklet "Memories of Old Poplar". This deals with life around St. Michael's Church in St. Leonards Road, and is still available. It is published by Stepney Books (Contact : Jenny Smith, 19 Tomlins Grove, E3 4NX).

J.C.

7 UNUSUAL MUSEUMS IN LONDON

Condensed details from a leaflet are given here for your interest:-

1. Thos. Coram Foundation for Children, 40 Brunswick Sq. WC1.
Adm. 30p adults, 10p children. Phone : 278 2424
2. Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 53 Gordon Sq. WC1.
Adm. free Phone : 387 3909
- The Jewish Museum, Woburn House, Tavistock Sq. WC1.
Adm free Phone : 388 4525
- The Dickens House, 48 Doughty St. WC1.
Adm. charge (not given in leaflet) Phone : 405 2127
- Museum of the Order of St. John. St. John's Lane, EC1.
Adm free Phone : 253 6644
- National Postal Museum, King Edward St. EC1.
Adm free Phone : 432 3851
- Dr. Johnson's House, 17 Gough Square, EC4.
Adm. charge (not given in leaflet) Phone : 353 3745

J.C.

LEAFLETS

Visits to exhibitions have resulted in the collection of some interesting leaflets but we can only include very brief details here

"Walk around Historic Southwark" is beautifully produced by the Borough Development Department of Southwark, containing a map and masses of information as well as some lovely little line drawing.

"Festival of Architecture - Soho" another leaflet, smaller this time, giving a map and walk around Soho in London's West End.

Produced for the Cities of London and Westminster Society of Architects "Take the Old Kent Road to London's Past" explores 16 S.E. London museums and galleries. The producers of this is not given but presumably it is available from libraries in the area.

"Greenwich Meridian Centenary 1984" a small leaflet giving details

of the subject title; from *Waltham Forest Libraries*.

"Streets of London" Details of guided walks, costing £1.75 each. This one is commercial and further details by telephoning 882-3414.

"Market Porters Cycle Route" a small leaflet from Traffic & Transportation Section at the Town Hall Annexe, Reading Lane, E8., giving map and details of a route from Hackney Town Hall to Hackney Road, but not along the main road.

"Along the Red Brick Road" a leaflet, well illustrated, of a walk round the Isle of Dogs. Copy from Island History Project (987 6041).

9. NEW BOOKS

"Loynbee Hall" Details contained in the accompanying leaflet. special interest to members in view of our recent Annual Lecture by L Briggs.

"Tower Hamlets Arts Directory" an excellently produced reference produced by Tower Hamlets Arts Committee. Enquiries to 790 1818 ext. 266/267

"Touch Yer Collar" Produced and published by Waltham Forest Drama History Workshop, contains memories of childhood illness before the N Service. Good value at 60p, from Centerprise, THAP & Waltham Forest Libraries.

"My Mother's Calling me" A new publication from one of our own members, Robert Barltrop, about growing up in North East London between wars. 72 pages of interest, nicely illustrated with photographs. It priced at £1.75 and available from the above shops. J.C.

10 IN BRIEF...

The Isle of Dogs History Project are holding a programme of talks on Thursdays in February and March at 7.30 p.m. at the George Green West Ferry Road, on the past industrial importance of the Island. On 7th March Mr. French (himself an ex-Islander) will speak on "The Isle and World Industry". There are also walks. Ring Eve Hostettler (987 6041).

The Ragged Schools Museum Trust appears to be gaining ground in efforts to progress the Museum Project, having undertaken an excellent feasibility study. We look forward to seeing the Museum-cum-Workshop established at the ex-Barnardo's Ragged School buildings in Copperfield Road.

Queen Mary College is celebrating 50 years of activity in the Isle of Dogs (the Royal Charter was granted on the 12th December 1934). We congratulate them on reaching this milestone, and again express our gratitude for the assistance they have given the Society since its inception. A.F.

EAST LONDON HISTORY SOCIETY

COACH OUTING : SATURDAY, MAY 11TH 1985

Name..... Telephone.....

Address.....

.....

I would like.....Ticket(s) for the Coach Outing and
enclose cheque/postal order for..... (Coach ticket £3.60)
(Fees to the gardens and keep payable on the coach).

Send to:- Miss A.Sensow, 18 Hawkdene, Chingford, E4 7PF.

1984-85 SUBSCRIPTIONS Members please ignore unless personally addressed to you.

Dear *Chris Lloyd*

I have updated the mailing list and taken the chance to check subscriptions paid and unpaid.

