

EAST LONDON HISTORY SOCIETY

WINTER NEWSLETTER : DECEMBER 1979.

PROGRAMME

Do not miss the Meeting on the 17th January. Mr. Renson has taken some very colourful slides of Victoria Park during 1960-61 and will show some things which have gone for ever. The films of East London to be presented by Four-Corner Films on the 12th February at 113 Roman Road, should revive many memories. On the 18th March we have Jerry White's talk on "Rothschild Buildings" at the request of a number of members. The Hackney evening on the 17th April will be by Lerry Lewis whose subject "Drink & Decoration" covers the unusual study of the fountains of East London. This will be at the Rose Lipman Library, De Beauvoir Road, at 7.15 p.m. On the 14th May, John Boyes, a well-known authority on the River Lea will tell us something of its background, and Miss Sansom will conduct us over the area in a walk on the 7th June. The season will close with a study by the East of London Family History Society on "Tracing Cockney ancestors", on the 27th June. We are invited to a talk at the City Polytechnic (31 Jewry Street, E.C.3) on Thursday, January 10th, on "Ratcliff and Free Trade Wharf" by the Greater London Industrial Archaeological Society, at 6.30 p.m.

ST. MATTHIAS CHURCH, POPLAR

This Church, declared redundant, has recently come into prominence because of John Flaxman's marble memorial to George Steevens, the Shakespearean scholar who is buried in St. Matthias. It is one of Flaxman's finest works and has recently been exhibited in the Royal Academy and is now on temporary loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum. The Church itself is Poplar's oldest building and although in need of considerable repair, must be preserved. The intention is to use the building for cultural purposes. If any member would like to contribute to the Appeal for funds, or wishes more information, he should contact Mr. R. Pullen, 4 Nelson Road, Wanstead E.11. (989 9266).

DAVID GARRICK : A BICENTENARY EXHIBITION.

According to Samuel Johnson, Garrick was 'a master both in tragedy and comedy', and Heinrich Heine claimed that Shakespeare's genius was brought to the attention of the world by Garrick's interpretations of the major roles in his dramas. This information comes from a leaflet accompanying the Exhibition on David Garrick in the King's Library of the British Museum (entrance free) which runs until the 11th May 1980.

Besides details of Garrick's career as an actor of genius, playwright, theatre-manager and book-collector, the Exhibition has an added bonus for enthusiasts of East London history. Many will be aware that Garrick got his first break as an actor at Henry Giffard's Goodmans Fields theatre, when one of the regular performers there was taken ill. Shortly afterwards his interpretation of Richard III at the same theatre brought crowds from the West End to see the new Star. So great was his success that the licensed theatres had Giffard's unlicensed theatre closed down. Garrick moved on to Drury Lane (one of the licensed theatres) and further triumphs on the stage.

There is very little about this in the Exhibition, which is not surprising, as it is concerned with the national rather than the local significance of Garrick. There is compensation for this in Case Eleven, however, where two porcelain figures of characters from his play "Letha" are shown to have come from the famous Bow China Works. These figures (whose modern equivalents are posters of pop stars) were so popular that they were often pirated by other porcelain manufacturers of the time. The play "Letha", incidentally, is a short and witty farce that ought to have been produced by some Theatre Company for the bicentenary of Garrick's death (1979).

Yet another item of local interest in the Exhibition is a drawing on vellum of Garrick in Colley Cibber's presentation of Richard III. Colley Cibber was buried in his family vault beneath the Danish Church in Wall Close Square, a building for which his father, Caius Gabriel Cibber, was the architect.

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The Exhibition, therefore, is recommended not only to students of the theatre, but to everyone interested in eighteenth century London.

Colm Kerrigan.

CHRISTMAS IN BETHNAL GREEN, 1933.

Earlier this year Tower Hamlets Local History Library was given the diaries written by Miss Lydia Benoly during her year as Mayor of Bethnal Green. The following extracts describes her activities during Christmas 1933 :

"Sunday, 24th December.

The last weeks again so active, I have hardly known whether on my heels or my head. Much speaking especially in order to raise money for my Unemployment Christmas Fund. Have, in this connection, addressed all the cinemas in turn - a curious sensation that of speaking on a lit-up stage into a darkened hall, my only experience of speaking from a stage being on Friday morning, December 8th, when I addressed the crowded Cinema of children on behalf of the Safety First Council who were showing their film.

In connection with my visits to the cinemas, I want to pay special credit to the Managers who have been all of them most courteous and kind. All the audiences received me well and cordially. My stalwart band of "Uni boys" under Dick Brown plus a contingent of valiant Toc H lads under "Miffy" proved an excellent band of Collectors as well as a bodyguard. Financial result very good and much general enthusiasm for the cause. The evening of the 21st at the Oxford Hall where the Stock Exchange Concert Party gave their famous Annual Christmas "Show" and were supported loyally and splendidly by stalwart good old Henry Kemp and I appealed for funds in my robes, was really great and result excellent. And now this Christmas as Mayor!

The distribution of parcels moved me very deeply. I could have cried as they passed me and mostly shook hands and in the majority so grateful. The parcels were good and ample and all the borderline cases having been included I feel glad and grateful on this score. Everybody happy and satisfied. Have had many gifts and crowds of Christmas cards which all look very gay and festive put up round the rooms, for this year they have overflowed. All the Mayoral cards including those of the Lord and Lady Mayoress and the Sheriffs are very interesting, and I am keeping them for keeps.

5th January. - All the St. Matthew's Christmas and New Year services very helpful and beautiful throughout and we all enjoyed them and they did us much good. Events I have not yet noted from last year: The "Daily Sketch" Olympia Circus performance for our kiddies; a brilliant old-time Circus much enjoyed by the children and adults alike. Most noble horses etc. This on Wednesday 20th December - met several mayors. Friday, the 22nd - distribution of hampers to our dear crippled children at the Museum Cinema and then in State to the Guildhall Banquet to Little Londoners. I had assisted frequently in former years as a helper, but it was rather different going as one of the Mayors, in fact very interesting for me. The children cheered themselves hoarse and when I discovered my own Bethnal Green party, the joy was great...."

5. THE GERMAN COMMUNITY.

At the A.G.M. members were talking about the German Community in the East End. This extract dated May 13th 1915 from "In London during the Great War" by Michael MacDonagh (published in 1935) may be of interest.

"There is a scarcity of bread in parts of the East End of London where German bakers have been rooted out by the process of their shops being pilloaged and wrecked. I am told that other premises were attacked by the mobs because of incorrect assumptions as to the nationality of the names over the doors. For instance, a publican named 'Strachan' (an old Scottish name) was taken to be a German and had his windows smashed. In the opinion of the British in the East End, it is better that a Scotsman with a German-sounding accent, should suffer (both being colourable imitations of Germans) than that a genuine German should escape."

David Behr.

6. EAST LONDON RECORD. Printing costs for the Society's publication would be greatly reduced if camera ready copy was prepared by members. Anyone able to type and having access to a 'golfball' typewriter is invited to contact Bernard Nurse at the Tower Hamlets L.H. Library (01-980 4366). Articles for future publication greatly welcome. First issue now out of print.