I cannot find any trace of you having paid for the current year but if I am wrong can you please let me know when and what you paid, so that the matter can be speedily rectified.

If you have not yet paid, I hope this note will act as a reminder and that you will send the relevant sum by return.

Thanks,
John Curtis.

Name (Block letters please)

Address

.....

..... Date

Enclosed £..... (£2 Annual Subscription.

£1 for Pensioners and Full-time Students)

Return to John Curtis, 9 Avon Road, London, E17.

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11. An EXHIBITION to commemorate the tercentenary of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which led to thousands of Huguenots settling as silk-weavers in Spitalfields, is to be held at 19 Princelet Street, London, E1. This will be from late-May/early-June 1985.

The exhibition is being organised by Helen Carpenter and further details or offers help will be given/accepted by her at Tower Hamlets Environment Trust, 192/6 Hanbury Street, E1 5HU. Telephone 377 0481.

12. Members are reminded that items for inclusion in this newsletter are always welcome and can be sent to any officers. They will be passed to the editor. It is not always possible to use everything at once and some items may be held over. One such item is a fascinating account of Mr Jack Rubidge's experiences as a milkman for some forty years.

Items for inclusion could be such experiences, queries, requests, news of member's own researches or projects, news of other societies in which they are interested, services provided, etc.

13. Recently joined member Mr Stanley Fox wants to do a lot of research into historic places in the City and East End, where he was born in 1929. The happy event took place at 'Mrs Levy's' in Underwood Street, where Mary Hughes did so much work for poor people.

Buildings and streets around Whitechapel - and the types of people living there in the past hundred years - are the areas of interest in which he would like member's help.

Any communication can be made to him at 47 Waltham Avenue, Kingsbury, London, NW9 9SH

THE FLOWERY

Most of the places I lived in around Brick Lane have now been demolished, the last to go being Flower and Dean Street.

The Flowery was our street. You would not find it listed in any guide under such a title, but to most people living in the area immediately east of Aldgate Pump it only meant one street - the notorious Flower and Dean Street. Any other thoroughfare had its title tagged on.. It was always Brick Lane - Chicksand Street - Commercial Road - but Flower and Dean Street was 'The Flowery'.

It cannot be conceived that it should have kept such a rural sounding name from any similarity to the countryside or connection with horticulture. It was so called because the name rolled off the tongue so easily, and perhaps with some degree of affection or sense of individuality on the part of those living there.

There may well have been a time when it had its flowers but that time had long passed by the time I lived there. The name of the street derives from its two builders, John Flowers and Gowan Deane, who were Whitechapel bricklayers and built the original street in the 1650's.

There was an irony in the name because it must have been one of the meanest looking streets in the East End of London, a dark cavern of decaying tenement blocks, nearly all of them six storeys high. These effectively shut out much of the light and it is probably true to say that the only growing things were the many children of the neighbourhood.

These six-storeyed tenements had rather grand titles. There was Nathaniel Buildings, and Rothschild's Buildings, and my own buildings. I don't think these had a collective name but the blocks in Flower and Dean Street were Irene House and Ruth House. These were not blocks of flats in the true sense of the word but were separate stairways in one huge block of flats, the 'houses' each being named and having four flats on each of its six floors. I lived in Ruth House, on the top floor, at number 25.

At the Brick Lane end of the street the buildings were not so high and one of these was a men's lodging house, called Smith's. This was faced by a women's lodging house on the other corner, probably owned by the same people. Over both establishments I think there were more flats.

This brick canyon we called The Flowery connected Brick Lane and Commercial Street, and at both ends the road narrowed to single width, making it somewhat self-contained and forbidding to outsiders to enter. It was seldom used as a throughway by strangers owing to its reputation. It was said that in Victorian times policemen were forbidden to enter it alone. Halfway down the street, another turning, Lolesworth Street, formed a T-junction. This led away to the world-famous Petticoat Lane and thence to Aldgate and The City of London.

This then was our home-town, our village. When people ask where we lived as kids we tell them, Aldgate, this being the area in which the Flowery was.

Of course, we didn't call it Aldgate then... it was 'Allgit'. In those days it was a bustling and lively place, especially at evening time. There were plenty of pubs and adequate public transport, this being the terminus for many bus routes. Trams ran along the middle of the street and there were shops all ablaze with lights, each sending their smells out on to the crowded pavements. The big shop in Aldgate was Benny Woods, spread over four or five premises and selling meat, groceries and general provisions. Separated from this large store by Half Moon Passage was an eating house, in whose window the bill of fare was cooked. Many times did I stand in front of this when sent on an errand, gazing longingly at the trays of sizzling sausages and browning onions, promising myself that I would go inside when I was grown up. Alas, when I did grow up the shop had long vanished.

Strangely enough, many people think it was, or still is, a dangerous area but it wasn't to us. We were not casual visitors or the transitional sightseers who found the area 'interesting'. This was our place. We knew every nook and cranny, every little alleyway, every empty house (usually inside and out), and probably every cat and dog.

Immigrants have always been a feature of the area and we kids were a mixed bunch, many of us being first or second generation children of European or Asian refugees. Sometimes we maintained a loyalty to the foreign blood in our veins, at other times we tried to hide it. I suppose it could be said that the Irish and the Jewish stock remained truest to their origins and most proudly proclaimed their roots. Religion played a big part in this. When it came to mixed marriages, both racial and religious, the descendents tended to lose this patriotism to a foreign blood, and indeed, in many cases tried to hide. However, whatever our forebears, we were certainly all one thing. We were cockneys.

When we spoke we never sound the th's... it was always 'teef' and not teeth... it was 'barf' and not bath.. although that word, or the action it describes, was not used too often as far as I can remember. At the end of a word we never sounded a 't'... and at the beginning none of our words started with an 'h'. Nevertheless, in spite of these shortcomings we managed to communicate to a surprising degree and to make our various ways in the world. I think it unfortunate that in the course of this future life the cockney accent has had to be lost. It is a sad truth that whilst regional dialects and accents are accepted, and often considered attractive, the cockney accent has to be ironed out and lost, its use seeming to indicate lack of education and intelligence.

On the other hand, some people think the cockney talks too much, especially when on the end of some repartee. My own experience is that people in other parts of the country are wary of Londoners, often thinking them cunning and artful, full of the 'big city' wiles.... or look on them as characters, their opinions being shaped by the many professional stage cockneys.

In The Flowery a lot of us were poor, most of us very poor, and speaking personally I cannot look back to childhood as the happiest days of my life. Most of it was pretty miserable and I wouldn't want to live such days again. Of course there were happy times and I recollect many things that happened and places that existed that I feel a little nostalgic about. These parts of one's past seem to have disappeared from our world.

Some of the activities have disappeared due to different economic standards, some to rebuilding of bomb-damage and to slum clearance, and some to different religious and ethnic backgrounds. I would like to recall some of ours and commit them to paper before they from my own memory.

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HOPPIN' A RIDE

While recently watching television we saw some modern cars, sleek and streamlined. I idly mentioned to my wife that modern kids could never be able to ride on the bumpers of these as we had done on the cars of the nineteen-thirties and forties.

We boys had several ways of getting a ride.. or Hopping on, as we called it. The first of these was to stealthily settle on to the rear bumper of private cars, of which there were far fewer in those days, and subsequently less traffic. The cars in those far off days had bumpers which stood well out from the car and had a curly bit at the corners, where one could sit in some sort of comfort. Cars also carried the spare wheel on the back (not hidden in the luggage boot) which made a convenient handhold with which to secure ones-self. If the car was a 'modern' one there was a chance that it also had a small luggage compartment, and this would have a handle which gave a holding on point.

There were favourit places and suitable runs for this pastime. In our case it was from Brick Lane to Great Garden Street (later renamed Greatorex Street). The best spot to get on board was at one of these corners, when the car had to slow sufficiently for it to turn. We would then dart out from a sheltering building, run alongside in a crouched position and out of the driver's view, and ease ourselves on to the bumper, clutching whatever presented itself for support and security. In this way we would ride up the street, alighting when the car turned the next corner, having to slow down again to do this.

In those far and distant days cars also had running-boards and it was sometimes possible to crouch down on these, holding the door handle, to get your ride. I suppose many of these drivers knew what we were doing but it was probably too much trouble to stop and throw us off. We sometimes thought they swerved to shake us off but this was probably imagined.

Trams were running at that time and it was sometimes, but

not often, possible to do the same thing with them on their very broad steel bumpers. Needless to say, these were on much busier streets and as well as the extra danger involved from the greater amount of traffic, there was also the ever-present interference from all grown-ups, there being more of these on the busier streets and broad highways. The fact that they may have been concerned for our safety never entered our heads..they just always seemed to be spoiling our game. The street favoured for this was Commercial Street, in which was sited the wholesale fruit and vegetable market, Spitalfields Market.

The easiest vehicle of all to jump on was the horse and cart. These had nice tailboards, supported by chains at just about the correct angle for hanging on to. These were slow enough to make it very easy to get aboard for the free ride, although not so exciting.

Once aboard, hanging at arms length from the tailboard, you could either let your legs dangle, just clearing the ground, or you could draw your knees up and wedge your toes into the bar that formed the hinge for the tailboard. Sometimes we would hang on to this 'hinge' bar by our hands, swinging our legs under the cart and resting our feet on the axle bar. This was the safest from the point of view of remaining unobserved by the driver.

There was a great danger in 'bunking on a horse and cart'. You very often got other kids shouting out.. "Look behind you mister....." At this, more often than not, out would snake the driver's whip, catching one a nasty flick on the fingers if you were unlucky. Perhaps most drivers would would not be trying to catch you but rather endeavouring to dislodge an unwelcome parasite. One couldn't blame them for trying because as well as amusing ourselves by getting a ride we would nearly always, as an accepted way of life, be on the lookout for something to 'nick'. Woe betide any carter carrying any box or sack with even the tiniest hole in it. Somehow or other it always got a little bigger when we were about... and some of the contents 'fell' out... and got lost.

We sometimes avoided the danger of getting our fingers whipped by running along behind the cart and ducking under the tailboard, getting our lift by lying along the large wooden box which carried the axle of the cart. Mention of this bring back, even now, the smell of the feed in the horse's nosebag which used to be hung under the cart. This nosebag when in use was filled with feed and hung from a strap around the horse's head. Every so often the horse would toss its head to shake the contents up and a small shower of feed would fall to the floor. Consequently, a large bird population was maintained, particularly the sparrow and the pigeon.

Lastly in this game of getting a ride there were the lories. These, like the horse and carts, also had handy tailboards for our convenience.. and also carried bounty

for our prying fingers. You could however, be taken quite a way by one of these, having to disembark far from familiar territory. Like the trams, they operated in the more crowded main roads but they didn't slow down or stop so often.. and if the driver knew you were on board it sometimes seemed that he kept going as fast and far as he could. Quite often these lorries had vanboys on the back, guarding the contents and stopping us from getting our ride. In time these vanboys were replaced by a new and more economic guard, a dog.

Looking back at this abuse of other people's property and the pilfering we did, one realises full well that we were quite simply stealing and that we were delinquents. I don't know if that word was then in use or whether we really were so.

To us, everything we came by had been 'found' and although we knew we had pinched things and would get punished if caught, it didn't seem so very wrong... everyone did it. That was our way of life and we were the products of our time and environment.

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THE MARKET

In view of the great amount of publicity it gets, lots of people tend to think that Covent Garden is London's only wholesale fruit and vegetable market. There are however others, among them being markets at Stratford, Southwark, and our one, the one we ran about in, Spitalfields Market. Its a large market that just grew and grew, lying between the Nicholas Hawksmoor church, Christ Church in Commercial Street, and Liverpool Street Station in Bishopsgate Street, built on the site of the first Bethlehem Hospital. This was the well-known and notorious madhouse, commonly known as Bedlam... but the name could well have been applied to the market we knew.

Nowadays it is full of lorries and may be a bit more organised with its waiting restrictions and one-way traffic system but when we were kids it was sheer pandemonium. The market and surrounding streets were all filled with lorries and handcarts.. but mostly with horse and carts. The vehicles were much smaller than their modern counterparts but conversely, there were so many more of them. Every greengrocer in those distant days must have had a cart with a horse or pony.

This market was one of our favourite haunts, our stamping ground. As well as providing a lot of our amusement it was extremely rich in pickings for busy and itchy fingers. Anything was fair game and we would collect as much loose fruit and vegetables as possible, putting these into our sacks which we had slung over our shoulders. Later, the contents would be sold, as and when we could dispose of them.

Our manner of collecting was varied. One of the methods used was to sort through the sweepings to try and find good and sound produce but this was not the best way of getting a good haul.

Mostly, it would be a matter of gathering around a cart that was being unloaded, about three or four of us along each side of the vehicle. As the sacks and boxes were taken off there was sometimes a tear in a sack or a small breakage somewhere in a crate. Consequently, some of the contents would fall out and roll about the floor of the cart. Needless to say, these were considered to be 'ours'.. and out would dart as many small hands as thought they could reach, resembling a crowd of striking snakes, in competition for the loose produce. Gradually our sacks filled.

What may have seemed so surprising is how sacks and boxes and baskets that had travelled from far off farms or had survived a long land and sea journey unharmed, somehow became damaged in the very short time they were in the market. It could perhaps have been something to do with us little scavengers.. I wouldn't like to deny it.

Of course, the unloading wasn't the only place or time we could get our loot. There were piles of fruit and vegetables all over the place and the market stands were also packed. In our day the actual market gates were metal grills that pulled out across the road and locked. These we could squeeze underneath or even climb over the top. In time these grills were replaced by very high metal rollers.. all the way down to the ground.

Firms having premises in buildings outside the market itself had piles of sacks and crates on the pavement and in the roads. These firms employed watchmen. Whatever the security we managed to continue our 'collecting'. We were like mice and rats and could get almost anywhere.

Another method of collecting was when a cart called weekly to collect rotten fruit from the Fruit Exchange, a modern addition to the market. I seem to recollect this happening on Thursdays. The cart involved was usually a high-sided one and we clambered up, perching and wedging ourselves as best we could. There may have been four or five of us on each side of the vehicle, leaning over into the rubbish being shovelled into the cart.. and sorting out any good fruit we could find.

All the time we were foraging for this good fruit from the rotting mess, the men loading the cart continued to shovel the pulpy waste out. As well as looking for good fruit we had to keep a wary eye on approaching shovelfuls of rubbish. I think we must have been good at it because I can't remember anyone being caught by the rotten fruit.

This reminiscence conjures up a particular smell. It is of a cart, full of rotten fruit, much of it covered with a lovely pale green mould.. all emitting a faint steam in which we kids had our heads nearly buried. Up it comes, the smell of oranges and tangerines... warm and rotting, sweet and rotten, but curiously, not offensive.

We somehow managed to extract a surprising amount of good fruit from this mess, all wiped clean on the little woollen jerseys we all wore, and popped into our sacks, later to be

sold to our various customers. Our term for the rotten fruit was 'spunky', something I haven't heard rotten fruit called for a long time. In my mind I can hear someone saying, "That's no good, its spunky".

In spite of the vast amount of foodstuff we must have managed to scrounge and pinch from the market our recompense was extremely small. We had our regular customers but these were as poor or poorer than we were. Some of course, we thought to be very rich, and we thought they got these riches by squeezing us kids.

One of these 'squeezers' was a furrier whose shop I never once saw with the shutters removed. It was probable that he used the shop premises for living in. He was, in spite of living very near the market, the last one we would try selling to. If, after many unsuccessful attempts to sell elsewhere, there seemed no hope of unloading our sacks, we would trudge wearily back to Fashion Street and the furrier. Looking back to those days I think he could well have been the original Fagin or at the very least, a direct descendant.

His story was always the same. It seemed he always had plenty of fruit and vegetables.. or somebody had just beaten us to it and he had already bought (needless to say he had bought cheaper and better) or that our stuff really wasn't worth buying. If all else failed and he couldn't clinch a bargain, we somehow got the intimation that he was friendly with the police.. something I now realise couldn't have been further from the truth. Quite often, this man being our last port of call and us not wishing to hold on to our perishable goods, he would get a sackful for a fewoppers. It is quite possible that he was as poor as he intimated, in which case we must have done him a great service.

As this man was our last port of call, so the first promising customers were the inhabitants of one of the many kiphouses of the area, a kiphouse being the term for a common lodging house. The one nearest the market, in it in fact, was in Duval Street. This street has now been built over and was known to us as 'Dossit' Street, the real previous name having been Dorset Street. The name was changed because of the bad character of the street, it having been the location for one of Jack the Ripper's murders. I always thought it was called Dossit Street because of the dosshouses in it.

Mention of the kiphouse brings other smells to mind, a mixture of an open fire, with perhaps somebody making themselves some toast - of scrubbed, bare wood of the floor and tables - of drying clothes in wet weather. Best of all, if you were lucky in being there when they appeared, of spotted dog or bread pudding. These were cooked in large trays and we would sometimes be able to afford to buy a lump if we had had a successful selling day. Hot, steaming, and smelling of suet pudding, fruits and spices.

In an area notorious for its crime and renowned for its bad character, perhaps one of the strangest aspects of this scrounging is that none of us ever took the stuff home. I don't know if our parents were too proud to use the scavengings of the market, poor as we all were... or that it was more probable that we could get a really sound beating for stealing.